

Prophecy in Shakespeare's English History Cycles

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Abstract

Prophecy — that is, the action of foretelling or predicting the future, particularly a future thought to represent the will of God — is an ever-present aspect of Shakespeare's historical dramaturgy. The purpose of this thesis is to offer a reading of the dramas of Shakespeare's English history cycles — from *1 Henry VI* to *Henry V* — that focuses exclusively upon the role played by prophecy in representing and reconstructing the past. It seeks to show how, through close attention to the moments when prophecy emerges in these historical dramas, we might arrive at a different understanding of them, both as dramatic narratives and as meditations on the nature of history itself. As this thesis seeks to demonstrate, moreover, Shakespeare's treatment of prophecy in any one play can be viewed, in effect, as a key that can take us to the heart of that drama's wider concerns.

The comparatively recent conception of a body of historical plays that are individually distinct and no longer chained to the Tillyardian notion of a 'Tudor myth' (or any other 'grand narrative') has freed prophecy from effectively fulfilling the rather one-dimensional role of chorus. However, it has also raised as-yet-unanswered questions about the function of prophecy in Shakespeare's English history cycles, which this thesis aims to consider. One of the key arguments presented here is that Shakespeare utilises prophecy not to emphasise the pervasiveness of divine truth and providential design, but to express the political, narratorial, and interpretative disorder of history itself. It is also argued that any conception of the English history plays that rejects homogeneity and even consistency must also acknowledge that prophecy, as a form of historical narrative in essence, cannot be expected to manifest itself in the same ways in each drama throughout Shakespeare's career. In this sense, the purpose of this thesis is to show that Shakespeare not only uses 'prophecy' to construct 'history': as a dramatist, he also thinks through 'prophecy', in various ways and from multiple perspectives, in order to intensify and complicate our sense of the complexity and drama of history itself.

This thesis treats the English chronicle plays in order of composition and performance. While the Introduction contextualizes concepts of prophecy in the early modern period, and its relationship to history in particular, chapters 1–3 address the *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III*, with chapters 4 and 5 examining *Richard II* and the two parts of *Henry IV*. *Henry V* is addressed in the Conclusion. The inclusion of the second cycle of histories, rarely interrogated by critics in relation to prophecy, is crucial to the approach taken by this thesis. Unlike previous studies, this thesis privileges prophecy in both the earlier and the later histories, not least because its perceived absence from the plays of the second cycle is capable of informing our understanding of Shakespeare's historical dramaturgy more generally. What is at stake in this reading of prophecy in Shakespeare's English histories, both locally in the plays themselves and more generally across the cycles, are questions of causality, identity (both personal and national), monarchy, and the art of theatre itself.

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Introduction

Let me speak, sir,
For heaven now bids me, and the words I utter
Let none think flattery, for they'll find 'em truth.¹

In the final scene proper of *Henry VIII, or All Is True*, believed to have been first performed in 1613, Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, demands the prerogative of the prophet, whose claim to communicate divine truth grants him or her a uniquely privileged platform from which to speak. Presiding over the baptismal ceremony of Princess Elizabeth, Cranmer, as if inspired, utters a prophecy that foretells her glorious reign, as well as that of her successor, James VI and I. Though lengthy, it is worth quoting in full:

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. Sheba was never
More covetous of wisdom and fair virtue
Than this pure soul shall be. All princely graces
That mould up such a mighty piece as this is,
With all the virtues that attend the good,
Shall still be doubled on her. 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.

¹ William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, *Henry VIII, or All Is True*, ed. by Jay L. Halio (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.4.14–16. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

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,
 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.

KING HENRY Thou speakest wonders.

CRANMER

She shall be to the happiness of England
 An aged princess. Many days shall see her,
 And yet no day without a deed to crown it.
 Would I had known more. But she must die—
 She must, the saints must have her—yet a virgin.
 A most unspotted lily shall she pass
 To th' ground, and all the world shall mourn her.

(*HVIII*, 5.4.17–62)

It is ironic that the final prophecy — and, indeed, the final scene — of Shakespeare's last English history play is likely to have been written not by Shakespeare himself but by a collaborator, John Fletcher.² Nevertheless, Cranmer's speech was no doubt included in the play with Shakespeare's blessing, and its status as the probable handiwork of another playwright does little to diminish the sense that the prophecy represents an apt end to Shakespeare's career as a writer of historical drama. In fact,

² See Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-Author: A Historical Study of Five Collaborative Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 331–402, 433–45, 480–91.

throughout his English histories, Shakespeare turns regularly to prophecy in order to achieve a variety of effects. It offers a means of organising and thereby illuminating history and historical drama, but it is equally capable of emphasising and even engendering complexity, confusion, and chaos, often signalling ‘terror’ rather than ‘Peace’ (*HVIII*, 5.4.47), to borrow Cranmer’s terms. In many ways, Shakespeare’s understanding of ‘history’ can be seen as being encapsulated and evidenced at any point by his treatment of prophecy. Cranmer’s prophecy of the reign of Elizabeth I, replete with ‘a thousand thousand blessings’ (*HVIII*, 5.4.19), is no exception: rather, it provides in some exemplary ways the rule when it comes to Shakespeare’s treatment of prophecy in the dramas of the history cycles. For that reason, it is worth dwelling upon for a moment.

First performed in 1613, ten years after Elizabeth’s death, *Henry VIII* is the only English history play to have been written by Shakespeare in the Jacobean period. In light of this fact, Cranmer’s prediction can be seen to occupy a unique and fascinating position amongst the many prophecies that appear in Shakespeare’s chronicle plays. It performs a striking dual function of prophesying and eulogising, posthumously celebrating Elizabeth’s legacy even as it seems to anticipate her life’s achievements. Yet, in doing so, it engages directly with an unusually recent period of history, one in which all of the Elizabethans-turned-Jacobean in the audience would have lived. Indeed, whereas Shakespeare’s other histories stage a remote past that none living could otherwise have witnessed, Cranmer’s vision encompasses the ‘Peace’ and ‘plenty’ (*HVIII*, 5.4.47) of the reign of James I, during which the play was written, performed, and watched on the stage.

At first glance, Cranmer’s speech might appear to be an uncomplicated eulogy to Elizabeth, albeit with the concomitant and perhaps ulterior purpose of

legitimising her successor, James: in Elizabeth's day, the Archbishop foresees, 'every man shall eat in safety | Under his own vine what he plants and sing | The merry songs of peace to all his neighbours', yet her successor will 'make new nations' (*HVIII*, 5.4.33–35, 52). Ivo Kamps thus argues that the prophecy works to present the transition from Tudor to Stuart monarchy as providential, and so glorify and legitimise James I.³ However, prophecy in Shakespeare's English histories is rarely, if ever, so straightforward, and the same words that seem simply to glorify the late Queen (as well as James I) can also be seen to draw attention to the intentional ways in which history can be — and, indeed, is being — constructed and represented on the stage. The 'thousand thousand blessings' (*HVIII*, 5.4.19) that Cranmer predicts amount to a depiction of Elizabeth's reign that many in the audience would have known to be largely unrepresentative. England's prominent conflict with Spain, including the Armada crisis of 1588, is conspicuous in its omission, and the Archbishop does well to reduce (or, perhaps more accurately, exalt) the complicated issue of succession to a case of miraculous rebirth through 'the maiden phoenix' whose 'ashes new create another heir' (*HVIII*, 5.4.40, 41).⁴

While it would be inaccurate to suggest that Shakespeare and Fletcher sought, through Cranmer, to call James' legitimacy into question, nevertheless they demonstrate an astute understanding of prophecy's potency as a means of

³ However, Kamps also acknowledges that 'anyone not caught up in the moment Cranmer is trying to create could instantly recognize how it grossly distorts even the most basic understanding of English royal genealogy'. Similarly, Anston Bosman suggests that Cranmer's "'vision" is of course a shrewd refraction of historical "truth": the genealogical distance between Elizabeth and James, not to mention the intervening occupants of and claimants to the throne, is hidden from view'. In other words, both Kamps and Bosman recognise the Cranmer prophecy's misrepresentation of history, but, contrary to my own interpretation, they each seem to view it as an attempt to deceive the audience into accepting it as truly historical. See Ivo Kamps, 'Possible Pasts: Historiography and Legitimation in *Henry VIII*', *College English*, 58 (1996), 192–215 (p. 209) and Anston Bosman, 'Seeing Tears: Truth and Sense in *All Is True*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 50 (1999), 459–76 (p. 474).

⁴ Leah S. Marcus notes that the phoenix was strongly associated with Queen Elizabeth even before her death. See Leah S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 89.

constructing and representing the past. The Cranmer prophecy works, it might seem, as a whitewashing of history that is self-aware in the extreme. Acting as a sort of exposé of dramatic technique, it does not so much attempt to deceive the audience as subtly make the audience conscious of its deception, drawing attention to what Phyllis Rackin has referred to as ‘the project of historical mythmaking’.⁵ Rather than receiving the prophecy, which appears neither in Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* nor Edward Hall’s account of the christening of Elizabeth, as historical fact, the audience is encouraged to understand it as an authorial embellishment designed to construct and therefore represent history in a particular way (i.e. one that is favourable to the current monarch), and which presents England, its past, and its future in glorified terms.⁶

In early modern England, history-writing was often thought to have — or to aspire to have — a didactic function. Amongst the earliest proponents of this idea was Polydore Vergil, whose *Anglica Historia* (1534), or *English History*, according to Henry Ansgar Kelly, ‘stresses heavily the exemplary aspect of history, and frequently draws on morals of universal application from events in England’. However, Vergil might be seen as unusual in the sense that, despite his *Historia* having been commissioned by Henry VII himself, he was ‘not committed to any

⁵ Rackin suggests that Shakespeare’s English history plays represent ‘a self-referential cycle that ends by interrogating the entire project of historical mythmaking [in *Henry V*]’. See Phyllis Rackin, ‘Stages of History: Ideological Conflict, Alternative Plots’, in *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, ed. by R. J. C. Watt (London: Pearson, 2002), pp. 76–96 (p. 78).

⁶ Jean-Christophe Mayer, too, notes the ‘subversive’ character of the Cranmer prophecy, which, he argues, ‘does not fit in the so-called protestant discourse of millenarian hope’. For Mayer, ‘The prophecy can be read more like a social comment, and in this way it resembles more “popular” forms of prophecies, which, as we have said, are a response to specific social needs and tensions. As a result, such prophecies tend to be subversive’. See Jean-Christophe Mayer, ‘Revisiting the Reformation—Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *King Henry VIII*’, *Reformation & Renaissance Review: Journal of the Society for Reformation Studies*, 5 (2003), 188–203 (p. 201). Mayer also notes the extent to which James I was ‘irritated’ by those who praised openly his predecessors (p. 200).

partisan view of English history by reason of family ties or local patriotism'.⁷ As Kelly has shown, the accounts of many chronicles were shaped by the political biases of their authors, who regularly 'envelop[ed] favorite sons with an aura of personal integrity and divine support, and suppl[ied] appropriately evil motives and cosmically based troubles for members of the opposition'.⁸

As the existence of these slanted chronicles suggests, historical 'fact' was perhaps not as stable a concept in early modern England as it is today. Indeed, Adrian Johns argues that readers in the period were often deeply sceptical of what they encountered in print, which, as they understood, was not always identical to the work as it was conceived and even written by the author.⁹ As D. R. Woolf points out, moreover, 'it was easy to make fun of the chronicler by exposing the very disagreement of the sources on which he based his account and his failure to reconcile them.' For Woolf, 'history' was constructed as much by the reader or receiver as it was by the author or historian. He asserts:

the very nature of historical knowledge was such that it was intended to be socially circulated: once read in a book, it was supposed to be put to practical moral or political use, talked about, shared with friends and family, and interactively revised and reshaped by the reader.¹⁰

In *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles* (1994), Annabel Patterson takes a different view of both the didactic function of history and the 'disorder' of the chronicles (or, at least, those of Holinshed and his fellow contributors). For Patterson, one of the motives of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, often Shakespeare's primary source and first

⁷ Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare's Histories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 86.

⁸ Kelly, *Divine Providence*, p. 298.

⁹ See Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), especially chapter two.

¹⁰ D. R. Woolf, *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 25, 80.

point of call when drafting his English history plays, was to ‘make available to the reading public *enough* of the complex texture of the national history that the middle-class reader could indeed become his own historian — that is to say, a thoughtful, critical, and wary individual’. Patterson posits that, for Holinshed and his collaborators, ‘a national history should not and could not be univocal, but must shoulder the responsibility of representing diversity of opinion.’¹¹

Shakespeare, too, has been seen not only as a reader of history but as a historiographer in his own right (indeed, Kelly goes so far as to call him ‘the greatest of the Renaissance historiographers’).¹² Graham Holderness comments:

Shakespeare’s historical plays are not just reflections of a cultural debate: they are interventions in that debate, contributions to the historiographical effort to reconstruct the past and discover the methods and principles of that reconstruction. They are as much locations of historical controversy as the history books: they are, in themselves and not derivatively, historiography.

For Holderness, ‘the plays can be read as serious attempts to reconstruct and theorize the past — as major initiatives of Renaissance historical thought’.¹³ Shakespeare’s treatment of prophecy in his English history plays suggests that he is indeed concerned with the reconstruction and representation of the past, but also that, like Patterson’s Holinshed, he seeks always to foreground the complexity and ‘disorder’ of history in his drama.

Although the somewhat metatheatrical function of the Cranmer prophecy is by no means typical of Shakespeare’s deployment of prophecy in his other English chronicle plays, nevertheless what it does indicate is that, by the end of his career,

¹¹ Annabel Patterson, *Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 8, 7; Patterson’s emphasis.

¹² Kelly, *Divine Providence*, p. vii.

¹³ Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 13.

Shakespeare had developed an understanding of prophecy — and, by extension, of history — that was attuned to the nuances involved in the construction and representation of the past.¹⁴ It also suggests that Shakespeare recognised the value and versatility of prophecy as a tool for the creation of drama. Indeed, the Cranmer prophecy is very different from the infamous ‘G’ prophecy of *Richard III*, or the riddling predictions of the conjured spirit in 2 *Henry VI*. Yet, as this thesis seeks to demonstrate, it is an ever-present aspect of Shakespeare’s historical dramaturgy, and one that is always capable of illuminating the workings of a play, both in terms of its ideas about history and its mechanics as a work of drama. The purpose of this thesis, then, is to undertake a reading of Shakespeare’s English history cycles that privileges the role played by prophecy in representing and reconstructing the past: it seeks to show how, through close attention to the moments when prophecy emerges in the drama, we might arrive at a different understanding of these plays, both as dramatic narratives and as meditations on the nature of history itself.

II.

Before we can begin to discuss prophecy in Shakespeare’s English history cycles, however, we must define prophecy and outline its complexity in an early modern context. In the most basic terms, ‘prophecy’ can be understood as that which is done or spoken by a prophet. It has its roots in the Latin *prophetia* or *prophecia*, which

¹⁴ James L. Calderwood has conducted numerous studies of Shakespearean metadrama. See *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York, NY: University of Columbia Press, 1983); *Metadrama in Shakespeare’s Henriad: Richard II to Henry V* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979); *Shakespearean Metadrama: The Argument of the Play in Titus Andronicus, Love’s Labours Lost, Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and Richard II* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).

can mean ‘the action or faculty of prophesying, spoken or written utterances of a prophet or prophets, [or] interpretation and expounding of the Bible’ (the word may be traced further to Hellenistic and ancient Greek).¹⁵ In the Christian tradition, upon which this thesis will focus, the prophets of the Bible expressed, expounded, and indeed enacted the will of God. Hence, prophecy can be understood as the articulation of the will of God, and its speakers are His agents. In Arthur Dent’s *The plaine mans path-way to heauen* (1601) and William Covell’s *Polimanteia* (1595), for example, ‘prophecie’ or ‘prophesie’ is used to refer primarily to the predictions of the Biblical prophets. For Covell, their knowledge of the future came directly and unambiguously from God, who ‘alone knoweth things to come’. However, Covell also uses it to describe any prediction that is arrived at by divine inspiration, for ‘God neuer ceaseth to send aduertisements to men; bee it by dreame, vision, or any other meanes, to make them knowe his will, to the intent to guide and gouerne them according to the same’. Covell contrasts prophecy with ‘diuination’, which he explains as the ‘foresee[ing of] things to come, by an exterior motion’ — an overtly Satanic practice.¹⁶ John Harvey, meanwhile, is less particular, gathering ‘counterfet predictions, fabulous traditions, forged deuises, superstitious tales, vaine rumors, idle

¹⁵ ‘prophecy, n.’, in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2013) <<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.liv.ac.uk/view/Entry/152685?redirectedFrom=prophecy>> [accessed 14 November 2013].

¹⁶ Arthur Dent, *The plaine mans path-way to heauen. Wherein euery man may clearely see, whether he shall be saued or damned. Set forth dialogue-wise, for the better understanding of the simple*, 9th edn (London: 1607), pp. 211, 214, 215; William Covell, *Polimanteia, or, The meanes lawfull and vnlawfull, to iudge of the fall of a common-wealth, against the friuolous and foolish coniectures of this age. Whereunto is added, a letter from England to her three daughters, Cambridge, Oxford, Innes of Court, and to all the rest of her inhabitants: perswading them to a constant vnitie of what religion soever they are, for the defence of our dread soveraigne, and natiue cuntry: most requisite for this time wherein wee now live* (London: J. Orwin, 1595), B1^r, N3^v, B1^r. George Gifford also writes that ‘God onelie doth know what shall bee done in the time to come’. Satan, however, cannot tell the future, but only ‘gesseth at things which are prophecied, and is a sharpe obseruer of causes’. See George Gifford, *A dialogue concerning witches and witchcraftes. In which is laide open how craftely the Diuell deceiueth not onely the witches but many other and so leadeth them awrie into many great errorrs* (London: John Windet, 1593), G2^r.

surmizes, and all such erroneous, or friuolous testimonies whatsoever' under the heading of 'prophesies'.¹⁷

In the Bible — and, subsequently, it would seem, in popular usage — prophecy came to be understood as quite simply 'the action of foretelling or predicting the future'.¹⁸ However, the simplicity of this definition masks prophecy's complex and in many ways self-contradictory nature. While it promises access to the highest and most infallible of truths — the very thoughts and will of God — its authority is often paradoxically uncertain. Central to the concept of prophecy as a means of prediction was (and sometimes still is) the motif of Judgement Day: the promise of salvation through destruction that represents the end of Christian linear time and which was an especially topical concern in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.¹⁹ The Apocalypse, in this context, can be seen as both a central tenet of Christianity and a means of organising time. In the early modern period, England was rife with both self-proclaimed prophets declaring themselves

¹⁷ John Harvey, *A discoursiue probleme concerning propheties, how far they are to be valued, or credited, according to the surest rules, and directions in diuinitie, philosophie, astrologie, and other learning: deuised especially in abatement of the terrible threatenings, and menaces, peremptorily denounced against the kingdoms, and states of the world, this present famous yeere, 1588, supposed the greatwonderfull, and fatall yeere of our age* (London: John Jackson, 1588), A1^v.

¹⁸ 'prophecy, n.', in *OED Online*.

¹⁹ For studies of the Apocalypse in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, see Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse: Sixteenth-Century Apocalypticism, Millenarianism and the English Reformation: From John Bale to John Foxe and Thomas Brightman* (Sutton Courtenay: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978); Katharine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530–1645* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). More recently, the late Christian radio broadcaster Harold Camping gained notoriety for his predictions of the end of the world, which were 'based on a complex formula involving the biblical flood survived by Noah' — in other words, interpretation and expounding of the Bible. *The New York Times* reports that Camping's predictions of 2011 created hysteria amongst his supporters: a woman in Palmdale, California, attempted to kill first her daughters (aged eleven and fourteen) and then herself using a box cutter. She was unsuccessful on all counts. The same unfortunately cannot be said for another Californian who drowned when, despite being unable to swim, he tried to reach God across a lake in Antioch. Similarly, a Taiwanese man, fearing that recent earthquakes and tsunamis signalled the end of the world, leapt from a building to his death. Although by no means widespread, such frenzied behaviour, as well as the intensity of the media coverage received by Camping's predictions, demonstrate the extent to which we remain fascinated by religious prophecy. See Robert D. McFadden, 'Harold Camping, Dogged Forecaster of the End of the World, Dies at 92', *The New York Times*, 18 December 2013, p. B17 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/18/us/harold-camping-radio-entrepreneur-who-predicted-worlds-end-dies-at-92.html?smid=pl-share>> [accessed 3 January 2014].

harbingers of ‘the End’ and reports of signs and omens of the same. Alexandra Walsham notes:

Scripture taught sixteenth- and seventeenth century Christians to expect the appearance of false prophets and pseudo-messiahs immediately prior to the Second Coming. Early modern England nurtured a sizeable brood of bogus Christs and obscure persons claiming to be Enoch, Elijah, or some other ecstatic figure foreshadowed in the Bible.²⁰

Of course, the Apocalypse was only one dimension of prophecy. As well as having to do with Christian teleology and the fate of all humankind, prophecy also had significance in the more populist, albeit mundane realm of the local, the communal, and indeed the (unremarkable) individual. Seers were often consulted to perform such tasks as tell their clients’ fortunes and find lost or missing objects and personal effects.²¹ Walsham notes that preachers such as William Perkins, George Gifford, and Gervase Babington were extremely critical of such “superstitious” practices: ‘It was “fond”, “vain”, and “foolish” to suppose that a hare crossing one’s path betokened bad luck and divination based on the examination of the entrails of beasts and the flight path of fowls was equivalent to “wicked and damnable” wizardry’.²² The antipathy of the likes of Perkins and Gifford serves to emphasise the deep conviction with which such beliefs were popularly held. It demonstrates how prophecy was capable of operating within multiple spheres of perceived significance, from the trivial to the global, the everyday to the Apocalyptic. In the early modern period, the language of prophecy pervaded, it seems, all levels of life and society.

²⁰ Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 203–204.

²¹ See Owen Davies, *Popular Magic: Cunning-Folk in English History* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2003; repr. 2007).

²² Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, p. 179.

Indeed, early modern English prophecy was part of a tradition that ran through the nation's history, from the prophecies of Merlin of Arthurian legend to those that were believed to have both predated and predicted Britain itself.²³ To this degree, prophecy was perceived to be part of the country's identity, and can be found in its very genesis. For example, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136), or *The History of the Kings of Britain*, provides an account of the life of Brutus, the nation's mythical founder, whose own life was itself the subject of prophecy. According to the *Historia*, before Brutus's birth, his father had his child's future told: 'the soothsayers said that [Lavinia, Brutus's mother] would give birth to a boy, who would cause the death of both his father and mother; and that after he had wandered in exile through many lands this boy would eventually rise to the highest honour.'²⁴ Later, as an adult, Brutus is reported to have visited the temple of Diana, where he implored her to 'pronounce a judgement which concerns the earth. Tell me of a safe dwelling-place where I am to worship you down the ages, and where, to the chanting of maidens, I shall dedicate temples to you'. According to Monmouth's account, after performing the proper ritual, Brutus then experienced a dream-vision of the goddess, who prophesied to him the founding of Britain:

'Brutus, beyond the setting of the sun, past the realms of Gaul, there lies an island in the sea, once occupied by giants. Now it is empty and ready for your folk. Down the years this will prove an abode suited to you and to your people; and for your descendants it will be a second Troy. A race

²³ For a study of prophecy in early modern English literature in light of the 'Merlinic tradition', see Howard Dobin, *Merlin's Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry and Power in Renaissance England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990). Dobin's seminal text is undoubtedly the most substantial and influential work on prophecy in early modern English literature — and, in particular, in Shakespeare's English history plays — to have been published in the last twenty-five years, and will be discussed in more detail below.

²⁴ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966; repr. 1980), p. 54.

of kings will be born there from your stock and the round circle of the whole earth will be subject to them.’²⁵

It is not difficult to hear echoes of this passage, and Brutus’s original petition to Diana, in John of Gaunt’s famous ‘sceptered isle’ speech in *Richard II*. The notion of England as ‘[an]other Eden’ and a ‘teeming womb of royal kings’ seems naturally evocative of Diana’s prophecy (even if, in the case of the latter, it is the more heroic Troy rather than the spiritual Eden that fulfils the role of lost paradise). Indeed, Gaunt fashions himself as ‘a prophet new inspired’ at this point in the play, reiterating what is evidently an ancient relationship between prophecy and English history, with the former becoming, it would seem, the most appropriate and natural means of expressing the latter.²⁶

While the purpose of this thesis is precisely to examine individual dramatic instances of this all-pervasive relationship between history and prophecy in Shakespeare’s chronicle cycles, it is worth pointing out in advance that despite (or perhaps as a result of) prophecy’s prominent role in the nation’s history, its position in early modern England was problematic. As the historian Keith Thomas has shown, belief in the validity of prophecy and omens was particularly rife amongst the lower orders, especially considering that the country was plagued by uncertainty on a number of fronts.²⁷ The threat of Catholic Europe, typified by Spain, was a source of constant anxiety for Elizabethans.²⁸ Even the years immediately following

²⁵ Monmouth, *Kings of Britain*, p. 65.

²⁶ William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. by Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.1.42, 51, 31. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the text.

²⁷ See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), especially pp. 151–73.

²⁸ Indeed, Joan la Pucelle, the antagonist of Shakespeare’s *1 Henry VI*, might be seen to embody this threat. See chapter one.

the defeat of the Armada were defined by political uncertainty.²⁹ In fact, the year 1588 was itself the subject of prophecies warning of disaster and even the Apocalypse.³⁰ At the same time, England's Catholic enemies (particularly the seat of power in Rome) were also a prominent feature of the Apocalyptic prophecies of the late sixteenth-century. As Patrick Ryan notes, the belief that Rome 'was St. John's Babylon soon to be destroyed by the army of true Christians, God's elect waging holy war against the forces of the Antichrist' in the approach to Judgement Day was 'a staple of Reformation doctrine'.³¹

The unease surrounding Elizabeth's succession was another source of concern — and, with it, prophecy. The Queen was unmarried and childless, and, without a rightful heir to the throne, there seemed to be the genuine possibility that England could soon be without a lawful monarch.³² Naturally, Elizabeth herself became the subject of prophecy as astrologers and cunning-folk endeavoured to predict her future — and, in doing so, that of the nation. Dobin writes that 'there was

²⁹ As Nicholas Grene notes, 'The post-Armada period was no longer read [by late twentieth-century critics] as one of euphoric patriotism, and Shakespeare's history plays were often construed rather as a contribution to a radical historiography reflecting the political unease of the time.' See Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 7. R. B. Wernham suggests that, 'during the crucial six or seven years following the defeat of the 1588 Armada', 'the burdens and frustrations of that war, in Joel Hurstfield's words, "sapped the wealth and manpower and good temper of the nation" and thereby helped to begin a drifting apart of government and people, and of "court" and "country", that was to continue and accelerate through the next half century.' See R. B. Wernham, *After the Armada: Elizabethan England and the Struggle for Western Europe 1588–1595* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1984; repr. 1986), p. v. Wernham quotes Joel Hurstfield, *The Illusion of Power in Tudor Politics* (Creighton Lecture, 1978), pp. 19, 20.

³⁰ See Duff Hart-Davis, *Armada* (London: Bantam Press, 1988), pp. 11–14. See also Thomas Dekker, *The wonderfull yeare. 1603 Wherein is shewed the picture of London, lying sicke of the plague. At the ende of all (like a mery epilogue to a dull play) certaine tales are cut out in sundry fashions, of purpose to shorten the liues of long winters nights, that lye watching in the darke for vs* (London: Thomas Creede, 1603); Harvey, *A discoursieue probleme*.

³¹ Patrick Ryan, 'Shakespeare's Joan and the Great Whore of Babylon', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 28 (2004), 55–82 (p. 56).

³² For a study of early modern English drama in the context of, and as a vehicle for, this anxiety, see Marie Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977). As Axton notes, 'From the death of Henry VIII to the accession of James I dispute over the succession to the English crown was a principal focus of political instability and unease.' 'Men of law and popular dramatists were alike,' she suggests, 'in their anxiety for the future of England, governed for the first time since before the Conquest by a virgin queen' (p. ix).

an explosion of prophetic activity in the late Tudor period, precipitated, like Merlin's fit in *The Faerie Queene*, by the political crisis of uncertain succession'.³³ A bill, passed in 1580, made it a felony to attempt to calculate "howe long her Majestie shall lyve or contynue" or, indeed, "who shall raigne as King or Queene of this Realme of England after her Highenesse Decease."³⁴ This proliferation of prophetic activity led, moreover, to a number of condemnations of such practices, perhaps the best-known of which was produced by Henry Howard, the Earl of Northampton. In his *Defensive against the poyson of supposed Prophetes*, Northampton warns 'simple and unlearned' people against crediting prophecies, dreams, and astrological predictions (amongst other forms of prognostication), especially where they concern matters of state.³⁵ As Dobin notes, Northampton 'had excellent reasons to be wary of prophetic or any other kind of meddling in the affairs of state': both his younger brother and his father — Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, respectively — were executed for treason, the former having been found in possession of a prophecy that seemed to predict not only the deposition of Elizabeth in favour of Mary Stuart, but the union of Mary and Norfolk himself.³⁶ As Dobin observes, however, prophetic activity only increased in the last decade of Elizabeth's life. In 1599, the preacher Edward Topsell lamented that "above all the simple and vulgar people imagine that here is no Scripture like to Merlins

³³ Dobin, *Merlin's Disciples*, p. 25.

³⁴ Quoted in Warren D. Smith, 'The Elizabethan Rejection of Judicial Astrology and Shakespeare's Practice', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 9 (1958), 159–76 (p. 162).

³⁵ See Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, *A Defensive against the poyson of supposed Prophetes: Not hitherto confuted by the penne of any man, which being grounded, eyther upon the warrant and authority of olde paynted bookes, expositions of Dreames, Oracles, Revelations, Invocations of damned Spirits, Judicialles of Astrologie, or any other kinde of pretended knowledge whatsoever, De futuris contingentibus: have been causes of great disorder in the common wealth, and cheefly among the simple and unlearned people: very needefull to be published at this time, considering the late offence which grew by most palpable and grosses errors in Astrology* (London: John Charlewood, 1583).

³⁶ Dobin, *Merlin's Disciples*, p. 26.

prophesie”’. Sir Francis Bacon and Michel de Montaigne also ‘denounce[d] the prognosticators’ fraudulent practices as well as the blind credulity of the masses’.³⁷

These condemnations seem to suggest that prophecy was merely the domain of the superstitious and ill-educated — in other words, the lower orders. However, as Northumberland’s own family history shows, prophecy also had its place amongst the elite. Elizabeth often consulted Dr John Dee ‘in times of crisis, both about her own health and about general matters’.³⁸ This fact demonstrates the pervasiveness of prophecy’s influence, particularly in relation to what David Riggs terms ‘the occult science of astrology’.³⁹ For theologians, too, prophecy was a subject of serious debate, with many acknowledging that the possibility of genuine divine inspiration, despite its connotations of Catholic credulity, could not be dismissed altogether. Although the Protestant reformers had asserted that miracles were ceased, the notion that the ways of God were ultimately inscrutable meant that no human could claim to know for sure.⁴⁰ While in prison, the Presbyterian leader Thomas Cartwright was

³⁷ Dobin, *Merlin’s Disciples*, p. 26. Dobin quotes Edward Topsell, *Times lamentation: or An exposition on the prophet Ioel, in sundry sermons or meditations* (London: Edm. Bollifant, 1599), p. 63.

³⁸ Hart-Davis, *Armada*, p. 13. According to Keith Thomas:

The Earl of Leicester employed Richard Forster as his astrological physician and commissioned Thomas Allen to set horoscopes. He also offered Allen a bishopric. It was at Leicester’s invitation that John Dee chose an astrologically propitious day for the coronation of Elizabeth I. Dee maintained relations with many of the leading nobility of his day and was called in by the Queen to offer his views on the comet of 1577.

(Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 343)

³⁹ David Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 172. For a useful discussion of astrology and prediction, see pp. 172–80, as well as Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 283–92. Another early modern figure with an interest in ‘prophecy’ was the astrologer-physician, Simon Forman (1552–1611). Forman dabbled in what Lauren Kassell refers to as ‘the divinatory arts’, and he sought to derive foreknowledge not only from the stars but from his dreams, as well as his understanding of medicine and anatomy. See Lauren Kassell, *Medicine & Magic in Elizabethan London: Simon Forman: Astrologer, Alchemist, & Physician* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 215. For an account of Forman’s dealings with Marie Mountjoy, who may for a time have been Shakespeare’s landlady, see Charles Nicholl, *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street* (London: Allen Lane, 2007; reis. London: Penguin, 2008), pp. 112–17.

⁴⁰ Walsham observes that this ‘urge to pin down the exact meaning of particular prodigies’ was much indebted to ‘techniques of divination inherited from classical antiquity’, but was also ‘somewhat at

asked ‘whether there were anie Apostles, Prophetes, and Euangelistes in these daies’. He replied that ‘those callings ceased many hundred yeares agoe, and as no Apostles were euer hereafter to be looked for, so t’other two were not to be expected’ — ‘vnlesse God in th’vtter waste and desolation of the Church did extraordinarily raise them vp for th’erection of a church out of the dust’.⁴¹ As Walsham concludes (wonderfully inconclusively), ‘Although rare, [...] seers sent from heaven might still be wandering around in one’s midst’.⁴² This uncertainty might be said to be the defining characteristic of prophecy — and, from a scholarly perspective, perhaps its most appealing.

III.

The fluid and flexible capacity of prophecy to cross societal boundaries while also inevitably emphasising the disparities between different groups of people has made it a subject of great interest to social historians, as well as to literary critics interested in the dynamics of power structures and hierarchies within early modern society.⁴³ Indeed, from a Shakespearean perspective, the most extensive and influential study of prophecy on the early modern stage (and beyond) almost certainly remains

odds with Calvin’s stern caveats about divine inscrutability’ (*Providence in Early Modern England*, p. 198).

⁴¹ Thomas Cartwright, *A brief apologie of Thomas Cartwright against all such slaunderous accusations as it pleaseth Mr Sutcliffe in seuerall pamphlettes most iniuriously to loade him with* (Middelburg: 1596), B2^v. According to Walsham, Peter Martyr Vermigli refused to rule out the possibility that some prophets still existed in the Church (*Providence in Early Modern England*, p. 206).

⁴² Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, p. 206.

⁴³ See, for example, Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, especially chapter five; Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (London: Polity Press, 1989); and Tim Thornton, *Prophecy, Politics and the People in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006).

Howard Dobin's *Merlin's Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry and Power in Renaissance England* (1990), a work which falls squarely into the New Historicist school of criticism.

As a New Historicist study, *Merlin's Disciples* is interested in literature's potential to illuminate societal power dynamics, the subversion and (inevitable) reaffirmation of the power of the ruling order, and the text's ability to partake in this exchange. Dobin thus develops a model that seeks to theorise prophecy's function as a tool of political power. A fundamental assumption of this theory is that every prophecy possesses the potential to produce a multiplicity of interpretations, no single one of which is more or less authoritative than another. Consequently, any prophecy could be interpreted and re-interpreted *ad infinitum*, as different meanings (and their advocates) competed for dominance. In Dobin's own words:

we can understand sixteenth-century prophecy — and the threat it posed to institutionalized power — as the private self-authenticating interpretation of what was once regarded as absolute, received truth. Typically, prophecy was practiced by an individual outside the established order who opposed the prevailing powers and truths; the prophet refuted the authority of officialdom by claiming the supreme authority of divine truth. Private prophetic voices proclaiming alternate visions of the future rose to challenge the political, religious, and social institutions of the Elizabethan regime.⁴⁴

The archetypal 'prophet', whose anti-establishment agenda (as Dobin seeks to demonstrate, the early modern English prophet almost always had a political agenda) is empowered by the semblance of divine authority, has a counterpart in the figure of the 'priest'. 'The priest', Dobin explains, 'represents the dominant order as unalterable and natural, ordained and upheld by God. Through the strategies of demonizing, prosecuting, and appropriating prophetic discourse, the priest asserts the

⁴⁴ Dobin, *Merlin's Disciples*, p. 33.

dogma of the theocratic order and suppresses alternate interpretations. In contrast, the prophet represents a clear threat to the reigning ideology.’⁴⁵

For Dobin, prophecy’s defining feature is its potential to produce a plethora of potential meanings and thereby to subvert the dominant order of things. Prophecy’s power to validate a single individual, an entire regime, or even an idea within a providential design, thus presenting it as a part of God’s ‘plan’, is rendered all the more dangerous by the semantic slipperiness that often marks it. Dobin notes that many of the prophecies that were in currency in early modern England fell into what he calls the ‘Merlinic tradition’. That is to say, they were couched in obscure language, avoiding terms with concrete semantic value (‘king’, for example) in favour of riddles and symbols.⁴⁶ This indeterminacy embodies prophecy’s potential for subversion, as it meant that a prophecy that was read as validating the established order could also be made to undermine that same institution. Dobin likens this ‘style’ of prophecy to poetry, observing:

Prophetic and poetic styles are exclusive. Although these texts hold out the promise of divine truth, they function to exclude those unworthy to receive it. Both prophecy and allegory are tests — one spiritual, the other literary — that divide the elect from the reprobate. The faithful will recognize, even if not fully comprehend, and obey God’s will. Only the unfaithful or the treasonous will misconstrue divine prophecy, or credulously follow false prophecy, to their own ruin.⁴⁷

In *Merlin’s Disciples*, Dobin develops his ‘prophet’-‘priest’ theory (or, perhaps more accurately, framework), often using anecdotal evidence of early modern English prophets and their opponents and the former’s criminalisation and

⁴⁵ Dobin, *Merlin’s Disciples*, p. 36.

⁴⁶ Dobin identifies the ‘G’ prophecy of *Richard III* as an example of this kind of prophecy. As he explains, “‘Gloucester,’ Richard’s title, is the G of the prophecy. With a semiotic twist typical of the oracular and Merlinic traditions, the prophecy is fulfilled’ (*Merlin’s Disciples*, p. 66).

⁴⁷ This idea is based on Michael Murrin’s concept of ‘exclusive rhetoric’ (Dobin, *Merlin’s Disciples*, p. 86).

demonization by the latter. However, he also attempts to read literary texts of the period as expressing — and, more importantly, enacting — his theory of ‘prophetic’ subversion and ‘priestly’ containment. Amongst these texts are: *The Mirror for Magistrates* (first published in 1559), a series of poems, composed by multiple authors including William Baldwin and George Ferrers, in which various monarchs and other political figures recount their lives and the circumstances of their ends, often with providential overtones and moral lessons; Edmund Spenser’s epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (itself largely an allegory of the reign of Elizabeth I); and, of course, the subject of this thesis, many of Shakespeare’s English history plays.⁴⁸ What Dobin finds in these texts mirrors his conception of the prophetic contests of early modern England: the proliferation of the anti-establishment voices of prophets and the reactionary (and ultimately successful) attempts of the ruling order to suppress and contain them. Like many New Historicists, Dobin has a defeatist view of subversion, which he sees as being doomed to failure: the status quo will, it seems, always reassert itself.⁴⁹

Merlin’s Disciples remains one of the most substantial and valuable studies of prophecy in early modern English literature (especially where Shakespeare’s English histories are concerned). His ideas regarding prophecy’s role in the political discourse of the time, and the attack-containment mechanics that define it, have yet to be displaced by a more satisfying alternative. Indeed, echoes of Dobin’s work can be found in another major (but unpublished) study of prophecy in Shakespeare’s

⁴⁸ See Lily B. Campbell, ed., *The Mirror for Magistrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938).

⁴⁹ The Reformation presents a significant exception to this rule. For Dobin, the emergence of Catholic prophecies following the Reformation ‘demonstrates the political function of prophetic utterance and interpretation’. He explains that, ‘Once displaced and disempowered by the break with Rome, the priests turn prophetic, preaching an alternative interpretation to the new, official truth of church and state. Although inspired and sanctioned by the same claim of divine legitimacy,’ he continues, ‘the priestly Catholic voice, simply by being evicted from the center of power, becomes the marginalized and criminalized voice of the prophet’ (*Merlin’s Disciples*, p. 41).

English history plays: Richard Reese Hatcher's doctoral thesis, *Prophecy and Apocalypse in Shakespeare's First Tetralogy* (1995). For Hatcher, prophecy is a vehicle for public mourning (usually, it would seem, of the state of the realm); its subversive potential and tendency to express discontentedness enables it to become a unifying force that calls for social change. As Hatcher explains, 'The prophet unifies the power of the imagination as a way of conjuring alternative futures to the single one the dominant power offers as the only thinkable one'. Prophetic figures thus:

engage in a struggle for language in and through which their hearers might see the political situation from a critical perspective. In contrast to the grandiose, abstract language favored by the ruling powers, the prophetic voice most often draws upon the language of blood and soil, womb and tomb. In sum, the prophet is engaged in a struggle for language in an effort to create a different epistemology, out of which a new order might emerge.⁵⁰

For Hatcher, and especially Dobin, prophecy performs the same radical function in Shakespeare's English history plays (and, in the case of the latter, other works of early modern English literature) as it does beyond the confines of the stage and the page, in the society in which Shakespeare and his contemporaries lived and wrote. To this degree, Dobin's theory about prophecy's subversive potential remains particularly persuasive. Yet, his approach must also be acknowledged with some caution. Dobin's conclusions regarding prophecy's role in Shakespeare's English histories, epitomised by his typically cynical sense of prophecy's inability to effect real change, are somewhat problematic. 'The history plays', Dobin suggests, 'work

⁵⁰ Richard Reese Hatcher, *Prophecy and Apocalypse in Shakespeare's First Tetralogy* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Irvine, 1995), pp. 46, 49. The similarities between Hatcher's work and that of Dobin are perhaps best summarised by the former's claim that, 'As the time-honored idioms of the marginal and dispossessed, prophecy and apocalyptic themselves emanate from the edge', and that they 'typically cast a harsh indictment of present arrangement either in projections about the future or in an imaginative re-shaping of the past as prophecy *ex eventu*' (Hatcher, *Prophecy and Apocalypse*, pp. 128, 125).

to save both divine truth and political order by reducing multiple prophetic interpretations to the single ascertainable truth that turns history into a lesson about treacherous prophetic lies and incompetent kingship.’⁵¹ In other words, they serve to reaffirm and perpetuate the single ‘truth’ that empowers the establishment.

There are, however, two problems with this kind of reading. First, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, ‘prophecy’ in Shakespeare’s history cycles is rarely, if ever, so unitary and univocal in purpose, function, or effect. Prophecy is capable of doing much more than being simply a vehicle for political ideology, especially in drama. Secondly, Dobin’s insistence on the way that prophecy in Shakespeare’s chronicle plays serves to reiterate the naturalness of the ruling order is evocative of the work of certain Shakespearean scholars of the earlier twentieth century: in particular, E. M. W. Tillyard’s massively influential *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (1944).

Albeit with a different framework and approach in mind, Tillyard’s infamous theory of a ‘Tudor myth’, which he sees as underpinning Shakespeare’s English histories, also proposes that the plays serve to legitimise the ruling Tudor dynasty, represented of course in the late sixteenth century by Elizabeth I. According to Tillyard, this ‘myth’ was conceived by Henry VII as a means of supporting his claim to the throne, and sought to propagate the notion that ‘the union of the two houses of York and Lancaster through [Henry’s] marriage with the York heiress was the providential and happy ending of an organic piece of history’.⁵² Based on what he calls the ‘Elizabethan world picture’ — the idea that ‘Behind disorder is some sort of order or “degree” on earth, and that order has its counterpart in heaven’ — Tillyard

⁵¹ Dobin, *Merlin’s Disciples*, p. 65.

⁵² E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1944; repr. London: Penguin, 1969), p. 36. Tillyard suggests that the ‘Tudor myth’ was two-pronged, its second key notion being that Henry ‘through his Welsh ancestry [...] had a claim to the British throne unconnected either with his Lancastrian descent or his Yorkist marriage’. However, he considers Shakespeare to be less concerned with this idea, ‘though he must always have had it at the back of his mind’ (*Shakespeare’s History Plays*, pp. 36, 37).

proposes that Shakespeare's history cycles trace a clear pattern of divine punishment, beginning with an 'original sin' in the form of the deposition of Richard II and ending in the union of the warring houses of Lancaster and York.⁵³ They express 'successfully', he asserts, 'a universally held and still comprehensible scheme of history: a scheme fundamentally religious, by which events evolve under a law of justice and under the ruling of God's Providence, and of which Elizabeth's England was the acknowledged outcome.'⁵⁴ However, it is only by treating the plays in order of the historical events that they represent (i.e. from *Richard II* to *Richard III*) that Tillyard is able to read onto them a single metanarrative of providential justice. Only in this sequence, now considered to have been an invention of the compilers of the First Folio, do the history cycles seem to portray the unfolding of divine justice and the emergence of the 'Tudor myth'.⁵⁵

For as much as Tillyard's thesis now appears to be outmoded and perhaps rather crude, nevertheless recognition of his work is important partly because his conception of the English history plays would dominate Shakespeare scholarship for decades (indeed, he is often difficult to avoid even in more recent criticism), but also because his theory has a place for prophecy that has never been adequately redressed.⁵⁶ For Tillyard, prophecy served as an indicator of the unfolding of God's

⁵³ Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 16. According to Tillyard, the Elizabethans believed that disorder was temporary, and that, through Providence, order would always reassert itself (*Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 30).

⁵⁴ Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 325.

⁵⁵ Graham Holderness traces the idea that the history cycles constitute a 'linked, sequential narrative of English monarchical history' to their sequencing in the First Folio: 'It was assumed [by Tillyard and others] that the chronological reordering of these plays, secured by the printed format, infiltrated the overall meaning of the series, and transformed a sequence of discrete, independent plays into a unified national epic.' Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 2, 3.

