Shakespeare’s visionary women, usually confined to the periphery, claim centre stage to voice their sleeping and waking dreams. These women recount their visions through acts of rhetoric, designed to persuade and, crucially, to directly intervene in political action. The visions discussed in this Element are therefore not simply moments of inspiration but of political intercession. The vision performed or recounted on stage offers a proleptic moment of female speech that forces audiences to confront questions of narrative truth and women’s testimony. This Element interrogates the scepticism that Shakespeare’s visionary women face and considers the ways in which they perform the truth of their experiences to a hostile onstage audience. It concludes that prophecy gives women a brief moment of access to political conversations in which they are not welcome as they wrest narrative control from male speakers and speak their truth aloud.
SHAKESPEARE’S VISIONARY WOMEN

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ABSTRACT: Shakespeare’s visionary women, usually confined to the periphery, claim centre stage to voice their sleeping and waking dreams. These women recount their visions through acts of rhetoric, designed to persuade and, crucially, to directly intervene in political action. The visions discussed in this Element are therefore not simply moments of inspiration but of political intercession. The vision performed or recounted on stage offers a proleptic moment of female speech that forces audiences to confront questions of narrative truth and women’s testimony. This Element interrogates the scepticism that Shakespeare’s visionary women face and considers the ways in which they perform the truth of their experiences to a hostile onstage audience. It concludes that prophecy gives women a brief moment of access to political conversations in which they are not welcome as they wrest narrative control from male speakers and speak their truth aloud.
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All primary quotations drawn from unedited early modern texts have been modernised and their orthography standardised throughout. However, primary quotations drawn from modern editions retain the style of that edition. Titles of primary works take modernised and abridged form in my prose but can be found in full in my bibliography. Speech prefixes in drama extracts have been presented in a uniform style. Where it has not been possible to cite line numbers, page numbers or signature marks are given. All references to Shakespeare are taken from The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986; 2005), unless otherwise specified. All references to Shakespeare’s First Folio (1623) are to the digital facsimile of the Bodleian First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays, Arch. G c.7, accessed at firstfolio.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/. All Bible references are to the King James Version.

1 Introduction: Given to Lie

 a very honest woman, but something given to lie.

(Anthony and Cleopatra, 5.2.246–47)

Honest, but given to lie. This paradox, spoken by a Clown and suggesting in a wry line the doubtful value of capricious female testimony, might serve to summarise the position of visionary women in Shakespeare’s dramatic works. Shakespeare’s playworlds are full of premonitions, pointed dreams, and prophetic declarations. His characters are often intuitive, from Venus who warns Adonis, ‘I prophesy thy death, my living sorrow’ (666) to Juliet, whose ‘ill-divining soul’ prompts her to see Romeo ‘As one dead at the bottom of a tomb’ (3.5.54–6). While many such moments suggest that women are highly perceptive, if not even able to see the future, it is with the particular nuances of women’s political prophecy that I am concerned here. This is an examination not only of female experience but also of female speech. The visionaries I discuss must make their ineffable experiences effable in order to change the outcome of political decisions. Claiming divine inspiration,
extrasensory instinct, or magical influence, these women recount their visions in acts of rhetoric, designed not only to satisfy sceptical male hearers but to make them take action. The political visions discussed here are not only moments of inspiration but of intercession. The success of a vision depends on how persuasive visionary women are able to be in recounting it: belief in a vision comes down to the power of the visionary as orator more than oracle.

The political vision breaches the accepted sphere of female speech. Women speak on matters of both a political and (for their husbands and brothers) a personal future, participating in such discussions through their words of warning and often invoking the claim of divine or supernatural inspiration as both authority and excuse. The eight visionary women discussed in this Element intervene in political conversations to which they are, to differing degrees, denied access, not least because ‘women were not supposed to have a public voice, much less a public political voice’ (Schwoerer, 1998: 56). The default reaction visionary women face from their hearers is doubt. This is not to say that all women who share visions on the Shakespearean stage are disbelieved (or that all visionary men are automatically given credence, as Lear’s Fool and Caesar’s soothsayer find out), but when women are believed it is in spite of the assumption that they are liars or lunatics. The politically charged prophecies of the characters discussed here, when brought together, offer an overwhelming pattern, even a dramatic type. The political visionary, endowed with supernatural knowledge beyond her own, apparently limited, understanding, can offer essential political insight, should the men around her be astute enough to follow it: she is not only a harbinger of doom but a forward-thinking advisor who can

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1 While onstage women tend to describe their visions to men, their offstage audience, of course, also comprised women (Levin, 1989: 165–74). It is also necessary to note that the roles described here were all played by men, adding a further complication to the representation of female speech and agency.

2 Following Lois G. Schwoerer, I largely use ‘political’ or ‘political culture’ rather than ‘politics’: the term intends to capture the broader ways in which women of all classes might participate in the power structures around them including, importantly for this study, ‘influencing decision makers’ and ‘petitioning’ (1998: 57).
influence men to act on her vision’s warning. The following study is therefore also a study of women witnessing: the fundamental question of a visionary experience – *do you see what I see?* – splinters the received reality of a play and in that splintering makes space for further questions of misogyny, faith, and political intercession.

Shakespeare wrote within a culture that allowed, theoretically, for visionary women. Prophetesses, soothsayers, wise women, and witches were familiar, not only as figures in literature or in religious texts, but as figures of both recent history and present-day controversy. Classical mythology offered plentiful examples of divine and divinely inspired seers, from the Sibyl at Cumae to the Oracle at Delphi, the Parcae to Cassandra. The Old Testament acknowledges that some women speak the word of God (such as Miriam and Deborah). The New Testament offers the Virgin Mary’s encounter with Gabriel and names Mary Magdalene as witness to the Resurrection. Yet, despite these precedents, contemporary prophecies were often treated as highly threatening, especially when invoked as political tools: “prophecies of one kind or another were employed in virtually every rebellion or popular rising which disturbed the Tudor state”, and Henry VIII, Edward VI and Elizabeth I all found it necessary to legislate against them (Hobday, 1979: 72). Whenever they appear in his work, Shakespeare makes clear that political visionary women are dangerous; in fact, the following sections show consistent punishment for visionary women who speak of or to power. Yet, on the other hand, Shakespeare makes clear that those visionary women speak the truth. It is a contradiction that is never resolved, playing out again and again across Shakespeare’s work. Shakespeare’s visionary women emerge as articulate political thinkers stifled by disbelief, condemned for their capacity to see the future, dismissed for their dreams.

The women in Shakespeare’s plays who experience visions or apparitions not only face the difficulty of speaking up in a patriarchal society, but of articulating their inner sight without retaliatory accusations of witchcraft, madness, or hysteria. Their thoughts, dreams, and instincts are necessarily performed for a judging audience. This is therefore an examination not only of extrasensory experiences and how those experiences are staged, but also of authority and agency, and – because these women are not only passive advisors or intercessors – of personal ambition. That ambition and agency
must be considered in all its complexity; while all of Shakespeare’s women speak within a patriarchal system, their circumstances are various and distinct. In 1 Henry VI, Joan moves with the authority of the biblical prophetesses she invokes as ancestors but has no earthly connections to call upon when accused of witchcraft. Cassandra is dismissed as mad but is also able to access the centre of the Trojan court through her father, King Priam. Katherine of Aragon, an ex-queen whose royal privilege is now failing, can be held against those freshly aspiring to royal power, such as Eleanor and Lady Macbeth. These women speak from different positions of power: their visionary experiences, or more precisely their experiences of testifying to their own visions, are therefore different. What these women have in common, however, is that very act of public testifying, and the limited contingency of the belief which they are extended.

This contingency is neatly captured by Shakespeare’s perhaps best-known visionary women, the witches of Macbeth. The witches offer only balanced contradictions (‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’, 1.1.10) that equate prophecy with fallacy: if foul is fair, then all semantic distinctions are lost and anything and its opposite could be true. This contradiction is also evident in their decision to meet ‘When the battle’s lost and won’ (1.1.4). That prophecy is at once easily proved true (they reappear, as of course the dramatist can ensure, at the end of the battle) and impossible to prove (if the battle is won by Macbeth, it will not be ‘ere the set of sun’, 5: that victory won’t be apparent until after he has killed Duncan). It is also a logical redundancy: if someone has lost a battle, someone has won it. Yet, despite this contradiction, the witches are alone amongst the visionaries discussed here in being believed without question. The reason for this is simple. It is not because there are three witches, able to corroborate each other’s visions (after all, as I discuss in Section 2, Cassandra and Andromache speak together). It is not because they have any demonstrable magic powers: Macbeth and Banquo only encounter three women on the heath. 3 It is rather,
uninspiringly, because their prophecy is favourable: the Macbeths both hear what they want to hear, their own ambitions resounding as if in an echo chamber. The witches both demonstrate the role of prophecy as a means for women to speak, however obscurely, on politics, and also that the chances of that prophecy being believed is contingent not only on the scepticism with which women’s voices are met, but on the content of the prophecy itself: it is easier to persuade someone who is already inclined to agree, as the many visionary women discussed in the following often find out.

Negotiating the boundaries of their domestic roles, visionary women at once intervene in the public political culture of the court and speak in private settings of their dreams, worries, and hopes for their husband’s future and, by extension, their own. An ideal wife should, after all, advise her husband, although only in appropriate settings. She might offer a ‘curtain lecture’, a term that Neil Rhodes has shown was used widely in the period to describe private moments of intercession in which a wife would advise her husband on his affairs within the closed-off space of their bed (2020: 111–12). Yet, the ‘lectures’ with which I am concerned are often public speeches and often closer to instructions than to guidance: they are not moments of intimate, deferential advice offered when it is decorous to do so. The New Testament offers the model of this conversation: Pilate’s wife, recounts a dream to warn against the execution of Jesus. The incident is contained within a single verse, which suggests a public moment of intercession: ‘When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him’ (Matthew 27:19).

There is no explanation in Matthew for the visionary dream. The narrative moves immediately to the persuasive arguments of the chief priests and elders, who convince Pilate to secure Barabbas’s rather than Jesus’s release. The account is so brief that various renditions in medieval and early modern literature must supplement it and therefore differ wildly as to the origin of the dream. On stage, in the Tapiters and Couchers’ play of the York Mystery
cycle, the dream’s aetiology is unambiguous: Lucifer whispers in the ear of ‘Sir Pilate’s witless wife’ as she sleeps (Poulton, 2016: 89). Yet, in Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum (1611), Aemilia Lanyer frames the dream as a divine warning. Lanyer’s narrator addresses Pilate directly: ‘But hear the words of thy most worthy wife, / Who sends to thee, to beg her Saviour’s life’ (Lanyer, 1611: C4 v). It is Pilate who lacks vision: ‘Open thine eyes, that thou the truth may’st see’, Lanyer’s narrator demands. Pilate’s wife’s dream offers a precedent for several of the concerns that play out in Shakespeare’s representation of visionaries onstage. The first is the possibility of ascribing two entirely contradictory origins – divine and demonic – to a vision. The second is the lack of acknowledgement given to female visionaries even when their prophecies are ultimately proved true. The New Testament offers no response to Pilate’s wife; if Pilate answered, readers are not given that answer. Many of the visionaries I discuss follow Pilate’s wife’s not only in standing as a public witness to their own dreams, but also in receiving no fair answer or being dismissed from the narrative. This is the paradox of visionary women: they claim a rare opportunity to speak publicly and yet are swiftly silenced.

Shakespeare’s visionary women must share their visions in front of an audience, even if they seek privacy. The stage is a space where the act of witnessing is publicly performed and publicly inspected, a platform on which women recount personal, internalised experiences. The stage puts the account of the vision up for public judgement and forces its truth to be confronted, whether or not that vision is actually shown to the audience. The vision itself can be an absent theatrical experience, taking place off-stage. In considering such visions, I am indebted to Andrew Sofer’s concept of theatrical ‘dark matter’, ‘the invisible dimension of theater that escapes visual detection, even though its effects are felt everywhere in performance’ as the play ‘incorporates the incorporeal’ (Sofer, 2013: 3). Sofer explicitly names hallucinations (not easily distinguished from prophetic experiences) amongst these ‘invisible presences’, drifting onstage when they have been dreamed within, discussed in passing, reported second-hand. Without seeing it for oneself, it is impossible to verify a vision, not least because the visions discussed here are not shared (as, say, Hamlet’s encounter with his father’s ghost is supported by Horatio). Women usually experience visions alone and, even in rare cases such as that of Andromache and
Cassandra, discussed below, the sight of a particular vision or manifestation itself is not shared. The exception to that rule lies with the audience: although visions are often intangible dark matter there are moments (as discussed in Section 4) in which playgoers share a vision with the visionary woman, forced into the complicated role of potential corroborators who see what the visionary sees but must nonetheless remain silent.

Yet, despite the various doubts and prejudiced outlined here, the scenes examined below do not suggest that for women to speak up in matters of political culture is entirely fruitless; even when they are dismissed, they do, for a moment, model the act of political intervention and do so before an audience. For women in Shakespeare (as in the early modern courtroom), the act of bearing witness was an act of claiming the floor, however briefly. Laura Gowing describes giving testimony in the early modern courtroom as a kind of performance: ‘For women, witnessing also involved a shift that put them at the centre of dramas of sex, words, and marriage . . . The act of testifying gave a weight to women’s words and an attention to women’s points of view that was rarely accorded them in law or in culture’ (Gowing, 1996: 234).

In a transition that Gowing describes as a move from ‘bystander to actor’, women took control of their own narrative for as long as they held the floor to testify to it. Gowing’s work also offers a model for understanding the performance of witnessing on the stage. Although the Shakespearean characters described in these pages do not testify in court (as, say, Hermione is made to do in The Winter’s Tale), they nonetheless claim stage space for the brief time it takes to narrate their visions. Yet, unlike the women Gowing describes as offering legal testimony, which is predicated on the truth of tangible experience, visionary women are compelled to narrate experiences that they themselves cannot be sure are true. Therefore, this work is not concerned with lived experience so much as with the un-lived, unshared experience of sights that are real and accessible only to the visionary herself and are shared by her for the purpose of inciting change.

Women in Shakespeare’s plays are frequently portrayed as having access to foreknowledge or divine knowledge, especially in Shakespeare’s tragedies and histories, genres that are predicated on the temporal structures of what has been (history) and what will be (tragic fate). The power and scope of these visions unsettles not only the balance of knowledge which is assumed to
be held by men but the reality of the worlds being constructed before an audience’s eyes. In my account of visionary women, I begin with two women who have prophetic dreams within the context of Trojan and Roman cultures that at least appear sympathetic to omens and augury: Calphurnia and Cassandra. Both characters, as I will discuss, articulate their dreams with precision, only to be dismissed by the very men their prophecies concern. I then turn to characters whose visions are more firmly associated both with their own apparently damaged psyches and with a culture of witchcraft: Lady Macbeth and Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester. My next section is concerned with the representation of two historic women, Joan of Arc and Katherine of Aragon, women who see apparitions rather than abstract dreams. I finally consider the more slippery sensory experiences of Margaret of Anjou and Constance, both of whom describe sights that lie somewhere between imagination and vision. Together, this survey of visionary women suggests different but interwoven ways in which visionary women seek to claim space in political conversations. The vision offers a moment of knowledge and the possibility of agency: seeing beyond the earthly, visionaries use their experiences to actively intercede in their own political cultures.

The scenes discussed here offer examples of when and why women are believed (however fleetingly), what the role of a sceptical or supportive male auditor can offer, and how female-voiced visions contradict or confirm the predispositions of the men who hear them. The vision offers intervention but cannot always incite action: it is the description of a road not taken, a glimpse of another potential future that is soon cut short. Through sharing visions, visionary women onstage open themselves up to the particular vulnerability of becoming a spectacle: the question do you see what I see? becomes do you see me?

1.1 Believe Women: A Methodology

The vision on stage claims a strange temporal position, existing as it does in the past, present, and future. Shakespeare’s visionary women, even those drawn from history, speak their own destinies aloud, in their present moment. Cleopatra, for instance, imagines a fate in which her life is treated as the subject of a comedy. In describing her prediction, Cleopatra invokes the
language of the vision itself: ‘I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness’ (5.2.215–16), she claims, imagining not only a performance of herself, but herself as witness to it. Her words prove prophetic and, shifting from verb to noun, the Cleopatra player who ‘boys’ her greatness is in fact a squeaking boy actor on the seventeenth-century stage. This means that Cleopatra not only sees the future but also embodies it, as that very boy actor: her words ‘shall see’ become true in the present even as she speaks them aloud. The historical past of Cleopatra’s life, the present of the early modern boy actor, and the future of her prediction fuse together in a time-bending moment that is typical of Shakespearean prophecies. The visionaries discussed here frame the present through an understanding of the past and through thoughts of the future, living all three moments at once.

This text takes a similar approach to time in its own theoretical approach, understanding the vision both in a specific historic context and turning, whenever it is illuminating, to contemporary moments of performance that complicate and challenge such historicist readings. After all, Shakespeare’s visionary scenes may reveal the alterity of early modern culture to our own contemporary playgoers, but they also demonstrate an ‘aural misogyny’ (Panjwani, 2022: 18) which is uncomfortably close to our present. My own desire to examine the visionary experiences of the female characters discussed in these pages has certainly been shaped by contemporary cultural conversations about the position of women as testifiers of their own experiences and I want briefly to acknowledge that work. In Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives, Leigh Gilmore aims to redress the fact that ‘women’s witness is discredited by a host of means meant to taint it: to

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5 This is Varsha Panjwani’s term, used in Podcasts and Feminist Shakespeare Pedagogy, in particular reference to Hamlet and The Winter’s Tale. In her Element, Panjwani draws a connection between early modern culture and the way in which Shakespeare Studies itself ‘sidelines the voices of women scholars’ (18).
contaminate by doubt, stigmatize through association with gender and race, and dishonor through shame, such that not only the testimony but the person herself is smeared’ (Gilmore, 2017: 2). While it would be disingenuous to compare the accounts of actual sexual violence that Gilmore discusses to the intangible, if often traumatic, visions of Shakespeare’s female characters, what unites both is the position of assumed falsehood against which women speak.

Resistance to this bias has recently been given a simple, unifying motto, one which might as easily be applied to Shakespeare’s stage as to the courtrooms of the United States for which it was coined. That motto, ‘Believe Women’, emerged from the MeToo movement, which was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke, and in response to the 2018 Kavanaugh hearings. This motto has itself been subject to scepticism and interrogation, prompting a clarifying response from Jude Ellison Sady Doyle, ‘Despite What You May Have Heard, “Believe Women” Has Never Meant “Ignore Facts”’: ‘The phrase is ‘believe women’ – meaning, don’t assume women as a gender are especially deceptive or vindictive, and recognize that false allegations are less common than real ones’ (Doyle, 2017). What Doyle articulates is not, of course, that women are infallible, but that when women offer testimony, they speak in the face of default disbelief. This scenario – a woman describing her own sensory experience to a hostile male audience – unfolds with such frustrating regularity across Shakespeare’s plays that this Element might as easily have been called #BelieveShakespeare’s Women.

The difficulty women face in being believed is, however, hardly a modern phenomenon. As Richards and Thorne discuss in their work on rhetoric, women, and politics in the early modern period, ‘female petitioning was frequently met with ridicule and hostility’ (2007: 1–2). Yet, while ridicule and hostility are certainly common reactions, the visions discussed here are staged as bravura performances of female eloquence if not, always, successful persuasion. The visionary women here are insistent and unapologetic, modelling the possibility of female political speech for female playgoers while not ignoring the difficulties of such attempts at intervention. After all, women’s speech was associated with abandon and excess: women are, as Richards and Thorne discuss, included in rhetorical manuals ‘not as practitioners of this art, but through their long-standing association with “unruly tropes”, and other linguistic “abuses” as analogously disruptive “figures” needing to be brought
under control’ (2007: 5). To be at once outspoken and silenced is a paradox of power associated with prophetic women far more widely. As Phyllis Mack has argued in her landmark work on visionary women in the seventeenth century, ‘the ground of women’s authority as spiritual leaders was their achievement of complete self-transcendence’ (1992: 5). To be taken seriously, the visionary woman must speak on behalf of external, higher powers, not on her own terms. She is a conduit through which political thought is passed to men, not a political player in her own right: her visions are then both a source of power and shield from criticism, the opportunity to speak and at the same time even more suspect than more usual forms of female public political intervention.

An additional difficulty facing women who would be believed is the association of visions not with the kind of divine authority I have just suggested but – where visions are accepted at all as more than a mere dream – with mental illness. Early modern women who claimed to see visions were more often diagnosed than acknowledged. Katherine Hodgkin finds a connection – even at times a synonymity – between ‘witch’, ‘female prophet’, and ‘mad woman’, and argues that ‘because the cultural constraints on appropriate behaviour for women are much more insistent on containment (emotional and physical), excessive or excitable behaviour in women is too easily attributable to mental disorder’ (2000: 219). The persistent denigration of female experience as symptomatic of mental illness has, of course, been a significant part of the discourse of feminist criticism over the past fifty years (as, for example, in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s discussion of the binary created between ‘angel-women’ and ‘monster-women’ (1979: 44), one which plays out quite literally in the visions of Joan and Katherine, discussed in Section 4. Visions and dreams were believed to result from the failures of the female body, the inability of women to tell the difference between what they ‘think they see’ and what they do not. As Thibaut Maus de Rolley has noted of demonic visitations, ‘the female body was considered to be more porous and open than the male body, and thus more easily invaded and possessed’ (2016: 74). Women’s bodies were imbalanced; their minds were rapt by imaginary sights; and their testimony was therefore held in doubt. Robert Burton, for instance, ties the false apparitions of the mind to bodily illness: ‘If thy heart, brain, liver, spleen be misaffected ... many diseases accompany, as Incubus, Apoplexy, Epilepsy,
Vertigo, those frequent wakings and terrible dreams . . . they think they see, hear, smell, and touch, that which they do not’ (1621: 232).

Dreams are conflated with symptoms which accompany disease: apoplexy, epilepsy, vertigo are all dream experiences for Burton, affecting the senses as much as the dream state itself to create an illness of unreality. Strikingly, this list also contains the state of incubus, or nightmare, thought to stem from possession by or sexual experience with a devil. To dream, to be ill, to be possessed: these states are so similar that Burton can group them without bothering with distinction. Many of the visions discussed here are framed by the men who hear them as madness rather than ecstatic experience. I have no desire to combat this by attempts to diagnose or differentiate between imagination and hallucination, dream and vision. Nor is such a distinction straightforward even within psychiatry: ‘Based on epistemic and psychological considerations, the prospect of arriving at a principled way to distinguish delusional from non-delusional beliefs is not promising’ (Bortolotti, Gunn, and Sullivan-Bissett, 2016: 48).

Rather than categorise each experience (an act which carries inherent judgement about what another’s mind finds ‘real’), I use ‘vision’ capaciously, not least because ‘visionary’ carries a contemporary association of forward thinking as well as future gazing.

Shakespeare’s plays show that unruly women who speak disruptively are ultimately brought under control. They are removed from the plot, through absence, active banishment by those onstage, or death. Their political speech is met with disdain at best and often with punishment. If their visions are not wanted, women are easily dismissed as ‘mad’ and ‘misaffected’ or else accused of witchcraft. Such misogyny is not confined to history. I want to argue not that Shakespeare’s scenes of visionary experience can speak to our own time, but that they must. The vision, as I will argue, is interpreted by its hearers to make its abstract messages comprehensible to the present. Visions then, quite accidentally, offer a model for presentist criticism, a term I use without the disdain with which it has sometimes been associated. This kind of reading looks forwards and backwards and insists that scenes of visionary women do not only speak to a specific historic misogyny, but can be used, as a dream is read, to confront the present and future.
1.2 Conclusion: Seek Further

For Thomas Hill, in his 1576 tract on visionary experience, the interpretation of dreams is a moral imperative. The first example of a prophetic dream in his long treatise is Hecuba’s dream of delivering a firebrand instead of a baby: ‘It seemeth a thing against nature, and a thing most strange for a woman to be delivered of a firebrand: if Hecuba had left here, and sought no further, then had she not known how her son Paris with whom she then went, should be the destruction of his own country Troy’ (Hill, 1576: A7 r).

Hecuba seizes the opportunity offered by a dream, which is to read it. The alternative is spelled out: if the dream were dismissed as meaningless, if Hecuba had ‘sought no further’, then she would not have known that Paris would bring about the destruction of Troy. Yet, the example ends here, and Hill fails to acknowledge the powerlessness and lack of agency that visionary women can face. Hecuba knows what Paris will bring about and is still unable to stop it; if she does tell others about her vision or attempt to react to its warning, Hill makes no mention of it. To have a vision is not to become mistress of fate: it is simply to become witness to it. The vision is a portent that is not necessarily a catalyst for change; visionaries are, like playgoers, compelled to watch, not act.

Nonetheless, the characters discussed in these pages do ‘seek further’, as Hill would have it, attempting not only to understand their visions but to incite action based on them. Speaking onstage, women claim some control over their own visions. Whereas Hill describes Hecuba’s dream and controls his reader’s expectations with the warning that it is ‘a thing most strange’, Shakespeare’s visionary women usually describe their own visions. Scenes of women attesting to visions publicly, onstage, are again and again offered as a testing ground on which to examine and often disavow the inherent truthfulness of female testimony. It is rarely that those listening onstage do not believe women have had visions or dreams: it is that those visions are not considered to have any import, and certainly are not important enough to change their hearer’s minds. This is then an examination of the control that women attempt to take over the not quite tangible and the not quite real, speaking ‘dark matter’ aloud without the hope of offering proof.
2 The Art of Dissuasion

Cassandra, a Trojan princess in Troilus and Cressida, and Calphurnia, wife of Julius Caesar, have in common their visions of doom and their attempts to dissuade the men close to them from unwise action. Cassandra warns her brother Hector that continuing to fight for Troy is useless: Troy will fall. Calphurnia dreams of her husband bleeding and begs him to avoid the senate on the Ides of March. Neither is successful in this intercession. Peripheral characters within their plays, both women enter the stage only for moments, offer a precise if abstract prophecy of death, and are dismissed not only from the conversation but ultimately from the stage. Both plays prove their visions correct, as Cassandra’s brother Hector and Julius Caesar meet their predicted fates, but neither visionary woman is present as a witness to these violent ends and their reactions remain unstaged. These visionaries then exist at a point of possibility, a temporal pivot in which the outcome seems as though it could be changed. Both, however, also exist within a plot that has already been written: the outcome of the Trojan War is stamped in epic poetry, and the death of Caesar is recorded history. These visionaries then have two impossible tasks. Firstly, they must dissuade their brother or husband from a course of action tied to his sense of honour, seeking to stop his ambition rather than to stoke it. Secondly, they must push against the inevitable tide of a narrative that is already surging forward. Looking at these visionaries at once within their present dramatic moment and, as if through double vision, with the metatheatrical awareness of how their story will end, audiences know their persuasive attempts must fail even as their prophecies prove true.

While the classical worlds of Troy and Rome, much like Shakespeare’s own, allowed for the possibility of prophecy (and, indeed, sanctioned augury and divination as religious practices), Shakespeare does not present these cultures as ones in which unwavering belief or so-called pagan superstition can be assumed. Despite the fact that one of the three soothsayers in Shakespeare is found in Julius Caesar, Calphurnia is not granted any prophetic authority (and, crucially, neither is the male soothsayer who warns Caesar of the Ides of March). Despite Cassandra’s historical role as

6 The others are found in Antony and Cleopatra and Cymbeline.
a priestess of Apollo, she is granted no official prophetic role in *Troilus and Cressida*: her title is never mentioned, and she is considered mad, not inspired. What distinguishes Cassandra and Calphurnia from other visionaries is not, then, their historically and geographically remote worlds. They are unlike other female visionaries in Shakespeare because they aim to halt, to dissuade. Cassandra and Calphurnia are anxious playgoers observing their own worlds, running in from the peripheries to try to stop a show that their fellow audience members know must end in blood.

2.1 Cassandra: Raptured Speech

Cassandra’s curse is to know the future and not to be believed. Her inability to persuade her father and brother that they will lose the war is tied not only to her apparently loose language – uncontrolled, ineloquent, even mad – but to the ways in which she is made peripheral to the male-led martial debate throughout the play. Her role (like Calphurnia’s, discussed in the following) is defined by absence: she appears briefly in Acts 2 and 5 but is otherwise excluded from the plot. Cassandra is contained within and can only burst on stage for brief moments, much like a thought which bubbles to the surface of consciousness only to be repressed. Unable to be heard in her own right, Cassandra calls on those ‘Virgins and boys, mid-age, and wrinkled old’ who must ‘Add to my clamours’ (103–5). This appeal for a critical ‘mass of moan’ (106) only makes the isolation in which Cassandra speaks starker: she appeals to a communal noise that might dissuade the men around her from going out to battle because the strength of her own voice is not enough. Her opening lines demand a choral response which never comes: ‘Cry, Trojans, cry!’ (2.2.96), ‘Lend me ten thousand eyes / And I will fill them with prophetic tears’ (100). Cassandra’s task, to drive the Trojans to prophetic grief with a contagious, affective sorrow, is not achieved; although she slowly acquires support, it is never enough to turn the tide and dissuade Hector from fighting, even though in their initial encounter he appears moved with ‘touches of remorse’ (2.2.114) as a result of her ‘divination’ (113). It is not then that Hector cannot be moved by Cassandra; it is rather that he cannot be moved enough to override his own
decisions and instincts. Even this vague sympathy is more than Cassandra usually receives; she is, to Troilus, simply ‘our mad sister’ (2.2.97).

Because audiences see nothing of Cassandra beyond her brief bursts into the royal family forum, they have no capacity to test the veracity of her claims. There is no explanation as to the mechanics of her visions; they are described simply as ‘brainsick raptures’ (2.2.121). Rapt by knowledge of the future, Cassandra hurtles forwards, transgressing the gendered rules of conversation by speaking up. Raptures are, elsewhere in Shakespeare, states of unbridled verbal excess, both feminine and infantile, as in Coriolanus, when a ‘prattling nurse’ is imagined to be so distracted as she gossips that she allows the baby in her care to cry itself ‘into a rapture’ (2.1.203–4). Elsewhere in Troilus, Cressida uses the association between female speech and heady rapture to her advantage, both admitting her desire for Troilus and delicately excusing her apparently forward speech by placing the onus for ensuring female silence on him.