⁵⁶ Despite his prediction to the contrary (Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 323), subsequent scholars have taken issue with both Tillyard's critical approach and his conclusions in *Shakespeare's History Plays*. See Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea: Studies in the Plays of Marlowe & Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Kelly, *Divine Providence*; John C. Bromley, *The Shakespearean Kings* (Boulder: Colorado Associated Press, 1971); David

‘plan’ for England, and was further proof of the plays’ subscription to the ‘Tudor myth’. Henry VI’s prophecy of the reign of Richmond — the future Henry Tudor — in *3 Henry VI* is the archetypal example of such a prophecy. Tillyard suggests that Henry VI is the ‘chief instrument’ of the expression of the ‘beneficent workings of heaven’, and that it is ‘he and no one else who blesses the boy Richmond (who would become, of course, Henry VII) and, as if divinely inspired, prophesies *a rescue through him from the present ills*’.⁵⁷ With this point in mind, prophecy can be seen as standing centrally within the ‘Tudor myth’ as Tillyard conceived of it. Henry VII, he suggests, ‘encouraged the old Welsh superstition that Arthur was not dead but would return again, with the suggestion that [Henry] and his heirs were Arthur reincarnate.’ Henry VII was not the only Tudor monarch, however, to exploit prophecies of Arthur’s return. As Tillyard notes, ‘the age of Elizabeth was sedulously called golden not in mere unrelated praise but to imply that the golden age of prophecy had indeed come in.’⁵⁸

Detractors of the ‘Tudor myth’ have challenged not only the conception of Shakespeare’s English history plays as a metanarrative in the sense that Tillyard had imagined, but also the notion of their role in endorsing the myth of divinely-ordained monarchy altogether. Perhaps the critical blow to this theory was struck with the

Riggs, *Shakespeare’s Heroical Histories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Robert Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare’s History Plays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Michael Manheim, *The Weak King Dilemma in the Shakespearean History Play* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973); Edna Z. Boris, *Shakespeare’s English Kings, the People, and the Law: A Study in the Relationship between the Tudor Constitution and the English History Plays* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1974). The impact of Kelly’s work in particular will be discussed in more detail below. Of course, Tillyard’s claims also had their advocates. See Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s “Histories”: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy*, 3rd edn (London: Methuen, 1968); Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

⁵⁷ Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, p. 195; my emphasis.

⁵⁸ Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, pp. 36, 37. Tillyard also notes that this tradition was continued by the Stuarts. In fact, James I claimed a twofold relationship to Arthur ‘not only through his Tudor ancestors but through his ancestor Fleance, son of Banquo, who married the daughter of Griffith Llewelin, himself a descendant of Arthur and last of the Welsh kings’ (Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, p. 37).

publication of Henry Ansgar Kelly's seminal study, *Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare's History Plays* (1970). In contrast (and, indeed, in direct opposition) to Tillyard's theory, Kelly proposed that Shakespeare tapped into not one single historical 'myth', but (at least) four: the myth to which the supporters of Richard II subscribed, and those that were endorsed by 'the supporters of each of the three dynasties that followed his reign' (i.e. the "'myths" of Lancaster, York, and Tudor').⁵⁹ Kelly recognises that Shakespeare's English history plays are sourced from and indebted to various historical chronicles and accounts, themselves displaying divergent sympathies and subscribing to competing 'myths'. According to Kelly, then, Shakespeare was able to pick and choose from a number of 'myths' to suit his needs. As Kelly puts it:

Shakespeare's great contribution was to unsynthesize the syntheses of his contemporaries and to unmoralize their moralities. His genius for sounding the realities of human passion and action, which are the components and raw materials of historical reflections, enabled him to sort out the partisan layers that had been combined in rather ill-digested lumps in Hall and Holinshed and to distribute them to appropriate spokesmen.⁶⁰

Indeed, Holderness argues that it is Tillyard's failure to acknowledge the diversity of Shakespeare's sources that ultimately causes his conception of the 'Elizabethan world picture' to be inadequate. According to Holderness, Tillyard saw the histories as 'mirror-image[s] of the present, not as genuinely historical'. Tillyard's "'world-picture'", Holderness argues, expresses 'only one dimension of Renaissance ideology': that preached by church and state, but not necessarily

⁵⁹ Kelly, *Divine Providence*, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Kelly, *Divine Providence*, pp. 304–305.

accepted by all Elizabethans, whose culture was ‘diverse and contradictory’.⁶¹ The would-be providential dimension of the plays reflects this diversity in nothing else if not in its variety and inconsistency. As Kelly notes, ‘In Shakespeare hereditary providential punishment seems to be predicted once by Richard II, and feared by Henry V in his own person and by Henry IV and Clarence in the persons of their children. But it is never dramatized as taking effect’.⁶² Prophecy, in its capacity as an indicator of providential agency, thus seems to be stripped of its potential to perform the function that had been assigned to it by Tillyard: that of reiterating the affirmations of the ‘Tudor myth’.

As the ‘Tudor myth’ was fractured, so too was the conception of Shakespeare’s English history plays as metanarrative. If Tillyardian criticism can be defined by a tendency to homogenise Tudor history, then the impulse of more recent scholarship, defined largely in opposition to Tillyard’s work, is towards subversion. Generally, the criticism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, no longer constrained by Tillyard’s ahistorical sequencing of Shakespeare’s English history plays, is often more concerned with these dramas as separate and, indeed, self-contained. As Graham Holderness observes, ‘postmodern notions of the end of history and the fragmentation of all metanarratives into discontinuous, independent “petit recits”’ have ‘provided an interpretative content capable of recognising the cultural conditions that produced, in the late sixteenth century, a collocation of

⁶¹ Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled*, p. 4. Dobin too seeks to distance himself from Tillyard’s ‘[un]subtle’ ‘concept of the plays as propagandist expressions of the Tudor myth’, rejecting the ‘model of authorial intention’ as a basis for interpretation. Yet, he ultimately concludes that, ‘By representing the narrative of providential history, the plays uphold institutionalized authority and the divine power behind it.’ (*Shakespeare Recycled*, p. 155).

⁶² Kelly, *Divine Providence*, p. 300.

volatile and unstable units of performance that appear to have continually thrown into question the apparently stable structure to which they normally belonged'.⁶³

Renewed attention to the compositional order of the English histories (i.e. from the *Henry VI* plays to *Henry V*, followed much later by *Henry VIII*) has led to a new conception of these dramas. This idea, that of there being two sets of plays (often called the two history 'cycles', 'tetralogies', 'series', or 'sequences'), while not universally advocated, has given critics a different understanding of the histories' significance.⁶⁴ As Patricia Parker notes, 'The reversed chronological ordering of the two tetralogies [...] undercuts the sense in Hall, for example, of linearity leading towards a punctuating point, historical end or period.'⁶⁵ Contrary to Tillyard, critics have, then, been keen to trace the evolution of Shakespeare's historical dramaturgy over the course of his career, from the relative inexperience of the *Henry VI* plays to the artistic maturity and sophistication of *1* and *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*. As this sequence developed, Shakespeare's idea of history has been seen to have become more nuanced, and his writing more self-aware. According to Rackin, 'The order in which Shakespeare produced his two tetralogies follows the progress of Renaissance historiography, towards an increasingly self-conscious and skeptical attitude, not only toward its subjects but also toward the very process of historical production.'⁶⁶ From this conception of Shakespeare's English history cycles has emerged the notion that, whereas the earlier histories depict an unsophisticated, providential universe in which the hand of God takes an active role in the affairs of humankind,

⁶³ Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Some critics oppose the use of 'tetralogy'. Grene, for example, suggests that it has connotations of Tillyard's 'grand narrative' conception of the English history plays, preferring the more 'neutral' term 'series' (*Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 8, n. 6).

⁶⁵ Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Contexts* (London and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), p. 37.

⁶⁶ Rackin, 'Stages of History', p. 78.

the later ones seem comparatively ‘modern’, portraying a political landscape both populated and shaped by a cast of Machiavels.⁶⁷

Contrary to the Tillyardian hypothesis, this view of the plays imagines a dramatist whose understanding and, indeed, idea of ‘history’ changed and developed over time. However, for some, the notion of a ‘sequence’ of plays naturally endures in one form or another. In *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays* (2002), Nicholas Grene sets out to interrogate the idea that the English histories were intended to be serialised (at least in part). But Grene’s findings also suggest that the plays can be divided into two groups: the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, conceived of and executed as a ‘series’, and *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*, which ‘grow into a series if only retrospectively’.⁶⁸ According to Grene, prophecy belongs exclusively to the earlier set of plays, in which it is ‘frequently used [...] to shape up the dramatic narrative to come’.⁶⁹ By anticipating the action of later plays in the ‘series’, prophecy serves a primarily structural purpose: that is, it predicts what will be dramatized in subsequent plays. However, this role cannot be resumed, Grene argues, in the later histories, which are structured ‘more typically by the retrospective rehearsal of what has gone before’.⁷⁰

Grene’s understanding of prophecy as an ‘organising principle’ — essentially, a theatrical device — goes some way towards liberating it from the ideological weight imposed on it by earlier critics. His conclusions regarding its function bear some resemblance to those of Marjorie Garber, who argues likewise that ‘prophecies offered the playwright a useful and suggestive model for the

⁶⁷ Rackin argues that ‘opposition between providential plot and Machiavellian character’ is a feature of the first tetralogy. In the second, however, these Machiavels ‘are no longer contained within the simple binary scheme that opposes character to plot and Machiavellian subversion to legitimate authority’ (*Stages of History*, p. 87).

⁶⁸ Grene, *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays*, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Grene, *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays*, p. 3.

⁷⁰ Grene, *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays*, p. 164.

“emplotment” of historical drama by encoding a foreseeable (and fulfillable) end within the unfolding story line of the play’.⁷¹ The effect of prophecy is therefore largely one of dramatic irony, Garber suggests, as ‘the audience knows the facts of history as the characters within the play cannot’.⁷² This emphasis on the significance of Shakespeare’s deployment of prophecy being dependent upon the audience’s historical knowledge is echoed by the more recent scholarship of Line Cottegnies, whose work has begun to reveal prophecy’s true potential as a tool of narratorial manipulation. Whereas Garber sees prophecy as a means of reaffirming the direction of the narrative (much like Grene), Cottegnies emphasises its disruptive potential. She argues that *2 Henry VI* (the subject of her essay ‘Lies Like Truth: Oracles and the Question of Interpretation in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI, Part 2*’) ‘reflects the contemporary anxiety [about political prophecy], but also manifests a sceptical view of historical transcendence’. ‘[I]n *Henry VI, Part 2* in particular,’ she suggests, ‘Shakespeare uses a variety of micro-prophecies, often uttered by dissenting voices, as a means of complicating the larger providential framework that has been later identified as the “Tudor myth.”’⁷³ There are echoes here of Dobin’s interest in prophecy’s dissident character, and Shakespearean scholarship’s abiding fixation with the ‘Tudor myth’ also manifests itself. However, for Cottegnies, prophecy’s defining characteristic (in *2 Henry VI* at least) is its power to undermine the homogenising impulse of Tudor ideology — an idea that, as this thesis intends to

⁷¹ Marjorie Garber, “‘What’s Past Is Prologue’: Temporality and Prophecy in Shakespeare’s History Plays’, in *Renaissance Genres*, ed. by Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 301–31 (pp. 311–12).

⁷² Garber, ‘Past Is Prologue’, p. 303.

⁷³ Line Cottegnies, ‘Lies Like Truth: Oracles and the Question of Interpretation in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI, Part 2*’, in *Les Voix de Dieu: Littérature et prophétie en Angleterre et en France à l’âge baroque*, ed. by Line Cottegnies et al. (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2008), pp. 21–34 (pp. 21, 23).

explain and to demonstrate, completely reimagines prophecy's function in Shakespearean historical drama.

IV.

Unsurprisingly, modern Shakespearean scholarship in general has acquired a more complete and nuanced understanding of Shakespeare's English history plays than that offered by Tillyard and his contemporaries (though those critics' work is not without value, of course). Rejecting the notion of a 'grand narrative' comprising the two cycles, recent scholarship (largely) refutes the existence of the 'Tudor myth', or indeed any other deliberate, all-encompassing and homogenising providential scheme. Yet, this movement away from the Tillyardian hypothesis also discourages a view of prophecy as performing the function that is traditionally attributed to it: that of articulating and reiterating providential design. The more recent conception of a body of historical plays that are individually distinct and autonomous of any sequence has freed prophecy from effectively fulfilling the rather one-dimensional role of chorus: one that simply provides a predictive — and predictable — source of drama and, often, of dramatic irony. However, this 'liberation' also raises as-yet-unanswered questions about the function of prophecy in Shakespeare's English history cycles, which it is the aim of this thesis to address.

The purpose of this thesis is not, however, to develop a theory that defines this function in limited and limiting ways, but, rather, to demonstrate that such a task may largely be impossible. Any conception of the English history plays that rejects homogeneity and even consistency must also acknowledge that prophecy, as a form

of historical narrative in essence, cannot be expected to manifest itself in the same ways in each drama throughout Shakespeare's career. Due to its explicit associations with providentialism, this thesis proposes that prophecy is, first and foremost, a most potent indicator of the kind of historical play that Shakespeare was endeavouring to write at any given point: his treatment of prophecy in any one play can be viewed, in effect, as a key that can take us to the heart of that play's concerns, unlocking crucial ideas about causality, identity (both personal and national), monarchy, and the art of the theatre itself. In this sense, the purpose of this thesis is to suggest that Shakespeare not only uses 'prophecy' to construct 'history': as a dramatist, he thinks through 'prophecy', in various ways and from multiple perspectives, in order to intensify and complicate our sense of the complexity and drama of history itself.

Due partly to prophecy's prominent role in England's history, its national identity, and the political landscape in the early modern period, this thesis focuses on Shakespeare's English history plays — primarily, the eight that comprise the two cycles — to the exclusion of other works in the canon. It does not consider the Roman history plays, nor those tragedies in which prophecy likewise plays a significant role.⁷⁴ Of course, without conducting a separate study on a scale similar to that of this thesis, it is difficult to make a claim for the uniqueness of prophecy in Shakespeare's English histories as opposed to his Roman plays. There are, however, a number of factors that should be considered when comparing prophecy in these two distinct groups of dramas. The prophecies of the Roman plays belong largely to a classical tradition of seers and oracles, while those of the English histories are

⁷⁴ The omission of *Macbeth* is to be justified, if not by its classification as a tragedy then by the unavoidable fact that it would be difficult to accommodate without it appearing to be a rather conspicuous afterthought. There is, however, precedence for considering Shakespeare's tragedies alongside his historical plays, this approach being advocated by Ornstein in his *A Kingdom for a Stage*.

presented and (understood by the characters) exclusively in Christian terms.⁷⁵

Though omens and prophetic dreams occur in both the Roman and English history plays, it would therefore be a mistake to treat them as inherently the same. In *Shakespeare: The Roman Plays* (1963), Derek Traversi argues:

Shakespeare found in Plutarch a narrative that moved easily and consistently, the work of a writer who saw clearly the ends he had in view and disposed his material accordingly. This *unclouded* narrative logic he was content to incorporate into plays which are, in a very real sense, the culmination of his life-long concern with the dramatic chronicle.

For Traversi, it seems, the ‘admirable lucidity’ of the Roman plays is amongst their most noteworthy qualities.⁷⁶ However, as this thesis contests (and as we shall see in the chapters that follow), transparency does not appear to be a particular aim of Shakespeare’s in his English history cycles. In fact, the opposite might be said to be true: in these plays, prophecy seems to work not to clarify the course and workings of history, but to obscure them.

The inclusion of the second cycle of history plays, which have rarely been discussed at all, it seems, in relation to prophecy, is, moreover, crucial to the approach taken by this thesis. Grene’s suggestion that ‘The *Richard II–Henry V* plays are not shaped to the same extent as the earlier series by anticipatory and proleptic figures, prophecies and curses’ epitomises a general lack of interest in this

⁷⁵ See, for example, David Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); H. W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1988).

⁷⁶ Derek Traversi, *Shakespeare: The Roman Plays* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1963), p. 10, 11; my emphasis. For a collection of New Historicist and Cultural Materialist essays on the Roman history plays, see Graham Holderness, Brian Loughrey, and Andrew Murphy, eds, *Shakespeare: The Roman Plays* (London: Longman, 1996).

aspect of these histories.⁷⁷ By contrast, this thesis privileges prophecy in the later cycle, not least because its perceived ‘absence’ in the later group of plays is capable of informing and expanding our understanding of both groups — the earlier and later histories — and, thus, of Shakespeare’s historical dramaturgy more generally. If Shakespeare can be viewed as a playwright who developed a more complex understanding of (and, indeed, interest in) history over the course of his career as a dramatist, it follows that his engagement with prophecy was refined and redefined also throughout his career. The aim of this thesis, then, is to show how Shakespeare’s English history cycles represent a body of work that is no longer chained to the Tillyardian notions of the ‘grand narrative’ or a single, overbearing providential scheme. At the same time, it argues that we need not restrict their interpretation to Dobin’s at times equally limiting framework of repressive strategies. Consequently, we are free to understand Shakespeare’s treatment of prophecy as tapping into any number of cultural or historical traditions at any one time.

In the sense that it considers prophecy in the context of early modern English culture, society, and thought, this thesis could be described, perhaps, as essentially an historicist study. However, the plays and how they are shaped by Shakespeare — dramatically and structurally, poetically and politically — remain the primary focus throughout. This thesis is less concerned with the ways in which Shakespeare might be seen to be commenting, for example, on the minutiae of specific affairs of his day or in relation to particular prophecies circulating in his own time. Rather, I am interested primarily in Shakespeare’s use of prophecy as a powerful dramatic device,

⁷⁷ Grene, *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays*, p. 164. For other critics who consider the later histories to be plays that ‘look backwards’, see Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Kiernan Ryan, ‘The Future of History: *1* and *2 Henry IV*’, in *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, ed. by R. J. C. Watt (London: Pearson, 2002), pp. 147–68.

albeit one that inevitably has a cultural and societal relevance that cannot and should not be dismissed easily, and how its use reflects his developing historical interest and dramaturgy. To demonstrate that prophecy is capable of both narratorial and symbolic significance in the plays of Shakespeare's English history cycles, and that our understanding of them can be both expanded and enlivened through more careful attentiveness to the language and conceptual frameworks concerning prophecy that are employed within them, is the central aim of this thesis. Although it does not offer a 'performance history' as such, nevertheless this thesis acknowledges that the plays in question were designed to unfold in front of an audience, and also to convey ideas about the nature of causality, identity, and history itself.⁷⁸ Prophecy has the potential to serve as such a rewarding point of entry into Shakespeare's English history cycles, then, precisely because it is itself a means of understanding as well as of complicating both history and drama. It is the very refusal of these plays to adhere to a single organising principle or scheme that makes them such a fertile and fascinating ground for interrogation through that problematic yet fascinating phenomenon: prophecy.

⁷⁸ For a recent account of 'staging' Shakespeare's histories, see Janette Dillon, *Shakespeare and the Staging of English History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

1. 'A prophet to the fall of all our foes!': Prophecy and challenging history in *1 Henry VI*

[W]hat if I prooue Playes to be no extreame; but a rare exercise of vertue? First, for the subiect of them (for the most part) it is borrowed out of our English Chronicles, wherein our forefathers valiant acts (that haue line long buried in rustie brasse and worme-eaten bookes) are reuiued, and they themselues raised from the Graue of Obliuion, and brought to pleade their aged Honours in open presence[.] [...] How would it haue ioyed braue *Talbot* (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee shoulde triumphe againe on the Stage, and haue his bones new embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least (at seuerall times), who, in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding. I will defend it against any Collian, or clubfisted Vserer of them all, there is no immortalitie can be giuen a man on earth like unto Playes.¹

In this celebrated passage from *Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Divell* (1592), Thomas Nashe credits the theatre with the power seemingly to raise the dead. 'Written historiographic texts could record the glorious past', Phyllis Rackin suggests, 'but only the theater could make that past present.'² For Nashe and for Rackin, the act of theatrical performance does not simply represent the past but resurrects it: those who are dead become capable of bleeding afresh, of losing their lives all over again. In effect, history on the stage is both live history and 'living' history. Although we might be tempted to view this apparent reanimation of the past as merely illusory and therefore entirely superficial (Nashe emphasises the role of the audience's imagination in this transaction), it could in fact be seen to have profound implications for the dynamics of the drama, especially where prophecy is

¹ Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse his Sypplication to the Divell*, in *Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. by Ronald B. McKerrow, 2nd edn, rev. by F. P. Wilson, 5 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), I (1958), pp. 137–245 (p. 212); Nashe's emphasis. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

² Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 113.

concerned. In historical drama, prophecy often serves to reaffirm the inevitability of a future that has already been written. However, if what we are witnessing on stage is revivification rather than re-enactment, performance is capable theoretically of ‘reopening’ history and undermining the inevitability of its future. In this context, prophecy attains the powerful potential to subvert and destabilise what might otherwise seem to be a ‘fixed’ historical narrative.

This idea is especially pertinent, it would seem, to the subject of this chapter, *1 Henry VI*, in which Joan la Pucelle’s prophecies threaten to ‘rewrite’ history. At the heart of the play, however, is a speech that exemplifies not only Shakespeare’s apparent interest in ‘revivifying’ history, but prophecy’s prominent and complex role in *1 Henry VI*:

EXETER

Ay, we may march in England or in France
Not seeing what is likely to ensue.
This late dissension grown betwixt the peers
Burns under feignèd ashes of forged love,
And will at last break out into a flame.
As festered members rot but by degree
Till bones and flesh and sinews fall away,
So will this base and envious discord breed.
And now I fear that fatal prophecy
Which, in the time of Henry named the Fifth,
Was in the mouth of every sucking babe:
That Henry born at Monmouth should win all,
And Henry born at Windsor should lose all—
Which is so plain that Exeter doth wish
His days may finish ere that hapless time.³

This despondent soliloquy at the end of 3.1 of *1 Henry VI* comes at a point at which the Anglo-French conflict hangs in the balance. Henry VI himself might have been

³ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part One*, ed. by Michael Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.1.190–204. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

forgiven for thinking at this point that his — and England's — fortunes were on the rise. After all, the King appears to have effected the reconciliation of his two great-uncles, the mortal enemies the Duke of Gloucester and the Bishop of Winchester, and has also restored Richard Plantagenet, long out of favour on account of his father's treason against Henry V, to his inheritance. To consolidate his double-victory, Gloucester encourages Henry to 'cross the seas and [...] be crowned in France': 'The presence of a king', he advises, 'engenders love | Amongst his subjects and his loyal friends, | As it disanimates his enemies' (*IHVI*, 3.1.183–86). Henry's response, while characteristically passive, reciprocates his uncle's rhetoric of violence: 'When Gloucester says the word, King Henry goes, | For friendly counsel cuts off many foes' (*IHVI*, 3.1.187–88). As this moment appears half-way through the play, the overwhelming suggestion is that England, having now mended its internal divisions, has reached a watershed moment in its war with France. Reinvigorated by the talismanic presence of the King, Talbot and his army will no doubt soon emerge triumphant.

This suggestion is not one that should be taken at face value, of course, nor, as the play demonstrates, is it particularly well-founded. Henry VI's power to unite and lead his countrymen, from which his naïve optimism springs, is shown to be a delusion: as much as he wants to (and, it would seem, does) believe in the nobles' sincerity, the various shows of amity in 3.1 are undercut by a series of asides, destructive of any show of peace. Winchester confirms Gloucester's suspicions by revealing to the audience that he has no intention of honouring their truce, and the Earl of Somerset, in a subversive gesture that seems especially suggestive of disharmony, inverts the nobles' salutation of the newly-restored Richard to curse him: 'Perish, base prince, ignoble Duke of York' (*IHVI*, 3.1.181). It would seem,

then, that Exeter has cause to be pessimistic in his summary soliloquy at the end of this scene.

In 3.1, Shakespeare presents us with a fork in the path of history. From this spot, we can see both the English revival that could have been (but, of course, never was), and the catastrophe that would soon come in its stead. But the continued squabbling of the nobles can only hint at the futility of Henry's attempts to revitalise the war effort. England's impending ruin is not confirmed as an absolute certainty until the end of the scene, when Shakespeare introduces a prophecy that contextualizes the present discord within a longer narrative of national dissolution, one that is unknowable to most — but not all — of the characters. Exeter, who observes the action of 3.1 in silence until the stage around him is empty, appears to be the only one capable of appreciating its true significance — an advantage of the unique position, almost choric in nature, that he occupies in the play. His near-complete lack of input in 3.1 is telling: presumably, he speaks only to join the others in saluting Richard, but even this contribution is by no means certain. His peripheral role in this scene is symptomatic of a larger disjunction that exists between him and the other characters. Rather than being simply a political outsider, as 3.1 might be seen to suggest, Exeter often seems to occupy a space that is actually outside of the play-world itself: he is both a participant in the history that the play presents and also a kind of observer, commenting upon it as if from a distance.

Exeter's position is thus inevitably paradoxical: simultaneously central and marginal, present and absent. This dichotomy is demarcated by the opening and closing lines of his soliloquy in 3.1, which seem to imply a fragmentation of his character into two or more distinct voices or consciousnesses. He begins bewailing his and his countrymen's blindness, lamenting that 'we may march in England or in

France | Not seeing what is likely to ensue' (*IHVI*, 3.1.190–91). Despite the fact that, for an audience in Elizabethan England, 'what is likely to ensue' has already taken place, the characters on stage cannot be allowed to know the course of history-yet-to-come. Indeed, blindness might be said to be their natural condition. However, at the end of his soliloquy, Exeter claims an elevated perception that seems to transcend the constraints of verisimilitude: England's doom is 'so plain', he says, 'that Exeter doth wish | His days may finish ere that hapless time' (*IHVI*, 3.1.203–204). The contradiction of his prophetic vision, at once blind and all-seeing, is one that Shakespeare permits at this moment, and which seems to exist outside of the play's linear time. Alone on stage, Exeter is able to step out of the play-world temporarily; looking in from this omniscient but transient position, the events of the previous scene — and, indeed, others that have yet to come — can be viewed and understood with an anachronistic and otherwise-impossible clarity. Here, Exeter is not simply just a character in the play, a theatrical representation of a real-life historical personage, Thomas Beaufort (c. 1370–1426): he is also the chorus, a talking chronicle, and an audience member, able to anticipate the course of history even as he lives it. What allows him to perform all of these roles at once, of course, is the prophecy that lies at the heart of and informs his soliloquy.

Yet, to describe Exeter as a prophet would be inaccurate, especially in a play that, as we shall see, depicts an explicitly prophetic figure in the form of Joan la Pucelle and which also employs prophetic language and imagery in its careful portrayal of Henry V at its very outset. Rather, Exeter, in keeping with his choric function in 3.1, might be said to be a 'keeper' of prophecy. His singular foresight is enabled not by divine inspiration, as Joan claims hers to be, but by his recollection of a prophecy from England's recent past. Indeed, the prediction 'That Henry born at

Monmouth should win all, | And Henry born at Windsor should lose all' (*IHVI*, 3.1.201–2) is recorded by Edward Hall in *The vnion of the two noble and illustrate famelies of Lancastre and Yorke* (1542). However, whereas Exeter locates it 'in the mouth of every sucking babe' (*IHVI*, 3.1.200), Hall attributes it to Henry V himself, though even here it is shrouded in uncertainty. Hall reports that the king, upon learning of the location of his son's nativity, was compelled to 'prophecy':

whether he fantasied some old blind prophesy, or had some foreknowledge, or els judged of his sonnes fortune, he sayd to the lord Fitzheugh his trusty Chamberlein these wordes, 'My lorde, I Henry borne at Monmouth shall small tyme reigne & much get, & Henry borne at Wyndsore shall long reigne and al lese, but as God will so be it.'⁴

Nicholas Grene suggests that, in *I Henry VI*, this prophecy 'is given all the more authority [...] by having been in "the mouth of every sucking babe"', associated as it is with the Psalms and the Gospels'.⁵ In the context of the play, though, it seems implausible that association with Henry V would not have been sufficient to mark the prophecy as credible. It seems that Shakespeare is aiming for a very different effect. By 3.1, that is, the memory of the warrior-king, so potent in the play's opening scene, already seems to have been lost. His semi-mythical figure, presented as a symbol of England's greatness in the play's opening speeches, is further distanced into the past by Shakespeare having Exeter 'misattribute' the prophecy.

Regardless of this alteration to Henry V's prediction, though, in a play in which prophecy is very much a present concern, Exeter's soliloquy reiterates the inextricable connection between prophecy and the past, between prophecy and

⁴ Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols (London: Routledge, 1957–1975), III (1960), pp. 41–42.

⁵ Grene refers to Matt. 21. 16: "'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise'". See Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 136.

history. It reminds us that prophecy is ultimately an expression of historical narrative, and that, in chronicle plays more generally, the utterance of the former is almost invariably also the utterance of the latter. For Exeter, the Monmouth-Windsor prophecy emphasises the immutability of the history-yet-to-come that it expresses. Indeed, at this crucial half-way point in the play, it is important, both thematically and schematically, that England is seen to be locked into its decline. As we shall see, in *1 Henry VI*, prophecy often expresses the threat of the nation's destruction. However, its implicit potential effectively to write history is elsewhere employed not to reaffirm the fixity of history-yet-to-come but to destabilise it. When Joan prophesies England's utter annihilation, the more that the nation is perceived to be 'doomed', as Exeter's speech suggests it is, the more powerful the disorientating force of her predictions. This effect contributes to, and might even be seen as directly symptomatic of, the rapid and disorientating decay of England that *1 Henry VI* presents.

The Monmouth-Windsor prophecy, articulated by Exeter at the close of 3.1, seems to exist in, or at least come from, a space that is somehow outside of the play. Its existence in such an external space might account for the otherwise inexplicable fact that, despite their urgency, Exeter does not share his concerns with any of the other characters, almost as if he is unable to do so. It is a moment of quasi-metatheatricity that actively engages members of the audience, asking them to consult their historical knowledge (however vague it may be) in order to anticipate, along with Exeter, the trajectory of the narrative (i.e. England's decline). In doing so, it clarifies and reaffirms what its original audiences might have understood to be 'accepted' history. Yet, the world of *1 Henry VI*, onto which this prophecy is imposed, is already fraught with prophetic meaning and imagery, little — if any —

of which works to illuminate in the same way that Exeter's speech does. Indeed, it is this fact that makes *1 Henry VI* the ideal play with which to begin a discussion of prophecy in Shakespeare's English history cycles, regardless of this play's uncertain chronological position within his body of work.⁶ The variety of uses that Shakespeare finds for prophecy in the play might initially give the impression of a young dramatist experimenting with the tools at his disposal, as well as with the historical mode in which he is writing. But the ways in which these prophecies interact with one another throughout *1 Henry VI*, and the patterns that they create, suggest intentional strategies of characterisation and structuralization that feed into some of the play's major concerns, historical and political as well as theatrical and dramatic.

The aim of this chapter, then, is to illustrate how, in *1 Henry VI*, Shakespeare is interested in dramatizing the beginnings of England's descent into political and moral chaos, a dark stretch of history that encompasses the Wars of the Roses and the tyrannous reign of Richard III. Throughout the play, prophecy is used not only to chart this decline, as it does in Exeter's soliloquy, but to contribute to its representation, articulating and accentuating the loss, despair, and confusion that characterise this drama. As well as Exeter, this chapter focuses primarily on two characters, each of whom is defined by a different form or aspect of prophecy: Henry V and Joan la Pucelle. Through his depictions of Henry and Joan in particular, Shakespeare presents in *1 Henry VI* a vision of the past that often seems to defy its own immutability, and in which prophecy's power to disrupt, destabilise, and

⁶ There has, of course, been no small debate over where *1 Henry VI* fits into the chronology of Shakespeare's histories, with some critics arguing that it was actually written after *3 Henry VI*. See Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, pp. 12–16. Although I here treat *1 Henry VI* as the first of the three plays about the eponymous king to be written, I do not believe that the way that prophecy operates in the play is necessarily dependent on its date of composition.

challenge catalyses his portrayal of the disorder and uncertainty of the early reign of Henry VI.

II.

At the heart of Exeter's soliloquy in 3.1 are two seemingly incompatible metaphors for England's decay. He explains how the 'late dissension grown betwixt the peers | Burns under feignèd ashes of forged love', which will 'at last break out into a flame' (*IHV*, 3.1.192–94). At the same time, he likens the body politic to 'festered members rot[ting] by degree | Till bones and flesh and sinews fall away' (*IHV*, 3.1.195–96). Each of these analogies describes a different process of degeneration, both of which will culminate in the same thing: the utter ruin of England. In this sense, they might be seen as proleptic figures, anticipating the direction of the play's narrative (as well as describing those of 2 and 3 *Henry VI*). Interestingly, however, they do not operate on the same timescale. The process of conflagration is rapid, violent, and unpredictable, while that of rotting is slow, steady, and insidious. What this imagery seems to suggest is that Exeter, as both a character in the story of *I Henry VI* and a choric, almost disembodied observer outside and above the narrative, is experiencing his country's deterioration on two levels at once: from within both the immediate and localised time of the play and the gargantuan creep of history. As a result, what Exeter's soliloquy indicates is the way in which Shakespeare, in dramatizing the beginnings of the Wars of the Roses and the nation's decline in *I Henry VI*, attempts to balance the necessity of following the chronicles (however loosely) with the impulse to explore the interstices between history as recorded, dead

and immutable, in the likes of Hall's and Holinshed's accounts, and history as 'lived' by Henry VI, Talbot, et al.

Exeter's soliloquy is, then, a site of contestation between these two incarnations of history. On the one hand, its prophetic scope allows us to view the events of the previous scene in the wider context of England's slow rot; on the other, it reminds us of the incendiary chaos of the world as the real-life Thomas Beaufort, Duke of Exeter, would have experienced it: a world yet to be stabilised, deciphered, and categorised by the chroniclers. Prophecy's capacity to arrange, order, and summarise, as demonstrated by Exeter's speech, operates on the same grand timescale as the slow rot that he predicts; it works to locate its own immediate context within a wider historical one, thereby seeming to contain and stabilise it. However, prophecy is also capable of operating on the more immediate timescale of the fire that is liable to break out suddenly, consuming with an unpredictable (and often uncontrollable) violence. In this mode, best represented in the play by Joan, it takes on the potential to create not order but disorder; it actually works to problematize the notion of a fixed and inevitable plot that we would expect the chronicles to guarantee, and to challenge (however temporarily) the narrative of English exceptionalism that can be read in them.

The processes of decline that *1 Henry VI* charts — simultaneously, then, those of rotting and of burning — begins with the loss of what Graham Holderness calls 'the unifying power of the armigerous monarch'.⁷ The fact that Shakespeare chooses to begin the play with the funeral of one of England's mythically great kings, Henry V, is of key significance in this regard. It delineates the end of a glorious period in England's history, and the uncertainty that it engenders breeds

⁷ Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 114.

pessimism about the future amongst the mourning nobles. On a symbolic level, it also seems to suggest something much more troubling: the failure of a conception of history that privileges a Protestant eschatology, and which is distinctly English in its perspective. In the scene's (and the play's) opening lines, the Duke of Bedford conveys the gravity of the king's death in appropriately cosmic terms. However, these images are perhaps not what we might have expected to find. Instead of suggesting the kind of celestial disorder that often accompanies the deaths of monarchs, they actually serve to express a startling lack of corresponding sympathy from the universe:

Hung be the heavens with black! Yield day to night!
Comets, importing change of times and states,
Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,
And with them scourge the bad revolting stars
That have consented unto Henry's death

(*IHVI*, 1.1.1–5)

Bedford's lament mingles traditional beliefs about the purport of astrological portents such as comets with natural inversions more readily associated with the end of days. The first line in particular — 'Hung be the heavens with black! | Yield day to night!' (*IHVI*, 1.1.1) — is reminiscent of Revelation: 'lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; | And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth'.⁸ At first glance, we might read these lines as suggesting that, for Bedford, the king's death not only entails the change of monarchical regime signified by comets, but is itself a sign of an even greater catastrophe to come: the end of the world. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that these omens are not being reported, but rather implored to come

⁸ Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, eds, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Revelation 6. 12–13. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

— as if by conjuration — from the depths of the cosmos. Indeed, it would seem that the absence of a black sun, a blood-red moon, or the ‘crystal tresses’ (*IHVI*, 1.1.3) of comets is cosmologically disconcerting to Bedford. In his eyes, the heavens, the stars of which are ‘revolting’ (*IHVI*, 1.1.4), are refusing to display the signs appropriate to the death not just of an English monarch, but of the greatest of English monarchs: Henry V. When we consider that, though not directly observed, such celestial anomalies are at least reported in both *Richard II* and *2 Henry IV*, seeming to portend the deaths of those plays’ respective kings, their absence in *1 Henry VI* seems even more pronounced.⁹

The significance of this lack of cosmic corroboration becomes apparent as the scene progresses, and the nobles begin to piece together an image of the dead king that is loaded with symbolism. Gloucester’s and Winchester’s eulogies to Henry depict him as a figure of ‘divine and superhuman power, somewhere between Achilles and the Archangel Michael’.¹⁰ Gloucester, for example, claims for him a position of singular pre-eminence amongst the nation’s monarchs:

England ne’er had a king until this time.
 Virtue he had, deserving to command;
 His brandished sword did blind men with his beams,
 His arms spread wider than a dragon’s wings,
 His sparkling eyes, replete with wrathful fire,
 More dazzled and drove back his enemies
 Than midday sun fierce bent against their faces.
 What should I say? His deeds exceed all speech;
 He ne’er lift up his hand but conquerèd.

(*IHVI*, 1.1.8–16)

⁹ See William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. by Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.4.7–17; *Henry IV, Part Two*, ed. by Rene Weis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.3.121–28. All subsequent references are to these editions and are placed in the body of the text.

¹⁰ Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 112.

Winchester, almost certainly looking to outdo his old foe, goes a step further, and attributes to Henry absolute divine favour, maintaining:

He was a king blest of the King of kings.
Unto the French the dreadful judgement day
So dreadful will not be as was his sight.
The battles of the Lord of Hosts he fought;
The church's prayers made him so prosperous.

(*1HVI*, 1.1.28–32)

Here, Gloucester and Winchester continue the trend of characterising Henry through allusions to Biblical prophecy. Their respective tributes work to portray him as embodying an ideal amalgamation of military supremacy and an almost saintly blessedness. However, the imagery that the two nobles employ carries rather more distinct connotations of Protestant apocalypticism. As Patrick Ryan notes, 'Gloucester attributes to Henry V characteristics of the Son of Man as depicted in St. John's apocalyptic visions: the Son of Man, whose "eyes were as a flame of fyre," whose "face shone as the sunne shinneth in his strength," whose "sharpe two edged sword" threatens the wrath of an angry God'.¹¹ Indeed, Winchester portrays him as the physical personification of Judgement Day, visiting God's vengeance upon the French.

The portrayal of Henry V as an apocalyptic hero is by no means unique to *1 Henry VI*, but can also be found in the second tetralogy plays that feature him. But, unlike in *1* and *2 Henry IV*, the imagery that defines him in *1 Henry VI* is

¹¹ Patrick Ryan, 'Shakespeare's Joan and the Great Whore of Babylon', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 28 (2004), 55–82 (p. 57). Ryan quotes Revelation 1. 14–16 and 19. 12–16. Furthermore, he suggests that 'When Shakespeare's noble characters identify their fallen monarch with the apocalyptic Son of Man and King of Kings, they define England's cause against France as righteous, even holy' ('Shakespeare's Joan', p. 59).

dispossessed of its potential to signify an imminent end to history.¹² Bedford's lamentation, which opens both the scene and the play, is not just a display of grief at the death of the King; it is also, on some level, an articulation of the desire for that death to mean something more within a wider and distinctly Protestant scheme of history, and an expression of disbelief that — somehow, yet impossibly — it does not. He describes the stars as 'revolting' (*IHVI*, 1.1.4) not because they have betrayed Henry by consenting to his death, but because they have betrayed 'history' as the Protestant English would have had it unfold. Henry's death is, in these terms, an anti-climax of incomparable magnitude. In death, the apocalyptic imagery that surrounds him thus becomes incapable of carrying proleptic significance. It is reduced to simply that: imagery — hollow rhetoric — emptied of the capacity to signify future action. This inversion transforms the function of the explicitly prophetic language surrounding Henry V's dead body from one of organising history to one of disrupting that same historical schema. Henry becomes a monument not only to lost glory at this point, but to lost hope, to a former state of prospect and expectation that can never be emulated.

By emptying Henry V's body of its prophetic import at the beginning of *I Henry VI*, Shakespeare necessarily also challenges that king's legend. In this sense, the playwright might be seen to be drawing attention to the elusiveness of historical truth — an obscurity that seems especially pertinent to prophecy, and to which Shakespeare will return in later history plays. On the subject of the legend of Henry V, Holderness wonders at the 'discrepancy between the size of [Henry's] awesome reputation, and the scale of the worldly achievement in which it is based'.¹³ As the king is already dead when the play begins, however, we have nothing tangible

¹² For an exploration of this imagery in the *Henry IV* plays, see Michael Davies, 'Falstaff's Lateness: Calvinism and the Protestant Hero in *Henry IV*', *The Review of English Studies*, 56 (2005), 351–78.

¹³ Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 112.

against which to measure the nobles' larger-than-life descriptions. Indeed, this fact is an essential aspect of his retrospective characterisation. In effect, Shakespeare allows his characters to create Henry for us at the start of *1 Henry VI*, and prophecy is central to this process. The nobles' words of exaltation fashion for the dead king a body and a life that 'exceed[s] all speech' (*IHVI*, 1.1.15), and he is transformed into a sort of pre-historical Titan that no one single actor could be capable of representing on stage. In other words, the myth becomes the man. As Holderness notes, the 'revival of Henry V's heroic memory' performs 'a double function very similar to the funeral rites celebrated in Westminster Abbey — that of furnishing an illustrious historical example for emulation and imitation; and that of providing a sharp reproof to the present's degenerate, effeminate days'.¹⁴ However, by glorifying Henry specifically in terms of Biblical prophecy, it necessarily reminds us of his failure to fulfil his apocalyptic potential. It also provides Shakespeare with a template of mythical and, more specifically, prophetic power with which to fashion that king's nemesis, one who is both his antithesis and his uncanny double: Joan la Pucelle, who almost seems to rise from the ashes of Henry's abortive prophetic status and who presents the English with what Lisa Dickson calls a 'conceptual nightmare'.¹⁵

Significantly, the scene immediately following Henry V's funeral straightaway introduces us to Joan. Her initial characterisation, as much as it is the antithesis of that of Henry, is in many ways also troublingly reminiscent of it. For example, the Bastard of Orléans, presenting her to the Dauphin, Charles, describes her as a 'holy maid',

¹⁴ Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 111.

¹⁵ Lisa Dickson, 'No Rainbow without the Sun: Visibility and Embodiment in *1 Henry VI*', *Modern Language Studies*, 30 (2000), 137–56 (p. 143).

Which, by a vision sent to her from heaven,
Ordained is to raise this tedious siege
And drive the English forth the bounds of France.
The spirit of deep prophecy she hath,
Exceeding the nine sibyls of old Rome.
What's past and what's to come she can descry.

(*IHVI*, 1.2.51–57)

Joan herself corroborates the Bastard's testimony, declaring:

God's mother deigned to appear to me,
And, in a vision full of majesty,
Willed me to leave my base vocation
And free my country from calamity.
Her aid she promised and assured success.

(*IHVI*, 1.2.78–82)

Later, she claims:

Assigned am I to be the English scourge.
This night the siege assuredly I'll raise.
Expect Saint Martin's summer, halcyon days,
Since I have entered into these wars.

(*IHVI*, 1.2.129–32)

Of course, the source from which Joan is said to derive her powers is highly significant here. Unlike Henry V, onto whom apocalyptic symbolism is read but who never claims to embody it, she purports to have experienced a divine revelation in which 'God's mother' urged her to 'free' her 'country from calamity' (*IHVI*, 1.2.78, 81). The images of the Virgin Mary and Saint Martin that inform Joan's initial connections to prophecy and establish her as a 'prophet' are distinctly Roman

Catholic, immediately identifiable with France.¹⁶ They reinforce our sense of Joan's otherness, establishing her as the antithesis of the proto-Protestant Henry V. We might, then, expect this strategy to undermine her as his illegitimate counterpart. However, as Holderness observes, 'Joan's mission of divinely inspired national revival is offered [...] dramatically without any obvious contextualizing irony.'¹⁷ Indeed, given that Joan might be seen to embody the threat of Catholic Europe, which was a source of real anxiety in early modern England, it does not seem implausible that the character of la Pucelle would have been genuinely menacing to an Elizabethan audience.¹⁸

The exploits of the historical Joan were recorded in both Hall's and Holinshed's accounts. The former's jingoism and vehement anti-Catholicism means that his account gives no credence to her claims to divine inspiration or prophetic foresight. From the very beginning, Hall describes her as 'an enchanteresse, an orgayne of the devill, sent from Sathan, to blind the people and bryng them in unbelife' — an explanation that reaffirms his notions of English righteousness and French heathenism.¹⁹ By contrast, Holinshed's *Chronicles* is more impartial, at least at first, in noting her 'great semblance of chastitie both of bodie and behaviour, the name of Jesus in hir mouth about all hir businesses, humble, obedient, and fasting diverse daies in the weeke.' Unlike Hall's aggressively reductionist explanation, *Chronicles* also allows for the existence of dissenting and non-English

¹⁶ As Michael Taylor points out, 'The feast of St Martin is celebrated on 11 November. Fine weather at this time would be a rather unexpected pleasure, an Indian summer, and would be in contrast to the normal bleak November climate' (*IHV*, p. 116, n. 131). Nancy A. Gutierrez argues that this imagery (or, more specifically, the allusion to the Virgin Mary) is not just Roman Catholic but feminine. Joan, she says, 'claims the power of "Heaven and Our lady," significantly a power derived from *female*, not male divine powers.' See Nancy A. Gutierrez, 'Gender and Value in *1 Henry VI*: The Role of Joan de Pucelle', *Theatre Journal*, 42 (1990), 183–93 (p. 187); Gutierrez's emphasis.

¹⁷ Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 127.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the anxiety surrounding Catholic Europe in early modern England, see Introduction.

¹⁹ Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, III, p. 61.

historiographies, describing Joan as ‘A person (*as their bookes make hir*) raised up by power divine, onelie for succour to the French estate then deeplie in distresse’.²⁰ Some of this initial lack of partisanship translates, it seems, into Shakespeare’s portrayal, which, as critics have noted, is less straightforward and more complex and dynamic dramatically than Hall’s overwhelmingly one-sided account.²¹

Like Exeter, then, Joan is a site at which, through her relationship to prophecy, several different and often incompatible experiences of history find expression and inevitably come into conflict. She emphasises, for instance, the contest between the experience of the English and that of the French hinted at by Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, but, as we shall see, she also pushes constantly against the notion of a fixed and infallible history with which an audience may have come prepared. Much of this subversive energy is evident from, and, indeed, generated during, Joan’s first appearance, and it stems from her explicit association with prophecy. Like Henry V, whose physical body is never visible onstage, she is constructed initially from the awe-inspired testimonies of her countrymen, even before she herself is present and able to authenticate them. The effect of this strategy of pre-emptive representation is to bestow upon her a quasi-mythical status similar to that afforded to the dead English king: the kind of status that can only be expressed in the unsubstantiated words of others. Indeed, the fact that, unlike Henry, Joan is characterised not retrospectively but pre-emptively seems to emphasise further her

²⁰ Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, III, p. 75; my emphasis.

²¹ Topical readings of the play, such as those of Gabriele Bernhard Jackson and Leah S. Marcus, have tended to emphasise the unstable, opalescent nature of Joan’s character. Jackson describes Shakespeare’s portrayal of Joan as ‘partially continuous and partially disjunct’. She comments that this ‘changing presentation allows Joan to perform in one play inconsistent ideological functions that go much beyond discrediting the French cause or setting off by contrast the glories of English chivalry in its dying moments’. Like Jackson, Marcus detects in Joan a series of possible allusions to Elizabeth I, which, she suggests, ‘undercuts the [play’s] appeals to patriotism’. See Gabriele Bernhard Jackson, ‘Topical Ideology: Witches, Amazons, and Shakespeare’s Joan of Arc’, in *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, ed. by R. J. C. Watt (London: Longman, 2002), pp. 20–41 (p. 22); Leah S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 70.

apparent reappropriation of his prophetic import. Whereas the body of myth that surrounds Henry V is, due to his death, no longer capable of carrying proleptic significance — his prophetic role has come to an untimely end — that of Joan implies the dangerous potential to affect the course of history still. According to Dickson, Joan even ‘appropriates the most powerful image of Henry’s spectacular kingship, the sun’, when she promises to bring France ‘halcyon days’ (*IHVI*, 1.2.131).²²

Joan claims the capacity not only to predict the future, moreover, but to bring about what she prophesies: ‘Expect Saint Martin’s summer, halcyon days, | Since *I* have entered into these wars’ (*IHVI*, 1.2.131–132; my emphasis), she proclaims. In 1.1, Shakespeare characterises Henry V through apocalyptic symbolism, necessarily rendering it as inoperative as the dead king himself. In this context, Joan’s apparent ability to predict the future — that is to say, history-yet-to-come — also imbues her with some of Henry’s unfulfilled potential to determine it. Her subversive energy is emphasised, then, not only by her overtly female qualities, but by her characterisation as an upstart visionary, similar to those whose unverifiable claims to divine prerogative provided a challenge to the Elizabethan regime in early modern England.²³ In fact, with the exception of the minor (and short-lived) character, Peter of Pomfret, in *King John*, Joan is arguably the only unambiguously prophetic figure in all of Shakespeare’s English histories.

²² Dickson, ‘No Rainbow without the Sun’, p. 143.

²³ For a detailed discussion of the subversive potential of such prophets in early modern England, see Howard Dobin, *Merlin’s Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry and Power in Renaissance England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990). See also Introduction.

III.

Critics have often regarded Joan primarily as a foil to Talbot, her role having been designed to accentuate the distinction between the chivalrous English and the cowardly French.²⁴ Yet, by introducing us to Joan while the aggrandised image of Henry V is still fresh in our memories, Shakespeare seems to invite us quite deliberately to draw comparisons between the dead king and the ‘new risen’ (*IHVI*, 1.5.80) prophetess. Like Henry, she is presented as possessing the archetypal characteristics of the Biblical prophet: the capacity to lead, military prowess, and, most importantly, the semblance of divine sanction.²⁵ Her promise of divinely-ordained victory over the English is strikingly reminiscent of Henry V’s successes against the French, which, similarly, were made not only possible but inevitable because of God’s support: as Gloucester recalls, he ‘He ne’er lift up his hand but conquerèd’ (*IHVI*, 1.1.16). Indeed, as Holderness notes, ‘La Pucelle remains until

²⁴ John D. Cox describes how ‘the properly humble Talbot is ranged against overweening Joan’. Similarly, Philippa Sheppard suggests that ‘Shakespeare depicts Joan much more as a wily military adversary to Talbot than as God’s messenger’. See John D. Cox, ‘Devils and Power in Marlowe and Shakespeare’, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 23 (1993), 46–64 (p.61); Philippa Sheppard, ‘The Puzzle of Pucelle or Pussel: Shakespeare’s Joan of Arc Compared with Two Antecedents’, in *Renaissance Medievalisms*, ed. by Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto, ON: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2009), pp. 191–209 (p. 192).

²⁵ Interestingly, these are the qualities that Machiavelli identifies as being necessary in a successful ruler. Indeed, the ideal Machiavellian ruler is, as Cary J. Nederman observes, based on the archetype of the Biblical prophet:

The only sure path to success, Machiavelli teaches, is divinely ordained. No one may earn admission to such a path through one’s deeds alone. God decides who is to do His bidding and perpetual political success is a sign of the divine gift. Moses, not Cesare Borgia or Pope Julius II, is the archetype of the successful Machiavellian ruler; and Moses succeeded precisely because he was chosen by God but simultaneously used his own abilities to advance and fulfill God’s plan for him and his people.

See Cary J. Nederman, ‘Amazing Grace: Fortune, God, and Free Will in Machiavelli’s Thought’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 60 (1999), 617–38 (p. 621). It would seem that Shakespeare endorses Machiavelli’s ideal only to an extent. Ultimately, what separates Henry from Joan is that the latter also proves to embody those characteristics most often associated with Shakespeare’s Machiavellian villains: deceptiveness, rhetorical trickery, and a desire to advance (and preserve) oneself at any cost.

her capture (unlike the historical Joan) virtually undefeated'.²⁶ When she proclaims herself 'the English scourge' (*IHVI*, 1.2.129), she echoes Winchester's description of Henry as more dreadful to the French than 'the dreadful judgement day' (*IHVI*, 1.1.29), seeming to suggest — with a surprising and troubling explicitness — a reappropriation of his divine power.

Given the Roman Catholic iconography that surrounds Joan (and, indeed, of which she is a part), the idea that she genuinely possesses divine sanction seems to be something of a conceptual impossibility: an affront to and a reversal of the notion of English exceptionalism embodied by the chivalry of 'brave' Talbot (as praised by Nashe in his memorable encomium, quoted at the beginning of this chapter). By the end of *I Henry VI*, Joan must be subsumed back into the Anglicised version of history that the chronicles ultimately endorse. However, for much of the play, she is allowed to challenge it, augmenting the disorder of the English state, and her powers of prophecy appear to be critical to this process. No sooner does she promise that 'This night the siege assuredly I'll raise' (*IHVI*, 1.2.130) than she leads the French to victory, validating — at least temporarily — her claim to genuine prophetic foresight. Unlike Hall, who downplays the correlation between Joan's appearance before the siege at Orléans and the triumph of the French there, Shakespeare actually draws attention to it, emphasising her disruptive prophetic and martial energy.²⁷ In an encounter with Talbot in 1.6, she bests him in single combat, boasting:

²⁶ Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 129.

²⁷ Hall records that Joan 'declared, that she was sent from God, bothe to aide the miserable citee of Orleance, and also to remit hym, to the possession of his realme, out of whiche, he was expulsed and overcome'. However, he immediately undermines her claims by commenting that 'I marvell muche that wise men did beleve her, and learned clarkes would write suche phantasies' (Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, III, p. 57). Tellingly, Joan is not mentioned at all in Hall's subsequent account of the seige itself, denying any correlation between her supposed divine mission and the French's capture of Orléans. Holinshed's account is much closer to Shakespeare's, noting her promise to 'raise the siege at Orleance' and her subsequent fulfilment of it. It may also be worth noting that, as Hall records, 'wise men did beleve her' — an apparent testament to her magnetism (Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, III, p. 76).

I must go victual Orléans forthwith.
 [...]
 O'ertake me if thou canst. I scorn thy strength.
 Go, go, cheer up thy hunger-starvèd men.
 Help Salisbury to make his testament.
 This day is ours, as many more shall be.

(*IHVI*, 1.6.14–18)

Talbot, disorientated by his defeat, responds by declaring that ‘My thoughts are whirled like a potter’s wheel. | I know not where I am nor what I do’ (*IHVI*, 1.6.19–20). By seeming to fulfil her own prophecy of French success, Joan is here shown to possess the power to invert normality and defy English expectations, making her an apposite symbol of the derangement of order that defines the play.

Immediately following Exeter’s prediction in 3.1 of greater sorrows to come, we are presented with another scene that epitomises Joan’s challenge to history. 3.2 dramatizes the loss of Rouen by the English in 1449, which, significantly, actually took place historically some eighteen years after Joan’s execution. In *1 Henry VI*, however, and after infiltrating the city, she raises a torch in view of her allies waiting outside the walls, signalling to them that they are able to enter. ‘Behold,’ she declares, ‘this is the happy wedding torch | That joineth Rouen unto her countrymen, | But burning fatal to the Talbonites’ (*IHVI*, 3.2.25–27). Upon seeing it, Charles exclaims: ‘Now shine it like a comet of revenge, | A prophet to the fall of all our foes!’ (*IHVI*, 3.2.30–31). Sure enough, the French straightaway capture Rouen, driving the English out of the city. Despite the indirect manner of this victory, which an indignant Talbot describes somewhat absurdly as ‘treason’ (*IHVI*, 3.2.35), it seems to represent at least a partial fulfilment of Joan’s promise of ‘many more’ (*IHVI*, 1.6.18) French triumphs.

Yet, the fact that Joan's victory is entirely unhistorical, defying and disordering the linearity of the chronicles, makes it entirely unpredictable, and Talbot's disbelief once again seems designed to guide audience response: 'Pucelle,' he claims, 'Hath wrought this hellish mischief unawares, | That hardly we escaped the pride of France' (*IHVI*, 3.2.37, 38–39). Moreover, the language that Charles uses to describe Joan's torch once again evokes Henry V. Like Henry, whom the English nobles had envisioned enacting God's final judgment upon the enemies of (an albeit anachronistic) Protestantism, the torch-bearing Joan is imagined as a 'comet of revenge' and a 'prophet to [i.e. an omen of] the fall of all [France's] foes' (*IHVI*, 3.2.30–31), a clear echo, it would seem, of Hall's description of Henry V as a 'blasyng comete and apparant lanterne in his daies'.²⁸ In comparison to Joan's apparent capacity to disrupt recorded history by 'rewriting' it through prophecy before enacting her vengeful 'revisions', Talbot's own promise that France 'shalt rue this treason with thy tears' (*IHVI*, 3.2.35) is rather unconvincing, conveying none of Joan's confidence and assuredness. Indeed, is it Talbot's death that shortly thereafter gives the English cause to weep.

Of course, within the wider scheme of England's slow decline, which continues long after this play has ended, Joan's prophetic torch is a mere flicker in the dark. Ironically, its flame — a symbol of chaos, of the conflagration that Exeter in his soliloquy of 3.1 senses is coming — also presages her own off-stage immolation in 5.5. Importantly, however, her death (and, indeed, the conclusion of the drama) is only possible once she has lost her ability to prophesy: the very power that otherwise grants her the capacity to disrupt history. As a form of historical narrative itself, prophecy enables Joan to 'foresee' an alternate version of history-

²⁸ Edward Hall, *The vnion of the two noble and illustre famelies of Lancastre and Yorke*, 2nd edn (London: Richard Grafton, 1548), p. lxxxi; my emphasis.

yet-to-come that runs contrary to, and threatens to overturn, the English chronicles upon which Shakespeare's two cycles are largely founded. In this sense, Joan's every prediction is a challenge not only to 'accepted' history, but to the possibility of an end to the drama: ultimately, Joan and her prophecies impede the progress of the greater narrative of England's slow decline into civil war. It is thus not until the last act of *1 Henry VI* that Joan, immediately before her capture in 5.3, is finally revealed to be a witch, only to be abandoned by the fiends to whom she owed her powers of prophecy. She addresses them as 'ye choice spirits that admonish me | And give me signs of future accidents' (*1HVI*, 5.3.3–4), but, ironically, it is their refusal to aid her that causes her to produce her last prophetic utterance:

See, they forsake me. Now the time is come
That France must vail her lofty-plumèd crest
And let her head fall into England's lap.
My ancient incantations are too weak,
And hell too strong for me to buckle with.
Now, France, thy glory droopeth to the dust.

(*1HVI*, 5.3.24–29)

The image of France's head falling into England's lap seems to work as a metaphor for Joan's subversive energy being subsumed, at last, into a distinctly English (and stable) historiography, one in which she is no 'prophet' at all, while its potential erotic connotations serve merely to extend Joan's final humiliation further.²⁹ Of

²⁹ Cf. Hamlet's ribald exchange with Ophelia before the performance of *The Mousetrap*:

HAMLET Lady, shall I lie in your lap?
OPHELIA No, my lord.
HAMLET I mean, my head upon your lap.
OPHELIA Ay, my lord.
HAMLET Do you think I meant country matters?
OPHELIA I think nothing, my lord.
HAMLET That's a fair thought to lie between maid's legs.
OPHELIA What is, my lord?
HAMLET No-thing.

course, given that ‘Henry born at Windsor sh[all] lose all’ (*IHVI*, 3.1.202) in any case, much to the profit of France ultimately, whether or not Joan’s final prophecy is genuinely prophetic is debatable. This uncertainty provides a marked contrast, then, to the almost perfectly prescient Joan of old, and is as striking (if less melodramatic) a confirmation of her fall as is her eventual execution. Without the ability to prophesy — the potential to re-envision history — the once inscrutable Joan is brought within the bounds of sure knowledge and of a fixed history. In this way, her threat is extinguished, and is finally able to be contained.

The failure of Joan’s prophetic potential by the end of the play thus mirrors, to some degree, that of Henry V at the beginning, and, significantly, brings the drama full-circle. Soon after her introduction in *I Henry VI*, Joan proffers a conception of history that acts as both an extension and a guarantee of her claim to divine sanction. Capitalising on the implied correspondence between the potential of the power that she claims to possess and that belonging to Henry V, she proposes:

Glory is like a circle in the water,
Which never ceaseth to enlarge itself
Till, by broad spreading, it disperse to naught.
With Henry’s death the English circle ends;
Dispersèd are the glories it included.

(*IHVI*, 1.2.133–37)

Here, Joan locates Henry in a history of ‘Glory’ (*IHVI*, 1.2.133) in which she is his inheritress. This glory might be simply personal or, perhaps more probably, national. However, given the context, it could refer also to the glory of God: a glory that Joan, and not Henry, now claims to embody, but whose relationship to which is eventually

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987; repr. Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.2.104–12. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

revealed to be fraudulent and perverse. Nevertheless, this image of dissipating cycles of decay, death, and rebirth — an almost entropic conception of time and perhaps even of history — proves to be particularly apt for *1 Henry VI*, which dramatizes the onset of the shameful disintegration of the English state through civil war. It is ironic, given Joan's prophetic foresight, that she could not anticipate that her ascendancy would, according to her own model, necessarily end in her fall.

The circular version of history that Joan envisions is, in a way, descriptive of the cyclical shape of Shakespeare's English chronicle sequence as a whole. At the beginning of *1 Henry VI*, Henry V is dead, and all of the hope that had been placed in him has been lost. Over the course of the play, as well as in *2* and *3 Henry VI* and most of *Richard III*, England falls further into both despair and disrepair. However, as we shall see, Henry V is reborn in the second tetralogy as Prince Hal, and his Protestant apocalyptic potential is, it seems, likewise to be reawakened there (and, subsequently, in his victory in France in *Henry V*).³⁰

Yet, it is clear that the early scenes of *1 Henry VI* employ prophecy in a number of different ways. 1.1 and 1.2 are proleptic in the sense that they anticipate if not specific events later in the play then certainly the general direction of the action.³¹ At the same time, they utilise the rhetoric, images, and associations of prophecy to characterise both Henry V and Joan as polarised, yet not unconnected, figures of prophecy. The end or death of English 'Glory' (*IHVI*, 1.2.133), symbolised in the loss of their righteous warrior-king, coincides with the appearance or birth of the French prophetess. By inventing this correlation, Shakespeare thereby destabilises the notion of English exceptionalism embodied by Henry V (and, in

³⁰ See Davies, 'Falstaff's Lateness'.

³¹ Grene suggests that 'The very first scene of *1 Henry VI* functions as overture to the play, if not the series as a whole' (*Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 133).

contrast, constantly reiterated by the likes of Hall), making the certainty of any eventual victory seem almost impossible.

Whereas Exeter's soliloquy in 3.1 thus employs prophecy to contextualize *I Henry VI* within a wider and specifically English scheme of history, prophecy is exploited early on in this play to engender doubt, providing an emblem for the chaos and confusion of national disintegration that is the overriding concern of the play — and, indeed, of Exeter's own prophetic outburst. In these moments, what we see onstage does not seem to be a two-dimensional re-enactment of accepted historical 'facts', but more of an imagined recreation of the experiences of those who lived it. In this context, the prophet Joan, while she lives, takes on a chaotic potential, threatening to defy and rewrite English history. She is allowed, however temporarily, to be more than simply a witch destined for the stake. She is allowed, albeit for a short while, to be exactly what she claims to be: France's saviour and 'the English scourge' (*IHVI*, 1.2.129). Such is the power of her prophecies.

2. 'What it doth bode God knows': Prophecy, disorder, and unpredictability in
2 and 3 *Henry VI*

[DUKE HUMPHREY]

My troublous dream this night doth make me sad.

DUCHESS ELEANOR

What dreamed my lord? Tell me and I'll requite it
With sweet rehearsal of my morning's dream.

DUKE HUMPHREY

Methought this staff, mine office-badge in court,
Was broke in twain—by whom I have forgot,
But as I think, it was by th' Cardinal—
And on the pieces of the broken wand
Were placed the heads of Edmund, Duke of Somerset,
And William de la Pole, first Duke of Suffolk.
This was my dream, what it doth bode God knows.

DUCHESS ELEANOR

Tut, this was nothing but an argument
That he that breaks a stick of Gloucester's grove
Shall lose his head for his presumption.
But list to me, my Humphrey, my sweet duke:
Methought I sat in seat of majesty
In the cathedral church of Westminster,
And in that chair where kings and queens are crowned,
Where Henry and Dame Margaret kneeled to me,
And on my head did set the diadem.¹

It is significant that this exchange between Duke Humphrey and Duchess Eleanor comes as early in 2 *Henry VI* as it does. The couple's discussion of their past night's dreams provides Shakespeare with a convenient opportunity to establish the characters' defining traits ahead of their respective downfalls: downfalls that are both prefigured by the dreams and bound up in the desires and emotions expressed therein. The placement of this encounter in the play's second scene allows it, moreover, to perform a proleptic function by anticipating later events in the

¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part Two*, ed. by Roger Warren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.2.22–40. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

narrative. The use of dreams — and, in particular, prophetic dreams — is a rather prominent characteristic of Shakespeare's early history plays.² In *Richard III*, Clarence's nightmare foreshadows his death by drowning at the hands of his brother Richard; later in the same play, Richard himself experiences a series of dream-visitations by the ghosts of his victims, condemning him to 'despair and die' at the Battle of Bosworth the following morning.³ The exchange between Duke Humphrey and Duchess Eleanor in *2 Henry VI* thus provides the earliest instance of what would become a familiar device by the end of the first tetralogy, but to which, for important thematic and artistic reasons, as we shall see, there would be no return in the second.

Shakespeare's use of prophetic dreams in *Richard III* will be explored in much greater detail in the next chapter, but suffice to say for now that the nightmares of Clarence and Richard leave little room for ambiguity concerning either the fates of the respective dreamers or the direction of the narrative more generally. Both characters receive oneiric foreknowledge of their deaths. Although neither one seems fully to comprehend the terrifying implications of his dream, an audience of *Richard III* may have become aware of a recurring pattern of promise and fulfilment. Indeed, this pattern is glimpsed briefly by Hastings, whose execution is anticipated in Stanley's dream of a rampaging boar, Richard's heraldic symbol. However, his realisation is essentially his own death knell, which necessarily precludes his communicating it to any other character. As the play rushes towards its conclusion at Bosworth, these prophetic dreams and other proleptic devices work constantly to

² For studies of dreams in early modern England, see Katharine Hodgkin, Michelle O'Callaghan, and Sue Wiseman, eds, *Reading the Early Modern Dream: Terrors of the Night* (London: Routledge, 2007); Carol Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance: Politics and Desire in Court and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). For a study of dream interpretation in English literature (including Shakespeare), see Peter Brown, ed., *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. by John Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; repr. 2008), 5.4.106. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

reaffirm its direction, eventually lending to the narrative a focus and even transparency — an impression of resolution — that is unprecedented in Shakespeare's early histories.

Of course, focus, transparency, and resolution are not words that are often associated with the *Henry VI* plays, at least in terms of the narrative structures of those plays.⁴ The disorder of internecine conflict that underwrites the content of parts two and three — which includes the rebellion of the Duke of York; the Jack Cade uprising; Henry VI's forced disinheriting of his son, Prince Edward, and the prince's murder; and the deaths of the Earl of Rutland and his father, the Duke of York — is inevitably reflected in each play's form, which is more episodic than the tetralogy's comparatively unified final instalment, *Richard III*. This agreement between the events that 2 and 3 *Henry VI* portray and the seemingly fragmented fashion in which they present them is not entirely unintentional, nor simply an accident of inexperienced or collaborative playwriting. Indeed, the ways in which prophecy works in these plays reflects their distinctive nature. As is so often the case, and as we have already seen in 1 *Henry VI*, Shakespeare's treatment of prophecy is usually indicative of his wider concerns, and gives us an insight into what he was at that time attempting to achieve as a writer of historical drama.

Nicholas Grene argues that prophecies and curses are 'frequently used in the earlier set of histories to shape up the dramatic narrative to come'.⁵ The same is presumably also true of prophetic dreams, which can be seen to serve a similar

⁴ In his influential study, Edward I. Berry argues that each of the *Henry VI* plays depicts the deterioration of a different pivotal aspect of society: chivalry and ceremony in part one, justice and law in part two, and kinship in part three. The theme of decay thus lends to each play an individual unity or focus, as well as providing a conceptual framework for the sequence as a whole. See Edward I. Berry, *Patterns of Decay: Shakespeare's Early Histories* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Press, 1975).

⁵ Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 3.

purpose, as in the above examples from *Richard III*. However, as Grene acknowledges, the proleptic dimension of prophecy in its many forms is not always the one to which Shakespeare wishes to draw attention: ‘Sometimes the emphasis was on the knownness, even the fatedness, of the events to come. In such cases prophecies acted as a proleptic prefiguring of the shape of the future’, he suggests. At other times, ‘it was the occluded nature of the signs that was highlighted, prophecies as riddles to be puzzled out, dreams as omens to be decoded.’⁶ This other side to prophecy, which we might call its ‘underbelly’, is central to Shakespeare’s dramaturgy in the *Henry VI* plays, perhaps even more so than its comparatively straightforward (and comparatively studied) proleptic function. One need only think back to the disorienting impact of Joan’s powers in *I Henry VI*, discussed in the previous chapter, to see how prophecy can work contrary to the illuminating or revelatory effect regularly associated with prolepsis. On this basis, the aim of this chapter is to show how, in the *Henry VI* plays, prophecies and dreams serve not to clarify the direction of the narrative but to obfuscate the causality that drives the events of the drama: events that encompass the cataclysmic consequences of civil war, including the deaths of important political figures and, eventually, of Henry VI himself. By emphasising prophecy’s obscure language and uncertain veracity, Shakespeare is able to manipulate audience expectations, projecting on a practical, narrative level the disorder that defines the action of the play. This chapter will, then, examine closely the key moments in these plays when ‘prophecy’ emerges, punctuating a drama of political chaos and destruction in ways not always predictable.

⁶ Grene, *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays*, p. 133. Although Grene acknowledges the existence of these less obvious aspects of prophecy, they fall outside the scope of his study, which, when it deals with prophecy, is concerned primarily with the ways in which it might be seen as evidence of the seriality of the histories.

II.

The exchange between Duke Humphrey and Dame Eleanor in 1.2, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, provides a useful starting point for an exploration of the ways in which prophecy works in both 2 and 3 *Henry VI*, not just because it is the earliest example of prophetic dreams in the first tetralogy, but also because it proves to be somewhat emblematic of the world of those plays. Duke Humphrey's dream, like those of Clarence, Stanley, and Richard in *Richard III*, is one of death. It anticipates his dismissal from the office of Lord Protector, an event that will ultimately facilitate his murder by his political enemies, led by Cardinal Beaufort: 'Methought this staff, mine office-badge in court, | Was broke in twain—by whom I have forgot, | But as I think, it was by th' Cardinal' (2*HVI*, 1.2.25–27). The dream also provides a gruesome foreshadowing of the deaths of Suffolk and Somerset, whose heads Humphrey envisions impaled on the ends of his broken staff. The imagery itself is not difficult to interpret, and affords the audience a relatively uncomplicated preview of the action to come, even if the web of causality behind the anticipated events is tangled beyond hope of comprehension.

Of course, 1.2 would hardly be worth discussing if it ended with Humphrey's dream, the straightforward nature of which makes it a comparatively unremarkable proleptic device in itself. However, the scene — and Humphrey's dream — is in fact utterly unique in Shakespeare's histories: nowhere else is the veracity of a prophetic dream, in almost all other instances a given, called into question by another dreamer and a second dream.⁷ As we have seen, Humphrey relates his dream to Eleanor, who

⁷ It should be noted that the dream of Stanley in *Richard III* is dismissed by Hastings, but out of scepticism rather than because of any conflicting dream of Hastings' own.

is quick to dismiss it, offering a would-be elucidation that reduces it from prophecy to mere aphorism: ‘Tut, this was nothing but an argument | That he that breaks a stick of Gloucester’s grove | Shall lose his head for his presumption’ (2HVI, 1.2.32–34). Eleanor’s interpretation emphasises the Gloucesters’ social standing — Humphrey’s political clout and the attendant security of their house (‘Gloucester’s grove’, 2HVI, 1.2.33) — and, in doing so, brings her husband’s dream neatly into line with her own, homogenising their seemingly contradictory insinuations in a fantasy of royal power.

If the implications of Humphrey’s dream — that the Cardinal will be complicit in the Duke’s fall, and that Suffolk and Somerset will meet grisly ends — are clear, then those of Eleanor’s are perhaps too obvious. Indeed, her vision of being crowned by King Henry and Queen Margaret in Westminster Cathedral inspires immediate outrage in her husband:

Nay Eleanor, then must I chide outright.
 Presumptuous dame, ill-nurtured Eleanor,
 Art thou not second woman in the realm,
 And the Protector’s wife beloved of him?
 Hast thou not worldly pleasure at command
 Above the reach or compass of thy thought?
 And wilt thou still be hammering treachery
 To tumble down thy husband and thyself
 From top of honour to disgrace’s feet?
 Away from me, and let me hear no more!

DUCHESS ELEANOR

What, what, my lord? Are you so choleric
 With Eleanor for telling but her dream?
 Next time I’ll keep my dreams unto myself
 And not be checked.

(2HVI, 1.2.41–54)

Eleanor’s ‘sweet’ (2HVI, 1.2.24) dream, to which she attributes prophetic meaning, is so opposite to Humphrey’s ‘troublous’ (2HVI, 1.2.22) one that she offers it not

only as an alternative but as an anodyne. Certainly, the effect that her dream is encouraged to have is one of neutralisation, both of her husband's 'sad[ness]' (2HVI, 1.2.22) and the audience's foreboding. Although it is impossible that Eleanor's dream should cancel Humphrey's entirely, nevertheless it complicates the earlier dream's prophetic status by offering a second, divergent future scenario. In other words, it emphasises not the 'knownness' or the 'fatedness' of the future (to borrow Grene's terminology), but its very unknowability. Here, it is not just that the prophecies are 'riddles to be puzzled out' or that the dreams are 'omens to be decoded', as Grene imagines, but that something more complex is afoot: the competing prophetic dreams work to scramble the anticipated narrative, rendering it perhaps even more impenetrable than it would have been had they never been introduced at all.

The closer we examine these two prophetic dreams, the greater this effect, produced by their dissonance, seems to be. In its cryptic imagery and capacity to perplex ('what it doth bode God knows', 2HVI, 1.2.31), Humphrey's dream bears a far closer resemblance to canonical prophetic discourse than does that of Eleanor. As Howard Dobin explains:

For Elizabethans striving to comprehend God's word and design, prophetic obscurity pointed to divinity. Prophecy signifies divine truth in the fleshly medium of human discourse, both insisting on the distance between human beings and God and promising eventual reunion with God. Concealment is only revelation deferred.⁸

The relative 'obscurity' of Humphrey's dream, coupled with its dreamer's infectious uneasiness over its implications and his own admirable sense of morality, seems to demand that the audience treat it as genuinely prophetic. Indeed, Eleanor's self-

⁸ Howard Dobin, *Merlin's Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry and Power in Renaissance England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 82.

absorption initially urges the interpretation that her own dream is nothing more than a wish-fulfilment fantasy, a manifestation of her professed desire for status and power. The fact that her husband understands it in this way encourages further this reading. However, Shakespeare ensures that this simple and perhaps even natural understanding of the scene does not hold up to scrutiny. The would-be divine obscurity that Dobin identifies is, in fact, less straightforward than the above quotation suggests. Elsewhere, he reveals another, more troubling side to this abstruseness:

The veiled sense and obscure language of canonical prophetic texts posed vexing questions: If scripture and prophecy were the direct word of God, why were they couched in such difficult language? Why were these divine texts so easily and so often misunderstood? If both God and the devil spoke in riddles, how was one to know which prophecies were divine and which demonic?⁹

The contradictory implications of ‘prophetic obscurity’, which, as Dobin shows, possesses the potential to indicate both divine and satanic presence, problematizes our unreserved acceptance of Humphrey’s dream as authentic. It becomes subject to the same ‘vexing’ questions that Dobin asks of canonical prophetic texts, and therefore also takes on their dangerous uncertainty.

As we shall see, Shakespeare’s interest in this problem of interpretation becomes more obvious as the play progresses. In the immediate context, though, it sanctions Eleanor’s scepticism about the import of her husband’s dream, in turn lending authority to her own, at first seemingly insignificant, vision of the future. As Carol Schreier Rupprecht shows, Shakespeare employs (or, rather, inverts) an important convention of ancient and medieval dream theory in his presentation of the

⁹ Dobin, *Merlin’s Disciples*, p. 76.

Duchess's dream, throwing its apparent implications even further into doubt. As Rupprecht points out,

Ancient and medieval dream treatises and literary texts often used the convention that dreams occurring in the morning, especially in the hours immediately before dawn, are purer, more beneficent, or at least more trustworthy. [...] The early morning, pre-dawn dreams are regarded as more reliably prophetic and meaningful since they are less somatically involved.¹⁰

The authenticity of Eleanor's dream, which she refers to specifically as her '*morning's* dream' (2*HVI*, 1.2.24; my emphasis), is thus supported by a theory that was apparently current in Shakespeare's day. Rupprecht argues that 'In inverting this convention by making the Duchess's morning dream misleading and the Duke's "night" dream true, Shakespeare presents moral character as more strongly correlated to dream content and meaning than are bodily processes taking place during sleep', suggesting that he played an 'important transitional role [...] in the history of dream theory and the literary representation of dreams'.¹¹

Regardless of any correlation between 'moral character' and 'dream content' that might be said to exist (after the eventual fulfilment of the relevant prophecies, of course), Shakespeare's tactic of inverting the conventions of dream theory here works to complicate further the audience's attempts to interpret the Duke and Duchess's respective dreams. Humphrey's upright 'moral character' and the comparatively obscure nature of his dream are solid indicators of its authenticity, whereas Eleanor's corrupt character and the wish-fulfilment aspect of her dream

¹⁰ Carol Schreier Rupprecht, 'The Drama of History and Prophecy: Shakespeare's Use of Dream in 2 *Henry VI*, *Dreaming*, 3 (1993), 211–27 (p. 216).

¹¹ Rupprecht, 'The Drama of History and Prophecy', pp. 216, 211. For Rupprecht, Shakespeare, along with Girolamo Cardano and Thomas Nashe, 'contribute[s] to the growing secularization of dream by dismantling the traditional hierarchy which placed greater value on predawn dreams because of their more spiritualized etiology' ('The Drama of History and Prophecy', p. 217).

immediately discredit it. However, the Duke's dream is diminished by the possibility of the devil's involvement (as well as his wife's alternative interpretation), while that of the Duchess is lent weight by the proposals of early modern dream theory. The pattern of implications here seems to be purposefully confused, even paradoxical, but its effect is precise. Each dream, believed by its dreamer to be prophetic, is undermined by its counterpart; each would-be future throws the other into uncertainty. With Eleanor's final remark, Shakespeare cleverly draws attention to this dilemma of prophecy by giving to the dreams absolute equality and thereby reducing them both to insignificance: 'Are you so choleric | With Eleanor for telling *but* her dream?' (2*HVI*, 1.2.51–52; my emphasis). The impossibility of interpretation — and, by extension, prediction — is thus made complete in 2 *Henry VI* as early as 1.2.

III.

Humphrey and Eleanor's discussion of their dreams comes, of course, immediately after the play's chaotic opening scene. Like that which follows it, 1.1 is concerned (albeit less obviously) with prolepsis and the problem of prediction, and is itself in many ways a foretaste of 1.2. As the play begins, King Henry receives Margaret of Anjou as his queen, much to the dismay of the other nobles, who object to the 'shameful' (2*HVI*, 1.1.97) terms of the match. The King's marriage reveals a rift between himself and the peers, one that extends over the course of the scene to divide the peers from one another. In this way, 1.1 demonstrates how the future is an object of uncertainty and anxiety from the play's earliest moments. Indeed,

England's future is very much at stake in the interactions of the nobles, whose different expectations for that future underline its precariousness. For Humphrey, the royal marriage is a 'Fatal' (2HVI, 1.1.98) omen that points towards a time in which the country's glorious past has been erased:

O peers of England, shameful is this league,
Fatal this marriage, cancelling your fame,
Blotting your names from books of memory,
Razing the characters of your renown,
Defacing monuments of conquered France,
Undoing all, as all had never been!

(2HVI, 1.1.97–102)

Cardinal Beaufort's dismissal of his nephew's alarm — 'For France, 'tis ours, and we will keep it still' (2HVI, 1.1.105) — does little to diminish it: it is symptomatic of a factiousness that only evidences Humphrey's concerns. When Beaufort's hostility finally forces the Duke to take his leave, he claims a prophetic foresight that, though presumably not intended to be taken literally, serves as a final, frustrated warning: 'say when I am gone, | I prophesied France will be lost ere long' (2HVI, 1.1.144–45).

Despite the conviction (and, indeed, the eloquence) of Humphrey's would-be prophecy, its distinction of being the scene's only foretelling of the future is short-lived. It is followed by a succession of lower-key predictions that work simultaneously to splinter England's nobility and the nation's anticipated future. Beaufort is quick to try to incite the other nobles against his nephew, reminding them that Humphrey 'is the next of blood | And heir apparent to the English crown' (2HVI, 1.1.150–51), and predicting that 'He will be found a dangerous Protector' (2HVI, 1.1.163). The image of a potentially regicidal Lord Protector — although it will be realised in the figure of another Duke of Gloucester, Richard, in *Richard III* — seems irreconcilable with Humphrey's selflessness. In Beaufort's vision, the body of

the king is in actuality a stand-in for himself and others of the nobles, each of whom sees their fortune as being subject to the fate of the Lord Protector. For this reason, Buckingham and Somerset agree to help to ‘quickly hoist Duke Humphrey from his seat’ (2HVI, 1.1.168), removing him as an obstacle to their own advancement. Yet it is Beaufort himself whom they identify as holding the greatest future threat: ‘His insolence is more intolerable | Than all the princes in the land beside. | If Gloucester be displaced, he’ll be Protector’ (2HVI, 1.1.174–76). Salisbury, Warwick, and York perceive that Buckingham and Somerset ‘labour for their own preferment’ (2HVI, 1.1.180), and resolve themselves to ‘labour for the realm’ (2HVI, 1.1.181). Unbeknownst to all of the others, though, York is in fact labouring for the crown: ‘A day will come when York shall claim his own’ (2HVI, 1.1.238), he foresees. In his vision of the future, the office of Lord Protector is not up for grabs — as Beaufort, Buckingham, and Somerset imagine — but defunct, as the peers’ scramble for power is rendered meaningless by an entirely new monarchical regime.

That disruption in its many forms is one of the major concerns of the *Henry VI* plays has long been recognised by critics.¹² However, very little has been said about how this disorder translates into the realm of the prophetic. What is significant about 1.1 of 2 *Henry VI* is the way in which the extent of the nobility’s factiousness is revealed piecemeal through a series of what are essentially predictions. Each nobleman or faction offers a vision of the future that necessitates or at least anticipates action, but which is incompatible with those of their peers — largely because of their own personal ambitions. In other words, the profound disunity of the state permeates the narrative even to the level of prolepsis. The result is a palimpsest

¹² See, for example, Berry, *Patterns of Decay*. Phyllis Rackin describes the action of the *Henry VI* plays as ‘chaotic and meaningless’, at least until it is ‘explained in retrospect in *Richard III*’. See Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 62.

of predictions that, in its sheer density, becomes illegible: each successive prediction is 'written over' the last. This palimpsest is complicated further almost immediately by the prophetic dreams of Humphrey and Eleanor in the following scene. Rupprecht suggests that 'one function of the dialogue [between the Duke and Duchess] appears to be to demonstrate that the pervading atmosphere of tension and suspicion in the kingdom is affecting people even at the level of sleep and dream'.¹³ There is certainly truth in this observation. However, it is not the only way in which Humphrey and Eleanor's discussion of their dreams might be seen as an extension of 1.1. Tension and suspicion, while undeniably present in the play's opening scene, do not seem to be its defining characteristics. Rather, the way in which the scene unfolds, drawing attention to the nobles' conflicting visions of the future, seems designed to emphasise the political disorder of the nation and its uncertain fate. If anything, Humphrey and Eleanor's dreams, and the mechanics of the dialogue surrounding them, provide a more solid symbol of this disorder — as well as, as we shall see, the seeds of some of the main narrative strands of the play.

IV.

The encounter between Humphrey and Eleanor is only the first of many episodes in the *Henry VI* plays that deal explicitly with prophecy. Moreover, the difficulty that the Duke and Duchess experience in attempting to decode their past night's dreams is shared by the audience. Whereas many prophecies are marked by dramatic irony (Stanley's dream in *Richard III* being a particularly illustrative example),

¹³ Rupprecht, 'The Drama of History and Prophecy', p. 214.

Shakespeare presents the Gloucesters' dreams in such a way as to limit the possibility of spectatorial prescience. Despite possessing a privileged historical position in relation to the play, the audience cannot be certain of being privy to any foreknowledge to which the characters are oblivious. As 1.1 suggests, both this inscrutability and the consequent difficulty of prediction are manifestations of the disorder that characterises the world of 2 and 3 *Henry VI* — a disorder that not only permeates all levels of the drama itself, but even filters through to its spectators.

In the *Henry VI* plays, then, prophecy is both an expression of disorder and a source of the same. Eleanor's oneiric vision might be understood as a manifestation of her desire for the crown, but, as we have seen, its complicated presentation also serves to obstruct the would-be prolepsis of Humphrey's own vision. Indeed, as well as creating narrative confusion, the Gloucesters' dreams come to contribute to the disunity of the state itself. Immediately following the couple's conversation in 1.2, the Duchess begins to act upon the dangerous suggestions of her vision. Once alone onstage, she reveals her intentions to the audience:

Follow I must; I cannot go before
While Gloucester bears this base and humble mind.
Were I a man, a duke, and next of blood,
I would remove these tedious stumbling blocks
And smooth my way upon their headless necks.
And being a woman, I will not be slack
To play my part in Fortune's pageant.

(2*HVI*, 1.2.61–67)

It is evident from their initial reactions to their dreams that the Duke and Duchess's respective attitudes towards prophecy are very different. In his recognition of divine inscrutability ('what it doth bode God knows', 2*HVI*, 1.2.31) and resignation to God's will, Humphrey anticipates the impractical unworldliness of King Henry, as

well as the pious (but equally ineffectual) passivity initially shown by John of Gaunt in *Richard II*. Each of these characters is marked by an admirable but unworkable idealism that leaves them prey to their more pragmatic political adversaries. Although it would be inaccurate to describe Eleanor as a Machiavel, her desire for potentially bloody self-advancement ('I would remove these tedious stumbling blocks | And smooth my way upon their headless necks', *2HVI*, 1.2.64–65) means that she is unable to disregard the dreams' promises of majesty.

In contrast to Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who, as we shall see in the next chapter, is typified and perhaps even defined by his contemptuous attitude towards prophecy, Eleanor invests herself entirely in its veracity. Her desire for the crown dictates her interpretation of the dreams, which in turn seem to authorise that desire. Indeed, when she declares her husband — a man who is 'next of blood' (*2HVI*, 1.2.63) and second only to the king — to be of 'base and humble mind' (*2HVI*, 1.2.62), she acts as though she is sitting on the throne already. Prophecy, which so often works by the subversion of linguistic conventions or expectations, seems even to disrupt language itself here: the disparate definitions of 'dream', which can mean both the visions of the unconscious and the ambitions of the conscious mind, become for the Duchess conflated. Her pursuit of her dream (in multiple senses of the word) forces us to confront the issue of causality: a concern that, in Shakespeare's histories, never seems to be far beneath the surface, especially where prophecy is involved.

That Eleanor conceives of the dreams (but particularly her own) as providential is suggested by her excitement at their initial recounting. However, it is not until she vows that 'I will not be slack, | To play my part in Fortune's pageant' (*2HVI*, 1.2.66–67) that she reveals explicitly the causality that she perceives to be behind both the dreams and, presumably, the waking world to which they seem to

speak. Eleanor sees herself as living in a providential universe in which dreams can — and do — show the future. By recasting the world around her as ‘Fortune’s pageant’, she essentially relinquishes her own agency, which becomes merely a predetermined ‘part’ that she must ‘play’ (2*HVI*, 1.2.67). Eleanor’s blurring of human and divine will through the imagery of performance is a striking reversal of Richard, Duke of Gloucester’s conception of acting as an expression of individual agency.¹⁴ If ‘All the world’s a stage’, as Jaques attests in *As You Like It*, then not all of the ‘players’ of 2 and 3 *Henry VI* are in agreement as to whose script they are performing.¹⁵

Shakespeare’s introduction of the issue of historical causality at this early stage thus inevitably affects our understanding of the rest of the play. After all, Eleanor presents us with a notion of causation that, by creating particular expectations of the action to follow, sets itself up for constant examination and re-examination by both audience and playwright. Indeed, historical causality and scrutability are continuously being interrogated through prophecy in the *Henry VI* plays. In this sense, the fate of the Duchess has implications not only for the specific dreams that originally inspired her to action, but for the status of prophecy more widely. In encouraging us continually to consider and reconsider the nature of the world that the *Henry VI* plays depict, Shakespeare forces us to imitate the characters that inhabit it and experience too its disorientating effects.

Eleanor’s ambition is not an invention of Shakespeare, of course, but is taken from Hall, who reports that the Duchess ‘was accused of treason, for that she, by

¹⁴ Richard goes on to boast that ‘I can add colours to the chameleon, | Change shapes with Proteus for advantages, | And set the murd’rous Machiavel to school’. See William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part Three*, ed. by Randall Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.2.191–93. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. by Alan Brissenden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.7.139, 140. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

sorcery and enchauntment, entended to destroy the kyng, to thentent to advaunce and to promote her husbnde to the croune'. At the Duchess's request, 'John Hum priest', 'Roger Bolyngbroke, a conyng nycromancer', and 'Margerie Jourdayne, surnamed the witche of Eye' (all of whom appear in Shakespeare's play) are said to have 'devised an image of waxe, representyng the kynge, whiche by their sorcery, a litle and litle consumed, entendyng thereby [...] to waist, and destroy the kynges person, and so to bryng hym death'.¹⁶ Although the historical Eleanor's offence is severe enough to warrant her imprisonment upon the Isle of Man, evidently Shakespeare did not find it quite fit for his purposes. It does not seem unreasonable to assume that it would have shocked an Elizabethan audience, but the generic forms of witchcraft recorded by Hall would likely have added little to the play beyond a more developed sense of the Duchess's depravity. In Shakespeare's version, then, it is not Eleanor's impatience for the King's death that defines her crime, but her obsession with knowing the future. Rather than attempting to 'destroy the kynges person' through her own agency (notwithstanding demonic assistance), she seeks merely to confirm her suspected 'part in Fortune's pageant' (2*HVI*, 1.2.67). She enlists Hum and co. to summon a prophesying spirit, hoping — if not expecting — that its predictions will corroborate that of her dream. In other words, Shakespeare invents an ahistorical (but dramatically spectacular) episode for 2 *Henry VI* that not only encourages the audience to assess prophecy's validity, but which also puts it explicitly to the test. Prophecy is thus called upon to authenticate prophecy.

1.4, the conjuration scene, is certainly amongst the most important in the play as far as prophecy is concerned. The spirit utters its predictions in response to questions prepared by Eleanor and propounded by Bolingbroke:

¹⁶ Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols (London: Routledge, 1957–1975), III (1960), pp. 101, 102.

SPIRIT

Ask what thou wilt, that I had said and done.

BOLINGBROKE (*reads*)

‘First, of the King: what shall of him become?’

SPIRIT

The Duke yet lives that Henry shall depose,

But him outlive, and die a violent death.

As the spirit speaks, [Southwell] writes the answer

BOLINGBROKE (*reads*)

‘What fate awaits the Duke of Suffolk?’

SPIRIT

By water shall he die, and take his end.

BOLINGBROKE (*reads*)

‘What shall betide the Duke of Somerset?’

SPIRIT

Let him shun castles. Safer shall he be

Upon the sandy plains than where castles mounted stand.

Have done, for more I hardly can endure.