And yet, good faith, I wished myself a man,  
Or that we women had men’s privilege  
Of speaking first. Sweet, bid me hold my tongue,  
For in this rapture I shall surely speak  
The thing I shall repent. (3.2.124–8)

The state of rapture implies a lack of agency, an inability to control the truth which flows forth; for Marguerite A. Tassi, ‘Raptness is a trance-like experience of deep absorption and fascination, ... a violent sensation of being swept away’ (2018: 9). Yet, for all of its implications of incontinence, the claim of speaking raptured truth also suggests the kind of useful self-transcendence that Phyllis Mack associates with female prophets, as I discussed earlier. The raptured woman cannot control herself – is not, in fact, entirely herself – and therefore

7 The word ‘rapt’ is also associated with Macbeth, who is described or describes himself as ‘rapt’ three times in the play’s first act, in response to the vision of the witches (1.3.55, 1.3.141, 1.5.5).
cannot be held accountable for her words. While it suggests the kind of hysterical speech which can be dismissed, an accusation of rapture then also offers women license to break the ‘men’s privilege / Of speaking first.’

There is a sense too that Cassandra is structurally ‘rapt’, swept away and propelled on and off stage by the force of her own speeches, unable to be contained by either the play’s romantic or martial subplots. In Act 2, Cassandra enters as Troilus’s speech is drawn together with a couplet and exits on a closing couplet of her own. Since Shakespeare often uses couplets to mark the end of a scene, Cassandra’s bookended interlude appears embedded in a longer scene which is utterly unconcerned with her opinion. Her so-called noise rises between the space of two paired, harmonious rhymes, both concerned with Helen (disgrace/place, woe/go). If rhyme binds concepts together through both sonic and semantic likeness (Rush, 2021: 7), then Cassandra becomes a kind of disruptive free verse in the midst of the monotonous couplets her dialogue defined by staccato repetitions, half-lines, and caesurae. In the face of a hostile audience of men, Cassandra’s capacity to express herself is shattered. If Troilus and Cressida is, as Gretchen E. Minton has put it, a play ‘about performance anxiety of various kinds – from the basic sexual fear to the most metatheatrical awareness’, then Cassandra is surely its most anxious actor, shouting her lines in desperation to a disinterested lords’ gallery (2018: 102). In a play made up of anxious, unresolved scenes, Cassandra is not the exception in speaking truth to unheeding ears. She is an emblem of broken communication in a play in which all are cursed not to be heard.

Despite this doubt, Cassandra’s prophecy is clear: ‘Troy must not be, nor goodly Ilium stand’ (2.2.108). Her refrain, ‘Cry, Trojans, cry!’, repeated six times in the mere thirteen lines she speaks in Act 2, offers insistent doom without extraneous details. Her hints of what will come are powerfully simple, requiring no exposition. In a play made up of repetitive and self-contradictory speeches between politicians on both sides, Cassandra’s plain warnings are arresting. Yet, despite this clarity, Cassandra is coded ‘mad’, entering ‘with her hair about her ears’ (2.2.99, s.d.), a representation which is, as David Bevington observes, echoed in Thomas Heywood’s The Iron Age, Part 1 (c. 1612–13) (1998: 429). Still, in 1 Iron Age, Cassandra is at least
acknowledged in the dramatis personae as ‘a Prophetess’ (Heywood, 1632: A2v). Moreover, Heywood’s Trojans are less casually cruel than Shakespeare’s. In Heywood, Paris acknowledges his sister with ‘What intends Cassandra?’ (B2r), creating space for her response even if that response is immediately undercut by Priam’s decisive line, ‘Cassandra’s mad’. Even then, Cassandra argues back: ‘You are mad, all Troy is mad’. Moreover, Heywood’s Hector defends his sister as a ‘Vestal Prophetess’ (B2v), unlike Shakespeare’s Hector who speaks only three words directly to his sister: ‘Peace, sister, peace!’ (2.2.103). Only after Cassandra’s exit does Shakespeare’s Hector appear sympathetic, as discussed earlier, describing her ‘high strains / Of divination’ (2.2.112–13) and attributing to the disbelieving Troilus the ‘madly hot’ (115) blood that Troilus himself attributes to Cassandra. In understanding Cassandra’s speech as a sign of bodily imbalance, however, Heywood’s and Shakespeare’s Trojans agree. Madly hot blood suggests that visions are symptoms of illness in a body not raptured by divine inspiration but ravaged by disease.

Despite her isolated and apparently imbalanced speech in Act 2, Cassandra at last gains the ally for whom she has been pleading. Hector’s wife, Andromache, has also had dreams which ‘will sure prove ominous to the day’ (5.3.6), although Hector dismisses these in a mere half-line. By Act 5, however, the Hector who felt a twinge of remorse is now fixed on his course, too far into the war to stop now. The two women work together, kneeling to Hector (as Calphurnia kneels to Caesar), ‘consor[ting]’ in ‘loud and dear petition’ (5.3.9). For a brief moment, two peripheral women, both of whom know through visions that Hector will die in battle, find strength in their shared experience. In this moment of solidarity, Shakespeare (as so often in the play) deviates from the Iliad. In Book 6, Andromache does beseech Hector not to fight, but not because of a dream. Moreover, this intervention is not only far earlier in the narrative of Hector’s fall, given Hector’s death in Book 22, but is also spoken by Andromache alone. By bringing both women onstage to speak

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8 Of course, the Iliad was not Shakespeare’s only source: as Bevington notes, Shakespeare may also have been drawing on a range of contemporary but now lost plays on the Trojan War (1998: 409–10).
in consort and by attributing a dream of ‘bloody turbulence’ (5.3.11) to Andromache, making her a secondary visionary, Shakespeare doubles the strength of their warning, rendering Hector twice as foolish for dismissing both his wife and his sister. Two women’s voices are not enough.

By Cassandra’s third and final appearance, later in the same scene, she has gained a more powerful supporter still: her father, King Priam. Now Priam is convinced, not by Cassandra alone but by the weight of evidence which includes his own prophetic experience:

> Thy wife hath dreamt, thy mother hath had visions,  
> Cassandra doth foresee, and I myself  
> Am like a prophet suddenly *enrapt*  
> To tell thee that this day is ominous. (5.3.65–8, my emphasis)

Troy is suddenly full of visionaries, and Priam, who appeared ambivalent to his daughter’s prophecies, now shares them, or at least aligns himself with them through simile.\(^9\) But even with all the patriarchal authority offered by Priam, Hector will not listen. Cassandra has already hinted that prophecy might be a communal experience, one shared by the collective consciousness of a nation under siege. In her first appearance, she invokes the shared moans of fellow Trojans of all ages and genders; now, her own prophetic power is catching, as it spreads to Andromache, Hecuba, and Priam, who plead with Hector to break his oath and refuse to fight. Priam’s final, fractious conversation with Hector ends with the two exiting ‘severally’ (97, s.d.), an emblem of disunity that underscores a sharp farewell. The separate exits suggest that prophecies fracture the harmony between men (or rather between political groups of men), fulfilling the (similarly unheeded) warning that Ulysses offers in Act 1: ‘What plagues and what portents ... / ... rend and deracinate / The unity and married calm of states’ (1.3.96–100). Cassandra contains within herself a microcosm of this

\(^9\) To this list, Fly adds both Thersites and Achilles, whose prediction of Hector’s death – one drawn from intuition rather than from visionary experience – he calls ‘clairvoyant knowledge’ (1975: 158).
discord, giving flesh to fears which the Trojans will not voice and offering them truth which they cannot accept without pedantic debate.

Even after Priam attests to his own vision, or perhaps claims to have been rapt by the women around him as if by prophecy, the women onstage are blamed for the folly of claiming to see the future. Troilus dismisses the warning with an insult that might be addressed to either Andromache, who has just been made to exit, or Cassandra, who remains, but which does not criticise Priam: ‘This foolish, dreaming, superstitious girl / Makes all these bodements’ (5.3.82–3). Yet, Troilus does not have the last word. Cassandra finishes his line of pentameter with the resolution, ‘O, farewell. dear Hector!’ (83). In these final lines, Cassandra ignores Troilus and turns the question of sight back onto her brother, Hector, directing his gaze: ‘Look how thou diest; look how thy eye turns pale’ (84). Cassandra calls upon visionary sight which Hector does not share and asks him to see the two things which cannot be seen: one’s own death, and one’s own eye. For Hector, prophetic sight is impossible even when he is told where to look. Cassandra has prophesised; ‘Hecuba cries out’ (86); Andromache ‘shrills her dolours forth’ (87) but none of these ‘witless antics’ (89), as the visionaries seem, are taken seriously. Even Priam is dismissed: Hector bends his knee to ask for permission to fight but does not wait for an answer. Visionary experience is so thoroughly dismissed as madness that even King Priam’s intervention makes little difference.

Ending with the death of Hector, at once utterly expected and deeply shocking, the play judges Cassandra’s visions and finds them true, but it does not decide whether those visons are divinely sent, or just the good guesses or even the reasonable paranoia of a woman living through siege warfare. Her visions spread throughout her family, to Andromache, Hecuba, and Priam, but these shared moments of testimony are treated as if they were a shared psychosis, spread amongst a family in a moment of trauma. Of Cassandra’s own fate, the play says nothing: by omitting any sense of her personal narrative, it contains her only within three fragmented vignettes, unable to exist beyond the moments she wrests from a play far more sympathetic to violence than to visions.
If *Julius Caesar* is a tragedy of two parts, with the death of Caesar at its centre, then Calphurnia is found only ‘before’. Where Cassandra punctuates *Troilus and Cressida*, drawing focus back to inevitable doom until the final act, Calphurnia falls out of her play entirely. Her agency in *Julius Caesar*, such as it is, centres around her prophetic dream of Caesar’s death. After his death, both the dream and Calphurnia appear to have served their purpose and disappear. Moreover, in the two scenes in which she appears onstage, Calphurnia moves only according to Caesar’s design. She is called onstage by Caesar, told where to stand (‘directly in Antonio’s way’ (1.2.5)), and exits with Caesar moments later. Beyond establishing her existence, Calphurnia’s presence in her first scene is hardly necessary at all. She does not react when Caesar warns Antony to touch his wife during the fertility ritual of the Lupercalia, nor when Brutus observes her pallor. In the brief moments she spends onstage, however, Calphurnia does stand as a wordless witness to an interaction between Caesar and a soothsayer who delivers the fatal line: ‘Beware the ides of March’ (1.2.25). Although they share a significant fate – neither is believed – the soothsayer is established as Calphurnia’s prophetic foil: he cries out for Caesar’s attention while she stands in silence and pushes through the crowd while she is carefully positioned. He also speaks his own prophecy, whereas Calphurnia, as I will discuss, does not. Through her silent presence, Calphurnia is at once aligned with soothsaying and positioned only at its periphery, as she is at the periphery of the play.

Calphurnia then enters the stage for the second and final time to hear her own dream recounted onstage by Caesar: she endures the dissonance of not only seeing the dream of her husband’s body as statue, bleeding from multiple wounds, but now of hearing the living Caesar describe it. In Plutarch, as translated by Thomas North, Caesar is the spectator who watches Calphurnia ‘weep and sigh, and put forth many fumbling lamentable speeches’ in her sleep (1579: 793). Instead, Shakespeare gives Caesar the role of describing the dream (or rather, of recounting Calphurnia’s sleeping words onstage). By speaking it himself, Caesar wrests control of the dream from Calphurnia, with his onstage echo of his wife’s words ‘suggesting that female wisdom is always already appropriated by men, the better to be disposed of’ (Roulon, 2016: 21).
Calphurnia’s vision becomes a passive experience, reframed solely for its effect on Caesar. Despite Plutarch’s emphasis on the imprecision of her ‘fumbling’ words, Shakespeare’s Caesar describes a far sharper account of his wife’s dream: ‘Thrice hath Calphurnia in her sleep cried out / “Help, ho! They murder Caesar!”’ (2.2.2–3). This clarity makes Caesar’s final refusal to listen to the dream appear absurdly reckless: this is not a mumble, but a statement, repeated three times as rhetorical emphasis demands. This sense of certainty is tempered in Plutarch by the admission that other sources (Livy) suggest that the dream was of a torn gable rather than Caesar’s body. Shakespeare offers no ambiguity, despite the scene’s continual drive towards doubt: there is one clear dream, and Caesar dismisses it.

As the scene progresses, Calphurnia tries to wrest back agency over the dream, despite knowing her word is not enough. This is not the moment of rapture that sweeps Cassandra in a state of seeming madness; it is a calm, planned intervention from a politician’s wife. Yet, before she enters or speaks, Caesar has already sent out word to the patriarchal and religious structures which make up the power of Rome, asking for their opinions. Only once this call for alternative augury has been sought is Calphurnia finally seen and heard, despite the fact that in Plutarch, Calphurnia is the one who urges Caesar to seek other proofs if he will not accept the truth of her vision. Instead of turning to priests, Shakespeare has Calphurnia invoke the shared visions of other citizens, recounted second-hand as Caesar recounted her own dream second-hand. Repeating the vision of the soldiers of the watch, she describes a meteorological omen, in which

Fierce fiery warriors fight upon the clouds,
In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,
Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol.
The noise of battle hurtled in the air.
Horses do neigh, and dying men did groan,
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets. (2.2.19–24)

It is difficult to tell whether, in the one moment of extended speech she is granted, Calphurnia’s description of a shared vision that she herself did not share has slipped into metaphor: the vision of warring soldiers in the clouds
echoes a passage from Nashe’s *The Terrors of the Night* (1594) in which Nashe describes visions which emerge from the fumes of melancholy: ‘whole armies of men skirmishing in the air, dragons, wild beasts, bloody streamers, blazing comets, fiery streaks with other apparitions innumerable’. In *Terrors*, published five years before *Julius Caesar* was first performed, airy soldiers are the product of a vaporous mind: any playgoer recalling Nashe would associate the vision that Calphurnia describes with bodily imbalance. Indeed, even for the brief time that he is swayed by Calphurnia, Caesar cannot resist alluding to the supposed fragility of the female body. Sleeplessness and its resultant hallucinations were associated with an imbalance of the humours (Fretz, 2016: 5–8). When Caesar does agree to stay away from the forum, it is therefore with a weighted concession: ‘And for thy humour I will stay at home’ (2.2.56). Here humour is both inclination and, more literally, bodily fluid: Caesar is not moved (or will not acknowledge being moved) by the vision, but by the humour which has created a false image in his wife’s mind. The vision is tolerated as a sign of mental weakness (and as a useful excuse for Caesar, who is equivocating about a journey to the senate which is so freighted with ill omens).

Her dream alone is not enough, and Calphurnia’s invocation of a group of witnesses (and one witness’s particular description of armies in the clouds) only weakens her case. Caesar believes that if visions are widespread, their prophetic power is cheapened or diluted, as if their power lies in their exclusivity and the personal advantage that exclusive knowledge might offer: ‘Yet Caesar shall go forth, for these predictions / Are to the world in general as to Caesar’ (2.2.28–9). Caesar’s wilful refusal to heed his wife’s warning is, moreover, typical of his refusal to consider the warnings of Artemidorus and the soothsayer (Schupak, 2016: 125).¹⁰ For Caesar, the only second opinions that he values when deciding on the veracity of prophecies come from men of rank. Following Caesar’s decision to avoid the forum, Decius Brutus enters the scene to offer

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¹⁰ This name recalls the dream theorist Artemidorus whose work, already translated from Greek into Latin and French, was published in English in 1606 as *The Judgement, or Exposition of Dreams*. For Caesar to ignore a warning from such a character suggests his wilful refusal to listen.
a persuasive reframing of Calphurnia’s dream. Decius Brutus’s ability to
turn the interpretation of the dream on its head and argue that the blood
running from the statue of Caesar is the lifeblood of Rome itself suggests
the malleability of oneiromancy (dream reading). Shakespeare follows
Plutarch in invoking Caesar’s toxic insecurities, framing the idea of
returning to the senate only ‘when Calpurnia should have better dreams’
(North, 1579: 793) not only in terms of superstition but of fragile male
pride. The vision is not enough to dissuade Caesar in the face of a greater
threat: the laughter of other men.

In a world full of accepted prophecies (Decius Brutus does not deny
Calphurnia’s dream but rather its interpretation), Calphurnia is dismissed,
despite the fact that her dream – unlike Casca’s and Cassius’s which are
heard elsewhere – is sharp and precise. In its accuracy it is rivalled only by
the Soothsayer’s prophecy which warns of a particular day, not of
a particular event. Even then, the Soothsayer’s fleeting encounter with
Portia, as both hurry through the streets of Rome, reveals that his prophecy
is not certain: ‘None that I know will be, / Much that I fear may chance’
(2.4.32–3). Calphurnia’s dream is the moment at which Caesar’s death is
first played out and at which its inevitability is sealed. Brief as it is,
Calphurnia’s dream is the centre of the play, around which the temporal
axes of foreknowledge and retrospection pivot. Yet, the moment which
seems to stage the possibility that Caesar might change his mind offers only
false hope. The play even predicts Calphurnia’s failed prediction. In the
scene before her dream takes place, the disbelief with which it will be heard
has already been decided. Cassius worries that Caesar has become credulous
of ‘apparent prodigies, / The unaccustomed terror of this night’ (2.1.198–
9) – it is hard not to hear Nashe’s title, The Terrors of the Night, in this line –
and sends Decius to ‘o’ersway’ him (203). Even before Calphurnia has
shared her dream, it is fated to be misinterpreted: she cannot stop Caesar.

2.3 Conclusion

The visions of Cassandra and Calphurnia offer only the illusion of change.
Both women speak against the tide of fate and the momentum of the tragic
narrative within which they exist. Cassandra is cursed never to be believed;
Calphurnia may win her husband round for a moment, but ultimately cannot
dissuade him when pitted against the driving forces of his own pride and his
apparent destiny. Following the model of Pilate’s wife’s dream, discussed
earlier, these vision scenes not only reveal the failure of female political
interventions, even within the firmly domestic role of concerned wife or sister,
but also allow for the staging of political men as unwise listeners. Hector and
Caesar emerge from these vision scenes as reckless husbands and rash politi-
cians. Both men are temporarily, if not swayed, then sympathetic to the
prophecies they hear, but neither will commit to a course of action based on
the words of a woman. In fact, the consequences of not listening to Cassandra
and Calphurnia take up far more stage time than either can claim herself.

Cassandra and Calphurnia both warn of impending death, and in doing
so both speak directly to the man whose death is foreseen. Both have some
success. Cassandra articulates her visions and in the course of the play
acquires more support, although she is never able to dissuade her brother
Hector from his course of further fighting. Calphurnia is briefly able to
dissuade Caesar from attending the senate meeting at which he will be
killed. Ultimately, however, the power of visionary experience is wrested
from both: Cassandra needs not only her sister-in-law Andromache but also
her father, the Trojan king Priam, to share her experience in order to gain
any traction with her brother, and Calphurnia’s dream is only given
attention when it is recited by Caesar and interpreted by Decius Brutus.
As such, both women become peripheral to their own visions, unable to
claim ownership over their own cognitive experiences. The vision becomes,
when convenient, the product of the unbalanced female body, rapt with
emotion: the power of diagnosis lies with men who are predisposed to
dismiss the vision as a symptom, not an experience. The vision can be taken
from their hands and parsed for political ends when what Calphurnia and
Cassandra want is simply an end, the end, a scene cut mercifully short.

3 Ambitious Visions and/as Sinful Thought

Both Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, and Lady Macbeth understand the role
prophecy might play in political advancement. Drawing the two women
together, Alison Findlay has suggested that ‘The damaging effects explored
through Eleanor’s role provide a prototype for the role of Lady Macbeth’ (2010: 123). Certainly, Eleanor’s willingness to pay for Jordan’s necromancy to further her ends is echoed in Lady Macbeth’s use of the witches’ visions as far as they suit her purposes. Both women are drawn to the political power of prophecies, the way that future-gazing can itself influence the future. Yet, while both women begin their plays with ambitious dreams, those dreams ultimately falter. Whereas Eleanor is arrested and banished, Lady Macbeth is utterly destroyed by haunting visions of the past. These women, overtly political, clever, and engaged, experience dreams which are suggested to be the result of their own damaged psyches, not of divine (or even demonic) inspiration. Lady Macbeth’s somnambulant visions of her bloody hands, caught between the states of waking and sleeping, are suggestive of an obsessive return to memory; Eleanor makes no secret that she is continually thinking of the ambitious climb which shapes her own dream of her coronation at Westminster. Yet, this turn to interiority does not simply serve to examine the rich and often troubled inner lives of two female characters: it also serves to suggest that their prophetic dreams are the result of their own sin, not of some higher knowledge. The dreams discussed in this section are associated with delirium, madness, and, most troublingly of all, with witchcraft. In 2 Henry VI and Macbeth, dreams of politics and ambition emerge as a space in which women might be corrupted (or, like witches, might corrupt).

In early modern culture, the vision could be understood as a revelation of the secret self rather than a moment of access to a higher truth; the interpretation of visions could be framed as an act of introspection. In an essay on dreams, written c. 1650, Thomas Browne dismisses any possibility that dreams offer true visions. Dreams could, however, offer insight into the self: ‘Men act in sleep with some conformity unto their awaked senses; and consolations or discouragements may be drawn from dreams which intimately tell us ourselves’ (1991: 19). The use of dreams, Browne claims, is not to look outwards towards unknown futures, but to better understand one’s own interior and present self. Both Eleanor and Lady Macbeth experience dreams or hallucinations which seem indicative of their apparent failures of thought: their ambition, their jealousy, their guilt. And, as if to confirm that their visions are self-induced signs of sin, both Eleanor and Lady Macbeth are punished for seeking to manifest their dreams of power, Eleanor with a public shaming, Lady Macbeth with private trauma. The warning is clear: women
who not only imagine but actively seek a more powerful future will be curtailed. Having attempted with differing success to place their husbands in the position of king, both women are removed from the narrative. By sharing their dreams, these women show their hands, and must pay for it.

3.1 Eleanor of Gloucester: Presumptuous Sight

2 Henry VI begins with two opposing exchanges between husbands and wives. The first scene sees King Henry VI greet his new bride Margaret of Anjou (a visionary woman discussed further in Section 5) with public fanfare; the second reveals Humphrey and Eleanor, the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, sharing their dreams in private. This scene begins with Eleanor’s attempt to redirect her husband’s gaze in a negotiation of sight and perspective, in the first of the scene’s several extended uses of the imagery of rising and falling:

Why are thine eyes fixed to the sullen earth,
Gazing on that which seems to dim thy sight?
What seest thou there? King Henry’s diadem
Enchased with all the honours of the world?
If so, gaze on, and grovel on thy face
Until thy head be circled with the same. (1.2.5–10)

Gloucester’s line of sight and, therefore, his ambitions are too lowly for Eleanor and therefore she tells him where to look. She imposes meaning upon his bowed head, suggesting symbolism where none exists and introducing the suggestion of a crown: she reads the scene in front of her as if it were a dream, full of meaningful messages, to which she can add messages of her own.

We’ll both together lift our heads to heaven
And never more abase our sight so low
As to vouchsafe one glance unto the ground. (1.2.11–16)

In a rhetorical feat, Eleanor argues that Gloucester should raise his sight from the ground, where he sees the crown, to heaven, where he will still see the crown. Eleanor’s manipulation of Gloucester’s gaze suggests the psychological suppression known as ironic process theory, in which the more
the thinker struggles to suppress a thought, the harder it is to think of anything else. In other words, whatever Gloucester was thinking of when he lowered his eyes, he is now thinking of the crown. Eleanor is not simply visionary; she carefully controls Gloucester’s vision, turning his gaze upwards, although her own will soon, given her involvement in necromancy, turn towards the hell space of the playhouse, where power seems to come from below. She turns Gloucester’s gaze towards their apparently shared goal, inserting herself in a line of sight that she can guide.

This exchange now turns to actual dreams. Unlike the scenes I have discussed so far in which women are the primary dreamers here Gloucester first recounts his own dream: his staff of office was broken, and the heads of Somerset and Suffolk were mounted on pieces of the staff. The dream is immediately dismissed by Eleanor not as meaningless (dreams must have meaning in order for her own to matter) but as having a simple ‘argument’ that she can explain: those who challenge Gloucester will be punished. Yet, interpreting Gloucester’s dream is her contingency plan; Eleanor had tried to dismiss his dream entirely. Even before he offers a description of the dream, Eleanor offers to ‘requisite it / With sweet rehearsal’ (23–4) of her own dream — a morning dream, moreover, and therefore widely understood in early modern culture to be true (Knowles, 1999: 167). When the audience finally hear Gloucester’s dream, it appears to be unambiguous: the heads of Suffolk and Somerset are placed on Gloucester’s own broken staff of state. Shakespeare rarely offers a more explicit dream, predicting the downfall of three men who all die in the course of the play, yet Eleanor, like Decius Brutus when faced with Calphurnia’s dream, offers a clearly subjective reading which acknowledges the danger to Suffolk and Somerset but omits the danger to Gloucester. This is not the only way in which the dream scene in 2 Henry VI offers a model to be inverted a decade later in Caesar: where Calphurnia is accused of being ‘humorous’, Eleanor deems her husband ‘choleric’ (51) and dismisses his dreams as symptoms of bodily imbalance.

Skating over Gloucester’s dream in three lines, Eleanor then distracts from further debate by offering a dream of her own, one in which she sits in Westminster for her coronation. Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin suggest that Eleanor discloses too much: ‘Rushing to recount her own dream, Eleanor
inadvertently reveals the role she will play in Gloucester’s impending downfall’ (1997: 74). That Eleanor articulates her real desires for the future in the deniable guise of a dream suggests that her dream vision is a manifestation of personal ambition played out in abstract form. For Eleanor, a dream’s power exists in its potentiality, not in its prophetic truth: it is not a supernatural message but a rhetorical tool. Eleanor is, as Gloucester dismisses her in turn, ‘Presumptuous’ (42) both in the sense of over-reaching and of over-interpreting. Through this epithet, Eleanor is aligned with the rhetorical figure George Puttenham calls ‘the presumptuous’, defined as presupposing what an opponent will say in debate: ‘we do prevent them of their advantage, and do catch the ball (as they are wont to say) before it come to the ground’ (1589: 194). In interrupting Gloucester with a dream of her own, Eleanor successfully employs a rhetorical device which is itself a kind of prognostication, intuiting what her rhetorical opponent (her husband) will argue, and countering it with an equally vivid description. Eleanor’s opening speech therefore carefully pre-empts her husband’s arguments and manipulates him towards taking ownership of both a prophetic dream and an ambition which belong to Eleanor. That ambition is disguised as fate.

In 1.4, Eleanor’s attempt to claim control over prophecy is exerted more literally in her employment of two necromancers. Having paid Margery Jordan, the ‘cunning witch’ (1.2.75), and Roger Bolingbroke, the ‘conjuror’ (76), to raise a prophetic spirit, Eleanor enters ‘aloft’ (1.4.12, s.d.) to watch the results. From her position above the stage, Eleanor takes the god’s eye view, and yet is positioned so that she is unequivocally visible: in this moment of seeing and being seen, she might be an emblem of the visionary woman. Her position above also recalls both epic and biblical necromancy, in which a prophetic spirit is drawn up from the ground (such as the nekyia through which Odysseus summons the prophet Tiresias in Book XI of the Odyssey or the moment when the Witch of Endor raises Samuel from the grave in 1 Samuel). Despite

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11 Puttenham associates the presumptuous with women and ascribes to women a propensity for hidden knowledge and for fickleness: ‘[the presumptuous] is also when we will not seem to know a thing, and yet we know it well enough, and may be likened to the manner of women, who as the common saying is, will say nay and take it’ (1589: 194).
Eleanor’s earlier dismissal of her husband’s downturned gaze, knowledge is drawn up from below; in the playhouse, the spirit rises from the hell space beneath the stage. Although not carrying out the rites, Eleanor is positioned above as the agent of this necromancy, raising the demonic up into the playhouse and into the court.

The spirit (whose name, ASNATH, is a simple anagram for SATHAN) offers prophecies which are both real and riddling: predictions of death which only make sense after the fact. To emphasise this semantic uncertainty, the prophecies are voiced and written multiple times, with each transfer risking a slip or false transcription. The questions for the spirit are written or dictated by Eleanor, then read aloud by Bolingbroke; the answers are then spoken by the spirit, and in turn written down by Bolingbroke or Southwell; they are then read aloud by York as evidence of Eleanor’s treason, who adds his own commentary as he reads. This circulation of prophetic information from paper to voice obscures Eleanor’s agency.\footnote{Levine suggests that Eleanor’s narrative agency is wrested from her by Buckingham, who enters the stage to share news of her arrest: ‘As it inscribes the duchess’s treason within the familiar narrative of virago-witch-traitor, Buckingham’s report gains a certain authority, for the characters onstage and perhaps for some members of Shakespeare’s London audience’ (1994: 104). This retrospective retelling of a woman’s visionary experience also prefigures Caesar’s retelling of Calphurnia’s dream (discussed in Section 2).}

Despite paying for this necromancy, and gazing on all from above, Eleanor only hears the spirit’s words while the men below her read, write, and recount them. Margery’s role is similarly curtailed. While Margery appears to begin the interrogation, it is Bolingbroke who immediately steps in to ask the questions; following this, Margery does not speak again. Margery ‘lies down upon her face’ (1.4.12, s.d.) and whispers to the devils, taking the same lowly position which Eleanor describes with scorn when insulting Gloucester: ‘grovel on thy face’. Both women are carefully positioned: lying on the stage establishes Margery as Eleanor’s foil, engaged in the necromancy and yet barely visible to audiences standing level with the stage. Gloucester’s words prove prescient, as Eleanor now looks from the ‘top of honour to disgrace’s feet’, her ambition proved, as Gloucester warned, to be ‘treachery’. 
For all Eleanor’s apparent financial and rhetorical mastery over prophecy, however, she too is victim to manipulation. She has been induced to seek out the prophetic powers of the spirit by Hume, who has been hired by Suffolk and Cardinal Beaufort to ‘buzz these conjurations in her brain’ (1.2.99). This fall is facilitated by Queen Margaret, who complains about Eleanor’s ambition to Suffolk and who is examined as a visionary woman in Section 5, primarily in her iteration in Richard III. This art of suggestion works on Eleanor, just as it worked for her in her conversation with Gloucester, and she is soon arrested for her part in the necromancy. Her final humiliation both invokes and revokes the powerful role she has played in the opening act of the play. As she is led barefoot through the streets, Eleanor once again becomes the object of the audience’s sight, although not now because of her prominent position above. Her warning to Gloucester, ‘Look how they gaze’ (2.4.21) both engulfs Gloucester within Eleanor’s embarrassment – he too is being watched – and implicates the audience in this ritual of looking, making any spectator culpable simply because they are watching the play itself. The paper trail of Asnath’s words described earlier is now recalled as verses pinned to Eleanor’s back, the prophecies replaced by slander. Eleanor’s capacity to look ahead (to think ‘presumptuously’) turns towards a prediction of how she will remember this day when Gloucester merely ‘stood by’ (2.4.46). Finally seeing her future as a fall, not a rise, Eleanor understands her fate not through visionary inspiration but through political instinct.