(2HVI, 1.4.28–37)

On a superficial level, the spirit’s predictions perform something like the proleptic function that Grene associates with prophecy throughout the first tetralogy, anticipating later events in the narrative (namely the deaths of Humphrey, Suffolk, and Somerset). However, this function is obscured here by the prophecies’ semantic slipperiness. Line Cottegnies suggests that, at this point, the audience is ‘offered a series of logical cruxes or verbal anamorphoses that are there to be cracked and to test their astuteness. [...] It could be claimed that Shakespeare thus turns the play into a hermeneutic treasure hunt for his audience’.¹⁷ However, this claim is predicated on

¹⁷ Line Cottegnies, ‘Lies Like Truth: Oracles and the Question of Interpretation in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI, Part 2*’, in *Les Voix de Dieu: Littérature et prophétie en Angleterre et en France à l’âge baroque*, ed. by Line Cottegnies et al. (Paris: Presses Sorbonne nouvelle, 2008), pp. 21–34 (p. 29). Cottegnies’ conclusions regarding prophecy’s function in 2 *Henry VI* are close to my own, for which reason it is necessary that I attempt to clarify the similarities and differences between our respective arguments. Cottegnies suggests that ‘Shakespeare uses a variety of micro-prophecies, often uttered by dissenting voices, as a means of complicating the larger providential framework that has been later identified as the “Tudor myth”’; these ‘micro-prophecies’, she argues, ‘reveal a multiplication of rivalling patterns of prediction that do not offer the reassuring perspective of a unifying viewpoint’ (‘Lies Like Truth’, p. 23). While I agree with Cottegnies to an extent (I am not convinced that Shakespeare is concerned directly with the ‘Tudor myth’ in 2 *Henry VI*), I would argue that this

the assumption that an audience would necessarily expect the spirit's predictions to be fulfilled.¹⁸ Rather, the presentation of these prophecies, like that of the Duke's and Duchess's dreams in 1.2, seems calculated to prevent an audience from simply accepting them as proleptic devices. In fact, we are encouraged to question their authenticity as early as 1.2, when Hum reveals that he has been hired to 'undermine the Duchess, | And buzz these conjurations in her brain' (2HVI, 1.2.98–99).

The conjuration itself is also framed in such a way as to emphasise its theatricality, suggesting a deeper sense of artifice. Indeed, the role that Hum plays is an explicitly directorial one. He employs the language of the theatre ('Come my masters, the Duchess I tell you expects performance of your promises', 2HVI, 1.4.1–2), and, as Cottagnies observes, even 'gives [his accomplices] stage directions', having the Duchess seated "aloft," like a well-born spectator attending a play'.¹⁹ Of course, at both the end of 1.2 and the beginning of 1.4, Eleanor is absent, and so neither Hum nor any of the would-be 'wizards' (2HVI, 1.4.15) is obliged to dissemble. However, when the Duchess is present onstage, they adopt a theatrical bombast that again draws attention to its own dubious superficiality. Bolingbroke assures her:

wizards know their times.
Deep night, dark night, the silent of the night,

conception of prophecy is symptomatic of the wider disorder of the world of the *Henry VI* plays, and is intended to express that disorder on a practical, narrative level. Furthermore, Shakespeare is less concerned with the 'Tudor myth' as such as he is with the act of prediction, which is problematized by the presentation of prophecy as itself unpredictable (both in terms of signification and veracity). Cottagnies identifies the semantic obscurity of the spirit's predictions as attempts to complicate interpretation (see 'Lies Like Truth', pp. 25–26 in particular). However, as we have seen, an audience would expect such ambiguity in a political prophecy. What is more unusual is the way in which prophecy itself, as a dramatic tool for signposting the direction of the narrative, is made suspect.

¹⁸ Dobin claims that 'in Shakespeare, every prophecy materializes' (*Merlin's Disciples*, p. 164).

Cottagnies however argues that the prophecy concerning the king ('The Duke yet lives', etc., 2HVI, 1.4.30–31) 'remains unsolved' ('Lies Like Truth', p. 23). Indeed, as we shall see, whether any of the spirit's predictions genuinely come true is debatable.

¹⁹ Cottagnies, 'Lies Like Truth', pp. 26, 27.

The time of night when Troy was set on fire,
The time when screech-owls cry and bandogs howl,
And spirits walk, and ghosts break up their graves:
That time best fits the work we have in hand.

(2HVI, 1.4.15–20)

The conjuror employs here a number of stock images that were associated with bad omens. In *3 Henry VI*, for example, King Henry claims that the ‘owl shrieked’ and ‘Dogs howled’ when Richard, Duke of Gloucester, was born (3HVI, 5.6.44, 46). More interesting, though, is Bolingbroke’s reference to the ‘night when Troy was set on fire’ (2HVI, 1.4.17). The Trojan Horse, with which this event is associated, is an apposite symbol for the conjurers’ fatal duplicity: the ‘performance’ (2HVI, 1.4.1–2) is an ostensible gift to the Duchess that will in fact bring about her downfall. Although perhaps not as conspicuous as Bolingbroke’s general tone, the Troy metaphor is itself a kind of Trojan Horse that carries his (admittedly poorly-hidden) intent to the audience, unperceived by the Duchess. Like the Trojans, she accepts it without suspicion, and, as a result, her estate is doomed to destruction.

Critics have, of course, noted the theatrical nature of the conjuration. Cottagnies comments that the conjuration is ‘set in an ambiguous light’ by the way in which it is presented.²⁰ Roger Warren seems to be in agreement, suggesting that Hum’s use of the word ‘performance’ in particular ‘may simply be a neutral phrase (“carrying out”), but it may imply the playing of a part, hinting at a deception from the start’.²¹ However, what does not appear to have been recognised is the way in which 1.4 echoes 1.2. Any feeling of ambiguity that critics have acknowledged about the prophecies spoken in 1.4 thus emerges only in retrospect; certainly, until the appearance of the spirit at the earliest, the overwhelming implication is that the

²⁰ Cottagnies, ‘Lies Like Truth’, p. 26.

²¹ Warren, ed., 2HIV, p. 143, n. 1–2.

conjunction is, overall, a con. It is important that the audience sees it as such. Hence, and quite oddly, it is not until the spirit's prophecies seem to begin to be fulfilled that its true nature becomes uncertain. The dialogue surrounding the conjunction, including Hum's soliloquy at the end of 1.2, thus works in the immediate context to undermine it. Indeed, the way in which 1.4 plays out strengthens the sense that we are witnessing not prophecy being uttered but prophecy being exposed as fraud.

The discovery of the conjunction by York, Buckingham, and others, whether planned (as suggested by Hum in 1.2) or otherwise, has widespread implications. It demonstrates once again how in *2 Henry VI* Shakespeare is interested in the points of contact between prophecy and the political world (this time from a legal perspective). However, its significance for the status of prophecy in the play is perhaps less apparent, and has not yet been fully explored. York's reaction to the spirit's prophecies is one of disdain: 'these oracles are hard, | Hardly attained and hardly understood' (*2HVI*, 1.4.68–69). Cottagnies suggests that this refusal to attempt to decode the spirit's prophecies — to 'indulge in the hermeneutical game' — places York squarely in a 'family of sceptical characters in Shakespeare (like Cassius, Edmund, Iago, or Richard III) who do not need signs from heaven to assert their own agency'. At the same time, Cottagnies argues, York's withholding of interpretation frustrates the audience's own desire to predict the direction of the narrative.²² The duke's remark works to downplay the significance of the prophecies, reiterating what has already been implied: that the overly theatrical conjunction was nothing more than a 'show'. This observation comes at the end of a scene in which the plausibility of prophesying, both on the stage and for the audience, presumably, has been dealt a mortal blow.

²² Cottagnies, 'Lies Like Truth', p. 28.

What does not seem to have been recognised by critics, however, is the way in which 1.4 interacts with and expands upon 1.2 to discredit and, in a sense, demystify prophecy, discouraging it from performing its conventional proleptic function. Like 1.2, 1.4 presents us with a number of prophecies that, while undoubtedly distinct, converse with one another in complex ways by virtue of belonging to the same realm of discourse (i.e. the prophetic). Their interactions necessarily affect, moreover, our conceptions about prophecy in the world of 2 *Henry VI*. While the conjuration produces three new prophecies, these are merely layered over other residual prophecies from earlier scenes. Although each one can be (and has been) seen as having its own discrete import, equally if not more consequential is the way in which each interacts with others that are also part of the palimpsest. In other words, the spirit's predictions in 1.4 should be understood not just alone but also in the context of the unfulfilled prophecies of 1.2. After all, from Eleanor's perspective, the whole purpose of the conjuration is to confirm the promises of her 'sweet [...] morning's dream' (2*HVI*, 1.2.24) — significantly, a vision that is lent weight, as we have seen, by the conventions of early modern dream theory.

1.4.38–40 might be seen, then, as the moment at which the illusion of the prophesying spirit comes to an end. Bolingbroke's command to 'Descend to darkness and the burning lake! *False* fiend, avoid!' (2*HVI*, 1.4.38–39; my emphasis), which only confuses further our sense of the authenticity of the spirit and the veracity of its predictions, is followed immediately by one of York's own: 'Lay hands upon these traitors and their trash' (2*HVI*, 1.4.40). Between lines 39 and 40, reality suddenly and violently imposes itself upon the conjuration; the spirit disappears and is replaced with York and others, accompanied by a guard. In a

jarring instant, the illusion of the prophesying spirit is shattered. It is not the only fantasy that is destroyed, however. In 1.2, Eleanor declares that ‘I will not be slack | To play my part in Fortune’s pageant’ (2*HVI*, 1.2.66–67). Although she describes herself as actively enacting God’s plan, she actually seems to conceive of herself as occupying a position that is both participatory and spectatorial. As the object of the same providential design that she wishes to bring about (that is, she sees herself as future Queen), the Duchess attributes to herself the invulnerability shared by both monarch and audience member: as she already ‘knows’ how the pageant will end, she also ‘knows’ that the necessity of her participation in it is ultimately only an illusion. When she takes her seat on the balcony above the conjuration, Shakespeare thus provides us with a symbol of her imagined power, guaranteed by the promise of the crown and expressed in the removed and therefore untouchable figure of the spectator.

It is Eleanor’s delusion of monarchical and spectatorial invulnerability, then, that is shattered by the sudden arrival of York. The spirit, bound to obey the Duchess’s commands by answering her questions, might be seen as a stand-in for her would-be future subjects. However, this authority proves to be spectral in more ways than one. York’s own order to ‘Lay hands upon these traitors’ (2*HVI*, 1.4.40) draws attention to the theatrical (and therefore essentially illusory) nature of the conjuration’s hierarchy of power by reasserting its ‘real-world’ equivalent. The ‘traitor’ tag that is attached to Eleanor and her accomplices insists upon their subservience to the King, emphasising the unnaturalness of both the ‘imaginary’

hierarchy that they established and the wrongful claim to the throne that it expressed.²³

In the conjuration scene, Eleanor is punished for her complacency about her dream-vision in 1.2, a complacency that might be described as spectatorial in character. Yet, the scene serves also to deter any complacency about prophecy on the part of the audience. It challenges the assumption that prophecy's primary purpose is prolepsis, and that 'in Shakespeare, every prophecy materializes'.²⁴ Moreover, the failure of prophecy in this scene necessarily influences our — and, conceivably, an Elizabethan audience's — expectations of the play to come. The most immediate effect of this failure is to promote further distrust of the spirit's predictions, which, as we have seen, have been presented as dubious since before even their first utterance. As the play progresses and the spirit's predictions seem to begin to be fulfilled, however, it becomes more and more difficult for an audience to systematise the ways of prophecy in this play. As in the conjuration scene, it is defined first and foremost by its power to create illusions and engender uncertainty. Like the world of the *Henry VI* plays (and, indeed, like history itself), prophecy and dreams are thus shown to be chaotic and — ironically — entirely unpredictable. The effect on the drama is clear: in the world of these plays, nothing is what it seems, and nothing can be trusted to unfold as we might expect.

²³ It was of course a treasonable offence to make predictions concerning the fate of a monarch, so 'traitor' is an appropriate tag for Eleanor and her accomplices. See Warren D. Smith, 'The Elizabethan Rejection of Judicial Astrology and Shakespeare's Practice', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 9 (1958), 159–76, especially pp. 161–3.

²⁴ Dobin, *Merlin's Disciples*, p. 164.

Enter one crying 'a miracle'

DUKE HUMPHREY What means this noise?

Fellow, what miracle dost thou proclaim?

ONE A miracle, a miracle!

SUFFOLK

Come to the King and tell him what miracle.

ONE (*to King Henry*)

Forsooth, a blind man at Saint Alban's shrine

Within this half-hour hath received his sight,

A man that ne'er saw in his life before.

KING HENRY

Now God be praised, that to believing souls

Gives light in darkness, comfort in despair!

(2HVI, 2.1.56.0–65)

2.1, the 'miracle' of Saint Alban's, has been seen as emblematic of 2 *Henry VI*. Edward Berry suggests that the scene 'creates a complex perspective on the hero [i.e. Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester] and the values he embodies' — those of justice and law, which Berry identifies as the two major concerns of the play. By tricking Simpcox, the alleged 'blind man' of Saint Alban's, into exposing himself as a fraud, Berry argues, Gloucester 'emerges as the mean between a piety that blurs vision and a "policy" that misdirects action'. Berry is right to suggest that 2.1 fulfils an emblematic role, but it is one that has significance for prophecy as well as for justice and law. When the 'miracle' is first proclaimed, Henry is quick to praise God for what he perceives to be a manifestation of divine agency. As a consequence, Berry suggests that Henry's piety is, quite straightforwardly, an expression of his providentialist worldview.²⁵ However, the king's eagerness to attribute the 'miracle' to God — even before he has confirmed its authenticity for himself — might be seen

²⁵ Berry, *Patterns of Decay*, pp. 36, 37, 32.

as symptomatic of his desperation for religious validation. Twice in the space of two lines Henry describes the ‘comfort’ of divine presence. He claims that God ‘Gives light in darkness, comfort in despair’, and that, as a result of His blessing, ‘Great is [Simpcox’s] comfort in this earthly vale, | Although by his sight his sins be multiplied’ (2*HVI*, 2.1.65, 68–69).

Like Eleanor, then, Henry too seeks for divine truth where there is, it seems, none to be found. Indeed, the ‘miracle’ is reduced from a manifestation of divine agency to a comic fiasco as the ‘blind’ man is chased from the stage by the beadle’s whip. The revelation of Simpcox’s deception subsequently elicits from the king an expression not of comfort but of despair: ‘O God, seest thou this and bear’st so long?’ (2*HVI*, 2.1.150). It would perhaps be a stretch to read Henry’s pained question as challenging the existence — or, at the very least, the compassion — of God (whether the King realises it or not), but the possibility that it indicates a momentary lapse of faith should not be dismissed. The failure of God to manifest Himself and reward Henry’s piety in this instance stands as an apt analogy for the promise-expectation mechanics of prophecy in the play. The ‘miracle’ scene, like the conjuration scene before it, presents us with a deception that works to intimate if not the absence then at least the obscurity of the divine, once again manipulating subtly audience expectations.²⁶

It is in 4.1, however, that Shakespeare returns once more to the spirit’s prophecies of 1.4, and we are forced once again to confront and re-evaluate

²⁶ John W. Blanpied argues that the king is a ‘device’ that ‘focuses and reflects the dramatist’s deepest concerns, even — or perhaps especially — when they conflict’. For Blanpied, the king ‘stands at the center of any given play as the figure in whom the tensions of the play, as history and as drama, are concentrated’. In this sense, ‘the king is both a character in the constituted world of the play and its interpreter, even its shaper — in other words, its surrogate playwright.’ See John W. Blanpied, *Time and the Artist in Shakespeare’s English Histories* (London: Associated University Presses, 1983), pp. 13–14. Blanpied’s observation seems especially pertinent to the ‘miracle’ scene, in which Henry’s disillusionment is an expression of the divine’s failure to manifest itself in 2 *Henry VI* more widely.

explicitly the issue of prediction. By this point in the play, the English state is in utter disarray. The wheels of the Yorkist rebellion are already in motion: the Duke of York, having divulged his claim to the throne, has enlisted Jack Cade effectively to act as his surrogate and to stir up unrest on the streets of London. Meanwhile, Humphrey has been killed, and Suffolk banished for his role in the duke's murder. Suffolk, having been captured by pirates, attempts unsuccessfully to use his status and wealth to escape execution:

Look on my George; I am a gentleman.
Rate me at what thou wilt, thou shalt be paid.

WHITMORE

And so am I; my name is Walter Whitmore.

Suffolk starteth

How now? Why starts thou? What doth thee affright?

SUFFOLK

Thy name affrights me, in whose sound is death.

A cunning man did calculate my birth,

And told me that by water I should die.

Yet let not this make thee be bloody-minded;

Thy name is Gualtier, being rightly sounded.

WHITMORE

Gaultier or Walter, which it is I care not.

Never yet did base dishonour blur our name

But with our sword we wiped away the blot.

Therefore, when merchant-like I sell revenge,

Broke be my sword, my arms torn and defaced,

And I proclaimed a coward through the world.

(2HVI, 4.1.30–44)

It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that a number of audience members might have started along with Suffolk at the utterance of Whitmore's name: Walter, a homonym of 'water'. Thus far, the play has shown prophecy, as well as its underlying agency (i.e. God), to be unfathomable at best, and, up to this point, Shakespeare has offered little to encourage anticipation of the fulfilment of the

spirit's predictions. In seeming to defy audience expectations, the sudden materialisation of the prophecy that 'By water shall [Suffolk] die, and take his end' (2*HVI*, 1.4.33) again draws attention to the unpredictable nature of the world of 2 *Henry VI* and to the manifestation of this disorder in a slippage of language. Berry argues that the fate of Suffolk 'offer[s] evidence enough that divine retribution is a contingency to be reckoned with'.²⁷ At first glance, we might be tempted to agree. However, this would-be manifestation of divine will, achieved through the apparent confirmation of the prophesying spirit's authenticity, does not hold up to scrutiny. Indeed, Shakespeare has already provided us with a model for thinking about manifestations of the divine (or, more accurately, the ostensibly divine) in the *Henry VI* plays: the 'miracle' of Saint Alban's, in which Humphrey's interrogation of what Henry — and, conceivably, some members of the audience — unquestioningly accepts exposes Simpcox as a fraud. We are encouraged, then, to follow the Lord Protector's example in questioning, rather than simply accepting, that which is presented to us as divine.

Likewise, the fulfilment of the Suffolk prophecy is achieved by a piece of semantic trickery. The spirit prophesies Suffolk's death 'By water' (2*HVI*, 1.4.33), the most obvious intimation being that the duke will 'take his end' (2*HVI*, 1.4.33) by drowning in the sea or a lake of some kind. However, as we have seen, it actually and eventually refers to the pirate, Walter Whitmore, whose name, when pronounced, seems indistinguishable from the spirit's prophetic 'water'. Although such an ironic twist is not atypical of prophecy, and, in this sense, the spirit's prediction might well be seen as having come true, the apparent ludicrousness of the revelation is difficult to overlook. Indeed, the scene seems to be overwhelmingly

²⁷ Berry, *Patterns of Decay*, p. 32.

bathetic in tone (though no less fatal for that). As in the ‘miracle’ scene, the semblance of divine truth is here reduced to an image of absurdity that borders on the comic, something that is mirrored in the degrading nature of Suffolk’s death at the hands of an ‘Obscure and lousy swain’ (2HVI, 4.1.51), prefiguring the carnivalesque uprising of Jack Cade. (Whitmore’s adoption of the royal ‘we’ also seems to anticipate Cade’s claim to royal descent.) This effect is accentuated later when, under an alehouse sign representing a castle, Somerset is slain by Richard, who gloats:

So lie thou there:
For underneath an alehouse’ *paltry* sign,
The Castle in *Saint Alban’s*, Somerset
Hath made the wizard famous in his death.

(2HVI, 5.2.66–69; my emphasis)

Here, nobility is debased by association with the ‘paltry’ (2HVI, 5.2.67) and vulgar, which, along with Richard’s contemptuous tone, undoes the initial suggestion of the manifestation of divine truth. Indeed, Shakespeare makes the connection to the ‘miracle’ scene explicit by having Richard specify that the castle represented in the sign is in fact none other than ‘The Castle in *Saint Alban’s*’ (2HVI, 5.2.68; my emphasis). In echoing the false miracle, the playwright encourages us to regard Somerset’s death (and, by extension, that of Suffolk) as itself an echo of the incident at Saint Alban’s. It might also be worth noting that the spirit’s prediction refers explicitly to castles that ‘mounted stand’ (2HVI, 1.4.36), a vexing specific that seems difficult to reconcile with the alehouse and its ‘paltry’ sign (2HVI, 5.2.67).

The deaths of Suffolk and Somerset, predicted earlier in the play, present us with a problem of interpretation, however, that goes far beyond the troublesome semantics of prophecy. Without providence to provide a comparatively

straightforward rationalisation, we are left seemingly unable to account for the apparent fulfilment of the spirit's predictions. It can be explained, somewhat unglamorously, as the result of deeply ironic coincidence: more cosmic joke than divine plan. Of course, the possibility that these 'prophecies' are demonic in origin, and thus deceptive entirely by design, cannot be discounted either, such is their uncertain and troubling nature.²⁸ Ultimately, though, it is the open-endedness of the prophecies that allows them to reach fulfilment. What does not seem to have been noted about the Suffolk prophecy, moreover, is that it reaches fulfilment twice over. Suffolk dies both at the hands of Walter 'Water' Whitmore and at sea (or, more accurately, next to the sea, 'on the sand', 2HVI, 4.1.10). This simple but perhaps not especially obvious fact, which is also indicated by the sounds of a '*fight at sea*' (2HVI, 4.1.0; Warren's italics) at the beginning of the scene, draws attention to the prophecy's lack of specificity, discouraging further the interpretation that it is supernatural in nature. These prophecies, though ostensibly 'fulfilled', are manifested with an ironic whimper rather than a revelatory bang. Through them, Shakespeare seems to be emphasising not the divine order of historical narrative, but the very opposite: its meaningless (and often cruel) disorder and utter unpredictability.

VI.

EDWARD

Dazzle mine eyes, or do I see three suns?

RICHARD

²⁸ Cf. the witch's prophecies in *Macbeth*.

Three glorious suns, each one a perfect sun,
Not separated with the racking clouds
But severed in a pale clear-shining sky.
See, see, they join, embrace, and seem to kiss
As if they vowed some league inviolable.
Now are they but one lamp, one light, one sun;
In this the heaven figures some event.

EDWARD

'Tis wondrous strange, the like yet never heard of.
I think it cites us, brother, to the field,
That we the sons of brave Plantagenet,
Each one already blazing by our meeds,
Should notwithstanding join our lights together
And overshine the earth as this the world.
Whate'er it bodes, henceforth will I bear
Upon my target three fair-shining suns.

RICHARD

Nay, bear three daughters; by your leave I speak it,
You love the breeder better than the male.

(3HVI, 2.1.25–42)

In many ways, *3 Henry VI* provides a continuation of the role that prophecy can be seen to perform in *2 Henry VI*. The sighting of the three suns by Edward and Richard in 2.1, the later play's earliest example of prophecy, is a case in point. At this stage in the narrative, the Yorkist rebellion has erupted into full-scale violence on the battlefield. The incident of the three suns is reported by Hall, who describes how the 'sunne (as some write) appered to the erle of March [i.e. Edward], like. iii. sunnes, and sodainly joined all together in one, and that upon the sight thereof, he toke suche courage, that he fiercely set on his enemies, & them shortly discomfited'.²⁹ Shakespeare's innovation is to accentuate the ambiguity of Hall's aside '(as some write)', which he achieves partly by introducing a second witness, Edward's brother Richard.

²⁹ Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, III, p. 179.

Richard Reese Hatcher argues that it is Edward only who sees the three suns during the battle of Mortimer's Cross, and that his brother merely humours him. Hatcher suggests that 'Edward projects the energy of his rather too fervid imagination into the realm of the visionary, as if the future is written in the heavens'.³⁰ Like Eleanor in *2 Henry VI*, the Earl of March seeks to locate himself within a providential design that would validate his ambition. However, just as Eleanor's dream is complicated by that of her husband, Edward's interpretation of the phenomenon is undercut by his brother. Richard's contemptuous tone, exemplified by his jibe about Edward's promiscuity ('You love the breeder better than the male', *3HVI*, 2.1.42), complicates the three suns' status as a prophetic sign by dismissing its proleptic significance. The purpose of the three suns, then, is not to anticipate the direction of the narrative. Indeed, the fact that it lacks a direct referent (unlike the prophecies concerning Suffolk and Somerset, for example) ensures that it is unable to perform this function. Instead, the indecipherability of the would-be omen draws attention to the obscurity of history itself, reinforcing the lesson of *2 Henry VI* about the difficulty — if not the impossibility — of predicting the future. However, it also allows Richard his first opportunity to demonstrate his sceptical (if not disdainful) attitude toward prophecy, which will come to define him as the cycle progresses.

Richard's attitude to prophecy is in direct contrast, of course, to that of Henry VI, the king he goes on to murder. Following the death of the Duke of York, it falls to his eldest son, Edward, to pursue his house's claim to the throne. In 4.6 of *3 Henry VI*, Henry, as he flees from the Yorkist forces, utters his famous prophecy about the Earl of Richmond:

³⁰ Richard Reese Hatcher, *Prophecy and Apocalypse in Shakespeare's First Tetralogy* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Irvine, 1995), pp. 184–89, 185. Randall Martin also concludes that Richard does not in fact see the three suns (*3HVI*, p. 189, n. 25).

HENRY

My lord of Somerset, what youth is that
Of whom you seem to have so tender care?

SOMERSET

My liege it is young Henry, Earl of Richmond.

HENRY

Come hither England's hope.

Lays his hand on Richmond's head

If secret powers

Suggest but truth to my divining thoughts,
This pretty lad will prove our country's bliss.

His looks are full of peaceful majesty,
His head by nature framed to wear a crown,
His hand to wield a sceptre, and himself
Likely in time to bless a regal throne.

Make much of him, my lords, for this is he
Must help you more than you are hurt by me.

(3HVI, 4.6.65–76)

The Richmond prophecy is an oddity in Shakespeare's English history plays, perhaps not finding a counterpart until Cranmer's speech in the final scene of *Henry VIII*. It represents a rare instance of a prophecy that Shakespeare allows to be presented, without a great deal in the way of mitigation, as possibly divinely inspired.³¹ In a series of plays in which, more often than not, prophecy becomes a means of obfuscating interpretation and destabilising meaning and certainty, its clarity and simplicity here are especially striking. It seems, at least initially, to provide a momentary respite from the disorder of the *Henry VI* plays that also works to throw that disorder — and the comparative obscurity of its many other prophecies — into relief. However, even this prophecy has an aura of doubt about it. It is perhaps unsurprising, given his disappointment at the exposure of the 'miracle' of St.

³¹ David L. Frey points out that, in the quarto version of 3 *Henry VI*, Henry attributes his premonition to 'heavenly powers' rather than 'secret powers'. Frey suggests that this alteration is evidence of 'Shakespeare's intention to remove the aura of Divine Providence from Richmond'. See David L. Frey, *The First Tetralogy, Shakespeare's Scrutiny of the Tudor Myth: A Dramatic Exploration of Divine Providence* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p. 64. The discrepancy between the quarto and folio texts, while intriguing, does not seem enough to dispel the impression of divine inspiration.

Alban's as a fraud, that Henry is so hesitant to ascribe to his 'divining thoughts' (3HVI, 4.6.69) genuine divine inspiration. We might do well to follow the lead of the king, whose prediction is, ultimately, predicated on a conditional 'if... then' clause.

Nevertheless, at this point in 3 *Henry VI*, Shakespeare is also beginning to point toward the events of *Richard III*, suggesting (but by no means confirming) to the audience the emergence of a providential design. As we shall see, the suspicion of divine agency, rather than its explicit manifestation, is a major aspect of the world of *Richard III*, which is in many ways defined most by guilt, paranoia, and delusion, and, as a result of its long reach into the next play in the sequence, it is difficult to dispel the impression that divine inspiration is behind the Richmond prophecy of 3 *Henry VI*. Regardless of the nature of Henry's prescience, however, his prophecy serves to mark Richmond as the true 'inheritor' both of his divinity and his crown, seemingly invalidating the claims of the 'three suns' (3HVI, 2.1.25) of York — including the tyrannous Richard.

The *Henry VI* plays' final exploration of prophecy comes in 5.6 of 3 *Henry VI*. Henry has finally been defeated, and, imprisoned in the Tower, he is confronted by his own death incarnate in the form of Richard, the new Duke of Gloucester. Here, Henry recounts the duke's ominous history as a means of prophesying the nation's bloody future under the tyrannous rule of this 'persecutor' and 'executioner' of 'innocents' (3HVI, 5.6.30–32). 'And thus I prophesy', Henry begins:

that many a thousand
Which now mistrust no parcel of my fear,
And many an old man's sigh and many a widow's,
And many an orphan's water-standing eye,
Men for their sons, wives for their husbands,
Orphans for their parents' timeless death,
Shall rue the hour that ever thou wast born.
The owl shrieked at thy birth, an evil sign,

The night-crow cried, aboding luckless time,
 Dogs howled and hideous tempest shook down trees,
 The raven rooked her on the chimney's top,
 And chatt'ring pies in dismal discords sung;
 Thy mother felt more than a mother's pain,
 And yet brought forth less than a mother's hope,
 To wit, an indigested and deformèd lump,
 Not like the fruit of such a goodly tree.
 Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou wast born
 To signify thou cam'st to bite the world.
 And if the rest be true which I have heard,
 Thou cam'st—

GLOUCESTER

I'll hear no more. Die, prophet, in thy speech,

Stabs him

For this amongst the rest was I ordained.

HENRY

Ay, and for much more slaughter after this.

O God forgive my sins, and pardon thee.

Dies

(3HVI, 5.6.37–60)

As in the Richmond prophecy of 4.6, Henry anticipates here the bloody events of *Richard III* — another manifestation of his new-found prescience. But his oration also works to prepare us more fully for the role that Richard will perform in the play that bears his name. Henry's description of the portents that are said to have accompanied the duke's nativity, as well as his distinctly unnatural birth, echo Hall.³² Unlike in Hall's report, though, Shakespeare gives this narration directly to Henry, and Richard is forced to listen (albeit briefly) as both his past and his future are told, linked by a discourse of deformity and monstrosity. As much of this information is new to the audience, Richard might be described as being constructed from (or, at the very least, fleshed out by) Henry's account at this point, especially from the omens that it itemises. However, neither the audience nor Richard is given

³² '[Richard] was malicious, wrothfull and envious, and as it is reported, his mother the duches had muche a dooe in her travaill, that she could not be delivered of hym uncut, and that he came into the worlde fete forwarde, as menne bee borne outward, and as the fame ranne, not untothed' (Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, III, p. 253).

licence to interpret these portents. Instead, it is Henry who prescribes their meaning — and, by extension, Richard's future. In effect, the duke's body and his mind become fused together in Henry's last speech, the one predetermined by the other.

By stabbing the 'prophet' Henry and interrupting his oration so murderously, Richard demonstrates his disdain not just for the would-be sacred discourse of prophecy (or, indeed, the sanctity of monarchs), but for the prescriptiveness that the former king attributes to the duke's portentous past, including his monstrous birth. This violent action, which Henry clearly does not predict (but which, like the audience, he may have suspected was imminent), acts as a symbol of the unpredictability of the human will — a concept that, as we shall see, Shakespeare explores more fully in his plays about Henry IV. Nevertheless, Richard goes on to confirm the veracity of Henry's report:

Indeed 'tis true that Henry told me of,
For I have often heard my mother say
I came into the world with my legs forward.
Had I not reason, think ye, to make haste
And seek their ruin that usurped our right?
The midwife wondered and the women cried
'O Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!'
And so I was, which plainly signified
That I should snarl and bite and play the dog.
Then since the heavens have shaped my body so,
Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it.
I have no brother, I am like no brother,
And this word 'love' which greybeards call divine,
Be resident in men like one another
And not in me: I am myself alone.

(3HVI, 5.6.69–83)

In reiterating the signs that Henry described, Richard also reinterprets them, relocating them within the scope of his own will. Significantly, he makes a separation between his body, 'shaped' by 'the heavens' (3HVI, 5.6.78), and his mind,

which hell must ‘make crook’d’ (3HVI, 5.6.79) in correspondence. In this sense, his deformed and portentous body provides a model for his mind, but it does not predetermine his actions: he will fulfil his ‘destiny’ on his terms ‘alone’ (3HVI, 5.7.83). Richard imagines a severance of body from mind, sign from signified, cause from effect. In doing so, he seems to take the *Henry VI* plays’ obfuscation of prophecy to its only imaginable endpoint, at last denying altogether the possibility of prediction, even while he appears to fulfil it. It is a paradoxical notion that will be put to the test in *Richard III*, the next and final play in the first tetralogy.

In the *Henry VI* plays, Shakespeare can be said to be interested in prophecy’s illusory potential, especially in conjunction with its narrative dimension. Rather than allowing it to perform its conventional proleptic function, which would conceivably lend clarity both to the narrative and its underlying causality, Shakespeare uses prophecy to complicate, obscure, and even mislead. In two plays about contention, it is fitting that prophecy is often made to contend with itself. In the early scenes of 2 *Henry VI*, Shakespeare presents us with contradictory predictions, manipulating prophecy’s assumed proleptic function to create narrative disorder, mirroring and in many ways realising the chaos of Henry VI’s England. Yet, as the play progresses, it becomes more explicit that prophecy is part of a wider examination of the nature of causality, particularly the divine. As Henry searches vainly for manifestations of divine truth in the play-world around him, the audience is encouraged to do likewise. When the spirit’s prophecies seem to be suddenly and unexpectedly fulfilled, the audience experiences a similar frustration. The deaths of Somerset and Suffolk, as well as the ‘miracle’ of Saint Alban’s, the conjuration, and perhaps even the sighting of the three suns, all seem to follow the same pattern, exposing the ostensibly divine as meaningless and engendering disappointment and even debasement. It is this

disjunction between prophetic sign and its referent that Richard, Duke of Gloucester, takes to its logical conclusion, rejecting completely the possibility of prediction in favour of his own unpredictable will. Ultimately, the nature of the world of the *Henry VI* plays remains obscure, its causality as anarchic as the state.

3. 'Libels, prophecies, and dreams': Prophecy and the foundations of
historical myth in *Richard III*

GHOST (*to Richard*)

When I was mortal, my anointed body
By thee was punchèd full of deadly holes.
Think on the Tower and me. Despair and die.
Harry the Sixth bids thee despair and die.
(*To Richmond*) Virtuous and holy, be thou conqueror.
Harry that prophesied thou shouldst be king
Doth comfort thee in thy sleep. Live and flourish. [*Exit*]
[...]

Richard starteth up out of a dream

KING RICHARD

Give me another horse! Bind up my wounds!
Have mercy, Jesu!—Soft, I did but dream.
O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!
The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.
Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.
What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
Richard loves Richard; that is, I and I.
Is there a murderer here? No.—Yes, I am.
Then fly.—What, from myself?—Great reason why:
Lest I revenge.—What, myself upon myself?
Alack, I love myself.—Wherefore?—For any good
That I myself have done unto myself.—
O no, alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself.
I am a villain.—Yet I lie; I am not.
Fool, of thyself speak well.—Fool, do not flatter.
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.—
Perjury, perjury, in the high'st degree!—
Murder, stern murder, in the dir'est degree.
All several sins, all used in each degree,
Throng to the bar, crying all, 'Guilty, guilty!'
I shall despair. There is no creature loves me,
And if I die, no soul will pity me.
And wherefore should they, since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself.

Methought the souls of all that I had murdered
Came to my tent, and every one did threat
Tomorrow's vengeance on the head of Richard.¹

The appearance of the ghosts in 5.4 of *Richard III* is defined by dichotomy. When apparition after apparition 'Throng[s] to the bar' (*RIII*, 5.4.178) to bring 'despair' (*RIII*, 5.4.106) to Richard and 'comfort' (*RIII*, 5.4.109) to his rival, Richmond, reinforcing the binary opposition between the king that is doomed and the earl that is ordained to be king, Richard's sense of self disintegrates. As Maurice Hunt suggests, 'Richard at last intellectually experiences the disorder that he has introduced into the lives of others'. Similarly, Waldo F. McNeir observes that the king has at this point 'disintegrated into the ineffectuality of one who has lost all cohesion as an individual. [...] Thus, he carries on a dialogue between his external or defending self and his internal or accusing self, the dramatized inner voice of his conscience'.²

This loss of selfhood is, perhaps, understandable. In *3 Henry VI*, Richard declared that 'I am myself alone', and, in *Richard III*, his pursuit of the crown is defined, and, indeed, driven by, his unwavering faith in his capacity to shape his own destiny.³ However, the ghosts' prophetic warnings present Richard with the

¹ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. by John Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; repr. 2008), 5.4.103–109, 156–85. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text. Though lengthy, Richard's fragmented soliloquy is here quoted in full so as to ensure that its effect is undiminished — and, indeed, to avoid dividing it further. The lines belonging to the several ghosts, however, are surely too numerous to receive the same treatment; the spectral Henry VI's speech is generally indicative of the pattern that the oneiric 'visitors' follow in condemning Richard and cheering Richmond. It also makes explicit the dream's (or dreams') would-be prophetic nature, reminding Richmond — and, not for the first time, the audience — of the deceased king's prediction for him in *3 Henry VI* (see chapter two on 2 and 3 *Henry VI*).

² Maurice Hunt, 'Ordering Disorder in *Richard III*', *South Central Review*, 6 (1989), 11–29 (p. 23); Waldo F. McNeir, 'The Masks of Richard the Third', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 11 (1971), 167–86 (p. 184). McNeir focuses on Richard's thespian dimension, and attributes the king's ultimate 'Schizophrenia' to the number of different 'roles' that he has performed over the course of the play: 'His continuous play-acting has fragmented his personality' ('The Masks of Richard the Third', p. 184).

³ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part Three*, ed. by Randall Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.6.83. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

possibility that other, non-human forces are working to determine the future: that, in fact, the self is not alone. Richard finds himself in an impossible situation, hopelessly suspended between an inescapable past that incriminates him with ‘hateful deeds’ (*RIII*, 5.4.169) and a future that seems to promise ‘Tomorrow’s vengeance’ (*RIII*, 5.4.185). Indeed, the ghosts’ indictments are so disturbing because they imply an unyielding law of cause and effect, crime and punishment, in which Richard’s past actions chain him to an as-yet-unadministered revenge. His desperate and unrealisable desire to ‘fly’ (*RIII*, 5.4.164) from himself — that is to say, the self that has committed ‘perjury’ (*RIII*, 5.4.175) and ‘murder’ (*RIII*, 5.4.176) — represents a longing to escape his sinful past and, by extension, the future punishment that it ensures. In other words, Richard’s crisis of identity in 5.4 is prompted, at least in part, by prophecy. For perhaps the first time in the play, the king seems to have no control over his future: ‘I *shall* despair’ (*RIII*, 5.4.179; my emphasis). As Queen Elizabeth warned him, he has ‘Misused’ the time to come ‘by time misused o’erpast’ (*RIII*, 4.4.316); he is sleeping (and, indeed, dreaming) in the bed that he made, and rushing headlong into a grave that he himself has dug. However, for as much as Richard momentarily fears the visitation of divine retribution upon his head, he ultimately equates the voices of the many ghosts with that of his conscience, which ‘hath a thousand several tongues’ (*RIII*, 5.4.172) — and, as he declares in his oration prior to the battle at Bosworth, ‘Conscience is but a word that cowards use, | Devised at first to keep the strong in awe’ (*RIII*, 5.5.38–39). Richard’s Machiavellian self-confidence is too deeply entrenched to be eradicated so absolutely so suddenly.

Whether Richard truly believes that his nightmare in 5.4 represents a manifestation of his guilty conscience (the existence of which, it should be noted, the

play does not seem to so much as hint at prior to this scene), or whether he is simply refusing to face the much more disturbing possibility of his being ensnared in a providential death-trap, is perhaps irrelevant. What seems more significant for us at this point in the play is the presence of the element of doubt, which works to undermine any attempt to determine the true nature of the ghostly ‘visitation’, both for Richard and for us. This uncertainty is of course typical of prophecy in Shakespeare’s English history cycles, which is rarely, if ever, straightforward. For as much as Shakespeare utilises prophecy’s proleptic quality to structure the action of *Richard III*, he is also interested here in the psychological effects of prophecy and especially its ostensible fulfilment, both on the characters and on us. Indeed, Richard’s would-be premonitory dream is complicated further by the presence of a second sleeper on the stage: Richmond. In a set-piece that exemplifies the imaginative potential of the early modern theatre, the distance between Richard and Richmond’s respective camps is negated, and the two characters’ dreams are depicted simultaneously. Richard and Richmond each sleeps in his own tent, but the stage encompasses both, and it is the theatrical space between the dreamers — paradoxically physically empty and yet pregnant with representative potential, signifying both nothing and anything — that the ghosts inhabit.⁴ In a sense, Shakespeare is here recreating the experience of dreams, wherein the possible is not precluded by the impossible.

The instability of this liminal space necessarily affects the play’s presentation, and the audience’s understanding, of the dream sequence. The apparent impossibility of making sense of its spatial implications leads, almost inevitably, to the events unfolding onstage being interpreted as supernatural — an explanation that

⁴ John Jowett notes that ‘Capell had the ghosts “rising between the Tents” on a trap, and the same staging is suggested by Rowe’s illustration of 1709’ (*RIII*, p. 339, n. 96.1).

permits the inexplicable by circumventing the question of what is humanly possible or probable, and one which the play often offers as an expedient (but not necessarily correct) solution. The complexity of the dream sequence lies, ironically, in its tendency towards simplification through homogenisation. Just as the ‘Tudor myth’ can be understood as repressing historical relativity with an officially sanctioned interpretation, in the dream sequence, the experiences of two distinct individuals are collapsed into, and incorporated within, a single vision. Through Shakespeare’s theatrical trickery, the ghosts are able to address themselves to Richard and Richmond at the same time, though we understand the sleepers to be physically distant. For every curse of ‘Despair and die’ (*RIII*, 5.4.105) that is hurled on Richard’s head by the ghost of the murdered Henry VI (amongst others), Richmond receives a blessing of ‘Live and flourish’ (*RIII*, 5.4.109), a rhetorical symmetry that seems to suggest divine intentionality, imbuing the spirits’ words with all of the authority and immutability of the prophetic will of God.⁵

Yet, even as the ghostly ‘visitations’ seem to support the notion that we are witnessing the unfolding of a divine plan, this impression is subtly undermined. We cannot help but be reminded of the inherent subjectivity of dreams — and, indeed, of prophecy. The dream sequence, for instance, is preceded and perhaps even prefigured by the prayer of Richmond, who has retired to his tent before the battle:

I’ll strive with troubled thoughts to take a nap,
 Lest leaden slumber peise me down tomorrow
 When I should mount with wings of victory.
 Once more, good night, kind lords and gentlemen.
Exeunt Stanley Earl of Derby and Lords
 [Richmond kneels]

⁵ A. P. Rossiter suggests that what he calls “‘patterned speech’”, or ‘the classicist’s *stichomythia*’, is characteristic of *Richard III*. See A. P. Rossiter, ‘Angel with Horns: the Unity of *Richard III*’, in *Angel with Horns and Other Shakespeare Lectures*, ed. by Graham Storey (London: Longmans, 1961), pp. 1–22.

O thou whose captain I account myself,
 Look on my forces with a gracious eye.
 Put in their hands thy bruising irons of wrath,
 That they may crush down with a heavy fall
 Th'usurping helmets of our adversaries.
 Make us thy ministers of chastisement,
 That we may praise thee in the victory.
 To thee I do commend my watchful soul
 Ere I let fall the windows of mine eyes.
 Sleeping and waking, O defend me still!

(*RIII*, 5.4.83–96)

As he does elsewhere, Richmond fashions himself as a minister of divine ‘chastisement’ (*RIII*, 5.4.92), whose mission it is to reclaim the English throne using God’s ‘bruising irons of wrath’ (*RIII*, 5.4.89). In other words, Richmond views (or, at the very least, presents) his political agenda as being at one with providential design; he considers himself to be enacting both his own will and that of a higher power.⁶

As John Wilders notes, ‘Richmond is certainly not portrayed as a hypocrite and his prayer before battle is offered in all honesty’.⁷ It is for this reason, rather than in spite of it, that the earl’s prayer might in fact be seen as a destabilising influence on the way in which we receive and ultimately interpret the dream sequence. Richmond’s conception of himself as a divine avenger is reinforced by the ghosts, who assure him that ‘the *wrongèd* souls | Of butchered princes fight in thy behalf’,

⁶ Wilbur Sanders describes Richmond’s rhetoric, but particularly that of his speech at the end of the play, as a ‘pious shell and a hard core of prudential self-interest’. See Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea: Studies in the Plays of Marlowe & Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 73. David L. Frey argues for what he calls Shakespeare’s ‘shrinking’ of Richmond, whose significance, Frey claims, is underplayed in comparison to *The True Tragedy of Richard III*. He also notes that *The True Tragedy*, unlike Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, ends with an epilogue in praise of Elizabeth I, reiterating its glorification of the Tudor regime. Frey suggests that, for Shakespeare, Richmond ‘becomes simply the historically correct means of ending the play’. See David L. Frey, *The First Tetralogy, Shakespeare’s Scrutiny of the Tudor Myth: A Dramatic Exploration of Divine Providence* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p. 122.

⁷ John Wilders, *The Lost Garden: A View of Shakespeare’s English and Roman History Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 58.

that ‘The *wrongèd* heirs of York do pray for thee’, and that ‘our *wrongs* in Richard’s bosom | Will conquer him’ (*RIII*, 5.4.100–101, 116, 123–24; my emphasis.) Moreover, Richmond’s plea for divine protection — ‘Sleeping and waking, O *defend* me still!’ (*RIII*, 5.4.96; my emphasis) — likewise is seemingly not only acknowledged, but granted: ‘Good angels *guard* thy battle’; ‘Good angels *guard* thee from the boar’s annoy’; ‘God and good angels fight on Richmond’s side’ (*RIII*, 5.4.117, 130, 154; my emphasis). Queen Anne bids Richmond ‘Dream of success and happy victory’ (*RIII*, 5.4.144), and that is exactly what he does. There seems to exist a symmetry between Richmond’s desires, expressed in his prayer, and the content of his dream — which, according to Richard, is subject to the ‘thousand several tongues’ (*RIII*, 5.4.172) of the subconscious.

It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that Richmond’s dream could be interpreted as a cosmic wish-fulfilment fantasy, in which the prophetic element (i.e. the ghosts’ predictions) consists of present desires projected onto, and thus legitimised by the image of, an ideal future. Certainly it would not be the first such dream in Shakespeare’s English history cycles. Although the treasonous machinations of Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, in *2 Henry VI* are very different from Richmond’s would-be divinely sanctioned mission, the two characters’ aims are ultimately the same, and the dreams that they experience might be seen to follow similar formulae.⁸ Like Eleanor, for whom her ‘sweet [...] morning’s dream’ points to her destiny, Richmond awakens with a reinvigorated sense of his fate.⁹ ‘The sweetest sleep and *fairest-boding* dreams | That ever entered in a drowsy head | Have I since your departure had, my lords’, he declares:

⁸ See chapter two.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part Two*, ed. by Roger Warren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.2.24. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

Methought their souls whose bodies Richard murdered
Came to my tent and cried on victory.
I promise you, my soul is very jocund
In the remembrance of so fair a dream.