For Eleanor, prophecies are tools to be fabricated and bought. In a brief, eight-line soliloquy, Eleanor reveals that her relationship to prophecy and to political culture is not passive: ‘being a woman, I will not be slack / To play my part in fortune’s pageant’ (1.2.66–7). Fortune, or fate, or the future, is a performance, and one in which Eleanor will play an intelligent and autonomous role. Yet, Eleanor’s influence ends sharply with Act 2. Knowledge of the future once seemed a shrewd investment, but the price Eleanor pays is not only a ritual humiliation which excludes her from the court but a removal from the play itself. The memory of her actions, however – and in particular her capacity to buy visionary influence through the necromantic powers of others – taints the rest of the play’s prophetic proclamations, not least as the deaths predicted by the spirit do in fact take place. Eleanor’s influence lingers after her sharp exit: the ‘bedlam brainsick Duchess’ is still on Suffolk’s mind in Act 3.
(3.1.51) and the punishment she suffers may remain in a playgoer’s memory when the Cardinal admits that he too has seen God’s ‘secret judgement’ in a dream’ (3.2.31). She is recalled visually in 4.5, when Lord Scales stands above the revolting citizens below in the same configuration as Eleanor and the conjurers and spirit below, suggesting that his authority is just as suspect. Eleanor dominates the first acts of the play only to be silenced, but, as she makes clear in her brief soliloquy, Eleanor would rather be silenced than never speak at all.

3.2 Lady Macbeth: Sick Visions

Following his encounter with the witches, Macbeth seems to catch their capacity for seeing visions. He is the seer of the play, hallucinating daggers and ghosts. For the first four acts of the tragedy, Lady Macbeth’s role is not, unlike many of the other visionaries discussed here, to petition her husband because of her visions (although she does petition him on behalf of the witches). Her role is more active: to make manifest what Macbeth sees. Initially, therefore, Lady Macbeth seems only a facilitator of visionary experience. Macbeth’s famous ‘fatal vision’ (2.1.36), the dagger he imagines or hallucinates as he contemplates the murder of Duncan, is made real by Lady Macbeth, who actually does place a dagger before her husband: ‘Hark! – I laid their daggers ready; / He could not miss ‘em’ (2.2.12–13). Whereas Macbeth believes in prophecy and the augury of ‘maggot-pies and choughs and rooks’ (124), in the first half of the tragedy Lady Macbeth is willing to accept Macbeth’s supernatural encounters largely for the political opportunities they offer. Yet, in the final act, all suddenly pivots. As if prophecy is pushing at its seams, Macbeth seems unable to contain two visionaries, or two tragic falls. The Macbeths’ visionary experiences never overlap. Although Act 4 has seen the witches offer a catalogue of apparitions to Macbeth – an armed head, a bloody child, a crowned child, eight kings, and Banquo – in Act 5, all visions belong to Lady Macbeth. Her troubled sleepwalking, her inner sickness, seems to be inherited from Macbeth. While Tassi distinguishes between Cassandra and Lady Macbeth in claiming that the latter ‘infected’ those around her with ‘the malignant potency of [her] visions’, Lady Macbeth
seems more infected than infectious: the suggestion of physical and mental illness is present throughout her last scenes.

Lady Macbeth’s visionary experience in Act 5 comes as if by sudden illness rather than by demonic influence. Macbeth’s visions are created by external forces; Lady Macbeth’s are generated within. Macbeth’s experiences are highly visualised: from his ekphrasis of the dagger before him to the presence of Banquo onstage, everything Macbeth sees, the audience also sees. Lady Macbeth’s visions are starkly internal, invisible to those around her. A fleeting suggestion that Lady Macbeth seeks paranormal influence is her address to the ‘spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts’ (39–40), but even here the supernatural and cognitive are deeply interwoven. The effect of the spirits, too, is not to offer visions but to influence her body: the spirits are ‘murd’ring ministers’ (47) that might make toxic her breast milk and allow her body to poison whatever might try to consume it. If the speech is read as an incantation, then it is a failed one: no spirits attend, as they so evidently do elsewhere in Shakespeare at the behest of necromantic women. As tempting as it is to suggest that Lady Macbeth begins the play with a connection to the supernatural world (she seems to echo the witches in referring to the ‘all-hail hereafter’, 54, but in fact simply echoes her husband’s letter), it is vital that Lady Macbeth’s actions are not influenced by any supernatural power. She can ‘feel now / The future in the instant’ (56–7), but because of her own intuition, not because of a demonic vision. Surprisingly, as so many visionaries are treated with suspicion, the hints of visionary experience associated with Lady Macbeth actually serve to mask the less palatable reality of her violent ambition. The sight of bloody hands, accompanied by the ‘smell of the blood still’ (48), actually suggests a sensory imprint of trauma. Trauma resists forgetting: as Cathy Caruth argues in her theory-defining work, trauma ‘is not assimilated fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession.

The exception might be the dagger, which Lesel Dawson argues is the product of ‘mental fixation, a cognitive disturbance in which an extremely pleasing or terrifying image is forcefully imprinted on the brain’ (2020: 9). The dagger, which both the Macbeths encounter in the murder of Duncan, and which Lady Macbeth seems to hold, psychically, forever, as the blood on her hands suggests, is then a pivotal vision which unites their fixated minds.
of the one who experiences it’ (1995: 4). Hallucinations only push Lady Macbeth backwards, inverting the role of the vision which is to offer foresight.

The question of Lady Macbeth’s visions is then not what they mean (audiences know well where the imagined blood has come from) but why they are happening. This debate is centred around the Doctor who is brought to observe Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking. The Doctor claims that ‘infected minds / To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets’ (69–70) but then appears unsure if her mental infection is medical: ‘More needs she the divine than the physician’ (71). There is a suggestion that Lady Macbeth’s mind is not infected so much as possessed. Resisting the kind of binary between the supernatural and medical that the Doctor proposes, however, Dympna Callaghan cautions that mental illness and witchcraft were often understood and treated in much the same ways: ‘the witch in Jacobean culture had become the hysteric, a scientific phenomenon rather than a disturbing threat to phallic power’ (1992: 369).\(^{14}\) Lady Macbeth’s interiority, the reality of her mental trauma, is diminished by the Doctor’s implication of possession, her actions attributed neither to remorse nor to personal illness but to demonic forces. Just as sleepwalking positions Lady Macbeth between the dream space of sleep and waking awareness, it also positions her between conscious and unconscious thought. Trauma can be a moment caught between performance and recollection: ‘is the subject’s return to the “origin” of the trauma – in flashbacks and nightmares, and so on – a literal re-enactment of the event, or a representation of it?’ (Starks-Estes, 2014: 18). Remembering and re-enacting, Lady Macbeth is caught in the trauma of a past scene which is now embellished with her guilt. She is an actress forced to repeat her lines, filling the stage with imagined sensory effects in order to relive a murder. Audiences watch Lady Macbeth remembering a scene that they remember too but are unable to get access to her vision beyond her scattered descriptions and their own imaginings. This distance – this utter uncertainty as to what Lady Macbeth can see – serves to unsettle the play’s reality, as Act 5 seems to

\(^{14}\) For more on the overlapping connections between exorcism, witchcraft, and hysteria, see Levin, who argues that ‘The demonic woman and the hysteric violated patriarchal ideals, but they validated misogynist accounts of an essentially corrupted female nature’ (2002: 29).
slip from tragedy into abstract morality play. Emma Smith argues that ‘often Shakespeare stages that very nothingness behind our interpretations, refusing to give us any access to the event itself, only its subsequent and contested readings’ (2019: 151). Lady Macbeth’s visions are ‘nothingness’, neither quite message nor memory, and the attempts of the Doctor and Macbeth to understand them leads to nothingness too.

Because they do not suit his ambitions, as her encouraging use of the witches’ prophecies once did, Macbeth treats his wife’s hallucinations as illnesses. His first reaction to her ‘thick-coming fancies’ (5.3.40) is an abrupt half-line: ‘Cure her of that’ (41). The doctor, who is so roundly unhelpful as to appear parodic, still turns away from medical treatment.

Macbeth Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

Doctor Therein the patient
Must minister to himself. (5.3.41–8)

Macbeth suggests that visionary experience is the result of excess, of emotions that cannot escape the mind but remain festering there. He describes a sorrow that is ‘rooted’, troubles that are ‘written’, a weight upon the heart: paradoxically, permanence of thought is associated with an instability in the mind. ‘Rooted’ also recalls his own first encounter with the witches; Banquo proposes that the encounter might in fact have been a drug-induced hallucination: ‘have we eaten on the insane root / That takes the reason prisoner?’ (1.3.82–3). Banquo turns more readily to bodily explanations than to the supernatural, despite the fact that the play is dripping with all the markers of the supernatural, from ghosts to omens. Medical or even chemical imbalance may serve as an excuse for Lady Macbeth but this does not generate sympathy. The Doctor’s final diagnosis lays the blame on Lady Macbeth: her visions are self-induced and must be self-treated.
The Doctor is, however, emphatically not the authority on Lady Macbeth’s visions. The primary witness to Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking is an unnamed gentlewoman, a character who does not appear elsewhere in the play. The gentlewoman understands the visionary state far more clearly than the attendant physician, especially in the following exchange which places the Doctor in the role of bystander and the gentlewoman as diagnostian:

**Doctor** You see her eyes are open.

**Gentlewoman** Ay, but their sense are shut.

**Doctor** What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.

**Gentlewoman** It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands (5.1.23–8)

This is also not the only moment of female support that the play suggests. Lady Macbeth’s suicide takes place out of sight, the only evidence of its occurrence the ‘cry within of women’ (5.5.7, s.d.). There is then aural, if not visual, evidence of other women surrounding Lady Macbeth, of a network which exists only within, and never onstage. These women (and the cry is very deliberately a cry of women, rather than the more usual ‘noise within’) offer, for a mere second, a collective mourning for a woman who is, while onstage and awake, never in female company. Yet, again, as with the gentlewoman and Doctor, the voices of the crying women are mediated by a male figure, Macbeth’s servant Seyton, who explains their cry. Ultimately, the Doctor’s only treatment for Lady Macbeth is further observation, a role which falls to the gentlewoman, who must ‘still keep eyes upon her’ (5.1.74). Under the intensity of this gaze, Lady Macbeth becomes the scene’s optical focus, its ‘vision’. The audience see her as a bloody apparition not unlike those seen by Macbeth in 4.1. Lady Macbeth’s vision is then infectious in more ways than one; in her sleep, she becomes a spectre even before her own death: audiences see the vision of a future ghost walking.

Once her visions have begun, Lady Macbeth is pushed increasingly to the periphery. She is observed in her sleepwalking as if an actor; the audience never again see her awake or conscious of her visions. Following the vision scene, she remains offstage, mentioned briefly when Macbeth describes his wife’s hallucinations as ‘written troubles’. The sense of haunting images scored on the mind
offers a particular understanding of the role of the visionary: trapped by the inevitable structure of tragedy, Lady Macbeth’s fate is already written. Lady Macbeth is a spectator who cannot escape the play inside her head, watching her own scenes be performed again and again. Endlessly rotating back through the sounds (‘knocking at the gate’, 63–4), smells (‘All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand’, 48–9), and sights of the first four acts, by the fifth act Lady Macbeth is trapped, leaving only by the fail-safe exit from tragedy: death.

3.3 Conclusion
For Eleanor and Lady Macbeth, the vision cannot be easily separated from the anxieties and ambitions of the woman who experiences it. The vision becomes an expression of interiority, not only of inner dreams but of inner thoughts, standing alongside the soliloquy as an exteriorised articulation of self. The visions discussed in this section serve to expose an apparently frightening desire for power as well as a manifestation of mental illness. When Lady Macbeth and Eleanor speak it is, like many of the visionaries discussed here, in an attempt to intervene in their husband’s political decisions. Richards and Thorne note that wives had a ‘recognised duty to promote the interests and standing of their family’ (2007: 14). In this sense, Eleanor and Lady Macbeth could be understood as exemplary spouses, if not exemplary subjects, putting their hopes and visions for their husband’s future above the power structures of the monarchy. They are then perversions of ideal humanist wives: they might even be considered anti-wives, as the witch is often considered the anti-mother, who will ultimately destroy, not sustain, her husband. They are active in political culture, using their husbands as proxy figures for their own ambition: the future they see is one in which they claim power through men. However, such attempts at power come at a price; like figures in a morality play, both women represent Ambition that must be curbed. The visions of future power that Eleanor describes and Lady Macbeth makes use of tell only half of the story: these visionaries are limited, too fixated on their rise to see the inevitable fall.

15 See Willis (1995) and Purkiss (1996: 100–4) for discussion of this trope.
4 Believe Not Every Spirit

The term ‘vision’ serves to describe an array of imagined and hallucinated experiences precisely because of its semantic ambiguity: a vision is the term for both a sight seen and a sight imagined. It is ambiguity with which this section is concerned: the space for doubt created by the vision which is inherently unprovable as the only one with access to it is the visionary. A vision can be ‘true’ (divinely inspired) or ‘false’ (demonic), with no clear way to distinguish between the two. Referring to 2 Corinthians 11:14 (‘And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light’), Copeland and Machielsen emphasise the spiritual difficulty of believing even a vision experienced with one’s own eyes: ‘Paul’s warning invites scepticism, calling on Christians to question the veracity and authenticity of what they perceive. But how were they to discern true content from the label on the box, especially when the two might be diametrically opposed and yet appear the same?’ (2013: 2). It is this verse to which Holinshed refers in his description of the execution of Joan of Arc to argue that her visions are inherently untrustworthy: ‘since Satan (after S. Paul) can change himself into an angel of light’ (1587: 605). To see angels is no proof of divine inspiration if those angels might be devils in disguise. Once again, the truth of the vision is determined by how it is interpreted, not by its inherent value. After all, Joan was considered divinely inspired until she was no longer useful.

The visions discussed in this section are of devils and angels, although the distinction between the two is uncomfortably unclear. As Stuart Clark has discussed, the slippery semantic space between the demonic and divine has been a matter of considerable debate in discussions of visionary experience: ‘Both good and bad angels could use their natural powers to alter the local motions of the animal spirits and humours which, in line with Aristotle’s teaching in De somniis, caused the human phantasia to make images during sleep’ (2007: 125). Moreover, while either devils or angels might induce a vision, there was further risk that the vision was a result of neither. Visions could be nothing more than mental images, created by a sleeping or disturbed mind. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Theseus’s definition of ‘the lunatic’ is one who experiences visions of devils: ‘One sees
more devils than vast hell can hold: / That is the madman’ (5.1.9–10). Theseus’s speech offers a model for the scepticism with which the demonic and angelic visions staged for Katherine and Joan are met. If such visions are a sign of madness, then the audience too are implicated, because, like the ‘lunatic’, playgoers see those spirits plainly.

4.1 Joan Puc/zel: Hearing Devils

In 1 Henry VI, Joan Puc/zel is caught between the French for whom it is politically astute to believe that God is sending her favourable visions and the English who interpret those same visions as demonic. Like Eleanor of Gloucester (discussed in Section 3), Joan is ultimately tried and punished for her apparent witchcraft. Shakespeare’s Joan is ‘Puzel or pussel’ (Shakespeare, 2000: 1.4.106), the whore or the virgin; she is also Joan the witch, a ‘railing Hecate’ (3.5.24), or reanimated Medea (Stapleton, 1994: 231), whose military prowess is attributed to demonic influence. Yet, when that influence is at its most vital, it fails, and the fiends which flank Joan leave her in silence. Joan is a visionary whose visions desert her, a woman abandoned by the spectacular power for which she is executed.

Joan’s first scene is one of visionary significance. Her first test of vision is to identify the Dauphin in a room of other men, a task she easily accomplishes. Standing before the Dauphin, itself a position of power accorded to no other woman in the play, Joan then describes the experience which called her to action: ‘God’s mother deignèd to appear to me, / And in a vision, full of majesty, / Willed me to leave my base vocation’ (1.2.57–60). In recounting her vision, Joan’s emphasis is on clarity. In her account, the Virgin Mary appears ‘full of majesty’ (58), suggesting that the image was sharp and complete. Its message is equally coherent, and Joan lays it out with precision. Still, Joan anticipates that she will not be believed and – before Charles replies – offers herself for trial by combat, understood in chivalric culture as

16 Throughout, I refer to Joan Puc/zel, differing from the Oxford Shakespeare edition, which I otherwise cite, and which gives ‘Joan la Pucelle’ as speech prefix. The Folio offers both ‘Puzel’ (98) and ‘Pucell’ (107). I have therefore offered a hybrid name which neither damns Joan with a misogynistic slur nor sanitises the insult implied every time she is given lines to speak.
a sign from God, who would allow the righteous party to win (Russell, 2008: 335–57). Joan wins the fight and is finally given the status of prophetess. Her visionary power surpasses that of Helen, ‘the mother of great Constantine’ (121), whose vision of Christ led her to convert her son to Christianity, and that of ‘Saint Philip’s daughters’ (122), all of whom were prophets (Acts 21:8–9). Charles’s concession that she ‘fightest with sword of Deborah’ (1.2.84) aligns her clearly with ‘a female judge, prophet, and war-leader’ (Schroeder, 2014: 3). In the eyes of the Dauphin, at least, Joan is a visionary in the model of biblical visionaries: not only blessed by God but active in military command. Through the mention of these female visionaries – and, in the case of Deborah and Helen, their substantial political influence – Joan is established within a line of inspired women, her own visions given weight because of theirs. The need for such a list of ancestors does, however, suggest Joan’s vulnerable position at court. Without such precedents, her word is not enough.

The devotion with which Charles receives Joan is held against the English reaction to her prophecies. Talbot implies that Joan’s visions are intangible: ‘So bees with smoke and doves with noisome stench / Are from their hives and houses driven away’ (1.7.23–4). The smoke and smell of the visions and therefore Joan’s effect on the English soldiers are mere airy tricks, nothing substantial. Smoke and smells are also the markers of stage lightning, the symbol of devils and witches (Thomson, 1999: 11–24). Joan’s own arrival to battle against the English is marked with thunder as if she were a devil: even the English messenger’s words that she is ‘A holy prophetess, new risen up’ (1.4.80) are suggestive of a devil rising from the hell space as much as of Joan’s social ascension. As readily as the French raise Joan to the spiritual heights of biblical prophetesses, the English denigrate her through comparison to devils and witches. The stage directions of Joan’s most explicit visionary moment in Act 5 offer an almost choral influence, pushing towards a demonic reading: Joan is visited by ‘fiends’ – she calls them ‘choice’ (5.3.3) and ‘familiar spirits’ (10) – who appear, by Joan’s own admission, from ‘powerful regions under earth’ (11) in a moment of conjuring which aligns Joan with the persistent orientation towards the hell space in Eleanor’s necromancy (see Section 3). In the one explicit glimpse given into Joan’s visions, the audience learn that the visions are not in fact an unexpected
revelation from God but rather summoned by Joan. The play which has so far fluctuated between English and French gazes – between Joan Puzel and Joan la Pucelle – now, jarringly, forces the audience’s eyes firmly in one direction. Joan’s visions are the result of witchcraft, not least because, as was held typical of witches, she is ‘wont to feed [the fiends] with my blood’ (14). More degradingly still, Joan’s witchcraft is no longer even potent in Act 5. The fiends ‘walk and speak not’ (12, s.d.), ‘hang their heads’ (17), ‘shake their heads’ (19). Her devils are not even the fiery, chatty, bombastic devils of the Medieval mystery plays: they are, as James Paxson has put it, ‘diabolical mimes’, ineffectual, even embarrassing (2001: 143). Their silence suggests that Joan has no line of communication with the supernatural world beyond that created through her own delusion. Joan reacts to her silent devils with a phrase which parodies the Passion: Joan’s ‘See, they forsake me’ (24) uncomfortably echoes the reported words of Christ on the cross, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Matthew 27: 46). Through this inversion, Joan’s visions are reduced to petty conjuring as she suffers through a fifth act which ‘dispe[ls] both Joan’s power and her pretensions to divine aid in a series of progressively less dignified scenes’ (Jackson, 1988: 41–2). In the play’s penultimate scene, Joan is finally led offstage to be burned alive as a ‘sorceress’ (5.6.1), her visions now apparently confirmed false.

In her trial before the English, such as it is, Joan’s word is twice called into doubt, firstly when she denies the lower-class shepherd parentage that she used to bolster her image earlier in the play, and secondly when she claims to be pregnant in the hope of being given a stay of execution. Robbed of all dignity, Joan dies as a liar, although her death provides her, for a moment, with an attentive English audience. Writing of women as witnesses in early modern England, Frances Dolan argues that the limits of female speech stretched until the point of death itself. Women at the point of execution were granted a rare opportunity to speak in public, but only as

17 For more on this trope and further discussion of the ‘polluting female body’, see Purkiss (1996: 134).

18 Maguire and Thomson’s discussion of voice-hearing in Doctor Faustus offers an illuminating reading of a near contemporary play of 1 Henry VI which stages demonic voices in terms of interiority and passivity (2020: 255–80).
they were about to be silenced by death (Dolan, 1994: 169). Yet, despite the illusion of agency in public speech, Joan’s final words only induce confirmation bias: the inclination of the mind to gather evidence in favour of an already-held belief. Here, the men who already consider Joan to be ‘Stained with the guiltless blood of innocents’ (44) are primed to blame her every action. Realising that a fair hearing is impossible, Joan then turns to more earthly defences, only in her desperation finally foregrounding the gendered role that she has spent the play unwriting. In a seeming reversal of her position, she claims not to be a virgin after all, but to be pregnant, naming three possible fathers: the Dauphin, Alencon, and Reignier. Joan’s final attempt to save her life seems the panicked reaction of a teenager about to face execution and serves to humiliate her further. Any of her claims that these men have fathered a child might be genuine; none can be proved. This ambiguity underscores the fraught relationship between prophecy and truth: if Joan will lie about this, the play suggests in its final moments of misogyny, she might lie about anything.

Further complicating the treatment of Shakespeare’s Joan is the queerness of her gender representation: the historic Joan was, as Holinshed puts it in his list of her so-called misdeeds, charged with ‘shamefully rejecting her sex abominably in acts and apparel to have counterfeited mankind, and then all damnably faithless, to be a pernicious instrument to hostility and bloodshed in devilish witchcraft and sorcery’ (1587: 604). The two charges are given equal weight: Joan is caught between an apparently counterfeit masculinity and the accusations of witchcraft used to undermine her speech when perceived as female. Sawyer Kemp has proposed that, in the context of justice-oriented pedagogy, ‘We might model a close reading of Joan la Pucelle’s madness through the lens of body dysphoria’ (2019: 42), and certainly in her own lifetime Joan of Arc’s gender identity was treated as

19 My thinking here is indebted to Stryker, who offers a capacious definition of the term transgender as ‘the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place, rather than any particular destination or mode of transition’ (2008: 1). I am also indebted to the modelling of ways to ‘fuse historicist methods with presentist concerns’ expressed in Early Modern Trans Studies (Chess, Gordon, and Fisher, 2019: 11).
a matter for debate (Pernoud, 1964: 34–5). Joan’s claim that she is pregnant is then more tragic still, as Joan negotiates the misogyny of the English by appealing to their fantasies of the female body as something that is knowable, controllable, and generative only through childbirth. Ultimately, Joan is not only on trial for her visionary experiences, which are pre-emptively judged as witchcraft. Joan is put on trial for being an unknowable enemy. The English have no tolerance for ambiguity: Joan’s ‘puzzling body’ (Spiess, 2016: 106) cannot be explained, her visions cannot be proved, and so she is removed from their version of history.

Joan’s battle to be heard has been examined recently in Charlie Josephine’s I, Joan (2022), a powerful response to 1 Henry VI which speaks in defence of self-identification and the rights of trans and non-binary people. In the play’s complicated representation of visionary experience, Joan’s (Isobel Thom) visions are more often described as innate and self-generated, and even when they do seem to come from God, they are not images so much as instincts, a sense of a ‘calling’ or ‘Truth’. This shift, away from the Joan in 1 Henry VI who describes specific images of the Virgin Mary and is later shown to the audience surrounded by devils, cuts to the question of what the vision is and how (indeed, if) it can be proved. I, Joan does not stage its visions for public scrutiny because the opinion of others has no bearing on what is true to Joan, who urges that ‘everyone would listen to their insides, for there the Kingdom of Heaven sings sweetly’ (13). The play makes clear that access to divine truth comes through knowledge of oneself: it is felt, not seen.

Despite the play’s representation of vision as an experience which can sometimes be drawn from within and which needs no external proof, Joan is not believed. Joan, who moves in and out of the world of the play, often

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20 While Holinshed’s account suggests that the claim of pregnancy ‘gave her nine months stay’ from execution, ‘at the end whereof she found herein as false as wicked’ (1587: 604), Shakespeare’s York gives Joan neither credence nor time, meaning that the pregnancy is not proved false before Joan is taken to her death.

21 ‘Prompt Book for I, Joan’, GB 3316 SGT / THTR / SM / 1 / 2022 / IJ; all text and page numbers for I, Joan are taken from this prompt book, with thanks to Shakespeare’s Globe.
addressing the audience directly, first interacts with Charles, the Dauphin, three generic male advisors (Man One, Man Two, and Man Three), and Thomas, another advisor, who, throughout the play, will try to understand Joan as both visionary leader and non-binary person. In this scene, when Charles expresses excitement at Joan’s arrival (not because he takes them seriously but because he is bored), his advisors offer paint-by-numbers misogyny (assuming, as they do, that the ‘strange visitor’ arriving is a ‘girl on horseback’ (8)):

MAN TWO: But sir! She could be a fraud!
MAN ONE: Or a mad woman! An assassin!
MAN TWO: Or a witch!
MAN ONE: Or the devil himself!
CHARLES: Or a monster from the deep dark depths of foolish man’s imagination?! She’s a girl! A simple maid! I want to meet with her. (8)

Joan might be a con artist or a devil, rapt and out of control or viciously calculating. Yet, refreshingly, given the constant interrogations which make up 1 Henry VI, Joan’s origin story is never fully put to the test in a scene which shows no interest in pandering to or disproving these accusations. Instead, Joan quickly recognises the king in disguise, but, in another move away from the narrative of 1 Henry VI, all details of their visions are stripped away and are discussed only offstage. Joan announces, ‘I have been sent by God to deliver a message to you’ (9) but offers their message to Charles alone and asks for privacy. Here, Joan moves from a central stage position to an offstage space, and those onstage are left to wait. Yet, even proximity to a visionary moment is staged as a kinetic reaction, a physical shudder shared by the men waiting onstage who ‘begin shaking’.22 The erratic movement, which reads as a physical resistance to taking in Joan’s truth, is repeated in Joan’s final trial scene. Again, in Joan’s presence, judges move and jerk like clockwork automata to the sound of rattling and knocking percussion, interrupting and repeating themselves incessantly. It

22 Handwritten note for p. 13 of promptbook.
is as if Joan’s visions, never staged for the audience’s judgement, cannot be fully absorbed by these sceptical bodies which instead shudder with resistance. Joan’s visions come from inside their own body; such intangible truths will not be accepted by the bodies of their judges.

In the first act of the play, Joan is sometimes believed, but that belief is contingent not only on their success and cooperation but on the court’s limited understandings of gender identity. Most shockingly in the play, Joan’s early supporters, Charles’s wife and mother, Marie and Yolande, who are framed as powerful proxy-rulers, who ‘hold the purse strings’ (20) and ‘advise these men who sit safely in the palm of my hand’, viciously retract support when Joan refuses to wear a perceived marker of femininity, a pink dress. Charles’s support is also retracted when he considers Joan to have outlived their usefulness. This anxiety is expressed as an envy of their visions: ‘I am the King! Why does God not send his messages to me?’ (60). Elsewhere, Charles simply ‘covers his ears’ (77) to Joan’s moans of pain. In the play’s second act, Joan’s relationship with Charles is fractured, as Charles no longer allows them access to his presence: the exclusivity of Joan’s offstage visions, told to Charles in private, are now horribly echoed in their exclusion from the court. *I, Joan* stages the unsettling reality of contingent belief, demonstrating the ways in which Joan is accepted so long as their visions support the agenda or biases of the politicians around them. Without showing a vision onstage, the play offers a radical challenge: believe people when they speak about their own experiences, whether or not those experiences seem tangible or are made visible.

This challenge extends to the structure of the play itself. *I, Joan* uses the metatheatrical power of the vision to resist its apparently forewritten conclusion. Many of the visions discussed in this study seem true as soon as they are spoken because they express what is now historical fact, such as the death of Caesar. This Joan can see the end of their play and tries to resist it with the simple choice, ‘fuck your historically accurate . . . Joan aint dying tonight!’ (88). Yet, their vision of ‘how my story ends’ (86) plays out nonetheless: in an echo of Joan’s claims of pregnancy in *1 Henry VI*, Josephine’s Joan disavows their visions under the threat of fire and is ultimately taken from the stage to be executed. The visionary intervention that Joan makes in the play’s final scenes is not then to change the ending of the story but the way it is told, as a Girl remains onstage, cutting her hair in imitation of Joan and singing to
lead a ‘joyous rebellion of bodies moving together’ (92). *I, Joan* does not argue that our retrospective gaze can change the performance of the past, but it does provide a vision of what might have been, an experience of Joan’s contagious alternative reality.

### 4.2 Katherine of Aragon: Seeing Angels

Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII* is predicated on prophecies, ending with a final prediction from Cranmer that King Henry’s daughter will become the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth I, and will herself be succeeded by James VI/I. This ‘oracle of comfort’ (5.4.66) seems to conclude the history play neatly, drawing its lines of influence right up to the present, Jacobean day. Yet, despite the lofty proclamations of Cranmer, the only substantive vision of the play belongs to Katherine, the rejected, Catholic, Spanish former queen, a woman who is, at the moment of the vision, too infirm to stand unaided. Katherine’s vision of six white-clad figures is performed before the audience’s eyes. Her experience, unlike any other in Shakespeare, is specifically called ‘The vision’, a title printed in the Folio. Yet, vision is a slippery term, one which invokes both truth and delusion, actual sight and imagined sensation: is this what Katherine ‘sees’ as she dreams or is some higher, psychic sense of ‘see’ invoked? By ‘meditating’ (4.2.79) to music which she terms her ‘knell’ (79), Katherine has established the cognitive conditions in which a vivid dream might be induced. She thinks of ‘that celestial harmony I go to’ (80), creating the kind of mental fixation thought to frame the content of dreams. The vision itself, even if only a manifestation of Katherine’s final thoughts, is a last, passive, if no less important, example of her political role throughout the play. In her first scene, Katherine intervenes to challenge Wolsey’s policy and question the king’s decision on taxes; she later defends herself at her divorce trial and refuses to adhere to the court’s judgement. This is a queen who has shown herself to be an active agent, speaking on her own behalf as well as on that of the people. Here, in the vision, she is silent as she seems to receive divine approval for her decisions, and especially for her refusal to accept divorce as a devout Catholic. Even if the vision is a dream, conjured from her inner meditations, it reflects a sense of peace in her own decisions.
However, the stage directions betray a hesitation in their parenthetical instructions for Katherine: ‘At which (as it were by inspiration) she makes in her sleep signs of rejoicing and holds up her hands to heaven’ (82, s.d.). The language is ambiguous: ‘as it were’ might suggest either ‘as by inspiration’ or the more subjective ‘as if by inspiration’. The audience are left to read Katherine’s body, interpreting her ‘signs of rejoicing’. It is only after the vision that the audience learn that Katherine’s movements were perhaps part of the vision and did not take place in reality: neither Griffith nor Patience, who have sat in attendance, saw any sign of them (or, at least, understood their meaning). Whatever tangible proof there might be is left behind within the vision world: the crown which Katherine is given is removed, as the dancers ‘vanish, carrying the garland with them’ (82, s.d.). The conditions of the vision (Katherine is explicitly asleep) tempt the audience to consider it as merely a dream (where readers may know it as a ‘vision’, playgoers do not). This, certainly, is Griffith’s assumption as Katherine describes her vision: ‘I am most joyful, madam, such good dreams / Possess your fancy’ (4.2.94–5).