(*RIII*, 5.4.206–213; my emphasis)

In *2 Henry VI*, we are often faced with the challenge of determining whether a dream is a supernatural sign; a psychological indicator of the sleeper's fears and desires; or, indeed, both of these at once. We are never fully able to disregard one possibility in favour of another. The same interpretative problem, which is characteristic of prophecy in its many forms, is also capable of troubling our reading of the dream sequences of *Richard III*. The notion that the dreams of Richard and Richmond are not in fact supernatural but merely psychological has the potential to radically alter our understanding of the play as a whole. The threat of this possibility is enabled — and perhaps even encouraged — by the world of the play, which mirrors the Yorkist court in its distinctly paranoiac ambiguity.

Richmond's experience stands in contrast to that of his adversary, Richard, to whom the ghosts spoke nothing but curses and 'threat[s of] | Tomorrow's vengeance' (*RIII*, 5.4.184–85). Despite the unusual theatrical presentation of the dream sequence, which seems to indicate that Richard and Richmond are witnessing, as we are, a single oneiric premonition, the sleepers' reactions upon awakening suggest two individually distinct, and thus entirely subjective, dream-visions. Unlike the Gloucesters of *2 Henry VI*, the dreams of Richard and Richmond point unequivocally in the same direction (i.e. towards the death of one and the ascension of the other), engendering the impression of a providential design emerging. However, equally, each one is liable to be understood as the product of the respective dreamer's individual unconscious. For Richard, the weight of the past (and his guilt)

evidently disarms him, stripping him momentarily of the capacity for action. Indeed, his consultation of an almanac on the morning of the battle — ‘Give me a calendar. | Who saw the sun today?’ (*RIII*, 5.5.6–7) — suggests a growing lack of faith in the power of his own unconquerable will. For the first time, Richard defers to the absolute determinism of prophecy, a sure sign of his diminishing self-confidence:

RATCLIFFE Not I, my lord.

KING RICHARD [*looking in an almanac*]

Then he disdains to shine, for by the book
He should have braved the east an hour ago.
A black day will it be to somebody.

(*RIII*, 5.5.7–10)

Indeed, Richard dwells upon, and evidently submits to, the prescriptions of the absent sun, even if these are typically uncertain:

The sun will not be seen today.

The sky doth frown and lour upon our army.

I would these dewy tears were from the ground.

Not shine today: why, what is that to me

More than to Richmond? For the selfsame heaven

That frowns on me looks sadly upon him.¹⁰

(*RIII*, 5.5.11–16)

For Richmond, by contrast, it is the expectation of future success that seems to inspire his dream and fuel its prophetic dimension. The notion that he is England's saviour, come to dethrone the 'usurping boar' (*RIII*, 5.2.7) Richard, is one that he has already expressed to his followers:

In God's name, cheerly on, courageous friends,
To reap the harvest of perpetual peace

¹⁰ Richard's lapse in willpower, apparently prompted by prophecy, might be compared to that of Henry IV in *2 Henry IV*. Henry, recalling a prediction made by Richard II, attributes to his predecessor supernatural prescience, and seems to lose the capacity for action. See chapter five.

By this one bloody trial of sharp war.
[...]
True hope is swift, and flies with swallows' wings.
Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures kings.

(*RIII*, 5.2.14–16, 23–24)

As Edward I. Berry notes, Richmond's words forge a 'link between Bosworth and Armageddon'. 'The imagery of harvesting', he suggests, 'is among the most powerful in Revelation'. While Berry concludes that 'Although Richmond's arrival surely does not represent the Second Coming or his betrothal the marriage of the Lamb, his role is in every respect that of an agent of God', the earl's use of the 'harvesting metaphor' might be seen as an intentional strategy designed to further his portrayal of himself as England's saviour — especially considering his potentially blasphemous suggestion of royal and deific promotion at the end of his oration (*RIII*, 5.2.23–24).¹¹

Of course, the idea that Richmond is little more than a Machiavellian opportunist — a dramatic precursor to, and historical successor of, Bolingbroke — should perhaps not be overstressed. Yet, what the dream sequence and its surrounding scenes demonstrate is that what might at first seem to be their ostensible and unequivocal endorsement of the notion of a providential plan can and should, in fact, be deconstructed, and that its constituent parts are doubtful and open to reinterpretation. As Henry Ansgar Kelly argues, 'Shakespeare's great contribution was to unsynthesize the syntheses of his contemporaries and to unmoralize their

¹¹ Edward I. Berry, *Patterns of Decay: Shakespeare's Early Histories* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Press, 1975), p. 102. Berry continues: 'That he [Richmond] is something of a "stick," as John Dover Wilson complains, may be true, but it is to be expected; as in the case of the victorious Malcolm in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare subordinates the hero's personality to his symbolic function' (*Patterns of Decay*, p. 102).

moralities'.¹² It would seem that, even in *Richard III*, which, perhaps more than any other of Shakespeare's English histories, seems to demand cohesion, conclusiveness, and homogeneity through the implementation of the 'Tudor myth', the playwright was incapable of simply disregarding the inherent relativism of historical individuals' experiences. Indeed, in places, it seems as though Shakespeare's aim is to draw attention to the uncertain foundations of historical myth, of which 'ideology' is only one part, alongside experience (consisting of conscious and unconscious impressions and feelings, dreams, hopes, fears, and so on). Prophecy plays a key role in this kind of historiographical and dramatic strategy. Its function in the closing stages of *Richard III* seems to be one of reaffirming the direction of the narrative: Richard will 'Despair and die' (*RIII*, 5.4.105) and Richmond will 'Live and flourish' (*RIII*, 5.4.109). However, these future events are guaranteed not necessarily by providence but by history itself — an entirely different form of 'predestination', and one that has key significance for Shakespeare's use of prophecy in *Richard III*.

At the same time, prophecy's effect is also unmistakably one of destabilising our (and, indeed, the characters') perceptions of causality, drama, and even character itself, not just in 5.4 but throughout the play. We need look no further than Richard's entirely uncharacteristic identity crisis — his loss of confidence in his self alone — upon awakening from his would-be prophetic dream for evidence. For, the dream sequence itself not only unsettles our understanding of the space that the stage at that time represents, but works to undermine any attempt to determine the exact nature of its prophetic dimension. As such, the dream sequence of 5.4 stands as a powerful emblem of the play as a whole, in which prophecy's destabilising influence — its crucial uncertainty factor — is constantly being deployed and exploited by

¹² Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare's Histories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 302–3.

Shakespeare from the very beginning. In *Richard III*, then, prophecy becomes a key device, as well as a mode of thinking, through which Shakespeare continually unsettles what should otherwise be fixed: our view of history as well as of ‘character’.

This chapter seeks to examine the remarkably enduring perception of *Richard III* as the first tetralogy’s definitive expression of the ‘Tudor myth’, as it is this idea that tends to prescribe limited and limiting possibilities for prophecy in the play. By assuming from the beginning that such a strictly providential reading of the drama is flawed (if not necessarily completely without truth), we may be less predisposed to see prophecy merely as a tool for the propagation of certain historical myths. The chapter argues that, despite the play’s ostensible endorsement of Tudor dogma, *Richard III* can also be seen as expressing doubt about the possibility of such historical objectivity. Central to this exploration is Shakespeare’s employment and deployment of prophecy, which promises the possibility of absolute certitude within a providential framework (something for which Richmond and others of the play’s protagonists long), but which is also often equally expressive of individual experience and desire. To this degree, it is prophecy’s unreadability — its refusal to be fixed in meaning or interpretation — that Shakespeare seems determined to exploit in *Richard III*’s examination of history. As such, the play seems to suggest that the ostensible fulfilment of prophecy is capable of shaping ours and the characters’ understanding/s of the nature of its causality, even if, upon closer inspection, it might in fact be seen to signify something other than the working of providence. As this chapter seeks to illustrate, then, many of the prophecies of *Richard III* are subtly undermined by external factors, creating a disjunction between

the characters' rigid conception/s of historical causality and the less well-defined one that the play might be seen ultimately to present.

II.

The spectre of the 'Tudor myth' has haunted *Richard III* since the publication of E. M. W. Tillyard's *Shakespeare's History Plays* seventy years ago. On the play's role in legitimising the Tudor dynasty as divinely ordained, Tillyard is unequivocal. '[T]he main business of the play is to complete the national tetralogy and to display the working out of God's plan to restore England to prosperity', he suggests:

When I [...] say that *Richard III* is a very religious play, I want to be understood as speaking of the play and not of Shakespeare. For the purposes of the tetralogy and most obviously for this play Shakespeare accepted the prevalent belief that God had guided England into her haven of Tudor prosperity. And he had accepted it with his whole heart, as he later did not accept the supposed siding of God with the English against the French he so loudly proclaimed in *Henry V*. There is no atom of doubt in Richmond's prayer before he falls asleep in his tent at Bosworth. He is utterly God's minister, as he claims to be[.]¹³

There is no room for ambiguity in Tillyard's understanding of the play, just as he sees there being no doubt about the nature or significance of Richmond's prayer on the eve of the Battle of Bosworth (contrary to my own reading). But, even for more recent (and, indeed, more nuanced) critics, it is exceedingly difficult to escape the shadow cast by Tillyard's influential study. For Phyllis Rackin, *Richard III*

¹³ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1944; repr. London: Penguin, 1969), pp. 205, 210. For a summary of critics' stances on the 'Tudor myth' in the wake of Tillyard, see Introduction.

retrospectively makes sense of the ‘Machiavellian chaos’ of the *Henry VI* plays by subsuming them into a ‘totalizing explanatory scheme that purges moral ambiguity and eradicates ideological conflict’. She suggests that, unlike in the *Henry VI* plays, in *Richard III* ‘the principle of historical causation is clearly providential. In this play, as in the three parts of *Henry VI*, the king’s vision of historical causation is subjected to a powerful dramatic irony, but this time, the king is a Machiavel, and it is providence that asserts its power in the end’. For Rackin as for Tillyard, *Richard III* ultimately legitimises the Tudor dynasty, and prophecy has a clear role to play in this validation: ‘In the providential world of *Richard III*, Richmond’s victory will be clearly marked as the will of God, not only by the judgments of the other characters but also by the prophecies, curses, and prophetic dreams that give direct and unambiguous directions for its interpretation.’¹⁴

Rackin’s conclusions point towards the difficulty of reconciling the apparent discrepancies between the *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III*.¹⁵ Indeed, it is hard to argue with the suggestion that, while the prophecies of 2 and 3 *Henry VI* in particular can often be seen to problematize the act of prediction (as is argued in chapter two), the direction and ultimate destination of *Richard III* — its telos — is never truly in doubt. However, in Shakespeare, prophecy is almost always characterised (paradoxically) by uncertainty, and *Richard III* too, in spite of its stifling association

¹⁴ Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 65, 28, 51.

¹⁵ Robert C. Jones also finds problematic differences between the plays, albeit in their engagement with ‘England’s longer heroic past’. He suggests:

the tetralogy that started with such a positive representation of historic renewal never shows the full recovery of that ideal, though the loss of memory that so largely besets England in the middle two plays is “corrected” by the retributive force with which the past swings back upon the present in *Richard III*. This resurgence of memory, focused on past wrongs, is a painful one for an England that still seems to have forgotten its better self. Richmond offers the nation a new start, but not much sense of renewal.

See Robert C. Jones, *These Valiant Dead: Renewing the Past in Shakespeare’s Histories* (Iowa City, IO: University of Iowa Press, 1991), pp. 42, 43.

with the ‘Tudor myth’, explores prophecy’s potential for disruption and its powerful psychological effects, albeit within a tighter and more dynamic structural framework. From the outset, the play might be seen to be concerned with prophecy’s potential for shaping history, whether in actuality or in the imagination; as the play progresses, the action is slowly subsumed in prophecy, eventually leading to a situation — namely, Bosworth and its aftermath — where both the nature of causality and the genuine efficacy of prophecy are difficult positively to determine.¹⁶ It is this indeterminacy, conveyed most effectively by prophecy in the play, to which we must turn our critical attention.

The play begins with Richard, Duke of Gloucester, a character whose relationship to prophecy is unmatched even by the ‘blessed’ Richmond.¹⁷ The deformed and therefore, in early modern terms, ‘ominous’ nature of Richard’s body is a prevalent feature of his characterisation and personal history in the *Henry VI* plays. In those plays, characters (Henry VI himself chief amongst them) regularly see Richard’s antagonistic personality and bloodthirsty deeds as evidence that he was marked as wicked at birth. In other words, his deformity both presages and prescribes his life. But, by murdering Henry VI mid-prophecy in *3 Henry VI*, as we have seen, Richard demonstrates an awareness not only of others’ perceptions of his ‘fate’, but of his own capacity to reshape it. Reinterpreting his bodily ‘portents’ against Henry’s own predictions, he claims the right to determine their meaning for himself (even if, in doing so, he ultimately validates others’ expectations).¹⁸ This

¹⁶ By contrast, prophecy does not feature at all in the anonymous *True Tragedy of Richard the Third* — an indicator, it would seem, of the extent to which prophecy is central to Shakespeare’s own play on the final Yorkist king.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the way in which prophecy shapes both Richard’s body and his identity in *3 Henry VI* (in others’ eyes as well as his own), see chapter two.

¹⁸ For a more detailed analysis of this scene, see chapter two. In a psychoanalytical reading of Richard, Bernard J. Paris argues that that character has grown up ‘in the midst of a mythology about himself in which he is a demonic figure’ and which ‘generate[s] self-hate and a corresponding rage at

attempt to master prophecy, and thereby his own destiny, is continued in the opening scene of *Richard III*, wherein Richard reveals (or, rather, reiterates) his murderous intentions:

since I cannot prove a lover
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determinèd to prove a villain,
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
Plots have I laid inductive, dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams,
To set my brother Clarence and the King
In deadly hate the one against the other;
And if King Edward be as true and just
As I am subtle, false, and treacherous,
This day should Clarence closely be mewed up
About a prophecy which says that 'G'
Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be.¹⁹

(*RIII*, 1.1.28–40)

Crucially, Richard's first step towards the throne in *Richard III* takes the form of a much less literal, though equally murderous, act of violence against the crown than that seen in the Tower at the end of *3 Henry VI*. Through the planting of 'drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams' (*RIII*, 1.1.33), he seeks to engender disorder and suspicion in the court. Richard, himself the subject of so much prediction, steps onto the stage armed with prophecy as a device for wreaking havoc: in his hands, its

those who make him feel so terrible about himself, but it also releases Richard to act out his rage, to seek revenge':

The prophecies about Richard are self-fulfilling; he embraces the scenario that society has laid out for him. [...] Since people regard him as a monster and expect him to be evil, he has little hope of gaining approval and sees no point in trying. He might as well accept his fate[.]

See Bernard J. Paris, *Character as a Subversive Force in Shakespeare: The History and Roman Plays* (London: Associated University Presses, 1991), p. 34. Despite his sympathetic portrayal of Richard, Paris still concludes that 'of course' the play is a 'justification of the Tudor dynasty' (*Character as a Subversive Force*, p. 46).

¹⁹ Jowett notes the double meaning of 'determinèd', which can be understood as both 'resolved' and 'preordained' (*RIII*, p. 149, n. 30).

power to destabilise is fully realised, and it becomes as deadly a weapon as the blade he used to execute the saintly Henry. The prophecy to which Richard refers, commonly denoted the “G” prophecy, is present in several of Shakespeare’s likely sources. Edward Hall records:

The fame was that the king or the Quene, or bothe sore troubled with a folysh Propheſye, and by reason thereof began to stomacke & greuously to grudge agaynst the duke [of Clarence]. The effect of which was, after king Edward should reigne, one whose first letter of hys name should be a G. and because the devel is wont with such wythcraftes, to wrappe and illaqueat the myndes of men, which delyte in such develyſhe fantaſyes they ſayd afterward that that Propheſie loſt not hys effect, when after kyng Edward, Gloceſter uſurped his kyngdome. . . . The king much greved and troubled with hys brothers dayly querimonye, . . . cauſed hym to be apprehended, and caſt into the Towre, where he beyng taken and adjudged for a Traytor, was prively drowned in a But of Malveſey.²⁰

The ‘G’ prophecy is also referenced in *The Mirror for Magistrates*, in which it is described, rather mysteriously, as simply having been ‘found’. Clarence bemoans the prophecy’s ‘obscure’ nature, pointing out that ‘God, a gleve, a gibet, grate or gate, | A Grave, a Giffeth, or a Gregory, | As well as George are written with a G’.²¹ For Clarence, it seems, prophecy’s power lies in its ability to seize hold of the imaginations of the credulous and influence them to take dangerous — and potentially deadly — courses of action. He warns the reader of the perils of prophecies, and describes how a genuine one can be distinguished from a fake.

²⁰ Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols (London: Routledge, 1957–1975), III (1960), pp. 249–50; Bullough’s ellipses.

²¹ Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, III, p. 302, ll. 181, 191, 187–89. For an exploration of the various possible interpretations of the ‘G’ prophecy, and of the prophetic significance of names in general in *Richard III*, see Yan Brailowsky, ‘What’s in a Name? The “G” Prophecy and the Voice of God in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*’, in *Les Voix de Dieu: Littérature et prophétie en Angleterre et en France à l’âge baroque*, ed. by Line Cottagnies et al. (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2008), pp. 35–46.

Shakespeare's version of the 'G' prophecy, then, is unique, and its significance cannot be overstated. In *Richard III*, the prophecy is not merely found, as in *The Mirror for Magistrates*, but forged by Richard himself. As in *3 Henry VI*, Richard seeks to demonstrate that he operates outside of prophecy's deterministic influence. For him, prophecy's power is derived not from any supernatural source, as it had been for Henry VI, but from its rhetorical force and his Machiavellian willingness to manipulate it. As he boasts in *3 Henry VI*, Richard is a master rhetorician: 'I'll play the orator as well as Nestor, | Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could' (*3HVI*, 3.2.188–89). Indeed, the description of the Earl of Gloucester's plot against his brothers is fixated upon the language of persuasion. His 'Plots', 'laid' like traps to entice the King, are not only 'dangerous', but '*inductious*' (*RIII*, 1.1.32; my emphasis) — they are persuasive and even seductive. Furthermore, 'prophecies' are equated with 'libels', formal written allegations designed to stand (and, indeed, convince) in a court of law, and 'dreams' (*RIII*, 1.1.33), which, as we shall see, are both insubstantial and yet capable of unparalleled imaginative force. All of Richard's contrivances are described as 'drunken' (*RIII*, 1.1.33), suggesting not only alcohol's ability to overwhelm one's capacity for measured and rational thought and action, but also the voracity often required to reach such a state of intoxication. Richard intends for Edward to drink ravenously of the 'G' prophecy, and, in his drunkenness, to permit it to derail his behaviour.

The contradiction at the centre of Richard's attitude towards prophecy is that, while he denies its validity as a sign of agency, he nevertheless allows it the capacity to generate action. Certainly, as an expression of providential determinism (i.e. the will of God), he rejects it wholeheartedly and with an almost atheistic determination. However, he is more than aware of its power to influence the minds of those more

naïve than himself. The irony of the ‘G’ prophecy is that it is in fact fulfilled, but perhaps not in the way that Hall envisions. In that account, Sir Thomas Vaughn, moments from execution, experiences a flash of inspiration, and ‘solves’ the riddle of the prophecy:

Ah, wo worthe them that toke the prophesie that G. should destroy kyng Edwardes children, meanyng that by the duke of Clarence lord George, which for that suspicion is now dead, but now remaineth Richard G. duke of Gloucestre, which now I se is he that shall and will accomplishe the prophesie & destroye kyng Edwardes children & all their alyes & frendes, as it appereth by us this day, whom I appele to the high tribunal of God for his wrongful murther & our true innocencye.²²

There is no such recognition of the hidden truth of the ‘G’ prophecy in *Richard III*, despite Brailowsky’s suggestion that ‘an Elizabethan audience, used to such puns and aware of many details of the history of the Wars of the Roses, would have fairly quickly divined that “G” *also* referred to Richard, Duke of Gloucester’.²³

Unlike in the chronicles, where the implication is that the ‘G’ prophecy is ultimately and ironically fulfilled through the working of providence, the same conclusion can be reached in *Richard III* only through unsolicited imaginative effort on the part of the audience.²⁴ For Shakespeare, it seems that the point of the prophecy is not necessarily the identity of ‘G’, however many possible interpretations there may be.²⁵ What the prophecy predicts is not the murder of Edward’s heirs (although the audience will be anticipating this outcome), but the

²² Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, III, p. 269.

²³ Brailowsky, ‘What’s in a Name?’, pp. 35–36; his emphasis.

²⁴ Marjorie Garber argues that the primary effect of the ‘G’ prophecy is to create dramatic irony, ‘appropriating any foreknowledge the audience might possess about the historical prophecy concerning “G”’. ‘That the most evidently true answer to this riddle (“G” signifies Gloucester, not George) is never explicitly developed in the text’, Garber suggests, ‘intensifies the discrepancy between onstage and offstage perception.’ See Marjorie Garber, “‘What’s Past Is Prologue’: Temporality and Prophecy in Shakespeare’s History Plays’, in *Renaissance Genres*, ed. by Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 301–31 (p. 314).

²⁵ For an exploration of these possibilities, see Brailowsky, ‘What’s in a Name?’.

reaction of the King himself to its appearance.²⁶ Richard leaves it to the audience to imagine how the prophecy might be interpreted, instead emphasising what it will accomplish ‘if King Edward be as true and just | As I am subtle, false, and treacherous’ (*RIII*, 1.1.36–37). The description of Edward as ‘true and just’ is partly ironic, picking up on the legal implications of ‘libels’ (*RIII*, 1.1.33) to suggest the manipulation and perversion of the course of justice. However, its second implication is perhaps more significant. That which is ‘true’ can also be understood as ‘Agreeing with a standard, pattern, or rule; exact, accurate, precise; correct, right’ — that is to say, as being predictable.²⁷ Just as Henry VI had sought to contain Richard within the destiny prescribed by his ‘ominous’ body, Richard subjects his enemies to, and makes them subjects of, a prophecy of his own creation. The ‘G’ prophecy, though ‘obscure’ (as Clarence points out in *The Mirror for Magistrates*), produces for Richard an entirely predictable effect, creating a sort of order out of the political disorder that it engenders — a disorder governed by Richard. Ironically, it is his enemies’ subscription to the notion of providential determinism, evidenced by Edward’s crediting of the ‘G’ prophecy, that makes them susceptible to Richard’s determining rhetoric. Through the illusion of one kind of causality (i.e. providential or supernatural), another is enacted (i.e. political or Machiavellian). At this crucially early juncture in the play, the ‘G’ prophecy makes us supremely aware of, and sensitive to, prophecy’s psychological power and its potential for planting ideas that

²⁶ Kirby Farrell and Graham Holderness each emphasise the significance of Richard’s anticipation of others’ actions. Farrell argues that, ‘for Richard, the deepest source of his power is his ability to anticipate the behaviour of others in his plots and “inductions dangerous” [*sic*] (I.i.32). To manipulate others he has to predict their responses to him, shaping himself to meet their expectations.’ For Farrell, this is part of Richard’s ‘verbal struggle to control the future’. Holderness also notes Richard’s ‘self-confident mastery of the situation’. See Kirby Farrell, ‘Prophetic Behaviour in Shakespeare’s Histories’, *Shakespeare Studies*, 19 (1987), 17–40 (pp. 19, 18); Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 86.

²⁷ ‘true, adj., n., and adv.’, in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2014) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/206884?rskey=pqc6ok&result=1&isAdvanced=false>> [accessed 30 March 2014]

affect the characters' — and perhaps even our own — understanding of what is unfolding onstage. The first appearance of 'prophecy' in *Richard III* is thus telling: it frames the world of the play, one in which the susceptibility and gullibility of fools is exploited by a man who has no faith whatsoever in prophecy as anything other than a tool with which to shape that world to his will.

As Richard predicts, 'Simple plain Clarence' (*RIII*, 1.1.118) is the first of many such 'gulls' (*RIII*, 1.3.328) to fall victim to the Duke of Gloucester's machinations. While imprisoned in the Tower, Clarence experiences a nightmare that epitomises the play's dichotomous and troubling presentation of historical causality: one that anticipates, of course, those other disturbing dreams of 5.4. Describing his vision to the keeper of the Tower, Brakenbury, he recounts:

Methoughts I was embarked for Burgundy,
And in my company my brother Gloucester,
Who from my cabin tempted me to walk
Upon the hatches. Thence we looked toward England,
And cited up a thousand fearful times
During the wars of York and Lancaster
That had befall'n us. As we paced along
Upon the giddy footing of the hatches,
Methought that Gloucester stumbled, and in stumbling
Struck me, that sought to stay him, overboard
Into the tumbling billows of the main.

[...]

O then began the tempest to my soul,
Who passed, methought, the melancholy flood
With that grim ferryman which poets write of,
Unto the kingdom of perpetual night.
The first that there did greet my stranger-soul
Was my great father-in-law, renowned Warwick,
Who cried aloud, 'What scourge for perjury
Can this dark monarchy afford false Clarence?'—
And so he vanished. Then came wand'ring by
A shadow like an angel with bright hair,
Dabbled in blood, and he shrieked out aloud,

‘Clarence is come, false, fleeting, perjured Clarence,
That stabbed me in the field by Tewkesbury.
Seize on him, Furies, take him to your torments.’

(*RIII*, 1.4.9–19, 41–54)

The similarities between Clarence’s nightmare and that of Richard on Bosworth eve are striking. Indeed, they even share a figure in the form of the ghost of Prince Edward, the murdered son of Henry VI, who is identified in the earlier dream only by the circumstances of his death: ‘stabbed [...] in the field by Tewkesbury’ (*RIII*, 1.4.53). In the Folio of 1623, Clarence follows his relation with a prayer, begging God to have mercy on his family:

O God, if my deep prayers cannot appease thee,
But thou wilt be avenged on my misdeeds,
Yet excuse thy wrath in me alone.
O spare my guiltless wife and my poor children.²⁸

This passage makes explicit the existence (or, rather, the presumed existence by Clarence) of inherited sin and divine retribution, which Tillyard and his acolytes have argued are the principles by which Shakespeare’s English history cycles are organised. Such a concept seems to provide Clarence as well as us with a straightforward explanation of the dream’s significance: it is a manifestation of inherited guilt and a prophecy of punishment to come, both before death and after it (as Nicholas Grene notes, ‘The Senecan landscape of Hades takes on the Dantesque colouring of Christian guilt’).²⁹ Clarence’s prayer also helps to guide the audience to

²⁸ These lines are quoted in Appendix A.B of Jowett’s edition of the play. Jowett suggests that they ‘were probably deleted for stage performance’ (*RIII*, p. 359).

²⁹ Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 148.

the conclusion that his dream is genuinely premonitory, prefiguring not just his death at Richard's command but also the manner of his execution.³⁰

However, the omission of the prayer helps to transform the implications of the nightmare, effectively disconnecting the dots that guide interpretation, and the lines that precede Clarence's supplication instead replace it:

O Brakenbury, I have done those things
Which now bear evidence against my soul
For Edward's sake, and see how he requites me.

(*RIII*, 1.4.63–65)

Clarence's guilt over his part in Prince Edward's murder remains overt, but his fear of God's vengeance against himself and his own is not strictly articulated. The emphasis, then, is not on future punishment (excluding that administered in the afterlife), but present suffering; it is not God who is responsible, but God's deputy, King Edward. Clarence's dream, like that of Richard later in the play, gives voice to his conscience, ventriloquized through the spirits of Warwick and the murdered prince. Indeed, we know that Clarence will in fact die only because Richard has promised us the same: 'if I fail not in my deep intent, | Clarence hath not another day to live' (*RIII*, 1.1.148–49).

Our knowledge of Clarence's impending death causes his nightmare to take on an eerie prescience, an unsettling suggestion of non-human agency, that it otherwise might not have possessed. Although, in his dream, the duke's death by drowning is largely incidental, a prerequisite for his confrontation with the ghosts in

³⁰ Holderness argues that 'The dream is a premonition both of death, and of the manner of the dreamer's murder by violent immersion' (*The Histories*, p. 86). Similarly, Grene notes that 'even in dream consciousness Clarence does not suspect Richard of treachery. Yet the language and action of his dream know better than he does'. As Grene points out, 'It is Gloucester who "tempted" him to walk on the dangerous hatches; it is while thinking to help his brother that he himself is struck into the sea' (*Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, pp. 147–48).

‘the kingdom of perpetual night’ (*RIII*, 1.4.44), the way in which it seems to anticipate events that have yet to occur — but which, as we are aware, must happen — has a powerful effect on our perception of the drama’s representation of causality. Yet, as is the case again and again in *Richard III*, the impression of the working of providence is allowed to be challenged and undermined, if not necessarily discredited altogether. Like that of his brother Richard before the Battle of Bosworth, Clarence’s nightmare internalises a conflict between guilt as a manifestation of remorse and guilt as a ‘mark’ or guarantee of as-yet-unadministered divine retribution. It forces us to consider if a person’s unconscious (or, perhaps more accurately, someone’s fear) can be prophetic without being providential, if dramatic irony and foreshadowing necessarily indicate a divine plan, and, ultimately, if the likeness of the hand of God is the same as its presence.

Clarence’s dispute with the two executioners works, much like the prayer of Richmond discussed above, to bring into question the would-be prophetic nature of the dream itself. The murderers offer to kill Clarence for the crimes that he committed in *3 Henry VI*, echoing the indictments of Warwick and Prince Edward when they accuse him of ‘false forswearing, and [...] murder too’ (*RIII*, 1.4.183). Clarence responds by urging ‘God’s dreadful law’: ‘If God will be revengèd for this deed,’ he warns, ‘Take not the quarrel from his powerful arm. | He needs no indirect or lawless course | To cut off those that have offended him’ (*RIII*, 1.4.190, 196–99). Essentially, what Clarence is arguing is that no mortal, however righteous they perceive their cause to be, can administer the vengeance that belongs to God.³¹ This reasoning makes a strong impression on one of the executioners, who expresses remorse upon the duke’s death (despite not striking the fatal blow himself): ‘A

³¹ The debate anticipates that between John of Gaunt and the Duchess of Gloucester in *Richard II*. See William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. by Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.2.

bloody deed, and desperately performed. | How fain, like Pilate, would I wash my hand | Of this most grievous-guilty murder done' (*RIII*, 1.4.245–47).

It does not seem to be a coincidence that Clarence's nightmare of divine retribution is followed immediately by the enactment of what the second executioner describes as God's 'vengeance' (*RIII*, 1.4.182), but which is in fact the product of Richard's conspiring. In Clarence's nightmare, death is not punishment in and of itself, but, rather, the means by which he is brought before Warwick's 'dark monarchy' (*RIII*, 1.4.48) for sentencing. The parallels with Judgement Day are clear. Indeed, it is referenced in the same scene, at which point the second executioner admits that 'The urging of that word "judgement" hath bred a kind of remorse in me' (*RIII*, 1.4.98–99). Certainly, no human can deputise for God on that day, and the second executioner's unease invalidates any claim that he might have had to being a divine avenger. Clarence's death, implausibly presented by its instruments as God's — rather than Richard's — will, throws into question the validity of divine retribution as a means of understanding the play. It also makes it difficult to view Clarence's dream as genuinely prophetic, as such an interpretation would almost inevitably result in his murder being understood as part of a providential plan — something that the play seems to be at pains to refute. When the executioners finally reveal that "'Tis [Richard] hath sent us hither now to slaughter [Clarence]'" (*RIII*, 1.4.223), they become unambiguously the ministers not of God's vengeance but of Gloucester's, contradicting and discrediting their earlier claim to be enacting divine retribution. Like the 'G' prophecy, another example of the political masquerading as the providential, the executioners' would-be holy mission is exposed as mere artifice. The world of the play seems increasingly to be composed of miniature

‘myths’, constructed by the guilty and the delusional in order to misrepresent human action as divine will.

III.

The notion of the world as ‘myth’- or illusion-based, and of divine retribution as problematized, is crucial to understanding the other great prophetic figure of *Richard III*: Queen Margaret, whose uncannily prescient curses might, like Clarence’s dream or the ‘G’ prophecy, seem to provide the key to understanding the play. Margaret’s status as an historical anomaly in the court of Edward IV has been widely noted by critics. As Roy E. Aycock observes, ‘Queen Margaret (1429–1482) is, of course, historically out of place in *Richard III*; and Shakespeare’s reasons for “resurrecting” her and her function in the play have intrigued the commentators down through the years.’³² Grene, too, points out that ‘Margaret’s Senecan role in the play is Shakespeare’s invention with no equivalent in the chronicle sources’.³³ Margaret’s conspicuous presence means that she is the object of especial fascination and scrutiny. The ahistorical nature of her curses encourages us to attribute to them a greater weight than we might otherwise have done. We are under her spell from the very beginning.

Margaret serves to remind us — and, of course, the other characters — of the events of the *Henry VI* plays. Recalling what she once was, and indicting her

³² Roy E. Aycock, ‘Dual Progression in “Richard III”’, *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 38 (1973), 70–78 (p. 70).

³³ Grene, *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays*, p. 153.

enemies with her loss, the past is both the source of her suffering and the fuel of her curses:

Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven?
Why then, give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses.
If not by war, by surfeit die your king,
As ours by murder to make him a king.
(*To the Queen*) Edward thy son, which now is Prince of Wales,
For Edward my son, which was Prince of Wales,
Die in his youth by like untimely violence.
Thyself a queen, for me that was a queen,
Outlive thy glory like my wretched self:
Long mayst thou live, to wail thy children's loss
And see another, as I see thee now,
Decked in thy rights, as thou art stalled in mine.
Long die thy happy days before thy death,
And after many lengthened hours of grief
Die neither mother, wife, nor England's queen.
Rivers and Dorset, you were standers-by,
And so wast thou, Lord Hastings, when my son
Was stabbed with bloody daggers. God I pray him
That none of you may live your natural age,
But by some unlooked accident cut off.

(*RIII*, 1.3.192–211)

Of course, Margaret has a 'grievous plague in store' (*RIII*, 1.3.214) for Richard, too, wishing paranoia, insomnia, and death upon him. She also warns Buckingham that the Duke of Gloucester 'shall split thy very heart with sorrow' (*RIII*, 1.3.300). Indeed, her final warning for Buckingham no doubt applies to all those onstage (as well as the audience off it): 'remember this another day | [...] And say poor Margaret was a prophetess' (*RIII*, 1.3.299, 301).

For many critics, Margaret's curses demonstrate once again that the universe of *Richard III* is at heart providential in nature. For Tillyard, who, as we have noted, conceives of Shakespeare's English history cycles as a whole as governed by providence, the curses 'agree with the tit-for-tat scheme of crime and punishment

that has so far prevailed in the tetralogy'.³⁴ Grene is more cautious, suggesting that although 'the cursing of enemies [...] might have apparent consequences', 'those doing the cursing could have little warrant for supposing God was on their side.'³⁵ Garber argues that 'Margaret's curse becomes in effect the true plot of *Richard III*, placed in opposition to, and ultimately defeating, the "plots" and "prophecies" (1.1.32–40) Richard himself invents to gain the throne': 'it foresees what history has already told, and what the playwright — in his play — is about to tell.'³⁶

It is not difficult to see how some critics of *Richard III* have come to the conclusion that Margaret's curses are fulfilled in the course of the play. Indeed, Rivers and Grey, both about to be executed, encourage us to see the unfolding of divine justice, predicted — and perhaps even prescribed — by Margaret:

GREY

Now Margaret's curse is fall'n upon our heads,
For standing by when Richard stabbed her son.

RIVERS

Then cursed she Hastings, then cursed she Buckingham,
Then cursed she Richard. O remember, God,
To hear her prayers for them as now for us;
And for my sister and her princely sons,
Be satisfied, dear God, with our true bloods,
Which, as thou knowest, unjustly must be spilt.

(*RIII*, 3.3.13–20)

The lords' words are reminiscent of, and may have been inspired by, those of Vaughan in Hall, whose revelation about the 'G' prophecy also seems intended to guide our understanding of causality. Queen Elizabeth and Buckingham are amongst

³⁴ Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 218.

³⁵ Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 133.

³⁶ Garber, "'What's Past Is Prologue'", p. 321. Aycock argues that Margaret's curses work alongside Richard's own 'inexorable march toward self-destruction' to bring about his downfall ('Dual Progression in "Richard III"', p. 70).

the other characters to credit Margaret's curses with efficacy. Margaret herself provides Elizabeth with a convenient summary of the shape of divine retribution:

Thy Edward, he is dead, that stabbed my Edward;
Thy other Edward dead, to quite my Edward.
Young York, he is but boot, because both they
Match not the high perfection of my loss.
Thy Clarence he is dead, that killed my Edward;
And the beholders of this tragic play,
Th'adulterate Hastings, Rivers, Vaughan, Grey,
Untimely smothered in their dusky graves.
Richard yet lives, hell's black intelligencer,
Only reserved their factor to buy souls
And send them thither; but at hand, at hand,
Ensues his piteous and unpitied end.
Earth gapes, hell burns, fiends roar, saints pray,
To have him suddenly conveyed away.
Cancel his bond of life, dear God, I plead,
That I may live to say, 'the dog is dead'.

(*RIII*, 4.4.58–73)

In recapitulating the main action of the play so far (which, typically, she understands in relation to the events of *3 Henry VI*), Margaret presents it as a slow but ominously steady process of divinely administered revenge. She anticipates that Richard, too, is soon to have 'Cancel[led] his bond of life' (*RIII*, 4.4.72), containing him within her 'tit-for-tat scheme of crime and punishment'.³⁷

However, contrary to Tillyard's understanding of the play, this scheme is entirely Margaret's, not the cycle's. As Hunt points out, there are 'discrepancies between Margaret's curses and later historical events'.³⁸ Perhaps the most obvious

³⁷ Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 218.

³⁸ Hunt argues that Margaret 'insists upon categorically ordering something [i.e. Providence] that retains a significant degree of disorder' ('Ordering Disorder in *Richard III*', p. 13). Hunt's essay has been influential on my own thinking. However, whereas he argues for the inadequacy of Margaret's understanding of providential 'justice' to explain its actual working in the play, I propose that the shortcomings of her organising schema are symptomatic of the doubtfulness that might be said to characterize providence in the play more widely. This ambiguity most often emerges when prophecies that seem to be fulfilled are made subject to, and subsequently destabilised by, other factors.

example is that of Dorset, which Shakespeare seems to make a point of highlighting. Upon discovering that Richard has imprisoned her sons, the young princes, and apparently seized the crown for himself, Queen Elizabeth is overcome with grief. She sees these events as a sign that Margaret's prophetic curses are beginning to reach fulfilment:

DORSET

Madam, have comfort.—How fares your grace?

QUEEN

O Dorset, speak not to me. Get thee hence.
Death and destruction dog thee at the heels.
Thy mother's name is ominous to children.
If thou wilt outstrip death, go cross the seas
And live with Richmond, from the reach of hell.
Go hie thee, hie thee from this slaughterhouse,
Lest thou increase the number of the dead
And make me die the thrall of Margaret's curse:
Nor mother, wife, nor England's counted queen.

(*RIII*, 4.1.33–42)

Of course, if we understand the princes' imminent deaths as predicted and guaranteed by Margaret's curse, then the idea that Dorset can escape its influence and 'outstrip death' (*RIII*, 4.1.37) is a paradox. Yet, even now, Queen Elizabeth seems to be playing the part of 'thrall of Margaret's curse' (*RIII*, 4.1.41), as if her sons were dead already. It may therefore come as a surprise to us that, as far as we can be aware, Dorset is indeed still living when the drama reaches its conclusion.

Although Dorset's survival is never explicitly announced, for the more perceptive members of the audience, it represents a loose end that works to undermine, however subtly, the impression produced by Margaret's curses. For Queen Elizabeth, on the other hand, the illusion of divine agency takes an unyielding hold of her imagination, and begins to replace her reality. She later acknowledges to

Margaret that ‘thou didst prophesy the time would come | That I should wish for thee to help me curse | That bottled spider, that foul bunch-backed toad’ (*RIII*, 4.4.74–76), attributing to her supernatural prescience. Indeed, she becomes convinced of the efficacy of curses, imploring Margaret to ‘teach me how to curse mine enemies’ (*RIII*, 4.4.111). Margaret’s response is somewhat problematic:

Forbear to sleep the nights; and fast the days.
Compare dead happiness with living woe.
Think that thy babes were fairer than they were,
And he that slew them fouler than he is.
Bett’ring thy loss makes the bad causer worse.
Revolving this will teach thee how to curse.

(*RIII*, 4.4.112–17)

Margaret’s advice reiterates an issue that Shakespeare explored in his earlier English chronicle plays, and to which he returns in *Richard III*: that of the discrepancy between history as objective ‘fact’ and history as subjective experience. Although they may seem to express a truth that transcends individual subjectivity, by her own admission, Margaret’s curses acquire their force only through her amplification — and, thus, misrepresentation — of what is categorically true. When she sets about mapping the course of divine retribution earlier in the scene, her logic is unmistakably flawed:

Thy Edward, he is dead, that stabbed my Edward;
Thy other Edward dead, to quite my Edward.
Young York, he is but boot, because both they
Match not the high perfection of my loss.

(*RIII*, 4.4.58–61)

Considering Margaret’s emphasis here on the perfect symmetry of divine justice, her schema is, of course, distinctly skewed. The presence of the young Duke of York —

the other prince in the Tower — amongst the dead seems to tilt the body count in Lancaster's 'favour', and yet he is dismissed by Margaret as 'but boot' (*RIII*, 4.4.60).

Margaret thus represents herself continually as history's 'victim', dispossessed and marginalised by the injustices perpetrated upon her by the House of Lancaster, and her curses — the last refuge of the disempowered and desperate — are an integral part of her self-created 'mythos'. Yet, this 'mythos', like the 'G' prophecy and the executioners' claim to be ministers of divine vengeance, is ultimately fallacious: Margaret has committed as many atrocities as any of her enemies (bar perhaps one), and the notion that God would avenge the wrongs that she has borne is preposterous. It is more likely that Margaret's experiences have made her an astute political analyst, and that her 'prophecies' are merely perspicacious predictions. The inevitable 'fulfilment' of her curses, in conjunction with the semi-fabricated myth of her incommensurate suffering, would be — and, it would seem, is — enough to enforce the illusion of an unfolding system of divine retribution. In other words, Margaret's subjective version of history, complete with personal biases and inconsistencies, begins to filter into and contaminate the views of the play's other characters — and, conceivably, even those of its audience.

IV.

As *Richard III* progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to view the events that it depicts as part of any providential plan, despite the fact that the characters themselves (Margaret and Queen Elizabeth amongst them) seem to insist upon it. Indeed, even while Margaret's curses still linger in the air, prophecies continue to

emerge that point towards the play's conclusion at Bosworth. Upon finally obtaining the crown, Richard begins to recall predictions of the reign of Richmond, including that of Henry VI (dramatized in the previous play):

As I remember, Henry the Sixth
Did prophesy that Richmond should be king
When Richmond was a little peevish boy.
A king—perhaps, perhaps.
[...]
How chance the prophet could not at that time
Have told me, I being by, that I should kill him?
[...]
Richmond! When last I was at Exeter,
The Mayor in courtesy showed me the castle,
And called it 'Rougemount', at which name I started,
Because a bard of Ireland told me once
I should not live long after I saw Richmond.
(*RIII*, 4.2.96–99, 100–101, 103–107)

Richard's recollection of these prophecies reminds the audience of what they already know, of what is guaranteed by history: that, at the Battle of Bosworth, Richard will 'Despair and die' (*RIII*, 5.4.105) and Richmond will 'Live and flourish' (*RIII*, 5.4.109). The suspicious (re-)appearance of these prophecies at this crucial stage in the play might be taken as evidence that we are intended to see the unfolding of providential design. Certainly, there is a suggestion of unease in Richard's repetition of 'perhaps' (*RIII*, 4.2.99) as he dwells the possibility of his usurpation.

However, it does not seem to be the case that the King is made anxious by the prophecy, but, rather, that his anxiety lends to the prophecy its unsettling imaginative force. Like his brother (and one of his first victims), Edward IV, Richard is presented with a prophecy that foretells what, on some level, he already fears: his loss of the crown. Richard's apprehension over the prophecies is consistent with Hall's characterisation of him following the murder of the princes in the Tower:

I have harde by credible reporte of suche as were secrete with his chamberers that after this abhominable deed done, he never was quiet in his mynde, he never thought him selfe sure where he wente abroad, his body prively feinted, his eyen wherled aboute, his hande ever on his dagger, his countenaunce and maner lyke alwaies to stricke againe, he toke evill reste on nightes, laye long wakyng and musyng. Forweried with care and watche, rather slombred then slept, troubled with fearfull dreames, sodeinly somtyme stert up, leapte out of his bed and loked about the chambre, so was his restlesse harte continually tossed and tomblod with the tedious impression and stormy remembraunce of his abhominable murther and execrable tyrannye.³⁹

In Hall, the exceptionally appalling nature of Richard's crime as infanticide manifests itself in a number of pantomime shows of paranoia and perhaps even guilt. Although, in Shakespeare's play, Richard does not seem to express remorse for the murder of the princes in particular, it is only after their deaths that he begins to experience anything like the anxiety described in the chronicles. However, unlike in Hall's account, this fear is not retrospective but anticipatory: it is a fear of the future. It is the same paralyzing dread that Richard experiences before the Battle of Bosworth; that causes Stanley, Earl of Derby, to send a messenger to Hastings in the early hours of the morning; and that lends to Margaret's curses their terrible weight. It is the fear of being helplessly caught up in an unforgiving system of divine retribution in which the future is terrifying in its sheer predictability — but, significantly, it is also grounded in and fuelled by a number of contentious 'myths' or illusions.

As *Richard III* nears its conclusion at the Battle of Bosworth, more and more of its characters become convinced that they are operating in a universe that is ruled by providence. Richard is the last of them to succumb to this illusion, and his sudden loss of faith in the efficacy of his own will is startling. We, too, are in danger of

³⁹ Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, III, pp. 279–80.

falling under the play's spell, of subscribing to the same view of causality ultimately as the characters. Yet, as is so often the case in Shakespeare's English history cycles, the nature of historical causality remains doubtful. Outwardly, the play's many prophecies seem to confirm the unfolding of providential design. However, Shakespeare is careful — and consistent — in his undermining of this impression throughout the play: it is part of its intellectual and dramatic design. On the morning of the Battle of Bosworth, Norfolk hands Richard a piece of paper that reads “‘Jocky of Norfolk, be not so bold, | For Dickin thy master is bought and sold’” (*RIII*, 5.5.33–34). Richard dismisses this message, and the play quickly moves on. However understated this moment is, it should not be overlooked. The pseudo-prophetic riddle, which is evocative of Richard's own ‘G’ prophecy, provides us with further grounds for an alternative interpretation of the day's events. The implication that Richard will fall as the result of a bribe (i.e. ‘bought and sold’, *RIII*, 5.5.34) takes the credit away from God, to whom Richmond would attribute it, and recasts it as a somewhat ironic piece of Machiavellian underhandedness. Of course, this case should perhaps not be overstated, but Shakespeare's last-minute introduction of an element of doubt is typical of a strategy that he has employed again and again in *Richard III*. The would-be divine prophecies that have, for much of the play, predicted the fall of Richard and the ascension of Richmond are, for a moment, undercut, allowing for the possibility that ‘perhaps, perhaps’ (*RIII*.4.2.99) we too have been buying into the mere illusion of providence.

The dream sequence of 5.4, then, might be seen as the point at which the play's melting pot of ‘myths’ boils over, where Richard is no longer able to contain his fear that Richmond's victory is ‘preordained’, and where the audience struggles to maintain perspective. Indeed, the staging of the sequence unsettles our perception

of space itself. However, in the process, our attention is drawn to the ‘myth’-based, and therefore uncertain, nature of the world of the play. It is one in which objective ‘truth’ (the events of 2 and 3 *Henry VI*, for example) is regularly filtered through the lens of subjectivity, and we are left only with competing accounts (of which Margaret’s is perhaps the most obvious example). Prophecy in the play gives voice to these subjective experiences: more often than not, we are encouraged, however subtly, to understand it not as an expression of God’s will but of the fears and desires of the characters. Prophecy thus works to expose the foundations of historical myth by demonstrating its potential to consume the imagination. It is only by undermining these prophecies and emphasising their psychological dimension that Shakespeare avoids simply regurgitating dogmatic commonplaces, transforming *Richard III* from an expression of the ‘Tudor myth’ into a mesmerising critique of historical myth itself.

4. Hollow words and hollow crowns: The performance of prophecy in *Richard*

II

Methinks I am a prophet new inspired
And thus, expiring, do foretell of him:
His rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last
For violent fires soon burn out themselves.
Small showers last long, but sudden storms are short;
He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes;
With eager feeding, food doth choke the feeder;
Light vanity, insatiate cormorant,
Consuming means, soon preys upon itself.
This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,
Feared by their breed and famous by their birth,
Renowned for their deeds as far from home
For Christian service and true chivalry
As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry
Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's son;
This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land,
Dear for her reputation through the world,
Is now leased out—I die pronouncing it—
Like to a tenement or pelting farm.
England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of watery Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds.
That England that was wont to conquer others
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.

Ah, would the scandal vanish with my life,
How happy then were my ensuing death!¹

From his deathbed, John of Gaunt, the troubled father of the banished Henry Bolingbroke, utters his now-famous elegy to the semi-mythical England of ages past in order to comment upon the present.² Fashioning himself as a ‘prophet new inspired’ (*RII*, 2.1.31) whose mission it is to condemn — and, in doing so, redeem — Richard II, the ‘insatiate cormorant’ (*RII*, 2.1.38) of his paean to England, he hopes that the social and cultural significance of deathbed utterance will imbue his words with a transcendental cogency:

they say the tongues of dying men
Enforce attention like deep harmony.
[...]
Though Richard my life’s counsel would not hear,
My death’s sad tale may yet undeaf his ear.
(*RII*, 2.1.5–6, 15–16)

Gaunt finds an unlikely parallel between himself and the prodigal king, using the sickbed as both a symbol of Richard’s reign and the means of his succour. However, the proud monarch will not be counselled — at least not by Gaunt — and angrily he dismisses his uncle as a ‘lunatic, lean-witted fool, | Presuming on an ague’s privilege’:

Dar’st with thy frozen admonition
Make pale our cheek, chasing the royal blood

¹ William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. by Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.1.31–68. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

² Cf. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s account of Brutus’s dream-vision in the temple of Diana, in which the goddess prophesies to him the founding of Britain. See Introduction. While the imagery of Gaunt’s speech is largely Christian, it also alludes to Roman mythology in the figures of Mars and Neptune (*RII*, 2.1.41, 63), reminding us — and, indeed, Gaunt’s on-stage auditors — of Britain’s mythical history. Brutus, the legendary founder of a ‘second Troy’ and nation of kings, is perhaps the ultimate antithesis of Richard, whom Gaunt dubs ‘Landlord of England’ (*RII*, 2.1.113).

With fury from his native residence.
 Now, by my seat's right royal majesty,
 Wert thou not brother to great Edward's son
 This tongue that runs so roundly in thy head
 Should run thy head from thy unreverent shoulders.

(*RII*, 2.1.115–23)

For a play that is so often understood in terms of schisms, ruptures, and 'falls', this exchange has key significance.³ Robert C. Jones argues that 'Gaunt's description of the England-that-was as "this other Eden, demi-paradise," suggests a fundamental loss, a basic change in the condition of things, not just a worsening situation'.⁴ For Graham Holderness, who conceives of this 'England-that-was' as being defined by feudalism, 'Gaunt's elegy is no panegyric of absolutism: it is a lament for the dissolution of a society in which king and nobility were organically

³ As Henry E. Jacobs notes:

It is commonplace to observe that Shakespeare's *Richard II* traces out a fundamental shift in the nature of kingship and the justification of rule. This movement, which reflects both Tudor perspectives on history and Elizabethan political theory, signifies the transition from a medieval to a Renaissance concept of kingship and power. [...] Richard and his loyalists, for all their failings, present an essentially ordered and medieval view of the cosmos based in the rule of law. Bolingbroke, on the other hand, provides an exemplum in the exercise of power which has no basis in law whatsoever.

George D. Gopen, who undertakes a meticulous and methodical analysis of the rhetoric of Gaunt's speech, suggests:

The play will end with Gaunt's son speaking in relatively straightforward syntax, making judgments that are more "humanistic" than conventional (pardoning and praising Carlisle, banishing and cursing Exton). The change is prefigured by the development (however slightly it may weigh in the plot) of the time-honored, time-honoring Gaunt who plays yes-man to Richard (I.i and I.iii) into a Gaunt whose judgment has become liberated enough to challenge his king (II.i.73ff).

See Henry E. Jacobs, 'Prophecy and Ideology in Shakespeare's *Richard II*', *South Atlantic Review*, 51 (1986), 3–17 (p. 3); George D. Gopen, 'Private Grief into Public Action: The Rhetoric of John of Gaunt in *Richard II*', *Studies in Philology*, 84 (1987), 338–62 (p. 341).

⁴ Robert C. Jones, *These Valiant Dead: Renewing the Past in Shakespeare's Histories* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1991), p. 71. For an exploration of the lost paradise motif in *Richard II*, see Clayton G. MacKenzie, 'Paradise and Paradise Lost in *Richard II*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37 (1986), 318–39.

bound together into a strong and unified nation'.⁵ In essence, these arguments might be seen as subtler variations of Tillyard's enduring notion of a play in which 'The world of medieval refinement [...] is threatened and in the end superseded by the more familiar world of the present'.⁶ The implication seems often to be that Gaunt's despair, articulated in his 'sceptered isle' speech, is symptomatic of a growing dissatisfaction with Richard's rule, a disillusionment that ultimately will lead to his usurpation by Henry Bolingbroke — an event conceived frequently as signalling a movement towards a more 'pragmatic', 'humanistic', or even 'Renaissance' politics. As Holderness observes, 'critics have argued that in plays like *Richard II* the traditional "providential" ideas are shown giving way to a new "political" understanding of history: the breakdown of an order reposing on providence and the emergence of a new regime deploying a flexible political pragmatism.'⁷

As its endurance suggests, there is some truth in this reading of the play. Certainly, the *Henry IV* plays, discussed in the final chapter of this thesis, seem to be less concerned with providence in any overt way than the plays of the first cycle. However, it would be inaccurate to characterise Shakespeare's earlier histories as simplistically 'providential'. Even *Richard III*, so often read as an expression of the 'Tudor myth', might be seen as being sceptical about the inherent truth value of

⁵ Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 64. As Holderness explains, 'Though Gaunt's language is that of Royalism and Divine Right, he is certainly no absolutist: his Golden Age is that of a feudalism given cohesion and structure by the central authority of a king bound to his subjects by the reciprocal bonds of fealty' — however, 'Richard is demanding obedience rather than fealty' (*Shakespeare Recycled*, pp. 64, 65).

⁶ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1944; repr. London: Penguin, 1969), p. 265. Robert Hapgood, challenging Tillyard's strict equation of 'medieval' with the reign of Richard II, argues that 'there are three eras distinguishable in *Richard II*, corresponding to the reigns of Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV', with that of Richard being characterised by transition. See Robert Hapgood, 'Three Eras in *Richard II*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 14 (1963), 281–83 (p. 282).

⁷ Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled*, p. 9. Holderness suggests that 'this distinction has considerable value, and is particularly helpful in providing a more generally historical approach to *Richard II*' (*Shakespeare Recycled*, p. 9).

providential claims: while many characters in the first cycle seek to understand their situations — and, perhaps more importantly, their futures — in relation to a ‘divine plan’, we seem to be discouraged from conceiving of the drama in similar terms. The extent to which we see *Richard II* as staging the ‘giving way’ of ‘traditional “providential” ideas’ depends, then, largely on how we view the play’s prophecies, which almost always reflect in some way, it seems, the currency of providential thinking. John of Gaunt’s deathbed speech, framed as an act of prophecy and suffused with its rhetoric and language, provides a useful starting point in part because it is a powerful indicator of the kind of world in which the drama takes place — a world that, from the very beginning, is perhaps no more ‘providential’ than that of the *Henry VI* plays, written and performed several years earlier.

While this chapter is, first and foremost, an exploration of Shakespeare’s employment of prophecy in *Richard II* (which, as the first in the second cycle, is both similar to and very different from that of the earlier histories), it also seeks to interrogate through prophecy the value of the ‘providentialism’/‘pragmatism’ (or ‘medieval’/‘Renaissance’) dichotomy that some critics have found in the play. It will be suggested that *Richard II*, which occupies a transitional space between the first cycle and the *Henry IV* plays, does in fact stage a sort of progression both in Shakespeare’s treatment of prophecy and in the nature of the play-worlds that he presents. However, this movement is not necessarily one away from a ‘providential’ or ‘medieval’ worldview and towards a ‘pragmatic’ or ‘Renaissance’ one. Rather, it might be understood as a dislocation in the language and symbolism of the physical/human and the divine — a rupture, essentially, of signifier and signified. One of the implications of this ‘break’ is that it becomes increasingly difficult to read and comprehend, as the characters of the first cycle so often attempt to do, the will of

God — not only in prophetic signs and omens, but in the kind of speech-making and ceremony for which Richard himself is so notorious. In other words, what once was thought to guarantee divine meaning becomes subject in *Richard II* to suspicion and reassessment (though, it should be stressed, God does not). Prophecy, which operates on a fundamental level through visual and verbal signs, provides an especially rewarding point of entry into this problem. Indeed, in a play that is very much concerned with rhetoric and the imaginative power of performance, the Biblical tradition of the outspoken prophet is also especially significant, particularly in relation to John of Gaunt.

As we shall see, the ‘break’ that Shakespeare dramatizes through prophecy in *Richard II* also has profound implications for *Henry IV*, parts one and two, as evidenced by the latter plays’ fixation with the past (i.e. the events of *Richard II*). For this reason, and for others that will shortly become clear, the end of this chapter does not represent the conclusion of this thesis’s discussion of *Richard II*, which continues in the succeeding chapter. Two particularly key moments of significance for prophecy — specifically, King Richard’s ‘armies of pestilence’ speech of 3.3 and the un-kinged Richard’s prophecy of Northumberland’s rebellion in 5.1 — receive only cursory consideration in this chapter. They are, however, discussed in more detail in the chapter that follows, where their far-reaching implications can be accorded the attention that they evidently warrant.

II.

Prophecy is an apposite medium for Gaunt's elegy to 'This blessed plot', 'now leased out' 'Like to a tenement or pelting farm' (*RII*, 2.1.50, 59, 60). Like the Biblical prophets, old Lancaster's oration is both a lament for the present — he describes a country 'now bound in with shame' (*RII*, 2.1.63; my emphasis) — and a warning for the future.⁸ According to Howard Dobin:

The prophets of the Old Testament primarily spoke "for" God, declaring his divine will and displeasure; however, their inspired prophecies inevitably entailed predictions, typically in the form of warnings, of the tests and punishments God would impose on his chosen people.⁹

This description might, without considerable difficulty, be applied to the dying Gaunt. His language, abounding with religious imagery, communicates the distinctly Biblical (and, indeed, distinctly prophetic) concept of a divine national exceptionalism: the notion that the English can claim to be God's 'chosen people'.¹⁰ The country is characterised as '[an]other Eden, demi-paradise' (*RII*, 2.1.42), a 'blessèd plot' populated with 'dear souls' (*RII*, 2.1.50, 57); its famous kings are as renowned 'For Christian service and true chivalry', Gaunt claims, 'As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry | Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's son' (*RII*,

⁸ Richard Reese Hatcher characterises the speeches of Gaunt, Clifford, Margaret, and Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, as the 'prophetic call to act on sure knowledge of the present'. For Hatcher, these calls to action are 'often frustrated by the counterforce of apocalyptic rhetoric'. See Richard Reese Hatcher, *Prophecy and Apocalypse in Shakespeare's First Tetralogy* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Irvine, 1995), p. 50.

⁹ Howard Dobin, *Merlin's Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry, and Power in Renaissance England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 27.

¹⁰ However, we should be careful to avoid reading England's current 'scandal' (*RII*, 2.1.67), its 'shameful conquest of itself' (*RII*, 2.1.66), as one of God's 'tests and punishments', lest we reproduce a Tillyardian narrative of divine retribution.

2.1.54–56). Gaunt's speech is marked not only by the scope and reach of the Biblical prophets, but also by the absolute conviction and self-assuredness that belongs to the divinely sanctioned. Indeed, he is even so bold as to equate the 'blessèd[ness]' (*RII*, 2.1.50, 56) of England with that of Christ himself.¹¹

Yet, for as much as Gaunt emphasises the divine election of the English, strikingly, his impassioned speech is 'divine' in rhetoric only. The claim to revelation that frames it and creates the expectation of preternatural insight — 'Methinks I am a prophet new inspired' (*RII*, 2.1.31) — actually serves to bring into focus the remarkably uninspired character of his predictions. Richard's 'rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last', he reasons, in the language of plain common sense, 'For violent fires soon burn out themselves' (*RII*, 2.1.33–34); likewise, he points out that although 'Small showers last long, [...] sudden storms are short', that 'He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes', and that 'With eager feeding, food both choke the feeder' (*RII*, 2.1.35–37). Gaunt's 'prophecy' is in fact so prosaically aphoristic — so un-singular — that it is tantamount to common knowledge: as R. W. Dent shows, each variation of his prediction is based on the proverb 'nothing violent can be permanent'.¹² Likewise, Henry E. Jacobs suggests that 'Gaunt's prediction that Richard II will "burn himself out" is based partly on his own reading of Richard's personality and partly on proverbial lore'. 'Both of these bases', he argues, 'reflect a medieval rather than a Renaissance orientation in Gaunt's thinking.'¹³ Jacobs contrasts Gaunt's 'medieval' prophecy with Richard's prediction in 5.1 of

¹¹ Gaunt's 'blessèd' (*RII*, 2.1.57) might refer to Mary rather than Christ. This reading, which is perhaps more likely, would reinforce the sense of England's divine election as opposed to its innate sanctity.

¹² R. W. Dent, *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language: An Index* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), p. 184. Jacobs notes that critics have traced this proverb back to Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc*, but suggests that 'we may assume a more ancient provenance' ('Prophecy and Ideology', p. 6).

¹³ Jacobs, 'Prophecy and Ideology', p. 6.

Northumberland's betrayal of Bolingbroke ('Northumberland, thou ladder wherewithal | The mounting Bolingbroke ascends my throne...', *RII*, 5.1.55–56), which he sees as exhibiting a characteristically 'Renaissance' 'understanding of the dynamics of power'. For Jacobs, the later 'prophecy' is 'founded on a radical shift in the world of the play and in Richard's understanding of the world'.¹⁴

However, the 'prophecies' of Gaunt and Richard are perhaps not so dissimilar (assuming that we accept Jacobs' reading of the latter). Gaunt, as does his nephew later on, bases his prediction on that which is observable and, crucially, which resembles the recognised 'if... then' patterns of folk wisdom. Where we might most expect divine revelation (indeed, where Gaunt has encouraged us to do so by framing his speech with the declaration of himself as a 'prophet new inspired', *RII*, 2.1.31), remarkably, we find knowledge that is neither supernatural in origin nor even especially insightful. As the following chapter illustrates, this absence of prophecy will become an important characteristic of the world of the *Henry IV* plays, but we can see its genesis even here, in the court of Richard II.

The implications of this apparent disjunction between language and meaning, appearance and substance, signifier and signified, have consequences beyond simply our reading of the famous 'sceptered isle' speech: they can, and perhaps should, influence more widely our understanding of *Richard II* and its world. Aside from his own assertion, there is of course nothing in Gaunt's speech to indicate that he is indeed a 'prophet new inspired' (*RII*, 2.1.31) and privy to divine knowledge of the future: he describes England as it is 'now' (*RII*, 2.1.63), not as it will be. Yet, despite its strange and conspicuous nature, critics rarely comment on Gaunt's claim to prophetic knowledge, other than to note its allusion to the belief that those close to

¹⁴ Jacobs, 'Prophecy and Ideology', p. 11. The 'Northumberland' prophecy is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

death were more likely than most to experience divine or otherwise supernatural revelation.¹⁵ However, given the markedly uninspired nature of Gaunt's would-be 'inspired' (*RII*, 2.1.31) predictions, it would be unfeasible to view him as one who is genuinely on the threshold of supernatural knowledge. Moreover, it is difficult to see what Gaunt would expect to accomplish — and, even more so, whom he would expect to fool — by presenting his words as divinely inspired. Rather, we should seek to understand the 'emptiness' of Gaunt's speech (and, in particular, his 'prophecies') not only as a self-conscious and intentional aspect of its construction, but as the very point at which it drives.

On the simplest level, the 'sceptered isle' speech is a lament for a debased nation, a proclamation of the discrepancy between the abstracted England of the mythical and heroic past and the 'shameful' (*RII*, 2.1.66) reality of its present. Perhaps it should not be surprising, then, that Gaunt begins his oration with a series of prophecies that draw attention to their own emptiness, their own inadequacy as articulations of the sacred tradition to which they claim to belong — prophecies that are not hallowed but hollow. Indeed, each ostensibly distinct prophecy that Gaunt utters is merely a repetition of the original ('His rash fierce blaze of riot...', *RII*, 2.1.33), albeit expressed via a different commonplace analogy. In other words, four of the five 'prophecies' are entirely superfluous, as if to emphasise further their lack of 'divine' substance. We might compare the 'prophet new inspired' (*RII*, 2.1.31) Gaunt to 'paper king' Duke of York in *3 Henry VI*:

[MARGARET]

York cannot speak unless he wear a crown.

A crown for York; and lords bow low to him.

Hold you his hands whilst I do set it on.

¹⁵ See, for example, Hardin Craig, *The Enchanted Glass: The Elizabethan Mind in Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 45.

She puts a paper crown on his head
Ay, marry sir, now looks he like a king.¹⁶

Gaunt is no more a prophet for his claim to prophetic powers than York is a king for the toy crown that he unwillingly wears. Like the paper crown, which is both an imitation of, and a derisory substitute for, the true one, Gaunt's declaration is a false signifier: a 'paper' prophecy. Yet, the paper crown, despite possessing none of the authority or power of the real thing, is in no way meaningless. Crucially, it is by drawing attention to the absence of its authentic counterpart that the paper crown works as a powerful symbol of unrealised monarchical ambitions:

Ay, this is he that took King Henry's chair,
And this is he was his adopted heir.
But how is it that great Plantagenet
Is crowned so soon and broke his solemn oath?

(3HVI, 1.4.97–100)

Gaunt's declaration works in the same way, it seems, and to the same ends. By proclaiming that he is a 'prophet', and then uttering his decidedly un-prophetic predictions, he is in fact insinuating the opposite: that he is an imitation of a prophet. Indeed, Gaunt might be regarded in this sense as little more than a 'paper' prophet, and it is important for us to understand why.

While the purpose of York's mock-coronation in 3 *Henry VI*, presided over by the sadistic Queen Margaret, is clearly to deride and humiliate the dying duke, Gaunt's own ritual of self-debasement is more complex. In another context, by declaring himself to be a 'prophet new inspired' (*RII*, 2.1.31), Gaunt would be claiming, as Joan does in 1 *Henry VI*, a special relationship to the divine; his

¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part Three*, ed. by Randall Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; repr. 2008), 1.4.93–96. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

prophecies would, in time, act as proof of the authenticity of this connection. By self-consciously drawing attention to the falsity and, indeed, the playfulness of his assertion, though, he necessarily breaks the terms of the relationship. However, it is not the case that Gaunt creates a disjunction between the court of Richard II and the divine. Rather, the emptiness of his claim to prophetic powers, and of the ‘prophecies’ themselves, give voice, however subtly, to a pervasive — and pre-existing — dislocation. Gaunt’s declaration is false because, in the world of the play, it is impossible for it to be otherwise.

The rhetoric of Gaunt’s speech, what Holderness refers to as his ‘language [...] of Royalism and Divine Right’, is made necessary — and, indeed, possible — only because of England’s ever-growing removal from the semi-mythical idyll that Gaunt invokes.¹⁷ As much as his speech is an elegy to a lost past (and surely it is), it is inevitably also an expression of the resultant absence: his evocation of ‘That England that was wont to conquer others’ is so powerful precisely because the nation ‘Hath made a shameful conquest of itself’ (*RII*, 2.1.65–66). The present reality that is the subject of Gaunt’s lament is thus defined, and perhaps only can be defined, in relation to what it should be but is not. Although he employs the language of divinity (both national and monarchical), Gaunt does so to draw attention to the fact that phrases like ‘earth of majesty’ (*RII*, 2.1.41), ‘demi-paradise’ (*RII*, 2.1.42), and ‘teeming womb of royal kings’ (*RII*, 2.1.51) have become empty signifiers, able to refer only to abstract notions with no basis in present fact: in the ‘now’ (*RII*, 2.1.63) of Gaunt’s speech. As we shall see, this critique extends to Richard II himself, and to the ideas and myths that sustain his un-divine reign.

¹⁷ Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled*, p. 64.

We can find evidence of the dislocation that Gaunt both discerns and performs as early as 1.3, in which Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray are preparing to try their dispute by combat. Of course, this trial never takes place: even as the Lord Marshal commands the combatants to ‘set forward’ (*RII*, 1.3.117), Richard forces them to stand down. As Holderness suggests, ‘the appeal of treason and consequent trial by battle are stages of a legal process, conducted in the Court of Chivalry’. He continues:

The conflict which ultimately leads to the king’s deposition is not a conflict between old and new, between absolute medieval monarchy and new Machiavellian power-politics. It is a conflict between the king’s sovereignty and the ancient code of chivalry, which is here firmly located in the older and more primitive tribal and family code of blood-vengeance.

When Richard interrupts the trial, he ‘impose[s] a policy of absolutism’ that violates the ‘code of chivalry’ and denies the rights of the lords: it is an expression of the widening divide between Richard and the barons that will ultimately guarantee his fall.¹⁸ Phyllis Rackin likewise argues that Richard does not allow the trial to take place because he believes in its authority and knows that Bolingbroke is in the right. She suggests that Richard uses his ‘ritualistic authority to interrupt the ritual that authorizes him’, and that it is in this moment that he ‘abandons the field to another kind of battle’ — one that is decided by military might and which he cannot win.¹⁹

Both Holderness and Rackin regard Richard’s interruption of the trial-by-combat of 1.3 as articulating, or perhaps even creating, a kind of discrepancy between the king’s own conception of his authority (i.e. as absolute) and the actual limits of his power, which are determined by contracts both legal and theological.

¹⁸ Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled*, p. 56.

¹⁹ Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 52.

There is truth in both of these interpretations. Yet, the scene has further implications for the state of the divine in the play (which is an integral aspect of the ‘sceptered isle’ speech). Tillyard has suggested that the ‘actions [of *Richard II*] tend to be symbolic rather than real’. As he observes of 1.3, ‘There is all the pomp of a tournament without the physical meeting of the two armed knights.’ While it is at odds with the point that Tillyard is driving at (which is simply to assert that ‘*Richard II* is the most formal and ceremonial’ of Shakespeare’s plays), nevertheless this lack of correspondence between the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘real’ is, it seems, indicative of a more momentous dislocation from the divine.²⁰ By preventing the trial by combat from taking place, Richard denies the possibility of divine justice: rather than deferring to God’s infallible judgment, instead he uses his own authority as earthly deputy to banish both of the combatants. While Gaunt employs the characteristically prophetic language of divine nationhood and national exceptionalism to draw attention to the failure of those notions, Richard does so in order to conceal their absence:

For that our kingdom’s earth should not be soiled
 With that dear blood which it hath fosterèd,
 And for our eyes do hate the dire aspect
 Of civil wounds ploughed up with neighbour’s sword,
 And for we think the eagle-wingèd pride
 Of sky-aspiring and ambitious thoughts,
 With rival-hating envy, set on you
 To wake our peace, which in our country’s cradle
 Draws the sweet infant breath of gentle sleep,
 Which so roused up with boist’rous untuned drums,
 With harsh resounding trumpets’ dreadful bray
 And grating shock of wrathful iron arms,
 Might from our quiet confines fright fair peace,
 And make us wade even in our kindred’s blood:

²⁰ Tillyard, pp. 251–52.

Therefore we banish you our territories.

(*RII*, 1.3.125–39)

Richard's decree, like his uncle's prophecies in 2.1, speaks for God where God is not present. But, whereas Gaunt makes the absence of divinity the very point of his oration, underscoring the 'fracturing' of the divine from human agency in his act of 'prophecy', Richard wilfully replaces the voice of God with his own. In a sense, both Richard and Gaunt are kinds of false prophets: Richard seeks to secure the future by enforcing his own will, obscured by the language of the divine. Shortly afterwards, he will compel Bolingbroke and Mowbray to take an oath not to collude in banishment and return in rebellion.

We can see, then, how Gaunt's 'sceptered isle' speech of 2.1 seems to imitate Richard's own rhetoric. In an oration that is concerned so prominently with monarchy and, in particular, with monarchical misrule, Gaunt's apparent emulation of Richard is unlikely to be a coincidence. Indeed, Gaunt presents his deathbed discourse unambiguously as a performance. The literal meaning of the speech is undoubtedly crucial: when Gaunt accuses Richard of being the 'Landlord of England' (*RII*, 2.1.113), we have no reason to believe that he is being anything other than earnest. However, the self-consciously histrionic nature of the speech — and, in particular, its emphasis on the hollowness of divine rhetoric (i.e. prophecy) — should perhaps be understood as a more subtle, but no less serious, criticism of the king. Gaunt is determined to exploit what is a once-in-a-lifetime (and, indeed, final) opportunity to influence the mind of his nephew: after all, 'they say the tongues of dying men | Enforce attention like deep harmony' (*RII*, 2.1.5–6). As well as announcing himself to be a 'prophet new inspired' (*RII*, 2.1.31), he also seeks to undermine his formerly stable identity. Addressing Richard directly, he muses:

O, how that name [i.e. Gaunt] befits my composition!
 Old Gaunt indeed and gaunt in being old.
 Within me grief hath kept a tedious fast,
 And who abstains from meat that is not gaunt?
 For sleeping England long time have I watched;
 Watching breeds leanness; leanness is all gaunt.
 The pleasure that some fathers feed upon
 Is my strict fast—I mean my children’s looks—
 And therein fasting hast thou made me gaunt.
 Gaunt am I for the grave, gaunt as a grave
 Whose hollow womb inherits naught but bones.

RICHARD

Can sick men play so nicely with their names?

GAUNT

No, misery makes sport to mock itself.
 Since thou dost seek to kill my name in me,
 I mock my name, great King, to flatter thee.

(*RII*, 2.1.73–87)

Richard’s use of the word ‘play’ (*RII*, 2.1.84) is perhaps telling. The allegation that Gaunt levels at him — ‘Landlord of England art thou now, not king’ (*RII*, 2.1.113) — is essentially an accusation of performing the wrong role. On a more fundamental level, Gaunt might even be seen to suggest that Richard has been miscast:

O, had thy grandsire with a prophet’s eye
 Seen how his son’s son should destroy his sons,
 From forth thy reach he would have laid thy shame,
 Deposing thee before thou wert possessed,
 Which art possessed now to depose thyself.

(*RII*, 2.1.104–108)

Richard responds by pitting performance against performance, and, crucially, by recasting Gaunt’s role from ‘prophet’ to ‘lunatic’ (*RII*, 2.1.115) and sick old man. That Richard proves insusceptible to his uncle’s performance as prophet — his presumption ‘on an ague’s privilege’ (*RII*, 2.1.116) — seems to attest to the truth of Gaunt’s accusation against him: he is too aware of the nature of rhetoric to be

profoundly affected. Nevertheless, the ferocity of his rebuke suggests alarm at being himself found out. He responds by reverting to the same language of divine kingship that Gaunt has so recently critiqued, even echoing (though he does not know it) his uncle's characterisation of England as 'this earth of majesty, this seat of Mars' with his own description of his 'seat's right royal majesty' (*RII*, 2.1.41, 120). Richard's uncanny repetition of the rhetoric of the 'sceptered isle' speech reminds us of its deliberate invocation of emptiness, but it is Richard's dismissing of Gaunt as a 'lunatic, lean-witted fool' (*RII*, 2.1.115) that finally brings us, as it were, full-circle.

Given Gaunt's irreverent tone, especially from 2.1.73–83, where he 'play[s] so nicely' (*RII*, 2.1.84) with his name, Richard's labelling of him as a 'fool' (*RII*, 2.1.115) seems, of course, quite apposite: a predilection for wordplay, particularly as a tool for mocking or criticising authority figures, is a common trait of the Shakespearean Fool.²¹ Equally, the Fool's characteristic perceptiveness or insight — his almost prophetic clarity of vision — makes Richard's would-be insult unwittingly apt. Shakespeare will go on, in *King Lear*, to give to the Fool in that tragedy a much-celebrated prophecy:

When priests are more in word than matter,
 When brewers mar their malt with water,
 When nobles are their tailors' tutors,
 No heretics burned but wenches' suitors;
 When every case in law is right
 No squire in debt, nor no poor knight;
 When slanders do not live in tongues,
 Nor cut-purses come not to throngs,
 When usurers tell their gold i' the field,
 And bawds and whores do churches build,

²¹ For a comparatively recent study of Shakespeare's Fools, see Robert H. Bell, *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). See also Robert Hillis Goldsmith, *Wise Fools in Shakespeare* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1955); Jonathan Bate, 'Shakespeare's Foolosophy', in *Shakespeare Performed: Essays in Honor of R. A. Foakes*, ed. by Grace Ioppolo (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), pp. 17–39.

Then shall the realm of Albion
Come to great confusion:
Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
That going shall be used with feet.
This prophecy shall Merlin make, for I live before his time.²²

Of course, we should not overstate the connection between Gaunt's deathbed speech and the Fool's prophecy in *King Lear*, especially given the debate surrounding the authenticity of the latter.²³ Nevertheless, the two passages share some interesting similarities, with the later one providing an enlightening point of comparison for the earlier. Like Gaunt, who is very much acting the fool, the Fool of *Lear* adopts (and perhaps even parodies) the prophetic mode to make a statement not about the future but about the present. Crucially, many of the happenings that he 'predicts' in the first half of the prophecy are already commonplace; those of the second, meanwhile, are unrealistic ideals. In other words, the prophecy is both self-fulfilling, having been made *ex eventu*, and utterly, self-consciously false. The point seems to be that 'great confusion' (*KL*, 3.2.92) has already engulfed the nation: indeed, the prophecy is itself an expression of that confusion. This impression is compounded, and perhaps encapsulated, by the Fool's claim that 'This prophecy shall Merlin make, for I live before his time' (*KL*, 3.2.95). In typically comic (and, indeed, anarchic) fashion, the Fool undercuts his prophecy by drawing attention to its anachronistic and artificial nature: he seems to 'step outside' of the play to view '[Merlin's] time' (*KL*, 3.2.95) in relation to his own (and vice versa). It is a strikingly metatheatrical moment. Just as the Fool emphasises the 'confusion' (*KL*, 3.2.92) of the realm by constructing an

²² William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by R. A. Foakes (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1997; repr. London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 3.2.81–95. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text. The authenticity of the Fool's prophecy, which first appeared in the Folio of 1623, has been disputed. See, for example, P. W. K. Stone, *The Textual History of King Lear* (London: Scolar Press, 1980), pp. 119–21.

²³ See previous note.

intentionally perplexing prophecy, Gaunt critiques the hollowness of Richard's own divine rhetoric by uttering a series of obviously spurious prophecies. Perhaps it is the license to free speech, shared by the Fool and the dying Gaunt, that enables and empowers such rhetorical acrobatics.

III.

In the first cycle of history plays Shakespeare often uses prophecy to engender uncertainty, to obscure the narrative, and to frustrate straightforward providential readings of history, all of which serves to further his dramatization — his revivification even — of the infinitely subjective and elusive past. As we have seen, in *1 Henry VI*, the apparent prophetic powers of Joan challenge, however temporarily, the inevitability of history and the notion of English exceptionalism that can be read into Shakespeare's chronicle sources; in the second part of that play, the prophesying spirit and its predictions defy both categorisation and interpretation, complicating our understanding of causality; and, in *Richard III*, the eerily prescient curses of the self-fashioned prophet, Margaret, work to draw attention to the unstable foundations of historical myth. We might be tempted to locate John of Gaunt's deathbed predictions, which seem to emphasise their own emptiness, squarely in this tradition of historical disruption through prophecy.

Although, in many ways, we would be right to do so, it cannot be overstressed that Gaunt's predictions are also very different. In fact, the 'sceptered isle' speech might be said to represent a turning point in Shakespeare's treatment of prophecy in his dramatization of English history. In *Richard III*, Richard, Duke of

Gloucester, is guilty of propagating false prophecy, but *Richard II* marks the first time that a character utters prophecy intending for it to be perceived as false, or at least as nothing other than a ‘performance’. When Gaunt, announcing that he is a ‘prophet new inspired’ (*RII*, 2.1.31), makes his distinctly uninspired predictions, he challenges — and encourages others to challenge — the assumed infallibility not just of prophecy, but of monarchy, the nation, and Englishness, which have been made similarly base and ‘empty’, upheld almost exclusively by the King’s rhetoric. Richard’s threat of execution thus locates Gaunt’s culpability in his tongue, stressing the oratorical nature of their quarrel: it is a dispute not just of language, but about language.

Although critics tend to understand Gaunt, ‘time-honoured Lancaster’ (*RII*, 1.1.1), as a remnant of an older and distinctly ‘medieval’ epoch, his prophetic utterances might be seen as very much at odds with the providential worldview often associated with that period. In many ways, they seem to anticipate the ‘shift’ that the ascension of his son, Bolingbroke, is sometimes said to herald. They encourage us to see the world of the play as one that, from the beginning, is no longer being understood in anything like straightforwardly providential terms. When Richard seizes Bolingbroke’s inheritance following the death of Gaunt, York is moved to issue his own warning for the future:

Take Hereford’s rights away and take from time
His charters and his customary rights,
Let not tomorrow then ensue today,
Be not thyself—for how art thou a king
But by fair sequence and succession?
Now, afore God—God forbid I say true—
If you do wrongfully seize Hereford’s rights,
Call in the letters patents that he hath
By his attorneys-general to sue
His livery, and deny his offered homage,

You pluck a thousand dangers on your head,
You lose a thousand well-disposèd hearts
And prick my tender patience to those thoughts
Which honour and allegiance cannot think.

RICHARD

Think what you will, we seize into our hands
His plate, his goods, his money and his lands.

YORK

I'll not be by the while. My liege, farewell.
What will ensue hereof there's none can tell,
But by bad courses may be understood
That their events can never fall out good.

(*RII*, 2.1.195–214)

In the wake of the 'sceptered isle' speech, which is marked by rhetorical hyperbole and an emphasis on the language of divine exceptionalism, York's 'prophecy' is strikingly sober, no doubt owing in part to its heavy use of legal diction, as well as its emphasis on 'natural' (i.e. non-divine) order. Jacobs suggests that 'The significant factor in this prophecy is [...] its basis in medieval law and a medieval conceptualization of the state. In warning Richard, York founds his prophecy on his own reading of the old order: the medieval cosmos'.²⁴ Again, for Jacobs, this prophecy is distinctly 'medieval' in character and in its concerns, an indicator of the world in which it is uttered; by the end of the play, he argues, the emergence of a 'Renaissance' worldview will have rendered its kind obsolete.

Yet, like Gaunt, York struggles to reconcile the decidedly un-kingly conduct of Richard with the theorised infallibility of divine sovereignty. In other words, the 'medieval' conception of the monarch as the locus of justice and order seems no longer to have a basis in reality. However, the 'hollowness' that Gaunt so recently articulated (and, indeed, performed), and which we are now witnessing in action, is

²⁴ Jacobs, 'Prophecy and Ideology', p. 7.

by no means a revelation to York, who has long suffered Richard's misuse of his royal power:

How long shall I be patient? Ah, how long
Shall tender duty make me suffer wrong?
Not Gloucester's death nor Hereford's banishment,
Nor Gaunt's rebukes nor England's private wrongs,
Nor the prevention of poor Bolingbroke
About his marriage, nor my own disgrace,
Have ever made me sour my patient cheek
Or bend one wrinkle on my sovereign's face.

(*RII*, 2.1.163–70)

Jacobs might indeed be correct in suggesting that York's prophecy has its basis in 'medieval law and a medieval conceptualization of the state'.²⁵ Certainly, York's sense of the loyalty that he owes Richard is informed, at least in part, by a medieval understanding of the monarch's intrinsic inviolability. York finds himself torn between the fealty that the sovereign demands and his own moral instinct, leaving him in a position that is almost literally inconceivable, that 'prick[s] my tender patience to those thoughts | Which honour and allegiance *cannot think*' (*RII*, 2.1.207–208; my emphasis). Yet, the prophecy, though it seems only to predict a world without meaning, is in fact also a product of the collapse of meaning (or, at the very least, what York perceives as such), which has already begun. York adopts the prophetic mode, with its traditional (i.e. Biblical) connotations of divine admonition, to issue a warning to a king who is, in theory, divinely sanctioned. It is a paradox of which York seems to be all too aware. Indeed, his prophecy (which gives us an indication of his thoughts) itself strains against its very nature as prophecy. It expresses a future that should not — cannot — be, yet its very utterance is a guarantee of its truth: 'afore God—God forbid I say true' (*RII*, 2.1.200).

²⁵ Jacobs, 'Prophecy and Ideology', p. 7.

York's prophecy in 3.1 is thus a conceptual conundrum that emblematises his own struggle for stable meaning in the wake of Richard's tyranny. The world that he predicts is not one that has been thrown into chaos by the disruption of a 'medieval' cosmological order, but one in which meaning has become dislodged from its conventional sites. Whether or not this 'dislocation' constitutes a transition from a 'medieval' world to a 'Renaissance' one is debatable. In York's vision of an end of 'fair sequence and succession' (*RII*, 2.1.199), which has clear apocalyptic connotations, time loses its orderliness and concepts like 'tomorrow', 'today', and even 'king[ship]', stripped of points of reference, seem to become arbitrary: 'Let not tomorrow [...] ensue today, | Be not thyself—for how art thou a king | But by fair sequence and succession?' (*RII*, 2.1.197–99). Whereas the prophecies of the first cycle of history plays engender uncertainty, most often through their obscure language and indeterminate veracity, York actually predicts it (though, of course, divine inspiration plays no part). He envisages a future that, rather than being only temporarily concealed by riddles and symbols that are, in theory, decipherable (like those of 'Merlinic' prophecy, for example), is impossible to foresee: as he warns Richard, 'What will ensue hereof there's none can tell' (*RII*, 2.1.212). For York, only gut instinct remains as a meaningful location of prognosis: 'by bad courses may be understood | That their events can never fall out good' (*RII*, 2.1.213–14). Queen Isabelle and others will later defer to intuition as a powerful source (or, in Isabelle's case, 'womb', *RII*, 2.2.10) of 'prophecy'.

When, reminded by the Earl of Northumberland and Lord Ross of the King's misdemeanours, Lord Willoughby asks in 2.1 'what in God's name doth become of this?' (*RII*, 2.1.251), he articulates not only the general mood of despair expressed so far in the scene, but a changing attitude towards predicting or anticipating the future.

In the exchange that follows, as Northumberland, Ross, and Willoughby conspire to join Bolingbroke, the trio employ a series of ‘prophetic’ images that are even further removed from the self-exposing rhetoric of the ‘sceptered isle’ speech than was York’s quasi-apocalyptic prediction. Northumberland comments that

we hear this fearful tempest sing
Yet seek no shelter to avoid the storm.
We see the wind sit sore upon our sails
And yet we strike not but securely perish.

ROSS

We see the very wreck that we must suffer
And unavowed is the danger now
For suffering so the causes of our wreck.

NORTHUMBERLAND

Not so. Even through the hollow eyes of death
I spy life peering; but I dare not say
How near the tidings of our comfort is.

(*RII*, 2.1.263–72)

Unlike York, the three lords exhibit no sense of loyalty to Richard, whom Northumberland labels a ‘most degenerate King’ (*RII*, 2.1.262). Consequently, they are not faced with the same existential crisis. Indeed, it might be argued that their own prior awareness of the ‘meaninglessness’ or ‘emptiness’ that Gaunt earlier articulated is what enables their casual treason. They conceive of Richard’s downfall as a ‘tempest’ that will make a ‘wreck’ of England, guaranteed by a higher power only in the sense that it is the King himself who will bring about this ‘storm’ (*RII*, 2.1.263, 269, 264). They must, they are aware, ‘seek [...] shelter’ (*RII*, 2.1.264) from it. Although Ross displays an almost fatalistic resignation to going down with the ship (‘We see the very wreck that we must suffer | And unavowed is the danger now’, *RII*, 2.1.267–68), his initial attitude serves only to emphasise by contrast Northumberland’s conviction that theirs is not an inescapable fate, that ‘Even

through the hollow eyes of death' there is 'life peering' (*RII*, 2.1.272). It is by joining Bolingbroke's rebellion, of course, that Northumberland and co. are able to weather the 'storm' (*RII*, 2.1.264) of Richard's fall, which, in terms of pure physicality, turns out to be little more than a whimper: as we come to see, the King is ultimately unable to offer anything in the way of military resistance.

The three lords' conception of causality here also seems to anticipate Richard's prophecy of 5.1, which Jacobs argues is evidence of a 'fundamental shift in the nature of kingship and the justification of rule' having taken place.²⁶ Furthermore, their sense of their capacity to affect the future (or, at the very least, to accommodate it) stands in stark contrast to the fatalism of, say, Henry VI — or, indeed, that of Richard himself later in the play. Although the predictions of Northumberland and Ross are perhaps not as integral to the development of *Richard II* as are those of Gaunt or even York, they nevertheless serve as indications of the ways in which the characters are thinking about the future. Stripped of the language of divine agency that Gaunt first begins to expose and critique earlier in the scene, they provide a model of cause and effect that is rooted more firmly in the strictly observable realm of human action. If we view the world of *Richard II*, even only in its early acts, as a 'medieval' one of dogma and ceremony, such 'prophecies' would certainly be conspicuous.

However, we should perhaps understand this world, as Gaunt encourages us to, as one in which traditional values are being 'emptied out', conventional meanings are becoming 'dislocated', and it is in fact Richard who is desperately out of place: his reliance upon the rhetoric of divine power, dogma, and ceremony means that he too is necessarily becoming 'dislodged'. This process is not strictly one of transition

²⁶ Jacobs, 'Prophecy and Ideology', p. 3.

away from ‘medievalism’, but of separation of the human from the divine. In particular, we observe that the prophecies, signs, and omens which proliferate in the first tetralogy begin to recede quite markedly in *Richard II*, and it becomes increasingly difficult to see — never mind to read — the will of God in any tangible way. In such an environment, Richard has no means of justifying his rule other than by recourse to a rhetoric of divinity that seems no longer to carry the weight that it once might have had, that has become resoundingly hollow (as we shall see, both in this and in the following chapter on *Henry IV*).

IV.

Following Northumberland’s defection to the side of Bolingbroke, which is itself a strictly secular omen of Richard’s imminent fall, we are presented with what might be the play’s only suggestion of explicitly providential (or, perhaps more accurately, seemingly providential) portents. Awaiting Richard’s return from the Irish wars, Salisbury is informed by the Welsh captain of that nation’s decision to abandon the King, whom they now suspect to have perished abroad:

’Tis thought the King is dead. We will not stay.
The bay trees in our country are all withered
And meteors fright the fixèd stars of heaven.
The pale-faced moon looks bloody on the earth
And lean-looked prophets whisper fearful change.
Rich men look sad and ruffians dance and leap,
The one in fear to lose what they enjoy,
The other to enjoy by rage and war.
These signs forerun the death and fall of kings—
Farewell, our countrymen are gone and fled,

As well assured Richard their King is dead.

(*RII*, 2.4.7–17)

Superstition is associated repeatedly with Wales and the Welsh in Shakespeare. The captain here anticipates Owen Glendower of *1 Henry IV*, whose own belief in magic and the supernatural is a source of irritation and target of ridicule for Hotspur (who appears in 2.3 of *Richard II* as Percy, the son of Northumberland). However, the omens that the Welsh captain describes are also reminiscent of those of the first tetralogy, where they are often treated with seriousness (if not necessarily presented as genuine providential signs). Certainly, at first, it is difficult to view the ‘portents’ as anything other than what the captain alleges them to be: visual corroborations of Richard’s death. But the Welshman seems unaware that his nation’s decision to abandon their king is founded on a paradox: the strange occurrences that Wales is experiencing are said to ‘forerun the death and fall of kings’ (*RII*, 2.4.15), yet, supposedly, Richard is already dead.