Unable to see what Katherine (and, crucially, the audience) have seen, Griffith assumes that the parade of white-clad personages represents only the workings of Katherine’s sleeping mind. Funlola Olufunwa offered the following insight into playing Katherine of Aragon (as she did in a rehearsed reading I directed for Creation Theatre in 2020).23 Speaking of Katherine’s evident illness in her last scene, Olufunwa suggests, ‘Her mind was working to comfort her. There was also some disjointed thinking, because one minute there’s music, then there isn’t. The human mind, it does that, doesn’t it?’ (Personal interview, 2021).24 The scene foregrounds not only Katherine’s

23 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFMh1jzzB9w.

24 I am indebted to Funlola for also taking the time to speak to me about her own play, Keeping up with Kassandra (dir. Anne Musisi, 2021), which draws on Cassandra’s role in the Iliad to consider intersectional questions of class, race, and mental illness as they connect with ideas of prophetic female speech in an era of ‘bad, fake news’. Kassandra’s (Diana Yekinni) knowledge of the future is held suspect because ‘she is a woman and an African woman at that’, because she is ‘an inconvenient truth-teller, and that comes at a price’. Cassandra, who ‘hinted on live television that she was pregnant’ before her final broadcast, also offers
bodily vulnerability (her legs are ‘loaded branches’ now ‘Willing to leave their burden’, 3–4), but a mind failing through forgetfulness and pain. As the scene begins, she has already been told of Wolsey’s death, but needs Griffith to tell her again. The same uncertainty is evident after Katherine’s vision: ‘Saw you not even now a blessèd troop / Invite me to a banquet . . .?’ (4.2.87–8). Her perception of the world is already compromised, her memory faulty, and this fraying mental state casts doubt upon the vision itself. The vision is tied to Katherine’s failing body, which ‘is altered on the sudden’, ‘pale’ and ‘earthly cold’ (97–9). Yet, the vision is also a balm for her anxiety, and seems to be followed by an earthly blessing to match the perceived divine blessing: a final kind word from her husband, Henry, sent by messenger even as the white-clad personages might be messengers from God. Even if it exists only in Katherine’s mind, the dumb show of the vision is Shakespeare’s most extended reverie on what might happen after death, his theatricalisation of the divinely ordained fate awaiting this queen.

In a far more theatrically experimental vision than the described dreams I have discussed elsewhere, Shakespeare allows his audience to see the spectacle of Katherine’s vision. In her vision, Katherine is offered the crown she has been denied through the divorce proceedings staged in Act 3. The dancers hold a garland over her head, its bay leaves suggestive of victory. E. E. Duncan-Jones suggests that this represents the “‘crown of life’, promised to those “faithful unto death”’ (1961: 142). Certainly, the Book of Revelation promises: ‘ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life’ (2:10). The garland of bay leaves serves as the crown Katherine, named explicitly as ‘Dowager’ in the stage directions (4.2.1, s.d.) has lost. As I have discussed elsewhere (Wright, 2021: 289), the crown also recalls the bay branches brought to Elizabeth I in Spenser’s The Shepherd’s Calendar (1579), aligning the two monarchs despite the fact that Anne Bullen, not Katherine, is Elizabeth’s mother. The vision scene is one of redemption but also of vindication. Katherine’s dream comes moments after she has learned of a fascinating parallel with Shakespeare’s Joan Puc/zel. The play exposes urgent questions of misogynoir and ableism (Kassandra is epileptic) in the casting and performance of visionary women in and beyond Shakespeare: see creationtheatre.co.uk/show/kassandra/.
her great enemy, Wolsey’s, death, and now she seems to go to her own, shepherded by divine spirits who address the damage done to her by offering her a divine crown in place of a royal one.

The vision is, however, ambiguous enough to leave Katherine’s fate in some doubt. The ‘six personages clad in white robes’ (4.2.82, s.d.) might suggest angels; certainly, there is biblical precedent for the manifestation of angels in white, when Mary Magdalene ‘looked into the sepulchre, And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain’ (John 20:11–12). The iconography of white robes also firmly aligns Katherine with purity when the validity of her marriage has been tried in court. It is the colour not only of the goddess Vesta, ‘clad in white purity’, Daniel, 1604: B1v) but of Queen Elizabeth I, ‘Clad in the Virgin ornament of white’ (Lever, 1607: B1r). Yet, within Shakespeare’s plays, white robes are also theatrically haunted, weighted with darker associations. 25 White is the colour of Eleanor’s sh rift (‘white sheet’, 2.4.17, s.d.) in 2 Henry VI, as she is paraded through the streets. The visual ambiguity of the personages is also complicated by the ‘golden vizards’ (82, s.d.) they wear, not least as, proverbially, golden vizards often concealed leaden faces. Even this ambiguous proverb is, itself, ambiguous. William Fulbeck uses the proverb in discussing those who shield themselves with a more powerful patron: ‘so having gotten a golden vizard to a bad face, he thinketh he may mask in all kind of pleasures’ (1587: D7v). Yet, John Norden condemns Catholics who misinterpret the Word of God by turning to that same proverb: ‘they have a golden vizard upon their leaden faces, they have the names but not the effect or fruits of Catholics’ (1586: 24). This ambivalence is an idea Katherine has already invoked in her criticism of Wolsey: ‘Ye have angels’ faces, but heaven knows your hearts’ (3.1.144). The masked personages in her vision are uncertain: they are either the true

25 This association lingers beyond the early modern stage. See, for instance Barish’s discussion of the use of colour: ‘A further link between madness and the somnambulism of Lady Macbeth would seem to be suggested in the eighteenth century by the fact that Mrs Siddons, the most celebrated Lady Macbeth of the day, performed the sleepwalking scene in white satin. This, to at least one observer, indicated lunacy’ (1984: 151).
faces of angels or a cruel delusion, an echo of Wolsey, who hid behind the mask of Henry.

Katherine’s vision is also an echo and inversion of a scene in Heywood’s *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* (1605), in which a dumb-show dream is shown to the princess who will become Elizabeth I in her sleep. In both plays, the queen calls for music and falls asleep, witnesses figures, and wakes to find her maid has seen and heard nothing. In Heywood, a ‘dumb show’ of two angels is also made up of political players such as Winchester (E4v); in Shakespeare and Fletcher, Katherine is alone with her angels. Elizabeth’s dumb show offers protection against a Catholic figure (the angels shield her from a friar who is ‘offering to kill her’), emphasised by the open Bible that is placed in her hands. Katherine is given, instead, garlands, which emphasise her own spiritual value: if read as a riposte to Heywood’s Protestant fantasy of the Word, Katherine’s vision emerges as a paean to personal Catholic faith.26 Yet, at all turns – in resisting naming the figures onstage as angels, and in refusing to allow Katherine the evidence of her garland (Elizabeth keeps her Bible as proof of the experience) – Shakespeare and Fletcher offer ambiguity. Katherine is aligned with Heywood’s Elizabeth through this echo but is not given the clear message that Elizabeth receives (the Bible left in her hands is open to the verse ‘Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord / Shall not be confounded’, E4r). Katherine’s vision offers no evidence, but it does end with some validation of her faith: she does not receive instructions for the future but a reward for the past, dying as she does with an apparent mark of divine approval. This divine approval is, however, not entirely clear. As Mira Kafantaris has shown, Katherine’s vision cannot be straightforwardly categorised according to the play’s own desired demarcations of faith: ‘Catholic as she undoubtedly is, Katherine does experience a vision on her deathbed of Protestant piety. Her vision, unfolding through a set of elaborate stage directions, speaks to the inner experience of direct revelation, which the

26 In describing the inconstancy of human affection in *Religio Medici*, Thomas Browne treats the dumb show and dream as synonymous, and as equally fallacious: ‘Let us call to assize the lives of our parents, the affection of our wives and children, and they are all dumb shows, and dreams without reality, truth, or constancy’ (1642: 157–8).
reformation heralded’ (2018: 340). While the vision may attest to Katherine’s own piety, it does not answer the play’s debates over the value of different kinds of Christian faith. Although Katherine’s vision is staged at length, it is on the prediction of the newly born, Protestant Elizabeth I’s glorious reign that the play ends.

For all her infirmity, the vision seems to reaffirm Katherine’s belief in her own historical place. Although the ‘blessèd troop’ (87) bring Katherine garlands she is ‘not worthy yet to wear’ (92), by the end of the scene Katherine has reclaimed confidence enough to insist that she is buried with ‘maiden flowers’ (170), and ‘although unqueened, yet like / A queen and daughter to a king’ (172–3). For Katherine, as Catholic queen, the vision which appears as her death approaches might be a sign of virtue and martyrdom: ‘Catholic martyrologists also used dreams to demonstrate that those who died had been shown by God that they were heroes who should meet death with serenity’ (Levin, 2008: 67). It is peace, not political or spiritual influence, that the vision offers. Ultimately, Katherine’s vision pulls against the historical narrative which would frame her death as miserable and inconsequential, removed from the attention of court. Whether this is a divine message, or whether it is a dream as Katherine convinces herself that she is saved, the vision’s effect is the same: it gives Katherine the strength at this final moment to die with dignity, forgiving Henry and insisting on the royal trappings of burial. Through this reclamation of her own crown, Katherine reasserts her position as queen and denies the temporary indignity of her position as dowager for a queenly monument in futurity.

4.3 Conclusion

Waking, Joan sees devils; sleeping, Katherine sees angels. Yet, despite what should be a clear distinction between the hellish and the heavenly, the two spectacles are worryingly similar. In both, silent figures visit the visionary in a dumb show to which the audience also has access. These visions appear to offer clarity – look, here are figures of evil or of good! – but instead offer ambiguity. Even those visions which are staged rather than recounted are troubling speculative rather than confidently spectacular. They require interrogation, but interrogation is not easy, in part because visions leave behind no
trace. Although they have shared their vision with an audience, Katherine and Joan have no proof beyond their own testimony: Katherine, as I discussed earlier, is not permitted to hold onto her crown of bay as Heywood’s Elizabeth holds on to her Bible. And the existence of tangible evidence might make little difference anyway.

James VI/I’s manifesto on witchcraft, *Daemonology* (1597), which insists that visions are the work of the devil, takes pains to dismiss even physical evidence of such experiences. In their dialogue, Philomathes and Epistemon speak about a vision of a fairyland, a dream from which witches return carrying a small stone in their hand as proof that their experience was real. Epistemon explains away the stone:

> For may not the devil object to their fantasy, their senses being dulled, and as it were asleep, such hills and houses within them, such glistening courts and trains, and whatsoever such like wherewith he pleaseth to delude them. And in the meantime their bodies being senseless, to convey in their hand any stone or such like thing, which he makes them to imagine to have received in such a place. (James VI, 1597: 74–5)

While the mind is vulnerable and sleeping (or as if asleep), the devil might suggest any number of sights which would seem true. Even a stone, brought back as proof of a visionary experience, is dismissed as a trick played upon a body which is ‘senseless’ (although not innocent, as James makes clear that visionary women are witches). Even Shakespeare’s most explicit visions offer no surety: the audience watch Katherine and Joan and feel an illusion of sensory solidarity, but this is immediately undermined by the fact that no one else within the play world shares the vision. Evidence is not enough: no proof will satisfy a listener who is determined not to hear. If the playgoer thinks Katherine is saved, her dream is a vision; if they believe in Joan, she is taunted by devils but not controlled by them. Like a religious icon, a vision becomes an image made meaningful through meditation, an object of reflection which demands faith rather than generating it.
5 Sooth-Dreams

This section is concerned with visions that are seen while waking, visions that offer an almost tangible experience of death that has not yet come. Both Margaret, discussed above as a threat to Eleanor in 2 Henry VI, and Constance, the mother of Arthur, a claimant to the throne in King John, speak and think in a future-oriented manner: they draw on the evidence of the past to predict the outcomes of the future, in a way that uses the language and trappings of the vision even if it is not precisely visionary. Their experiences of imagined grief are, to borrow a phrase from James I’s Daemonology, ‘sooth-dreams’, or waking visions, described in the same passage as that discussed at the conclusion of Section 4, which claims that visions are experienced by women deluded that they have visited a fairyland: ‘But what say ye to their foretelling the death of sundry persons, whom they allege to have seen in these places? That is, a sooth-dream (as they say) since they see it walking’ (1597: 75).

In this visionary state, women see the dead, not as a ghost but as an apparition of a living person who will soon die. The grammar here is unclear: is the visionary walking (and presumably waking) or is the spirit? Both the visions I discuss here play out not during sleep itself but during moments of semi-lucid grief. Both experience panic as much as prophecy, fixated as they are on what will come. There is, however, something predictive about Margaret and Constance’s visionary thoughts of future death: their sooth-dreams are fear made real through imagination and, crucially, fear that proves true.

Margaret of Anjou, whose presence is felt across Shakespeare’s first tetralogy, offers sibyl-like speeches promising that the chain of deaths across these history plays will continue. Her curses contain the seeds of visions which are expanded in later plays: her preoccupation with death offers the model for Constance’s hyper-sensory experience of grief. Both Margaret and Constance’s roles are dominated by maternal grief: there is a troubling implication that women’s bodies are so intimately tied to the future in generating offspring that prophetic experiences take the place of lost motherhood as a way to reach forward in time. Margaret’s prediction that she will one day be considered a ‘prophetess’ (1.3.299), ‘scor[ned] for my gentle counsel’ (295) also frames her
as a prototype of Cassandra, who faces hostility for her future-gazing later in Shakespeare’s career (see Section 2). In Margaret’s case, the sheer will for revenge appears to make her curses manifest: or, perhaps, her curses only reflect that which is inevitable in a historical cycle of destruction. Yet, despite these repeated musings on death, neither Margaret nor Constance is an abstract figure of grief: they intercede, argue, and protest, witnesses to the past and future, active in the present.

The imagined visions (visionary imaginings?) of Constance blur the semantic distinction between hope and foresight. Both Margaret and Constance see a future formed not from external influences, demonic or divine, but from the fixations of their own minds. Margaret imagines an endless cycle of death and prophesises doom for the living; Constance too sees her son caught between life and death, potentially gone. Death itself, which is at once so grimly visual – as the ghostly clothes Constance imagines filled with her son’s body suggest – and at the same time, beyond the veil of sight, becomes a locus for thought which, if not visionary, brushes closely against that mode. In her discussion of the ‘ocular sublime’, Suzannah Biernoff has described the ways in which ‘vision is inextricably bound up with desire’ as ‘a state of suspension on the threshold between self and other’ (2002: 132). The intangible experience of death is something Margaret rehearses through active envisioning, just as Constance negotiates her ghostless grief by creating a phantom in her mind. Their sooth-dreams (or visions of those who will die) are of their own making. The mind becomes a stage on which to rehearse visionary experience: in the end, Margaret and Constance see internally, creating meaning through the images in their heads.