This faulty reasoning seems to indicate that a lack of correspondence between signifier and signified persists as a fundamental problem in the world of the play. Indeed, Salisbury’s response might lead us to question whether these would-be providential signs have any true significance at all. Alone on stage following the captain’s departure, he laments:

Ah, Richard, with the eyes of heavy mind
I see thy glory like a shooting star
Fall to the base earth from the firmament.
Thy sun sets weeping in the lowly west,
Witnessing storms to come, woe and unrest.
Thy friends are fled to wait upon thy foes
And crossly to thy good all fortune goes.

(*RII*, 2.4.18–24)

Salisbury transforms the captain's physical portents into metaphors, seen 'with the eyes of [his] heavy mind' (*RII*, 2.4.18), for the King's declining fortunes: the meteors that 'fright the fixèd stars of heaven' (*RII*, 2.4.9) become a single shooting star, its fall representing Richard's diminishing 'glory' (*RII*, 2.4.19); the 'bloody' (*RII*, 2.4.10) moon is converted to a setting (and 'weeping', *RII*, 2.4.21) sun. In this way, Salisbury literally imagines and, in doing so, reimagines the omens, reducing them from prophetic signs to mere emblems: images that do not necessarily presage anything at all. In fact, Salisbury's despair seems to be a reaction not to the 'prophecies' themselves, but to the Welsh army's desertion. They might therefore be understood as signifying Richard's death only in the sense that they prompt the Welsh, who imagine them to be portentous, to abandon him. The illusion of supernatural prophecy — a trick that is employed again and again in the first cycle — works here to further Shakespeare's portrayal of a world in which would-be divine signs are found to be increasingly 'empty' or without meaning.

V.

Despite the presentiments of the Welsh forces, Richard is of course not dead, and he returns to England (and to the play) in 3.2. Over the course of the scene, Richard's hopes of suppressing Bolingbroke's rebellion are raised and dashed repeatedly and dramatically, and he responds with characteristic histrionics. 3.2 holds especial significance for Harry Berger, Jr., who argues that what appears to be Richard's incompetence in the face of adversity is in fact a ruse. Richard, Berger suggests, is merely acting the part of inept monarch: a two-fold performance. Berger contends

that it is the King's intention to 'get himself deposed (having first picked out a likely heir [i.e. Bolingbroke] to perform that service), stage himself as a victim and martyr, reward his heir with the title of usurper, and leave him with a discrediting crown and the guilt of conscience for his labor'.²⁷ While Berger's theory of what can be described as Richard's 'self-usurpation' can be, in some ways, difficult to digest, it does highlight two particular qualities of the scene, and of *Richard II* more widely, that are significant for this chapter's reading. First, it emphasises the centrality of performance (in the sense of public speech-making). Secondly, it demonstrates the lack of correspondence between would-be divine sign (in this case, Richard's rhetoric of divine sovereignty) and ultimate meaning: Berger's reluctance to see even Richard as accepting his own monarchical invulnerability is a testament to the severity of this 'dislocation'. Indeed, it seems possible that Richard does not subscribe fully to the providential dogma that he so often espouses. As suggested above, his reaction to Gaunt's 'sceptered isle' speech might be seen to imply an awareness of the 'hollowness' that his uncle was critiquing therein. We are never quite sure, as a result, when Richard himself believes in what he says of himself as a divinely-appointed being.

3.2 is a scene that is concerned largely with the future, and, in particular, with the ways in which humans can prepare themselves to confront the most likely scenario — in other words, with the difference between anticipating and predicting the future. It is perhaps surprising (though certainly telling) that the Bishop of

²⁷ Harry Berger, Jr., 'Richard II 3.2: An Exercise in Imaginary Audition', *ELH*, 55 (1988), 755–97 (p. 757). Berger suggests (rightly) that 'The succession of kings in the *Henriad* is a genealogy of guilt'. However, he understands this guilt as one 'which, seeded in Richard's own self-division, transmits itself with increasing virulence'. 'This virulence', Berger argues, 'testifies to the abiding power of the murdered king, a power seriously underestimated by the canonical view of Richard as a weak and politically inept ruler who, if he victimized anyone, only victimized himself' ('Imaginary Audition', p. 758).

Carlisle advocates a strategy that, while appearing at first to privilege divine support, actually endorses human action:

Fear not, my lord. That power that made you king
Hath power to keep you king in spite of all.
The means that heavens yield must be embraced
And not neglected; else heaven would
And we will not: heaven's offer we refuse,
The proffered means of succours and redress.

(*RII*, 3.2.27–32)

The Duke of Aumerle is quick to clarify Carlisle's meaning:

He means, my lord, that we are too remiss
Whilst Bolingbroke, through our security,
Grows strong and great in substance and in friends.

(*RII*, 3.2.33–35)

Although Carlisle's worldview is undoubtedly (and unsurprisingly) providential, he discourages Richard from relying solely on God's provision: he must, the bishop reasons, embrace the 'means that heavens yield' (*RII*, 3.2.29). In this negotiation, crucially, the will of God is not strictly visible: essentially, Richard is being urged to act on the assumption that God is on his side. Aumerle's translation or undressing of Carlisle's advice emphasises that it is ultimately pragmatic. Yet Richard continues to adopt a code of passivity in which the crown, as an ostensible sign of the will of God, acts on the King's behalf. He does not anticipate the future, as Carlisle does, but attempts to predict it, envisioning a fixed one in which defeat is impossible. As he reminds Aumerle,

when this thief, this traitor Bolingbroke,
Who all this while hath revelled in the night
Whilst we were wandering with th'antipodes,
Shall see us rising in our throne, the east,

His treasons will sit blushing in his face,
 Not able to endure the sight of day
 But, self-affrighted, tremble at his sin.
 Not all the water in the rough rude sea
 Can wash the balm off from an anointed king.
 The breath of worldly men cannot depose
 The deputy elected by the Lord;
 For every man that Bolingbroke hath pressed
 To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
 God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
 A glorious angel. Then if angels fight,
 Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right.

(*RII*, 3.2.47–62)

Richard's plan of 'action' is in direct contradiction to the counsel of Carlisle. He may not necessarily believe in it, but the king remains invested in the notion that the 'throne' (*RII*, 3.2.50), the 'golden crown' (*RII*, 3.2.59), and even his own image (signified by 'the sight of day', *RII*, 3.2.52) are capable of acting as signs of God's eternal will and ordinance. The divine protection of which Richard speaks is not literal, but an imaginary deterrent. Richard later asks himself (and, indeed, those around him) a hypothetical question: 'Is not the king's name twenty thousand names? | Arm, arm, my name! A puny subject strikes | At thy great glory' (*RII*, 3.2.85–87). Here, Richard pits the physical strength of the subject against the imaginative force of the 'king's name' (*RII*, 3.2.85), which renders the former 'puny' (*RII*, 3.2.86). Yet, the reality of his situation, reiterated by wave after wave of messengers bearing 'heavier' and 'heavier tale[s]' (*RII*, 3.2.197), is that the name of the king has been hollowed out, and, like the play's other would-be divine signs, it no longer carries the significance that he would attribute to it.

No sooner has Richard reiterated to Aumerle the invulnerability of divine kingship — his kingship — than Salisbury delivers news of 'despair' (*RII*, 3.2.66): the Welsh forces have, as we already know, abandoned their king. Suddenly, the

victory that Richard seemed to ‘foresee’, as if preordained, is turned on its head, and his language of impregnability becomes one of vulnerability and mortality:

But now the blood of twenty thousand men
Did triumph in my face and they are fled;
And till so much blood thither come again
Have I not reason to look pale and dead?
All souls that will be safe fly from my side,
For time hath set a blot upon my pride.

(*RII*, 3.2.76–81)

A word of encouragement from Aumerle — ‘Comfort, my liege, remember who you are’ (*RII*, 3.2.82) — is enough to restore Richard’s belief in his inherent (i.e. monarchical) invulnerability: ‘I had forgot myself. Am I not King?’ (*RII*, 3.2.83). Yet Scroop’s ‘tidings of calamity’ (*RII*, 3.2.105), including news of York’s betrayal, send Richard again into a tortured fit of despair:

By heaven, I’ll hate him everlastingly
That bids me be of comfort any more.
Go to Flint Castle, there I’ll pine away—
A king, woe’s slave, shall kingly woe obey.
That power I have, discharge, and let them go
To ear the land that hath some hope to grow,
For I have none. Let no man speak again
To alter this, for counsel is but vain.

(*RII*, 3.2.207–14)

In the space of one short scene, Richard famously swings numerous times between the elation of his presumed victory over Bolingbroke, described in the same terms of divine monarchy that ostensibly guarantee it, and the dejection of what appears to be his increasingly likely usurpation. Essentially, what is being challenged with every piece of bad news is Richard’s ability to predict the future: every assertion of his would-be invulnerability is also a kind of ‘prophecy’ of a future

made certain by the impossibility of defeat. However, these ‘predictions’ serve only to reaffirm the emptiness of the rhetoric that should empower them. Ultimately, Richard opts for a kind of comfort in embracing the only future that he can predict: that of defeat. Through the dislocation that his own un-kingly — perhaps even tyrannical — conduct helped to bring about, the terminology of his reign has become, like his crown, hollow. As we shall now see, this ‘emptying out’ has profound significance for prophecy not only in the final scenes of *Richard II*, but in the chronicle plays that follow it: *1* and *2 Henry IV*.

5. 'O, I could prophesy...': The absence of prophecy in *1* and *2 Henry IV*

In an encounter with his queen Isabelle, the Earl of Northumberland, and the usurping Henry Bolingbroke, Richard delivers a critical speech, which, proving to be equally insightful and incisive, reverberates through the *Henry IV* plays. Penetrating the bounds of *Richard II* to 'sound the [...] after-times' of *2 Henry IV*, Richard warns:

Northumberland, thou ladder by the which
My cousin Bolingbroke ascends my throne
[...]
The time will come that foul sin, gathering head,
Shall break into corruption¹

This prophecy's primary mode is no doubt political: it concerns matters of state, and is explicitly directed at two prominent politicians in Northumberland and Bolingbroke. Of course, in early modern England, it was very uncommon for such a prophecy to denominate clearly its subject or subjects, as Richard does here. However, with regard to the function that it performs, the prophecy can be seen to be typical of those that were in currency in the period. As we have seen, Howard Dobin proposes a model for the way in which these prophecies worked, specifically in relation to political power, suggesting that they provided a means of legitimation for both the established order of Church and State and its opponents (represented by the 'priest' and the 'prophet' respectively): by reading a prophecy in a particular way, the priest or the prophet could locate themselves within God's 'plan', thus claiming

¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part Two*, ed. by Rene Weis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.1.277, 3.1.69–70, 75–76. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

divine ordinance for their actions.² For a monarch, such a claim would almost certainly serve to restate and perhaps reinstate their divine right to rule.

For a prophecy to be capable of performing a legitimating function, therefore, it was essential that it be perceived as communicating divine or otherwise supernatural knowledge. Neither the priest nor the prophet could achieve legitimization if they could not be seen to be part of the providential-historical scheme that such a prophecy would entail. It would be impossible to accept that a prophecy could be genuine without subscribing to a hard-line providentialist worldview that allows for the will of God to be readable in signs and omens — a worldview that, as we shall see, appears to have little place in the *Henry IV* plays. The rejection of such a worldview necessarily entails the refusal of the very notion of supernatural prophecy. In other words, a prophecy that is ambiguous or evasive in its language might have the potential to perform a legitimating function, but only if its interpreter allows for that possibility. Individual interpretation is not the sole variable in the formation of prophetic meaning, but is itself dependent upon agreeing intellectual circumstances.

Despite the fact that Richard's prophecy is unusual in that it refers clearly to Northumberland and Bolingbroke, it is by no means wholly uncharacteristic of prophetic rhetoric. The prognostication itself — that 'foul sin gathering head | Shall break into corruption' — is typical of would-be supernatural prophecy.³ At the very least, it is ominously suggestive of obscured knowledge of the future by virtue of its semantic ambiguity. This effect is compounded by the absence of any transparent deductions or working out that could be seen to inform the prediction. Its ambiguity

² Howard Dobin, *Merlin's Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry and Power in Renaissance England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 33–35. See also Introduction.

³ William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. by Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.1.58–59. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

could also potentially be seen as a sign of divine prescience. Indeed, the language of the prophecy seems to compel us to consider very seriously this possibility. The image that it evokes, of a boil or abscess swelling and subsequently bursting, echoes Exodus:

So the LORD said to Moses and unto Aaron, Take to you handfuls of ashes of the furnace, and let Moses sprinkle it toward the heaven in the sight of Pharaoh.
And it shall become small dust in all the land of Egypt, and shall be a *boil breaking forth* with blains upon man, and upon beast.⁴

This allusion emphasises the heightened and quasi-Biblical rhetoric that Richard employs throughout the drama of *Richard II*, and, crucially, the threat of divine retribution that his prophecy could be seen to entail. It is this threat that, Richard hopes, enables his prophecy to perform a legitimating function. The promise of providential punishment works to reassert his entitlement to the throne by incontestable divine right, and, while the gift of prophecy does not seem to have been seen as a certain boon of the royal office, the apparently supernatural nature of Richard's prophecy strongly implies God's favour. This impression necessarily invalidates the claim of any would-be rival to the throne, including Bolingbroke.

As we have seen, this kind of invocation of divine right is typical of Richard's public oratory throughout *Richard II*, which regularly works to reaffirm his position as God-ordained monarch. When first challenged to defend his crown from Bolingbroke, Richard threatened:

my master, God omnipotent,
Is mustering in his clouds on our behalf

⁴ Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, eds, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Exodus 9. 8–9; my emphasis. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

Armies of pestilence, and they shall strike
Your children yet unborn and unbegot
That lift your vassal hands against my head
And threat the glory of my precious crown.

(*RII*, 3.3.84–89)

This prophetic warning is unlike anything that can be found in the *Henry IV* plays. Compare it to Hastings' prediction of 'success of mischief' (*2HIV*, 4.1.273) in *2 Henry IV*, for example, and the disparity between the different plays' prevalent kinds of 'propheying' is impossible to overlook. Like the 'Northumberland' prophecy, Richard here promises providential punishment for those who attack their rightful king. Again, his rhetoric is carefully designed to evoke the wrathful God of Exodus, who instructs Moses to warn Pharaoh that 'I will stretch out my hand, that I may smite thee and thy people with pestilence; and thou shalt be cut off from the earth' (Exodus 9. 15, KJV).

Of course, by this point in the play, even Richard seems to have come to terms with the 'hollowness' of divine rhetoric, and to have accepted that he is incapable of predicting the future. However, rhetoric remains his only form of defence, and he proves himself to be a skilful orator. Through analogy with the Israelites, Richard continues to characterise himself as a chosen monarch whose persecution will be met with divine retribution. As he does in the 'Northumberland' prophecy, he makes reference to the Biblical notion of physical disease being symptomatic of, and punishment for, spiritual sin, but he also explicitly invokes the threat of dynastic punishment. Just as Pharaoh shall be 'cut off from the earth', so Bolingbroke's line shall, according to Richard, be struck down by the vengeful hand of God. This could be said to echo (or, rather, anticipate) the sentiment of the 'Northumberland' prophecy, which warns that the usurpers' 'foul sin' (*RII*, 5.1.58) may not necessarily

face immediate punishment (in other words, that it could be deferred until after their deaths). Richard's use of prophecy can thus be seen to follow a discernible pattern.

But there is a problem with this reading: the 'Northumberland' prophecy quoted above is not Richard's. At least, the words are not his exactly as they are uttered in *Richard II*. Rather, it is his prophecy as recalled by Bolingbroke, now Henry IV, in 2 *Henry IV*. In fact, what Henry attributes to his predecessor represents only four lines of what we can call the 'original' prophecy (and four somewhat distorted lines, at that). The speech that is found in *Richard II* is ten lines longer than the truncated version of 2 *Henry IV*, and it creates a significantly different impression:

Northumberland, thou ladder wherewithal
The mounting Bolingbroke ascends my throne,
The time shall not be many hours of age
More than it is, ere foul sin gathering head
Shall break into corruption. Thou shalt think
Though he divide the realm and give thee half
It is too little, helping him to all.
He shall think that thou, which know'st the way
To plant unrightful kings, wilt know again,
Being ne'er so little urged, another way
To pluck him headlong from the usurped throne.
The love of wicked men converts to fear,
That fear to hate and hate turns one or both
To worthy danger and deserved death.

(*RII* 5.1.55–68)

Here, Richard's prediction is not a providentialist explication of an anticipated future event. In fact, as we shall see, it is much more indicative of the kinds of predictions that we find in the *Henry IV* plays. Deduced from an incisive reading of Bolingbroke and Northumberland themselves, and lent weight by historical precedent ('The love of wicked men converts to fear...', *RII*, 5.1.66), it is equally suggestive of the

didactic function of history, as emphasised by the Renaissance humanists, and the realpolitik of Machiavelli. Although Richard's speech frames his usurpation as a 'foul sin' (*RII*, 5.1.58), and, in doing so, reasserts what he sees as his right to rule, it does not explicitly envisage a providential universe in which wrongdoings are punished by the vengeful hand of God. Instead, it imagines future discord between Bolingbroke and Northumberland as the likely product of a particular set of political circumstances. It is very much a cause-and-effect vision of history.⁵

Rather than creating problems for this reading of the *Henry IV* plays, as perhaps might be expected, the surprising nature of Richard's prophecy will serve to illuminate it. It is no coincidence, for instance, that the fire and brimstone of the 'armies of pestilence' speech is nowhere to be found in the language of the 'Northumberland' prophecy. Following Richard's usurpation, even he is unwilling to deploy the 'hollow' rhetoric with which he had sought previously to deter his enemies: its terms have become so far removed from their original meanings as to become meaningless. The world that this 'dislocation' creates has often been figured as postlapsarian, an 'abrupt plunge into a contemporary, fallen world'.⁶ There is some degree of truth in this idea: the rebels of *1 Henry IV* in particular tend to see the past, and especially Richard, through rose-tinted glasses; as Nicholas Grene argues, Henry IV himself is characterised by an 'impossible dream of turning back the historical clock'.⁷

⁵ Henry E. Jacobs' reading of Richard's prophecy is similar to my own. He also notes Henry's recollection of the prophecy in *2 Henry IV*, but does not explore the reasons for it. As I attempted to show in the previous chapter, the 'medieval'/'Renaissance' dialectic that Jacobs identifies does not always seem to hold true. Indeed, it is problematized further by Henry's recollection of Richard's prophecy in 3.1 of *2 Henry IV* (as we shall see). See Henry E. Jacobs, 'Prophecy and Ideology in Shakespeare's *Richard II*', *South Atlantic Review*, 51 (1986), 3–17.

⁶ Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 77. It should be noted that Rackin herself does not agree with this reading.

⁷ Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 165.

However, Richard's usurpation does not represent a kind of 'original sin' by any means. Rather, it is merely the logical conclusion of the 'dislocation' of divine meaning that he himself helped to bring about: the point at which the absolute centrality of the monarch, whose authority is derived from God, is brought into question and reconfigured.⁸ In the providential worldview that Richard appears to espouse earlier in *Richard II*, the monarch is the centre by which by society and history are oriented (through the interconnected doctrines of divine right and hereditary succession), and, as such, is invulnerable. But, if the sovereign becomes dislocated from God, as Richard does, the old providential language of the monarchy is rendered meaningless. It is for this reason that Richard's prophecy in 5.2 is — and can only be — explicitly political, as opposed to supernatural, in nature. Another consciously theatrical expression of divine right in the vein of the 'armies of pestilence' speech would have been tantamount to 'a tale | [...] full of sound a fury | Signifying nothing': no more than an allusion to an organising principle that, even for Richard, is no longer there; a legitimating act with nothing to legitimate; a riddle in a dead language.⁹

The disappearance of prophetic signs that could be taken unambiguously to be providential has profound significance for the practice of predicting the future in the *Henry IV* plays. However, this chapter is concerned not only with why (and, indeed, to what extent) prophecy disappears from the *Henry IV* plays, but also with

⁸ Derrida's concept of a 'decentred universe' provides a useful analogy with which to describe this world. Derrida argues that Western epistemology had always conceived of structures as having fixed centres, providing a 'reassuring certitude' by which anxiety could be mastered. Following what he calls a 'rupture', these centres had to 'begin to be thought', and thus were no longer certain. See Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism & the Sciences of Man*, ed. by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), pp. 247–65 (pp. 248, 249).

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Nicholas Brooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.5.26–28. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

how Shakespeare's historical dramaturgy responds to, and, indeed, is shaped by, its omission. It will be argued that the very absence of prophetic signs and omens engenders a kind of 'prediction' and breed of uncertainty that are not only different from those found in the first cycle (and, to a lesser extent, in *Richard II*), but unique to the plays here under consideration.

II.

The circumstances surrounding the 'Northumberland' prophecy in *Richard II* make Henry's recollection of it in *2 Henry IV*, quoted at the start of this chapter, doubly interesting: not only does it perform in *2 Henry IV* a function entirely opposite to what its original speaker seemed to intend, but it does so in a world in which, as we have seen, that function no longer carries meaning. We can reduce what we understand as Richard's prophecy, in both its *Richard II* and *2 Henry IV* incarnations, to two fundamental points: that a 'foul sin' (*RII*, 5.1.58; *2HIV*, 3.1.75) has been committed in which Bolingbroke and Northumberland are implicated, and that this will inevitably lead to an outbreak of 'corruption' (*RII* 5.1.59; *2HIV*, 3.1.76), which will in turn plague the guilty themselves. It is these two points that survive the transition from the epoch of Richard to that of Henry (no doubt because they proved true): the rest of the speech is forgotten in *2 Henry IV*, becoming a part of a context that is irretrievable. It is this context, however, that qualifies Richard's prophecy, governing and restricting the horizons of its potential meaning by disarming its dangerous ambiguity. When Henry recalls it in *2 Henry IV*, he recontextualizes it, and, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, removing

Richard's words from the circumstances of their original utterance allows them with hindsight to perform the legitimating function of supernatural prophecy. It is this legitimating function, then, that the fearful Henry seems to awaken when, in the wake of Northumberland's rebellion, he claims that Richard was 'Foretelling this same time's condition, | And the division of our amity' (2HIV, 3.1.77–78). What was an empirical and purely pragmatic political prediction in *Richard II* is, for Henry IV, transformed suddenly into something more: in Grene's words, it 'retrospectively becomes prophecy'.¹⁰

Henry's appeal to the past at this point is, of course, not unusual in itself. Critics have noted that such retrospection is very much typical of the plays of the second tetralogy, whose characters do not just look backwards, but often revise and reappropriate the past better to suit the needs of the present.¹¹ But what is striking about the recollection of Richard's prophecy in 2 *Henry IV* is that, unlike such revisions and reappropriations, it expresses an idea that can no longer make sense of the world. What is more, it does so by deploying a 'hollow' rhetoric of divinity that even Richard had abandoned by the time of the prophecy's original utterance. In this sense, Henry's reawakening of the 'Northumberland' prophecy in 3.1 of 2 *Henry IV* constitutes something of a relapse: it is not so much a revisiting of the past as an attempt to revive and impose its archaisms on the present.

To understand why Henry experiences this relapse into providentialism and a fear of Richard's prophecy, it is necessary to consider its immediate context. As is the case in *Richard II*, the meaning that is attributed to those crucial two lines — 'foul sin, gathering head, | Shall break into corruption' (2HIV, 3.1.75–76) — bleeds out into the words that surround them. The speech in which they are found comes

¹⁰ Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 136.

¹¹ See Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, chapter six. See also Rackin, *Stages of History*, chapter two.

during a particularly unquiet time in the reign of Henry IV, which is under threat from the continuing Northumberland revolt. ‘Oh God, that one might read the book of fate,’ a sleepless Henry moans, ‘and see the revolution of the times’ (2*HIV*, 3.1.44–45). This declaration of the unpredictability of history and the impossibility of foreknowledge, perfectly emblematised by the illegible ‘book of fate’ (2*HIV*, 3.1.44), is completely antithetical to the uncompromisingly dogmatic and immutable worldview espoused by the ruling Richard II. It is a lament over the ultimate powerlessness of monarchs in the face of the whims of Fortune, and an expression of the uncertainty of a world that is no longer anchored ostensibly to ‘fixed’ meanings in the way that, Henry implies, it once was. In this moment, Henry seems to desire the stability and security that the old worldview seemed to provide. He finds a symbol of this longed-for certainty in Richard’s prophecy, which appears in retrospect to represent an instance of genuine supernatural insight. The ‘book of fate’ (2*HIV*, 3.1.44) is transformed from a metaphor for the mutability of time into a very real record of providential history past and future, providing a certainty that appears to be strikingly anachronistic in the ‘dislocated’, and consequently more pragmatic, world of the *Henry IV* plays.

Of course, Henry’s attempt to reimpose the organising principles of providentialism is doomed from the start. Providentialism offers a map of a world that is now relatively unrecognisable in this play, a world that has since been reshaped by other powerful tectonic forces. In other words, Henry seeks refuge in the very same dogmatic worldview whose absence made it possible for him to seize the throne in the first place, and it is one that remains incompatible with the political pragmatism upon which his regime was founded. This moment creates a paradox that, for an instant, threatens to send Henry’s administration into chaos. By

decontextualizing Richard's prophecy and recasting it as supernatural, Henry awakens its latent legitimating potential, encouraging it to perform a function that no longer serves a purpose: that of reasserting Richard's divine right. In the 'dislocated' world of the *Henry IV* plays, this legitimation means nothing. Yet, in the relapsed mind of the King, it is an indictment that threatens to dispossess him both of his title and the capacity for action that first helped him to it: the figure who reads the book of fate and, disheartened to despair, 'sit[s] him down and die[s]' (2*HIV*, 3.1.55) appears at this point to be none other than Henry himself.

It takes the intervention of the perspicacious Earl of Warwick to recover and stir Henry into action. 'There is a history in all men's lives', Warwick suggests, 'Figuring the natures of the times deceased':

The which observed, a man may prophesy,
With a near aim, of the main chance of things
As not yet come to life, who in their seeds
And weak beginnings lie entreasurèd.
Such things become the hatch and brood of time;
And by the *necessary* form of this
King Richard might create a perfect guess
That great Northumberland, then false to him,
Would of that seed grow to greater falseness,
Which should not find a ground to root upon
Unless on you.

(2*HIV*, 3.1.79–91; my emphasis)

As we shall soon see, Warwick's understanding of historical causality is shared by many of the plays' characters, Princes Hal and John chief amongst them. Warwick asserts that, by unearthing the 'seeds | And weak beginnings' (2*HIV*, 3.1.83–84) of others' future actions, it is possible to anticipate what they will do — not through prophecy, but by making a more worldly 'perfect guess' (2*HIV*, 3.1.87). Although Richard could have made an informed prediction about the future, Warwick implies,

he could not have known it for certain. It is Warwick's insistence upon the necessity of the situation in particular that seems to bring Henry (back) around to his way of thinking. 'Are these things then necessities?' the King asks, 'Then let us meet them like necessities; | And that same word even now cries out on us' (2*HIV*, 3.1.91–93). Henry's changeability in this scene might, of course, put us in mind of Richard in 3.2 of *Richard II*. Yet, significantly, the term 'necessity' here has its roots in the political philosophy of Machiavelli, who uses *necessità* to denote that which is required in order for a ruler to secure or maintain power. He advises that a ruler should always do what is deemed to be necessary (*necessario*), and should not be deterred by moral, ethical, or even religious scruples.¹² A good ruler is able to imitate the Romans, who 'recognised what necessity required and were wise enough to submit to it even when the results were distasteful to them'.¹³

Henry's plea to Warwick — 'Are these things then necessities?' (2*HIV*, 3.1.91) — indicates that he is by no means unfamiliar with the concept of necessity. By his own suggestion, it was by recognising and submitting to 'necessity' that he came to the throne: he excuses his usurpation of Richard by insisting that 'necessity so bowed the state | That I and greatness were compelled to kiss' (2*HIV*, 3.1.72–73). At that time, Henry insists, he had no choice but to receive the crown. What is particularly interesting about this claim is that, as much as it reminds us of the distance between Henry's 'pragmatic' worldview and the 'dogmatic' one at least ostensibly endorsed by Richard, it also suggests an unlikely parallel between them. Henry seeks to absolve himself of culpability in the usurpation by insisting upon the overriding influence not of providence but of necessity. While he is not suggesting

¹² Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. by Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 55, 62. I follow Price's translation, which he elucidates on pp. 107–108.

¹³ Steven Forde, 'Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli', *The Journal of Politics*, 54 (1992), 372–93 (p.386).

that his actions were anything other than his own (i.e. human), he dissociates himself from the obligation to decide whether or not to act. Here, necessity replicates and indeed replaces the supernatural determinism of providence, providing an alternative impetus behind human political action and, by extension, historical causality.

It cannot be the case, then, that Henry is simply incapable of recognising necessity. Rather, his inability (or perhaps refusal) to do so, at least at first, in 3.1 of *2 Henry IV* — in the present — is a symptom of his relapse into a past and now-impracticable way of thinking about the world. The relationship between necessity and providence, which is one of both opposition and reflection, can be seen to be at the heart of this dilemma. Steven Forde suggests:

False hope of escaping necessity is the typical vice of weak states, especially modern states. For Machiavelli, Christianity is partly responsible for this vice. Christianity is the religion both of weakness and of false hope. [...] It prevents the inculcation of an adequate military spirit, and it prevents adequate knowledge of the ways of the world. It tends to view defeats that are due to military impotence as “miraculous” or owing to “sin” (*The Prince*, chaps. 3, 12). In both domestic and international politics, Machiavelli asserts that Christianity gives men up as “prey to the wicked” by making them passive. [...] Christianity is a fortress, seeming to remove the compulsion rulers of all sorts are under to rule well.¹⁴

This quotation would serve well as an account of the failures of Richard II, who sought constantly to deny necessity by taking refuge behind a ‘hollow’ rhetoric of divinity.

When, in 3.1 of *2 Henry IV*, Henry allows himself to be persuaded by Richard’s prophecy, he revives momentarily the ghost of the contest between necessity and providence that seemed to have died with his predecessor. Just as

¹⁴ Forde, ‘Varieties of Realism’, p. 386.

Richard's fall reinforced the failure of the worldview that he had sought to enforce, so his would-be prescience provides a powerful challenge to Henry's, which cannot accommodate two different deterministic forces.¹⁵ In Henry's mind, albeit just for an instant, the activity of providence dispossesses him of his own capacity for action. Not only does he become passive (as Forde suggests), but he loses faith in his ability to affect the course of history. It is thus up to Warwick to restore his king's lapsed confidence in his pragmatic worldview, which all of a sudden seems incapable of accounting for Henry's circumstances. The earl thus reinvigorates Henry by reminding him that necessity provides an answer both to Richard's prophecy and to the king's predicament: it emphasises the potential that every human action has to affect the course of history, but also 'that the individual historical event [which dictates much human action] is *ipso facto* unique and unpredictable'.¹⁶ In other words, although the future is ultimately unknowable, it is nevertheless possible to predict how a person is likely to act when necessity bids them.¹⁷ Richard was not revealing a preordained future, Warwick reminds Henry (and, indeed, us), but merely anticipating very humanly how Northumberland would no doubt behave in the future.

¹⁵ Gary J. Nederman argues that Machiavelli's thinking does allow for both necessity and providence. While, like Forde, he stresses the importance of 'knowing when one is well-situated to act and grasping the opportunity', he insists that these opportunities are granted solely by the grace of God. See Gary J. Nederman, 'Amazing Grace: Fortune, God, and Free Will in Machiavelli's Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 60 (1999), 617–38 (p. 629).

¹⁶ Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 479.

¹⁷ Daniel R. Sabia Jr. also notes a connection between necessity and prediction. He suggests:

claims of necessity rely almost always on foresight (and so on prudence in that, singular, sense). Specifically, the claims typically appeal to the predicted effects of proposed strategies or policies, and therefore to corrigible arguments and assessments about (often many) human beings and (often complicated and shifting) situations. In the complex and highly contingent world of politics, such predictions are usually clouded in uncertainty; they are in addition easily distorted by prejudice and other failings.

See Daniel R. Sabia Jr., 'Machiavelli's Soderini and the problem of necessity', *The Social Science Journal*, 38 (2001), 53–67 (p. 55).

Of course, Warwick's explanation of Richard's prescience might not have been needed: it is, after all, an echo of the old king's own elucidation of his prophecy, which he gave to his auditors even as he uttered it in 5.1 of *Richard II*. However, faced with the chaos of rebellion and his own uncertain future, Henry seems in 3.1 of *2 Henry IV* temporarily to long for the reassuring certainty provided by the providential and monarch-centred worldview that the ruling Richard II sought to enforce. It thus becomes necessary for Warwick to re-enact the 'dislocation' that displaced it. When he reminds Henry of the necessity of action, he is speaking in a tongue that is far removed from the divine but 'hollow' rhetoric of *Richard II*. In this moment, that word 'necessity', and the idea that it represents, in itself becomes a necessity.

What makes Henry's 'revival' of the 'Northumberland' prophecy so conspicuous, and the restoration of his belief in the efficacy of his own will such an exigency, is that the very mechanics of prediction in *1* and *2 Henry IV* are almost unrecognisable from those of Shakespeare's earlier histories. The conversation between the King and Warwick in 3.1 of *2 Henry IV*, and its cancellation of divine prophecy by human necessity, is unique in the English history cycles to this point. In order to understand how this overturning of 'prophecy' works in the *Henry IV* plays, it is to these two dramas more widely, and, in particular, to the instances of 'prophecy' and 'prophesying' that they present, that we must now turn our critical attention.

III.

O Harry, thou hast robbed me of my youth!
I better brook the loss of brittle life
Than those proud titles thou hast won of me;
They wound my thoughts worse than thy sword my flesh.
But thoughts, the slaves of life, and life, time's fool,
And time, that takes survey of all the world,
Must have a stop. O, I could prophesy,
But that the earthy and cold hand of death
Lies on my tongue. No, Percy, thou art dust,
And food for—¹⁸

When the hot blood of Hotspur is finally cooled by the sure blade of Prince Hal at the close of *I Henry IV*, the plain-spoken warrior with a disdain for 'mincing poetry' (*IHIV*, 3.1.129) is transformed into an unlikely philosopher. Indeed, young Harry Percy's final words seem, perhaps, uncharacteristically contemplative rather than impetuous and rash: we glimpse at this moment a different Hotspur, the man he tragically will now never become. Yet, Hotspur's dying revelation, although it remains unuttered and incomplete, is part of a long association between the deathbed and prophecy.¹⁹ As we have seen, the bedridden John of Gaunt insists on speaking with King Richard, explaining that 'they say the tongues of dying men | Enforce attention like deep harmony' (*RII*, 2.1.5–6); Henry VI, confronted with death incarnate in the form of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, is likewise compelled to

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, Part One, ed. by David Bevington (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.4.76–85. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

¹⁹ This association no doubt derived from the belief that those closest to the boundary between life and death, such as the very old and the very young, were most likely to gain access to prophetic insight. See Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 209–10. It should be noted that I use 'deathbed prophecy' here to refer to prophecy that is uttered in the moments before death, but not necessarily always from the deathbed itself.

prophecy. Proximity to one's mortal ending seems to release prophetic powers, it seems, particularly in noble beings. Hotspur too shares the compulsion, but not the time: the 'earthly and cold hand of death' (*IHIV*, 5.4.83) weighs down the celestial spirit of prophecy, and the rest — frustratingly — is silence.

It may be futile to speculate as to what Hotspur might have prophesied had he better spent his final breaths, but given that, in the words of King Henry, 'the soul of every man | Prophetically do forethink [Hal's] fall' (*IHIV*, 3.2.37–38), perhaps Hotspur would have offered his own (and perhaps better-informed) prediction for the future of the supposedly 'madcap' prince. Yet, although the purpose of Hotspur's speech might not be to encourage us to ask 'what if?', it seems significant that we have the option of doing so. Hotspur, urged on by an entire tradition of deathbed revelation, expresses the desire to prophesy — to take advantage of his 'dying' (*RII*, 2.1.5) tongue, as Gaunt puts it, to enforce both Hal's attention and ours — but he is unable to act on it. In this instance, in fact, Shakespeare accentuates the absence of prophecy by going out of his way to remind us of its appositeness to the situation. Hotspur's dying speech emphasises that, where we should most expect to encounter it, prophecy is not there.

This moment of non-prophecy is significant, then, precisely because it is so emblematic of the *Henry IV* plays as a whole, in which the disappearance of prophecies and omens is difficult to overlook (especially considering the size of the shadow that they cast over the first cycle), and in which King Henry's 'revival' and reappropriation of Richard II's final prophecy seems so startlingly out of place. Indeed, by the opening scene of *I Henry IV*, only vestiges remain of the previous play's fixation with the imaginative power of prophecy. Prophecy haunts Hotspur's dying oration, although he himself never utters it, and it occupies a similarly ghostly

position in the margins of the narrative throughout the *Henry IV* plays: prophecy is sometimes reported, but it never again manifests itself in the way that it does in Shakespeare's earlier histories. In 4.3 of 2 *Henry IV*, for example, the Duke of Gloucester notes anxiously:

The people fear me, for *they* do observe
Unfathered heirs and lowly births of nature.
The seasons change their manners, as the year
Had found some months asleep and leaped over them.
(2*HIV*, 4.3.121–24; my emphasis)

The Duke of Clarence shares Gloucester's fears:

The river hath thrice flowed, no ebb between,
And *the old folk*, times' doting chronicles,
Say it did so a little time before
That our great-grandsire Edward sicked and died.
(2*HIV*, 4.3.125–28; my emphasis)

It seems significant that it is apparently not the lords themselves who 'observe' (2*HIV*, 4.3.121) these phenomena, but the common people. The superstition and general excitability of the masses, though unspoken in this particular exchange, might well work at least to discredit the would-be signs and omens if not to throw them quite conspicuously into suspicion. The nobles themselves are in this instance removed from the prophesying that they report, emphasising, intentionally or not, the peripheral position that prophecy occupies overall in the *Henry IV* plays. Like the common people, it exists here only in indirect speech, and cannot be seen to have any influence on the main narrative, which is predominantly one of monarchical history. We might imagine prophecy to be an actor who, having had a major role in the first cycle of history plays (and in the climactic *Richard III* in

particular), has moved from the spotlight to the wings. In order for the stage not to be empty, another actor (or actors) must now be upon it. However, despite no longer being physically present, something of the first actor — an impression or expectation created, perhaps — may still remain.

Before we continue, though, it is necessary at this stage to remind ourselves of a key aspect of the *Henry IV* plays as part of a second cycle: the significance of serialisation. This issue, which is often unavoidable when dealing with Shakespeare's English histories, is particularly pertinent to the question of why prophecy seems to disappear from the *Henry IV* plays. Grene, for instance, suggests that the second cycle (including both of the *Henry IV* plays) is 'not shaped to the same extent as the earlier series by anticipatory and proleptic figures, prophecies and curses', but 'work[s] more typically by the retrospective rehearsal of what has gone before'. For Grene, this rather prominent disparity can be explained by the theory that the two cycles were not composed in the same way: the first, he conjectures, was always intended to form a series, but each play in the second represents an unanticipated addition to a more organic and less regimented sequence.²⁰

Grene's reading of the series of Shakespeare's histories may be persuasive, yet we should be careful not to ascribe to mere accident what are some of the defining characteristics of the second cycle (and of the two *Henry IV* plays in particular). It would certainly be a mistake to dismiss the 'retrospective gaze' that Grene and others have identified, and the corollary absence of prophecy, as simply necessities prescribed by the improvised manner of the plays' serialisation.²¹ To do so would be to imply that, had the circumstances in which they were composed been the same, the two cycles would have been similarly homogenous in character, and

²⁰ Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, pp. 164, 3.

²¹ For another discussion of the 'retrospection' of the second tetralogy, see Rackin, *Stages of History*, chapter two.

that the prophecies and curses that define the first cycle are absent from the second simply for pragmatic or convenient rather than for artistic and dramatic (or perhaps even philosophical and historiographical) reasons. As we shall see, this absence, which is most starkly defined in the two *Henry IV* plays, seems to be an integral and very much intentional aspect of how the second cycle works. It is made necessary not by Shakespeare's own lack of foresight, but by the specific kind of 'prophecy' that he is interested in exploring in *1* and *2 Henry IV* and by the nature of the world that he wishes to present therein. Indeed, this world might in many ways be seen as the logical outcome of the 'dislocation' of the divine that Shakespeare began to portray in *Richard II*.

The prophecies and omens that are noticeably absent from the second cycle are, in fact, of the kind so prominent in the first (and which King Henry comes to perceive Richard II's 'Northumberland' prophecy to be): predictions or anticipations of future action that imply — but, it should be stressed, by no means confirm — the deterministic agency of a supernatural force (typically God). Of course, while many of the characters in the first cycle are shown to assume that God influences the course of history, and that prophecies are potentially expressions of His will, Shakespeare himself might be seen purposefully to frustrate our own attempts to understand or systematise the plays' representation(s) of causality. Indeed, as we have seen elsewhere, prophecy seems to be central to this dramatic strategy.

Nevertheless, as Grene shows, prophecies and curses regularly perform what can be described as a structural function in the first cycle, indicating the events of later plays in the sequence. Henry VI's seemingly divinely-inspired prediction of the reign of Richmond is a particularly illustrative example of this prolepsis. Uttered in *3 Henry VI*, it is, in Grene's words, an 'unmistakable pointer to the "happy ending" of

the coming of the Tudors', which is dramatized in *Richard III*, the next and final play in the cycle.²² Yet, the role of prophecies and curses should not be seen merely as structural but also as what we could now term 'textural'; that is, they are as much a means of characterising the texture of the drama as they are of organising it. The 'Richmond' prophecy could be seen as implying seriality because it anticipates the events of a later play, but the same might not be said for the predictions of the prophesying spirit in *2 Henry VI* or for Margaret's eerily prophetic curses in *Richard III*. These prophecies are all fulfilled in the same play in which they are uttered (assuming, of course, that they are fulfilled at all), suggesting that, if they are not to be considered entirely arbitrary, they must serve a purpose other than that simply of reinforcing the impression of seriality. This purpose pertains not to the structure of the series as a whole but to the 'texture', the distinctive character and concerns, of the individual plays themselves.

As we have seen, it has been argued — quite persistently — that the prophecies and curses of the first cycle work to legitimate the reign of Henry Tudor as divinely ordained, and so glorify his grand-daughter, Elizabeth I.²³ But, even if these prophecies cannot be said to favour consistently a particular faction or individual, their prominent presence alone continually reiterates the pre-eminence of providentialism as a potential means of understanding historical causality — and, by extension, of predicting the future. On the one hand, the prominence of prophecy engenders a foreboding, quasi-apocalyptic atmosphere that is in many ways typical of the first cycle (particularly *1 Henry VI* and *Richard III*); on the other, it allows for the characters the possibility that the future, as part of an ostensible providential design made at least partially transparent through prophecies and omens, can be

²² Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 140.

²³ See Introduction.

known to them. In other words, although prophecy in the first cycle seems to work to obfuscate meaning and so frustrate our attempts to understand the plays' representation(s) of historical causality, its presence alone means that there is always the potential for certainty to be wrought from uncertainty.

The relative absence of prophecies and omens in the *Henry IV* plays thus holds several important implications. The lack of structural prophecies might well be an indication, for example, that, as Grene suggests, the plays grew into a series only retrospectively. The disappearance of what is being described here as 'textural' prophecies, however, cannot be attributed to the manner of the plays' serialisation. Rather, it signifies a shift that is more thematic than schematic, one that redefines not just the mechanics of prediction but its very nature. At the centre of this shift is the interplay between what might be called the 'divining gaze' and the issue of certainty that can be seen to be the aim of all acts of prediction. The 'divining gaze' denotes simultaneously, and is here shorthand for, the desire of Shakespeare's historical characters to know the future and the process of interpretation by which they seek to predict it: a 'divining' gaze is one that interprets visual signs and omens in an attempt to see or 'gaze into' the future.

This process is, and always has been, one of tracing the relationship between signifier and signified, between the prophetic sign and its 'meaning'. When the object of the divining gaze is the narrative of providential design, as it is in the first cycle, it is assumed that there is a single transcendental signified that can eventually be revealed. In other words, a prophetic sign can be misinterpreted, but it still undoubtedly signifies something (presumably of God's will). In *2 Henry VI*, for example, Eleanor first assumes that the spirit's prophecies are genuine, then interprets them according to her desires. Although we might question the authenticity

of the spectral 'prophet' (and perhaps be right to do so), for the Duchess, its predictions serve as a reminder of the working of more powerful forces, such as providence; despite the fact that she seems to misunderstand the signs' meanings, they never become for her empty or meaningless. The same might be said of all the prophecies and omens of the first cycle, at least from the perspective of the characters who populate the plays. When we enter the world of *I Henry IV*, however, these signs seem no longer even to be present: providence has become invisible, it seems, making it impossible to tell if it is at work at all.

In *Richard II*, as we saw in the previous chapter, we witness the beginnings of a process of 'dislocation': one that seems to render prophecy 'empty' and, as we shall see, changes irrevocably the dynamics of prophecy by altering the relationship between the divining gaze and the certainty at which it aims. Shakespeare's historical characters always desire to know the future, so it should not be surprising that the divining gaze is active in the second cycle as well as in the first. However, the system of would-be providential signs in which the divining gaze operates, as seen in, for example, *2 Henry VI*, and the notion of certainty that lies behind them, has in the *Henry IV* plays become much more unstable. The characters of the first cycle often emphasise God's 'plan', a single constant truth that provides the most ready means of explaining history and securing the future. In the *Henry IV* plays, the working of providence seems no longer to be evident, or at least legible: certainly, it becomes impossible for it to retain its hold on historical causality in the imaginations of Shakespeare's characters. In the absence of explicitly supernatural signs, the divining gaze is thus forced to continue its search elsewhere, for which an alternate system of signs, privileging another force of historical causality, is needed. What we find in the *Henry IV* plays as a result is, as we have seen in Henry's conversation

with Warwick about ‘necessity’, an increased focus on the role of human agents in shaping the future course of history. The focus of the divining gaze, too, becomes inverted: those characters who wish to predict the future must now begin to look inwards, away from the heavens and into the bosoms of scheming and dissembling politicians.

Surprisingly, Shakespeare does not discard the old rhetoric of supernatural prophecy in the *Henry IV* plays. Instead, he redeploys it to describe this new and more earth-bound kind of prediction. Remarkably, the human-engineered web of plots and ploys that displaces the grand narrative of providentialism is still expressed through the language of that doctrine, and the politicians responsible for spinning it find themselves, in turn, being read in terms of prophecies and omens. This striking reversal reinforces the impression that God’s ability to determine the future has been reapportioned, if not in actuality then certainly in the imagination, to humankind. The emphasis of prediction thus shifts in the *Henry IV* plays from God’s plan to human plots, fragmenting the one occasionally discernible, but always felt, future of providential design — that single transcendental signified — into an infinite number of potential futures, each entirely uncertain.

IV.

The character who is most comfortable in this startlingly changed world is, of course, Prince Hal. His ‘I know you all’ soliloquy of 1.2 in *1 Henry IV* provides a useful starting point for examining the implications of the impossibility of certainty, as well as the way in which ‘prophecy’ works in the *Henry IV* plays more widely.

Addressing his companions, of whose riotous company he has temporarily found himself free, Hal utters perhaps the most memorable speech of his 'wild' years:

I know you all, and will awhile uphold
The unyoked humour of your idleness.
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That, when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted he may be more wondered at
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.
If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work;
But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,
And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.
So when this loose behaviour I throw off
And pay the debt I never promised,
By how much better than my word I am,
By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
I'll so offend to make offence a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

(*1HIV*, 1.2.183–205)

The first and most important point to note about this key soliloquy is that it performs a strictly proleptic function. It anticipates Hal's reformation in 3.2 (as well as his rejection of Falstaff at the end of *2 Henry IV*), providing an indication of the direction in which the action is heading. This effect is achieved not through the use of supernatural prophecy, as it so often is in the first cycle, but by disclosing to the audience Hal's hidden intentions. The element of human or perhaps even Machiavellian secrecy is crucial here. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, it is still through a rhetoric of supernatural prophecy that the prince expresses his distinctly humanist

conception of historical causality. His speech, despite not being any kind of supernatural prophecy, is unquestionably fixated upon it. For it is a soliloquy that is very much concerned with prophetic signs, the divining gaze that interprets them, and the possibility of certainty. For this reason, it is worth looking again at this famous soliloquy as an instance of ‘prophecy’.

At the heart of this soliloquy is the image of the sun. In medieval and early modern England, as is well known, the sun was commonly used to symbolise the monarch: as Richard M. Eastman notes, the ‘medieval conception of human society [w]as ordered like the celestial system, revolving around the monarchy just as the planets center on the governing sun’.²⁴ E. M. W. Tillyard goes one step further, claiming that, in Shakespeare’s ‘own version of order or degree’ (which essentially mirrors what Tillyard calls the ‘Elizabethan world order’), the ‘order which prevails in the heavens is duplicated on earth, the king corresponding to the sun’.²⁵ James Hoyle suggests that ‘Shakespeare is positively traditional in the Henry IV plays about the sun emblem of his kings’.²⁶ Indeed, Hal’s soliloquy has often been read within this tradition. Harold E. Toliver suggests that the sun is here ‘connected to providential order’ and the “‘epiphany” of the new king’. Elsa Sjöberg likewise emphasises the symbol’s monarchical resonance, arguing that the Prince is emblematised by the ‘sun of royalty’, and that his soliloquy ‘shows [him] as being intensely conscious of his royal endowment’. Harold C. Goddard offers a similar

²⁴ Richard M. Eastman, ‘Political Values in *Henry IV, Part One*: A Demonstration of Liberal Humanism’, *College English*, 33 (1972), 901–907 (p. 904).

²⁵ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1944; repr. London: Penguin, 1969), p. 10. Tillyard’s conception of the ‘Elizabethan world order’ has, of course, been subject to criticism. Graham Holderness argues that it represents ‘only one dimension of Renaissance ideology’ — that which was endorsed by church and state, but which was not necessarily accepted by all Elizabethans, whose culture was ‘diverse and contradictory’. See Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 4. See also Introduction. It is difficult to deny that the sun often acts as a symbol of the king in Shakespeare’s histories (especially in *Richard II*), but it would be problematic to suggest that this is representative of the playwright’s own ‘world picture’ rather than those of his characters.

²⁶ James Hoyle, ‘Some Emblems in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Plays*’, *ELH*, 38 (1971), 512–27 (p. 514).

interpretation: 'The Prince', he says, 'was keeping himself figuratively hidden by his wild ways in order to emerge all at once as a self-disciplined king.'²⁷

Each of these readings emphasises the sun's status as a symbol of the monarch, and concludes that, in Hal's case, it represents royalty temporarily disguised as something 'base'. But, despite Hoyle's assertion to the contrary, Shakespeare is far from 'positively traditional' in his use of the sun here. Indeed, given its prior association with the 'hollow' kingship of Richard II, we might find Hal's use of the sun as a symbol of sovereignty highly questionable. Tom McAlindon has, for instance, suggested that Hal is primarily associated with the notion of time. He argues that 'The sun image is a major clue to his association with time's order [...] in the soliloquy', which 'is framed by temporal reference in its opening and concluding sentences and arguably has time as its subject'.²⁸

This incisive observation hints at another of the sun's potential connotations here, one that is particularly important to the way in which Shakespeare engages with prophecy in the *Henry IV* plays. The moment of revelation that is explicit in Toliver's phrase 'the "epiphany" of the new king', and implicit in the notion of temporarily disguised royalty, is clearly a central aspect of Hal's soliloquy, but its connection to the symbol of the sun has not been fully explored. Although it has been suggested that Hal's language echoes the imagery of apocalyptic prophecy, nevertheless, and in spite of any specific Biblical connotations that the image of a vapour-strangled sun could be said to have, the sun is already a highly significant

²⁷ Harold E. Toliver, 'Falstaff, the Prince, and the History Play', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 16 (1965), 63–80 (p. 67); Elsa Sjöberg, 'From Madcap Prince to King: The Evolution of Prince Hal', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 20 (1969), 11–16 (pp. 16, 13); Harold C. Goddard, 'Henry IV', in *William Shakespeare: Histories & Poems*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 57–120 (p. 68).

²⁸ Tom McAlindon, *Shakespeare's Tudor History: A Study of Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 83.

emblem of prediction, secular as well as religious, natural and superstitious.²⁹ For ordinary people of the middling and lower sorts (but especially for those who worked on the land), it acted, of course, as a sign by which to tell the time and predict the weather.³⁰ It was also used for less mundane purposes, being associated regularly with more explicitly superstitious and supernatural forms of prolepsis. The belief that one could predict the future by interpreting celestial signs (including the sun) was a central tenet of astrology and one of the ways in which the likes of Simon Forman and other ‘cunning-folk’ made a living.³¹ It can also be found in the Bible, in which these signs were indications of God’s will: in Luke 21, Christ warns his followers that ‘there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars’ (Luke 21. 25, KJV) when the end of days is nigh. We might also be put in mind of the ‘woman clothed in the sun’ of Revelation 12.³²

The sun, then, is in many ways an apposite symbol for Hal, who predicts the trajectory of his own career, yet remains himself an object of prediction throughout *1* and *2 Henry IV*. In terms of Shakespeare’s other, earlier histories, the Prince’s metaphor might cause the audience to recall the three suns before the Battle of

²⁹ Michael Davies suggests that ‘Hal’s imitation of the “sun” might be seen as a ‘clear alignment with the Reformation’s primary apocalyptic symbol: the “woman clothed in the sun” of Revelation 12, whose appearance precipitates the final battle by Michael and his angels against the dragon of Antichrist’. See Michael Davies, ‘Falstaff’s Lateness: Calvinism and the Protestant Hero in *Henry IV*’, *The Review of English Studies*, 56 (2005), 351–78 (p. 371).

³⁰ For the sun as a tool for telling the time, see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), pp. 394–95. For the sun and other natural signs as a means of predicting the weather, see Mildred Campbell, *The English Yeoman under Elizabeth and the Early Stuarts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1942), p. 369. For beliefs about how the weather conditions on certain days (typically holidays) could be portentous, see Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 284–85. Although these practices had purely utilitarian ends, they often mingled the natural with the supernatural (Campbell, *The English Yeoman*, p. 369).

³¹ See, for example, Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 335–39. See also Bernard Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press: English Almanacs 1500–1800* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), pp. 15–17.

³² See Davies, ‘Falstaff’s Lateness’.

Who saw the sun today?
[...]
by the book
He should have braved the east an hour ago.
A black day will it be to somebody.³³

Of course, there is a significant difference between the obscured sun of the ‘I know you all’ soliloquy and the sun that declined to shine on Richard III: one is real and the other is metaphorical. It could well be argued that the absence of the sun over Bosworth presaged Richard’s death, simply because its authenticity as a providential sign can never be conclusively disproven. But Hal’s sun, which serves as a key metaphor for himself, cannot be said to have a meaning that is objectively true or certain. Although he adopts the language of supernatural omens, describing the ‘sun’ as a ‘rare accident’ that is ‘wondered at’ (*IHV*, 1.2.195, 189), it is not a providential sign in this case, but a human one. It is not a legible expression of God’s will, but of Hal’s: the secret knowledge that the divining gaze seeks to reveal here is

³⁴ King Henry (and many of his subjects) envisage his son's reign in this way. See *2HIV*, 4.3.254–55.

his true intentions, and the sign that must be interpreted — the ‘sun’ — is none other than the Prince himself. In this sense, Hal’s soliloquy performs a rather remarkable trick: both within and through it, he becomes his own prophecy.

The implication of this ‘embodiment’ of prophecy in Hal is that the future that it signifies, unlike that indicated by discernible providential signs, can never be known for certain by other characters. In this sense, Hal embodies prophecy in what might be seen as a symbolic expression of humankind’s (rather than God’s) power to shape the course of history, giving him some degree of control over the sign and so enabling him to ‘falsify men’s hopes’ (*IHV*, 1.2.199) by signifying a future that he has no intention of realising (much to Falstaff’s ultimate disappointment). But, theoretically, it also means that the hidden knowledge that Hal discloses to the audience, the future that he does intend to realise, does not describe what is inevitable. It is merely a plot, and, as such, it is liable to mutate into something else or to be thwarted altogether (indeed, Hal does not seem to anticipate his own relapse into riot at the beginning of *2 Henry IV*).³⁵ In a world without visible providence, prophecy never indicates, it only suggests: when the object of the divining gaze is the intentions of a changeable human, as opposed to the incontrovertible will of God, achieving certain knowledge of the future is impossible. Indeed, Hal presents himself as a prophetic text for the divining gaze of others to interpret, but it is also one that is designed to obscure, rather than to reveal, the future to them.

Hal is by no means the only character in the *Henry IV* plays whose person acts as a prophetic text. Unlike the masked Prince Hal, his arch-rival Hotspur is a

³⁵ It has been suggested that this relapse is evidence that Shakespeare had not originally planned to write a sequel to *1 Henry IV* (Greene, *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays*, p. 27). However, it could be argued that the story remains incomplete until Henry IV is dead and Hal has become king (it might be worth noting that the *Henry VI* plays, *Richard III*, *Richard II*, and *King John* all end with the death of the titular monarch). Greene acknowledges that ‘as far as the chronicle is concerned, Shakespeare has saved up for a second part the whole of Henry IV’s reign after the battle of Shrewsbury in 1403, ten more years and another crop of rebellions’ (*Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays*, p. 27).

character who wears his heart on his sleeve. It is not in his nature to dissemble: ‘O, while you live, tell truth and shame the devil’ (*IHIV*, 3.1.59), he implores the dubious wizard Owen Glendower, whose own (distinctly Welsh) superstition Hotspur openly mocks.³⁶ In a tellingly comical passage, Glendower’s insistence that he, like Richard, Duke of Gloucester, was marked at birth by omens — an explicitly supernatural form of prophecy — is undercut by Hotspur’s aggressive and unrelenting scepticism:

[GLENDOWER]

At my nativity

The front of heaven was full of fiery shapes,
Of burning cressets, and at my birth
The frame and huge foundation of the earth
Shaked like a coward.

HOTSPUR Why, so it would have done
At the same season, if your mother’s cat
Had but kittened, though yourself had never been born.

GLENDOWER

I say the earth did shake when I was born.

HOTSPUR

And I say the earth was not of my mind,
If you suppose as fearing you it shook.

(*IHIV*, 3.1.12–21)

It is precisely this kind of straight-talking, candid incredulity that makes Hotspur’s would-be prophecy of 5.4, just before his death, so striking and poignant.

Of course, Hotspur’s forthrightness means that he is decidedly less skilled than the Machiavel Hal at manipulating himself as a ‘text’ to be ‘read’ by others. He is not, like Hal or Worcester, a ‘secret book’ to be ‘unclasp[ed]’ (*IHIV*, 1.3.188), but an open one. Given this ineptitude, perhaps it is no coincidence that he does not live to see the Prince’s coronation. Like him, Hotspur has a plot whose success is reliant

³⁶ Cf. the Welsh captain in *Richard II*, who gives the King up for dead on account of a series of signs and omens that had supposedly been observed in Wales. See previous chapter.

largely upon its remaining secret. Indeed, as a rebel and a traitor, his very life depends upon his (and his allies') discretion. He shows himself to be uncharacteristically aware of the necessity of keeping quiet, but perfectly typical in his inability to do so. In 2.3 of *I Henry IV*, he enters reading indignantly aloud from a clandestine letter penned by a would-be accomplice. In doing so, he unwittingly discloses its private contents to the audience, all the while insisting upon the importance of the letter's confidentiality and the danger that its publication would present: 'Ha, you shall see now in very sincerity of fear and cold heart he [i.e. Hotspur's correspondent] will to the King and lay open all our proceedings' (*IHIV*, 2.3.27–29). His exchange with Lady Percy later in the same scene follows a similar pattern of unconscious exposure. Hotspur attempts to conceal his preparations against the King from his wife, but his very body betrays his intentions to her. She observes:

Thy spirit within thee hath been so at war,
And thus hath so bestirred thee in thy sleep,
That beads of sweat have stood upon thy brow
Like bubbles in a late-disturbèd stream,
And in thy face strange motions have appeared,
Such as we see when men restrain their breath
On some great sudden hest. O, what portents are these?
Some heavy business hath my lord in hand,
And I must know it, else he loves me not.

(*IHIV*, 2.3.53–61)

Lady Percy's language, even more explicitly than Hal's, associates the body with natural and supernatural signs from which 'portents' may be deduced. The beads of sweat upon Hotspur's brow are described as 'bubbles in a late-disturbèd stream' (*IHIV*, 2.3.56), a metaphor that reaffirms the connection between signs that are visible (and readable) on the surface and causes that lie hidden beneath it.

Perhaps more interesting, though, is Lady Percy's description of her troubled husband's facial expressions as 'strange motions' (*IHIV*, 2.3.57). The *OED* indicates that, for an Elizabethan audience, 'motion' might have suggested political agitation and civil unrest.³⁷ Given that, as we have seen, the body has already been associated with prophetic signs in this play, it is possible that Lady Percy is also making a reference to another kind of motion in another kind of face: that of meteors, omens of both political agitation and civil unrest, in the face of heaven. Shakespeare employs similar metaphors throughout the *Henry IV* plays. In 1.1 of *1 Henry IV*, Henry likens the 'opposèd eyes' of armies meeting in civil war to the 'meteors of a troubled heaven' (*IHIV*, 1.1.9, 10), and, more light-heartedly but no less significantly, the carbuncles of Bardolph's face are described as 'meteors' portending 'Hot livers and cold purses' — or 'Choler, my lord, if rightly taken' (*IHIV*, 2.4.309, 313, 314).

Lady Percy, then, continues this trend of locating 'omens' in characters' bodies, treating them not as indications of God's will, however, and of the unchangeable future that it entails, but of the wills of the characters themselves, emphasising their capacity to affect a future that is very much undetermined. She recognises the 'strange motions' (*IHIV*, 2.3.57) in her husband's face as signs of his intentions — 'O, what portents are these?' (*IHIV*, 2.3.59), she asks — and reads them both in spite, and because, of his silence. When Hotspur persists in his refusal to confide in his wife, the justification that he gives seems highly ironic:

I know you wise, but yet no farther wise
Than Harry Percy's wife; constant you are,
But yet a woman; *and for secrecy*

³⁷ 'motion, n.', in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2012)
<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.liv.ac.uk/view/Entry/122693?rskey=DaE6aw&result=1&isAdvanced=false>> [accessed 1 July 2012].

*No lady closer, for I well believe
Thou wilt not utter what thou dost not know,
And so far will I trust thee, gentle Kate.*

(IHIV, 2.3.103–108; my emphasis)

As he himself has demonstrated, Hotspur's conviction that secrets can be divulged only through utterance is mistaken: in fact, it is only because he is verbally silent that Kate is forced to try to decipher his visual body language. Hotspur imagines his wife as a vessel for secret knowledge that is incapable of containing its contents. In reality, though, it is his body that conspires against him, revealing through tell-tale signs the intentions that he would have kept hidden. Unlike Hal, who has learned how to frustrate 'prophecy' by deflecting 'readings' of his intentions and predictions of his future actions, Hotspur cannot help but make himself clear.

The *Henry IV* plays are full of comparable instances of 'prophetic' bodies or persons. Henry discovers Worcester's treachery by the 'Danger and disobedience' (*IHIV*, 1.3.16) that he perceives in no other portents than directly in the Earl's eye, just as Northumberland anticipates Morton's bad news by reading his brow, which, 'like to a title-leaf, | Foretells the nature of a tragic volume' (*2HIV*, 1.1.60–61). Similarly, Falstaff's corpulence becomes a sign of his present corruption and need of future reform. In the uncertain world that these characters inhabit, the ability to read another and predict their actions is an exigency, and can mean the difference between life and death. In fact, in some instances, it is difficult even for the audience to anticipate the direction of the action, so ruptured is the connection between visual signs and invisible intentions.

4.1 of 2 *Henry IV*, in which a parley is sounded for Prince John to discuss the terms of a possible truce with the rebel leaders, also deals explicitly with the problem of prediction and the impossibility of certainty by examining the value of honour and one's word. The rebels, led by the Archbishop of York, act in a manner that is appropriate to the time-honoured tradition of the parley, but decidedly injudicious in the deceptive world that they inhabit. As might be expected, they list their demands in full, but they also openly reveal what they intend to do should they not be satisfied. Hastings threatens John with interminable rebellion:

though we here fall down,
 We have supplies to second our attempt.
 If they miscarry, theirs shall second them;
 And so success of mischief shall be born,
 And heir from heir shall hold his quarrel up
 Whiles England shall have generation.

(2*HIV*, 4.1.270–75)

Hastings' vision is so far-reaching as to be almost ridiculous, and its absurdity is only accentuated by the prophet-like confidence with which he presents it. His cocksure attitude towards the future, though, is almost universally typical of the rebels. When the anxious Mowbray confesses that a 'thing within my bosom tells me | That no conditions of our peace can stand' (2*HIV*, 4.1.181–82), the others reassure him that, for a number of would-be logical reasons, their 'peace shall stand as firm as rocky mountains' (2*HIV*, 4.1.186). John's contemptuous response, which itself proves to be cruelly prophetic, is just short of mocking. In contrast to Hastings, the

Prince's matter-of-factness is pronounced: 'You are too shallow, Hastings, much too shallow, | To sound the bottom of the after-times' (2*HIV*, 4.1.276–77).

Hastings' threat is predicated on the possibility of sure knowledge, presenting a future that is almost providential in its immutability. Prince John's words, on the other hand, express perfectly the uncertainty that characterises the *Henry IV* plays. However, they are by no means defeatist. Rather, they demonstrate the political astuteness that separates him and his brother, Hal, from the rebels. Like Hal, John understands that the future can never be certain, but he is also aware that its very uncertainty enables him to influence it, just as long as he does not allow his intentions to be anticipated. We should therefore not be surprised — although the rebels certainly are — that his promise that their 'griefs shall be with speed redressed' (2*HIV*, 4.1.285) proves to be a piece of semantic trickery. Indeed, it seems almost to imitate the slipperiness of prophetic language.

When the rebels discharge their forces, convinced of a favourable resolution, Shakespeare immediately calls their prudence into question by returning to the problem of prediction. Mowbray is apparently overcome with feelings of foreboding, complaining that 'I am on the sudden something ill' (2*HIV*, 4.1.306), and Westmorland ironically (and somewhat sadistically) encourages him to 'be merry, coz, since sudden sorrow | Serves to say thus: some good thing comes tomorrow' (2*HIV*, 4.1.309–10). Mowbray's intuition is not a supernatural omen but a very human gut feeling. His instinctiveness provides a potent contrast to, and utterly undercuts, the over-thought ratiocination of his co-conspirators. Although Westmorland seems to ridicule Mowbray, his response actually does nothing to undermine the effect of the rebel's hunch. By mocking the superstitious omens of folk wisdom, which suggest that events follow one another in discernible and

consistent patterns, he critiques the notion that the future can be known for certain. The fact that his sarcasm goes completely unnoticed by the rebels further emphasises their tragic failure to correctly interpret their adversaries' intentions.

Hence, when John finally orders the rebels' execution, the Archbishop of York is stunned and appalled: 'Will you thus break your faith?' (*2HIV*, 4.1.338), he asks. The Prince insists:

I pawned thee none.
I promised you redress of these same grievances
Whereof you did complain; which, by mine honour,
I will perform with a most Christian care.
But for you rebels, look to taste the due
Meet for rebellion.

(*2HIV*, 4.1.339–44)

It would seem that even honour, as an indicator of future action, has become hollow. The 'faith' (*2HIV*, 4.1.338) upon which the Archbishop's hopes (and, indeed, his life) rested proves to be no more inevitable than the future that he so confidently envisaged. Ultimately, they are both expressions of his naïve belief in the possibility of certainty. This belief is one that John no doubt does not share. His sinister pledge to redress the rebels' grievances 'with a most Christian care' (*2HIV*, 4.1.342) seems directed at the Archbishop personally, and might in fact be read as a promise to compensate for the clergyman's own lack of religious virtue in leading a rebellion: indeed, Westmorland has already castigated him for 'dress[ing] the ugly form | Of base and bloody insurrection | With your fair honours' (*2HIV*, 4.1.39–41).

However, more disturbing interpretations are also available to us. Following his order for the rebels' execution, John declares that 'God, and not we, hath safely fought today' (*2HIV*, 4.2.348), but the Prince's conduct suggests that the reality is very different. In a scene in which 'honour' (*2HIV*, 4.1.341) and 'faith' (*2HIV*,

4.1.338) are meaningless, ‘God’ is little more than a justification for a particular course of pragmatic human action. John’s promise of ‘Christian care’ (2*HIV*, 4.1.342) is meant not to console the Archbishop, but to mock him. Just as the metaphorical omens in the bodies of the plays’ characters highlight the deficiency of real omens in the world around them, the ‘Christian care’ (2*HIV*, 4.1.342) that John promises, and the ‘honour’ (2*HIV*, 4.1.341) on which he swears it, serve only to draw attention to their absence. As we have seen, although the *Henry IV* plays are not necessarily godless, they seem to be less explicitly (or, at the very least, visually) subject to divine agency. John’s insistence that ‘God, and not we, hath safely fought today’ (2*HIV*, 4.2.348) seems to be ironic at best, and, at worst, the plays’ most resounding statement of humanity’s power to determine ruthlessly the course of history, with or without any ‘Christian care’ (2*HIV*, 4.1.342). Such is the world we enter in 1 and 2 *Henry IV*.

VI.

To conclude, it is worth returning briefly to Henry IV himself. As we have seen, Henry’s ‘revival’ of the ‘Northumberland’ prophecy of *Richard II* suggests not only that he is unable to escape his own past, but that, in stark contrast to his sons, he struggles to conceive of a world not subject explicitly to the order of providentialism. Indeed, although he resolves to heed Warwick’s advice in 3.1 of 2 *Henry IV* and submit to necessity, at the same time Henry continues to desire, in some way, the certainty of providentialism. When, in 4.2 of the same play, it becomes evident that he will die, Henry enquires of Warwick if ‘any name particular belong[s] | Unto the

lodging where I first did swoon'. Warwick replies that 'Tis called Jerusalem, my noble lord'. 'Laud be to God!', Henry exclaims:

Even there my life must end.
It hath been prophesied to me many years
I should not die but in Jerusalem,
Which vainly I supposed the Holy Land.
But bear me to that chamber; there I'll lie;
In that Jerusalem shall Harry die.

(2HIV, 4.3.362–70)

Greene suggests that 'when he [Henry] learns of the name of the chamber in which he is to die, he reacts with pious resignation rather than despair'.³⁸ But there seems to be more to it than Greene supposes. It is true that Henry is not despairing, but neither is he resigned. In fact, the opposite is true. What is often overlooked about Henry's death is that it does not take place in the Jerusalem chamber by chance. Rather, the king orders that he be placed there. With this simple fact in mind, what might have been an ironic and last-gasp reaffirmation of the eternalness of providential design becomes the *Henry IV* plays' final statement on the ascendancy of human agency. The prophecies to which Henry refers are fulfilled, but only through his very deliberate actions, his wilful wrenching of prophecy into 'truth' through personal determination.

The Jerusalem chamber, rather than serving to demonstrate the working of providence, only draws attention once again to its absence. The road that led Henry (and, by extension, us) from banishment in France to death in 'Jerusalem' could not have been predicted by any prophet, but anybody could have guessed that the king, who was never secretive about his intention to go to the Holy Land (this being his professed aim in the opening speech of *I Henry IV*), would not come back. That he

³⁸ Greene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 190.

dies in a chamber called Jerusalem is mere coincidence, and the irony of a prophecy being ostensibly fulfilled for Henry IV in this way emphasises not the fixity of the future but its human unpredictability. Daniel Sabia Jr. makes an observation about the nature of prediction that is not only true for the ‘Jerusalem’ prophecy, but also provides an apt closing statement on the world of the *Henry IV* plays. ‘[P]olicies and plans, however sound, can always go wrong,’ he suggests:

the world of politics is a complex and contingent place and agents cannot control everything. A recurring theme of Machiavelli’s writings is that political agents fail, not only because of limits on knowledge and foresight, but also because the world is always changing, often in unpredictable ways.³⁹

By emphasising the uncertainty of the future, the *Henry IV* plays give the impression of witnessing history in the making. The past is not re-enacted onstage from the immutable chronicles that were Shakespeare’s sources, but recreated, as if the diverse influences that shaped its course were alive and at work once again. Although events unfold mostly as expected — the rebels are defeated and Prince Hal ascends the throne to become Henry V — the possibility that they might not have done so always seems to be real. Even a future that is scripted is thus made to feel entirely unpredictable.

³⁹ Sabia Jr., ‘Machiavelli’s Soderini’, p. 56.

Conclusion: 'The chronicle of wasted time': Prophecy in Shakespeare's
English history cycles

Thus far with rough and all-unable pen
Our bending author hath pursued the story,
In little room confining mighty men,
Mangling by starts the full course of their glory.
Small time, but in that small most greatly lived
This star of England. Fortune made his sword,
By which the world's best garden achieved,
And of it left his son imperial lord.
Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned king
Of France and England, did this king succeed,
Whose states many had the managing
That they lost France and made his England bleed,
Which oft our stage hath shown — and, for their sake,
In your fair minds let this acceptance take.¹

It may strike us as unusual that, in the Epilogue of *Henry V*, Shakespeare chooses to undermine the successes of that most revered of English kings by reminding us, seemingly unnecessarily, of the failures of his successor and son, Henry VI. Taking the form of a sonnet, which is, by its very nature, structurally unbalanced and characterised traditionally by unfulfilment, this remarkable anti-climax is encapsulated by the 'turn' of tone at line 9, which introduces us to 'Henry the Sixth, in infant bands' (*HV*, E.9). The contradictory nature of the Epilogue seems typical of a play that critics have often found difficult to 'pin down'.² Phyllis Rackin argues that the Chorus is 'clashed against' the main drama, which represents another, different version of the action of the play: the 'historically authorized, heroic words of the chorus', she comments, 'are repeatedly contradicted by the events enacted on

¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. by Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982; repr. Oxford University Press, 2008), E.1–14. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

² See, for example, Norman Rabkin's famous essay, 'Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 27 (1976), 264–87.

stage'.³ Coming immediately after the news of the engagement of Henry V and Princess Catherine of France in 5.2, the Epilogue is not, strictly speaking, a prophecy, despite the fact that it is reminiscent of how both Holinshed's *Chronicles* and Shakespeare's own *1 Henry VI* remind the audience of the prophecy that 'Henry born at Monmouth should win all, | And Henry born at Windsor should lose all'.⁴

In fact, it seems difficult to discuss *Henry V* in terms of prophecy at all: unlike in the other plays in the cycles, the word 'prophecy' (or any of its cognate terms) does not appear in any form in *Henry V*. Even in the *Henry IV* plays, the disappearance of prophecy from the action is highlighted both by the presence of the word itself, uttered by the dying Hotspur, for example, and by an emphasis on prognosis throughout. It is thus not easy to account for the complete absence of prophecy in *Henry V*. This problem may be due to the fact that, in many ways, *Henry V* is very different from the other plays in the cycles: it depicts, somewhat unusually, the extraordinarily successful (but ultimately doomed) career of a monarch who, according to Rackin, 'reconstruct[s] the royal authority that was lost' when Bolingbroke usurped Richard II.⁵ Possibly Shakespeare felt that the organising impulse of the Chorus, which seems to draw attention to its own present-centred theatricality, would have made redundant or even counteracted prophecy, or that he intended to present Henry V's triumphs as unmitigated by divine agency. The question of prophecy's disappearance from the final play of the second cycle does

³ Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 69, 30.

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part One*, ed. by Michael Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.1.201–204. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text. For this prophecy in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, see Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols (London: Routledge, 1957–1975), III (1960), pp. 41–42.

⁵ Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 80. However, in a concession that seems symptomatic of the ambiguous character both of *Henry V* and of Henry himself, Rackin also suggests that this reconstruction is 'deeply compromised by his recourse to Machiavellian strategies' (*Stages of History*, p. 80).

not appear to have a straightforward answer. Perhaps we should read its complete absence from this drama as a sign of the completion of the English history cycles, with Shakespeare not returning to prophecy again ostensibly until collaborating on *Henry VIII* over a decade later. It could be that Henry V fulfils God's plot so conclusively that prophecy becomes simply unnecessary, or, conversely, it may even be a sign that the Machiavellian *realpolitik* of the *Henry IV* plays has reached its apogee, culminating in the reign of a monstrous and heartless monarch whose thanks to God is ultimately empty. In *Henry V*, Shakespeare refuses to settle this issue.

The Epilogue of *Henry V* is, however, somewhat prophecy-like. Rather like Cranmer's prophecy in *Henry VIII*, discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, it looks both backwards and forwards simultaneously: backwards from the Elizabethan time of the play's first performances (and, indeed, any subsequent ones), but forwards from the fifteenth-century time of the events depicted in the play itself (somewhere between the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 and Henry's marriage in 1420). In this sense, we might see the Chorus's account of Henry VI's reign, though given in the past tense, as a proleptic device. Certainly, it 'anticipates' very self-consciously the events of the *Henry VI* plays, 'Which oft our stage has shown' (*HV*, E.13). Indeed, the subversive nature of the Epilogue, which undoes both the achievements of the play's royal protagonist and the triumphant mood of its final scene, is in more ways than one typical of prophecy's function in Shakespeare's English history cycles. In the 'little room' (*HV*, E.3) of the Chorus's concluding sonnet, we might perceive in miniature how prophecy works in these plays as a whole. It offers a prophecy of sorts in the 'Small time' (*HV*, E.5) that the sonnet affords.

It is therefore worth reminding ourselves of how prophecy might be seen to work in the English chronicle plays considered in this thesis. As we have seen, the first tetralogy in particular is characterised by disorder and discontinuity: in *3 Henry VI* and *Richard III* alone, the crown changes hands (or, perhaps more accurately, heads) four times. For Shakespeare, it seems, there is no better tool for expressing the political, narratorial, and, indeed, interpretative disorderliness of history than prophecy. *1 Henry VI* depicts the loss of France, which is reported by Exeter to have been prophesied during the reign of Henry V (and is predicted by Henry himself in Shakespeare's chronicle sources), and which is heralded by the appearance of the French prophetess, Joan la Pucelle. Joan is a powerful symbol of the political and historiographical disorder of the play, and is, arguably, its chaotic nucleus. In a concurrence of Shakespeare's own invention, Joan's rise coincides with the death of England's 'rock', Henry V, seeming to suggest a reappropriation of that king's unfulfilled prophetic significance. Her predictions threaten the erasure not only of the English but of history itself. Indeed, the arc of her own story is itself a pattern of discontinuity. The uncertainty that surrounds her true identity — prophet or witch? 'Puzzel or pucelle' (*IHVI*, 1.5.85)? — is unresolved even at the stake, where, despite being revealed to have made a pact with demonic 'fiends', she refuses to acknowledge her own origins, denouncing a poor shepherd who claims to be her father: 'Decrepit miser, base ignoble wretch, | I am descended of a gentler blood. | Thou art no father, nor no friend of mine' (*IHVI*, 5.5.7–9).

In *2 Henry VI*, Shakespeare continues this pattern, begun with his dramatic creation, Joan la Pucelle, of using prophecy as a means of obfuscating both the direction and the causality of the narrative. Though the playwright is concerned in *1 Henry VI* largely with the representation of divisive figures like Joan and with their

problematic relationship to the chronicles, in 2 *Henry VI*, the focus becomes the narrative — the very matter — of history itself, which, in its sheer, riddling incomprehensibility, is perhaps not so dissimilar from the prophecies that populate it. The prophetic dreams of the Duke of Gloucester and his wife, Eleanor, present the audience with competing visions of the future, while the predictions of the spirit, ‘summoned’ at the behest of the Duchess, do not clarify the direction of the narrative as much as obscure it. Indeed, the very nature of the spirit, like that of Joan in 1 *Henry VI*, is allowed to remain unclear. It is presented as a ‘False fiend’ and designed, like so many prophecies in Shakespeare’s English history cycles, to ‘undermine the Duchess, | And buzz these conjurations in her brain’.⁶ Yet, the inconceivably elaborate nature of the conjuration, the irony-free portrayal of the conjuror, Bolingbroke, and the ostensible authenticity of the prophecies produced all work to trouble our understanding of what we are witnessing onstage. Even when they seem to be fulfilled, the veracity of the spirit’s predictions remains unconfirmed — and, perhaps, unconfirmable. We are often left, then, with the sense that coincidence, not providence, is the causation that drives the action of the play. Like the events that the drama depicts — the disorder of political intrigue and the chaos of rebellion — prophecy, and, by extension, the narrative, is unruly and unpredictable. In 3 *Henry VI*, in which the conflict reaches its bloody meridian, prophecy and prophetic signs work not to offer clarity but to express and, indeed, amplify chaos. Only Henry VI’s prediction of the reign of Henry Tudor, at the time the young Earl of Richmond, gives us the comfort of a steady point of reference: a moment of stillness in a dizzyingly turning world.

⁶ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part Two*, ed. by Roger Warren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.4.39, 1.2.98–99; my emphasis. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

Much of the complexity of *Richard III*, and, in particular, Shakespeare's use and treatment of prophecy therein, is embodied by the character for which the play is named. As the Duke of Gloucester, Richard announces his disdain for prophecy and his determination to decide his own destiny when, in 5.6 of *3 Henry VI*, he murders Henry even as the former king prophesies Richard's future crimes. However, in seeking to impose by sheer force his individual will, Richard also reaffirms that he is defined in a unique way by his relationship to prophecy: the very body in which he is trapped is deemed to be portentous, and the villainy that he perceives to be his own has, in effect, already been prophesied. *Richard III* develops further prophecy's role, first explored in *1 Henry VI*, in the dialogue between the representation of history and our subsequent reception of it. There is perhaps no better symbol of prophecy's capacity to influence one's understanding of history than the infamous 'G' prophecy, especially when we consider that it is a forgery not only of Richard's but of Shakespeare's: although the prophecy itself is historical, Gloucester's invention of it certainly is not. In this sense, the prophecy deceives both King Edward and, potentially, the audience.

Margaret is yet another character whose understanding of history — in this case, her own past — is expressed through prophecy. Her eerily prophetic curses in *Richard III* are so grave, not least in her eyes, because of the suffering that she has endured. She calls on God to avenge her wrongs, and, remarkably, divine retribution often seems to unfold exactly as she anticipates. However, discrepancies between Margaret's vision of 'justice' and the reality that the play depicts, as well as the audience's awareness that she has no right to expect divine favour, work subtly to undercut this impression. Throughout *Richard III*, Shakespeare is thus careful and fairly consistent in his undermining of prophecy as an indicator of divine presence or

will. Even Richmond — the future Henry VII whose reign was prophesied by Henry VI in *3 Henry VI* — is presented in qualified terms. The effect of this strategy, it would seem, is to draw attention to what might be described as the ‘psychological’ dimension of prophecy. In a play that is fixated with guilt, paranoia, and obsession, prophecy is often shown to play on the minds of the characters (Richard chief amongst them), influencing the way in which they understand both the events of the past and those that are unfolding presently around them. We, too, are encouraged to be wary of prophecy’s potential to shape not only the representation of history on the stage (and, indeed, elsewhere), but our subsequent reception and even conception of it.

If the plays of the first cycle emphasise prophecy’s capacity to disrupt, then those of the second dramatize the disruption of the mechanics of prophecy itself, beginning with the collapse of the divine kingship of Richard II. As I have argued, central to Richard’s fall is the complex process of the ‘hollowing out’ of his divine rhetoric. Initially, Richard sustains himself by exploiting the assumed relationship between words and ‘things’ — more specifically, between words and divine or sacred ‘things’. The legitimacy of this correspondence is first challenged by John of Gaunt, who declares from his deathbed that ‘Methinks I am a prophet new inspired’.⁷ Gaunt’s playful use of language — in particular, his self-consciously uninspired predictions — works to draw attention to the emptiness of his claim to divine inspiration, and, by extension, the claim to divinity upon which Richard’s regime rests. As in all of the English history plays here under consideration, the future is subject to constant consideration and interrogation by both Shakespeare and his characters in *Richard II*. For the likes of York and the rebel Northumberland, the

⁷ William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. by Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.1.31. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

future hangs very much in the balance, and the largely secular modes of prediction that they employ reflect their uncertainty. For Richard, however, the future is certain: he conceives of it as expressed in and guaranteed by the terms of divine monarchy, even as the world around him is emptied of supernatural signs and omens. However, in 3.2, he finds himself no longer able to ‘prophesy’ a happy ending, and opts instead for the certainty of defeat. His ‘Northumberland’ prophecy of 5.1 thus emerges from a new conception of causality, one that privileges human action (i.e. that which is strictly observable) over the mysterious ways of the divine.

1 and *2 Henry IV* subsequently depict a world that has been fundamentally changed, it would seem, by the events of *Richard II* and by the ‘hollowing out’ of prophecy in particular. In these plays, which are strikingly absent of prophetic signs in the traditional sense, characters who wish to predict the future must do so not by looking to the heavens, so to speak, but by looking to — and, indeed, ‘at’ — one another. As a result, the one future of providential design — the single, transcendental truth that so many characters in the first cycles sought to reveal — is fractured into an infinite number of possible futures. Prince Hal, whose mission it is to ‘mock the expectation of the world’ (*2HIV*, 5.2.125) and ‘frustrate prophecies’ (*2HIV*, 5.2.126), seeks to manipulate the way in which others ‘read’ him. The signs by which observers attempt to ‘predict’ Hal’s future actions (i.e. his behaviour) — described by Shakespeare, remarkably, in the language of supernatural prophecy and popular portents — are almost entirely under his control. Other characters, such as Hotspur and the rebels of *2 Henry IV*, are less able to obscure their intentions, and are quickly despatched. However, not everyone has abandoned the once explicitly providential thinking of the former King, Richard II. As we have seen, Henry IV finds himself paralysed when, recalling and reconfiguring Richard’s

‘Northumberland’ prophecy as divinely inspired, he is unable to legitimise his kingship in his own mind. Though Warwick reminds him of the necessity of action (a concept that seems largely to supersede that of providentialism), Henry ultimately remains fixated with the prophetic, albeit in a way that points once again towards irony rather than to the heavens. In his last moments, he has himself conveyed to the Jerusalem chamber, thereby appearing to fulfil the prophecy that he shall die in the Holy Land. Of course, this ‘fulfilment’ is a mere illusion, brought about entirely by Henry’s own will, yet it acts as a powerful and final symbol of the displacement of supernatural prophecy experienced in the second cycle.

II.

When in the chronicle of wasted time
I see descriptions of the fairest wights,
And beauty making beautiful old rhyme,
In praise of ladies dead, and lovely knights;
Then in the blazon of sweet beauties best,
Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,
I see their antique pen would have expressed
Even such a beauty as you master now:
So all their praises are but prophecies
Of this our time, all you prefiguring;
And for they looked but with divining eyes
They had not skill enough your worth to sing;
For we which now behold these present days
Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise.⁸

⁸ William Shakespeare, ‘106’, in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan Jones (London: Thomas Nelson, 1997; repr. London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2007), p. 323. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

The Chorus's epilogue at the close of *Henry V* is not the only instance of Shakespeare employing the 'little room' (*HV*, E.3) afforded by a sonnet to consider 'the chronicle of wasted time' ('106', 1) and 'prophecies | Of this our time' ('106', 9–10), prefigured by 'divining eyes' ('106', 11).⁹ Here, in sonnet 106, Shakespeare returns us to these concepts, albeit in the startling context of love and the exaltation of beauty. These themes, like God, the crown, and war, transcend history, and it is their eternal relevance that allows the 'prophecies' ('106', 9) of times past inevitably to reach fulfilment by 'prefiguring' ('106', 10) them.¹⁰ In terms of subject matter, then, Shakespeare's sonnet 106 appears to have little in common with his English history plays. However, it is striking — and very much typical — in its conceptualisation of the dialogue between 'the chronicle of wasted time' ('106', 1) and 'this our time' ('106', 10), between past and present, as one that is defined by prophecy.

By their very definition, the histories are concerned first and foremost with representing and reconstructing the past on the stage. As we have seen, though, this representation is often refracted through and in many ways determined by acts of prophecy. For Shakespeare, it would seem, history is nothing less than remarkably complicated: as is exemplified in his final history play, *Henry VIII, or All Is True*, its narrative is intricate and interminable, its causation unknowable, and its meaning or 'truth' liable to produce an infinite number of interpretations. The same might be said of prophecy, to which Shakespeare regularly turns for a means of expressing the

⁹ Louis F. May, Jr. argues that sonnet 106's 'equation between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance' (i.e. between the past and the present) is founded on 'the implicit equation between the Old Testament and the New according to figural interpretation'. See Louis F. May, Jr., 'The *Figura* in Sonnet 106', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 11 (1960), 93–94 (p. 93).

¹⁰ As John D. Bernard comments, the young man who is the subject of sonnet 106 'is addressed as the unique incarnation of the Word in time, of whom all earlier praise is both prophecy and prefiguration'. See John D. Bernard, "'To Constancie Confin'de": The Poetics of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *PMLA*, 94 (1979), 77–90 (p. 86).

complexity of his subject matter. In his hands, it rarely works as a straightforward proleptic or ‘signposting’ device — something that would, we might suspect, betray the difficulty of making sense of history. Instead, it frustrates any attempt to anticipate the direction of the narrative and draws attention to the uncertain foundations of historical knowledge. Indeed, it could be said that Shakespeare’s very understanding of history, and his conception of its representation on the stage, is incomplete — if not impossible — without prophecy.

Given the highly politicised nature of some of the prophecies that were in circulation in early modern England, many of which are concerned directly with the monarchy, perhaps we should not be surprised that those of Shakespeare’s history cycles often erupt around questions and uncertainties of succession.¹¹ Cranmer’s prophecy in 5.4 of *Henry VIII* predicts both Elizabeth I’s succeeding of Henry and James’s of the childless ‘virgin queen’, Elizabeth; in doing so, it effectively ‘paints over’, very self-consciously, the problems of their respective accessions. In two plays not under direct consideration in this thesis, *King John* and *Macbeth*, monarchical succession — in both the short- and long-term — is also the subject of prophecy. In the former, John orders the execution of a prophet who predicts the king’s loss of the throne.¹² In the latter, the regicide Macbeth himself seeks the prophetic assurances of the witches concerning both the duration of his own reign and the ultimate destination of the crown. Of course, it is revealed that it is Banquo, James’s ancestor, whose progeny will rule for many generations: an example of legitimisation through prophecy that, in typical Shakespearean fashion, is mitigated — though not strictly negated — by the witches’ dubious morality.

¹¹ See Howard Dobin, *Merlin’s Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry and Power in Renaissance England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

¹² See William Shakespeare, *King John*, ed. by A. R. Braunmuller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.2. All subsequent references are to this edition and are placed in the body of the text.

As the titles of Shakespeare's chronicle plays underscore, the passage of time is often measured, and history thereby compartmentalised, by the reigns of monarchs. In this sense, Shakespeare's frequent use of prophecy to chart the movements of the crown from head to head demonstrates just how closely he associates prophecy with the time and history of succession. Indeed, it would seem that the kind of prophecy that we tend to find in Shakespeare's English history cycles — unclear in meaning and, ultimately, unknowable in origin — reflects perfectly the uncertainty of the throne, and who might legitimately sit upon it, in the plays. For Shakespeare, prophecy is rarely, if ever, a means of making sense of history by 'connecting the dots' for the audience. Instead, it makes sense of history by drawing attention to its fundamental nature: unfixed and unstable, despite appearing to be frozen in 'the chronicle of wasted time' ('106', 1). Indeed, prophecy is no more a guarantee of the truth of the future than history is of the past. In Shakespeare's histories, prophecy might thus be seen as the mirror of history: history through the looking glass, as it were. Both prophecy and history work with uncertainties, but they stand on different sides of the temporal divide. Prophecy emphasises the inherent inscrutability of both itself and history by reminding us that, as we cannot make sense of one, neither can we make sense of the other. It is as integral to Shakespeare's vision of history as monarchs and usurpers, God and politics, if not more so: it is both a part of history, the very fount of England's mythical past, and a mode in which it can be expressed. In essence, prophecy itself becomes in Shakespeare's chronicle plays a manifestation of historical narrative. Perhaps it is the only one that, for Shakespeare, is truly able to represent the complexity and profundity of the ultimately unknowable past.

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