5.1 Queen Margaret: Predictive Memory

The Margaret briefly discussed in Section 3, who organises the trap that will see Eleanor arrested for necromancy, is not quite the same Margaret discussed here, who reappears, ahistorically, in Richard III, to serve as both reminder of the past and prophet of future doom. This Margaret (who should, technically, be exiled in France) is brought back as a walking memory, a living ghost who intrudes into the present. Yet, as a walking memory, the Margaret of Richard III carries with her the weight
of her past iterations. In 2 Henry VI, following the humiliation of Eleanor discussed above, Margaret explains the difficulties of expressing her political opinion, using the tropes levied against women’s speech to add weight to her own. Following a lengthy and articulate answer as to Gloucester’s current whereabouts (thirteen times the length of Henry’s question), Margaret turns typical accusations against women’s speech on their head to bolster her own argument:

If it be fond, call it a woman’s fear;
Which fear if better reasons can supplant,
... Reprove my allegation, if you can;
Or else conclude my words effectual. (3.1.36–41)

Margaret links fondness with ‘women’s fear’, but this is not the dismissal it may seem. If her words are silly, they can be considered the fault of her sex, but women’s fears were also believed to carry a particular weight as well as a particular weakness: women are silly and hysterical, or else highly intuitive. The problematic phenomenon of ‘female intuition’ is still very much in circulation today and serves to masculinise its opposite, logic. In her speech, Margaret uses the distinction between fear and reason to place the burden of disproving her words on Henry: if he cannot, he must believe her worries about Gloucester. The rhetorical trick means that Margaret is required to provide no evidence while Henry must find positive proof of Gloucester’s loyalty, a task that is impossible as it would require knowing not only Gloucester’s actions but his thoughts.

27 The problem of attributing intuition to women (and, by doing so, dismissing their reason) is perhaps most famously captured by a remark from Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin who, ‘when defending the extension of the franchise to women of 21, said, “I have not a profound confidence in feminine logic, but I have in feminine instinct”.’ This comment was quoted and challenged in a 1927 study that showed no difference between male and female instincts (although that study is itself no longer adequate, dependent as it was on physiognomy): www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/sep/07/womens-intuition-myth-tested-archive-1927.
Margaret negotiates a world in which neither she nor the idea of prophecy is taken seriously. Richard III, for instance, begins with a demonstration that prophecy can be manipulated or made up for political ends. Richard has used ‘drunken prophecies, libels and dreams’ (1.1.33) to pit his brothers Clarence and King Edward IV, against one another, and will use ‘a prophecy which says that “G” / Of Edward’s heirs the murderer shall be’ (39–40) to facilitate his brother’s arrest and murder. At first, it seems that Margaret’s role is not one of future-gazing but of ‘repetition of what [Richard] has marred’ (1.3.165); she is fixated on the past and on re-enacting its violence in the present. If there are prophecies, she is their subject. As Dorset warns her, recalling her involvement in the death of Rutland, ‘No man but prophesised revenge for it’ (1.3.183). Prophecies are treated as promises: a desire to bend the future rather than a vision of the future. The conflation is expressed by Margaret: ‘dire induction am I witness to, / And will to France’ (4.4.5–6). The vision is caught between the two, witness and will, as a vengeful future that can be both intuited and enacted.

Margaret’s role in Richard III is not only to curse but to stir other women to cursing: those curses then morph retrospectively into predictions, as they prove true by the end of the play. In Richard III, her first entrance is as ‘old Queen Margaret, unseen behind them’ (1.3.109, s.d.). Both the description of her character and her position onstage show that her role is as a figure of the past: hovering behind those who are still actively engaged with politics, Margaret becomes the embodiment of memory while insisting on vengeance in the future. In this way, Margaret raises a troubling question: must a visionary always look forwards? Nonetheless, despite the thoughts which draw her back into the past, Margaret speaks in the future tense, warning Queen Elizabeth that ‘The day will come that thou shalt wish for me / To help thee curse this poisonous bunch-backed toad’ (1.3.243–4). Her curses are something that can be taught, as Elizabeth eventually learns. With the request, ‘teach me how to curse mine enemies’ (4.4.117), Elizabeth reveals her own intuition that Margaret’s curses are going to be made real. She also acknowledges Margaret’s visionary role, admitting that her warnings have come true and repeating Margaret’s words as if to give them the weight of an incantation:
O thou did prophesy the time would come
That I should wish for thee to help me curse
That bottled spider, that foul bunch-backed toad. (4.4.79–81)

Elizabeth finally believes Margaret’s capacity to intuit the future and now, rather than scorning it, as she has throughout the play, asks for similar insight. Despite (or, perhaps, because of) Richard’s obvious disdain for women, Richard III is interested in the ways in which women understand each other and share their recourse to ill wishes if not to actual revenge. In a scene that is later echoed in King John (discussed in the next section), Margaret is held beside another grieving mother, the Duchess of York, who describes herself as a walking vision of the past:

Brief abstract and record of tedious days,
Rest thy unrest on England’s lawful earth,
Unlawfully made drunk with innocents’ blood! (4.4.28–30)

The Duchess of York is soon joined by both Queen Elizabeth and, in surprising solidarity, Margaret herself. They sit together as if unable to move forward by playing their part any longer. Instead, they create a pause, a moment of powerful stillness in the present from which they can observe the past and future. These women share the role of ‘abstract’ for their time, recalling and embodying the recent political past in a world which seems to move so quickly between wars that former losses are forgotten. For a moment, these mothers are made static by their grief, able to claim only the space where they sit. Knowledge of the future is not the same as agency; unable to act, they think revenge on the men around them, imagining deaths to wash away past deaths.

This solidarity between women who find no place in the present is drawn out in Jeanie O’Hare’s rewritten history, Queen Margaret (2018). O’Hare crafts a character who is supported only by her continual conversation with Joan of Arc, who exists for Margaret as something between vision, memory, and ghost. Margaret and Joan overlap in their visionary fates in a detail not drawn from Shakespeare: in O’Hare, Margaret was brought to Joan’s execution as a baby and was ‘the last sound [Joan] heard on this earth’
Their connection in this sense is historic. Margaret’s mother, O’Hare stresses, was Joan’s patron: ‘Margaret would have grown up witnessing political machinations, thinking about Joan morning, noon and night’ (2018: 6). In each other, O’Hare’s Joan and Margaret find a confidante, even if only in an intangible form, as Margaret remembers or hallucinates Joan long after her death. O’Hare’s Margaret is herself a visionary who reads moments retrospectively, pinning down meaning only once events have taken place, as shown in her lament to Joan: ‘This bloody wound may make some sense to us tomorrow’ (87). In this, there is also a flickering allusion to Calphurnia, whose bloody dream is proved correct only in retrospect, when tomorrow has come on the Ides of March. This is how Margaret’s visionary sight operates, looking backwards and forwards, shedding light on the present only through the lenses of other times.

In Queen Margaret, both Margaret and Joan twist in and out of their prescribed Shakespearean roles. O’Hare draws on scenes from across the first tetralogy to present a Margaret who demands active political influence, laid out boldly in such scene titles as ‘Scene Four – Margaret Encourages the King to Rule’ (26). Yet, even in this scene, Margaret is positioned on the edges of political power, a kingmaker in the only way a woman apparently can be: a mother of heirs, whose child is brought onstage as the scene comes to a close. It is only at the end of Act 1 that Margaret is a more active agent, taking the dagger offered to her by Joan with which she will ultimately slit York’s throat. Margaret is told by the vision of Joan that she acts with divine authority: ‘All the power of heaven is now behind you!’ (69). Yet, Joan’s words are suspect, not least because Joan herself, a walking ghost in ‘purgatory’ (93), echoes the visionary experiences of Joan Puc/zel. O’Hare’s Joan takes the role of the silent devils who patrolled around Joan in 1 Henry VI. In 1.9, O’Hare’s Margaret asks Joan to answer as she paces the stage but ‘Joan remains silent’ (43), even as Joan in 1 Henry VI is ignored by her own pacing devils. The scene offers a moment of split vision: those familiar with Shakespeare’s play will see an allusion that casts O’Hare’s Joan in a more troubling light. As with all visions, interpretation is shaped by prior knowledge and prejudices.

Through the spirit of Joan, Margaret is a visionary who sees the past but not the future, her thoughts tied to a memory, ghost, or hallucination who
offers no details of what will come. When Joan ‘conjures’ Warwick’s death for Margaret (93), it has already happened. For all Margaret sees, she is never sure of her own prophetic power. *Queen Margaret* ends with just this question; as she leaves England for France, Margaret wonders, ‘But maybe I am a prophet’ (100). If so, Richard of York will kill his brother Edward and assume the role of king. Audiences know from history and from Shakespeare that this will prove true in *Richard III*. O’Hare’s Margaret is a visionary who imagines how her story will play out: she is, like playgoers, conscious of a relentless historical tide which is, from her position, the future. Shakespeare’s Margaret returns to see the show, watching her curses come to pass as much through the inevitability of violence as of her visions.

5.2 Queen Constance: Proleptic Grief

For the first part of *King John*, Constance is a political player, fighting for her son’s claim to the English throne. Constance refuses to accept a political marriage between John’s niece and the Dauphin which damages Constance’s son Arthur’s claim. Yet, Constance is widely dismissed. Constance has already been treated by her mother-in-law, Queen Eleanor, and by her son, Arthur, as a hysterical, slanderous figure. In her first scene she is cut short both by King John with the dismissive, ‘Bedlam, have done’ (2.1.183) and by King Philip with the curt line, ‘Peace, lady: pause or be more temperate’ (2.1.195). Yet, Constance is so widely criticised for speaking up on behalf of Arthur’s claim to the throne not because she is hysterical but because she is correct. Her advocacy on behalf of her son’s claim must be deemed mad or else it might work. This constant critique of Constance’s word is, finally, invoked by her and turned on its head, just as Margaret uses her ‘woman’s fear’ as a rhetorical tool above. Dismissing Salisbury’s word of the political marriage between the Dauphin and Blanche, Constance insists:

Thou shalt be punished for thus frightening me;
For I am sick and capable of fears;
Oppressed with wrongs and therefore full of fears;
A widow husbandless, subject to fears;
A woman naturally born to fears. (2.2.11–15)
Constance frames herself as a woman who is prone to paranoia, worrying constantly about what might happen. Yet Constance’s grief is not a weakness: it is the source of both her visionary experience and her acts of protest. Just as Margaret marshals her sorrow (‘Think therefore on revenge and cease to weep’, 2 Henry VI, 4.4.3)), Constance insists that she will use her emotions rather than suppress them: ‘I shall instruct my sorrows to be proud, / For grief is proud and makes his owner stoop’ (68–9). This pride takes the form of what might now be called a sit-down protest, as Constance takes the ground for her ‘throne’ (74) and refuses to move (at least for a moment). It is a direct echo of the scene in Richard III, discussed above, in which three women sit on the ground and share their grief, momentarily stepping out of action. Yet, Constance does not remain motionless. When she does stand, it is to contradict King Philip with curses and then to end her protest with a line that is painfully typical of visionary women: ‘Hear me, O hear me!’ (3.1.38).

Despite the protest and the rage that Constance expresses on her son’s behalf in the first acts of the play, Constance’s role shifts when, with her fear of Arthur’s death, she is no longer able to see a future and instead envisages one. Following news of her son’s imprisonment, Constance sees her child everywhere as a waking dream. Constance grieves sincerely, believing Arthur will soon die, but, unlike Hamlet or Macbeth who see ghosts that might be real or might be imagined, Constance definitely cannot actually see her son’s ghost. He is, after all, still alive. He exists to her only as a vision, imagined internally, not encountered. Yet, even as loss makes Constance appear to look inwards, she speaks out; even as she appears to look backwards, she is actually looking ahead, imagining how Arthur ‘will look as hollow as a ghost’ (3.4.84). Constance dominates her ‘vision’ scene, which is positioned at roughly the centre of King John and is played before a hostile male audience (King Philip, Lewis, Cardinal Pandolf, and male attendants are present). It is as if her grief splices the play into before (with Arthur) and after (without him), insisting that this play be constructed around her own political hopes. Yet, Constance’s visionary experience becomes a false temporal marker, undermined by the presence of Arthur, alive, in the following scene.

Constance becomes a prophetic harbinger, warning of a death which is inevitable not only because of Arthur’s imprisonment but because he is a bit player in a historical plot and his fate is already written. In mental distress,
Constance fabricates a sensory experience to replace the actual absence of Arthur: grief is that which ‘fills the room up of my absent child’ (3.4.93). Constance’s experience of Arthur is part memory (the image ‘Remembers me of all his gracious parts’, 95) and part ghost, almost corporeal in that it ‘Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form’ (97). Constance is imagining future grief, playing out her mourning before it happens; for Pandolf, who hears her with disdain, this is ‘madness, and not sorrow’ (43). Constance moves from future imaginings of resurrection to a present tense imagination in which Grief ‘walks up and down with me’ (94) as a constant companion. This temporal disjunction positions Constance not as a grieving mother but as a visionary seeing future death. Arthur, of course, does die in 4.3, leaping from the walls moments after King John has been told that Arthur does indeed live. This fluctuating sense of truth, with Arthur alive and dead by various reports, supports Constance’s sense of Arthur as a liminal entity, both present and absent. Arthur’s death is not only something which Constance foresees; it is an act of adoring imagination, the only thing that will allow her to see him again. She becomes fixated on death as an abstract, becoming herself a walking memento mori. Her thoughts of death stray into the haptic, the olfactory, caught in paradoxes of ‘odoriferous stench’ and ‘sound rottenness’ (3.4.26). Constance relishes the physical possibilities of death inside her own head; the moment is not only one of grief but also a mental rehearsal of suicide, a vivid envisioning which struggles to negotiate death as both a sensory experience and an experience which ends the senses.

While Constance turns from negotiating her son’s claim to the throne towards personal grief for a future that has passed, for others in King John prophecy remains a tool of politics, a way of writing what will come. Pandolf is aware that political actions dictate prophecies, rather than the other way around. As he advises Lewis, there is a great advantage if John kills Arthur because his people, so horrified by that act, will find ‘meteors, prodigies, and signs / Abortives, presages, and tongues of heaven’ (157–8) in the ‘natural exhalation’ of the sky (153). In other words, opinions are imposed upon seeming omens rather than extrapolated from them. Constance, too, who has left the stage only moments before, might then be considered to have constructed a visionary experience out of an existing emotional state, drawing her apparent certainty of the future not from
supernatural knowledge but from intuition. Despite his dismissal of Constance’s words as madness, Pandolf offers his own future-reading with a clear political agenda and a ‘prophetic spirit’ (3.4.126) that will guide Philip to the throne of England. The prophecy is little more than an aphorism which encases an obvious political reality: ‘That John may stand, then Arthur must needs fall; / So be it, for it cannot be but so’ (139–40).

Circling itself like an ouroboros, the nature of historical drama means that all the past is inherently predicted: what will be will be because it has already been. Yet, for all its apparent inevitability, Pandolf is not fully in control of his prophecy, not realising how apt his prediction will be when Arthur falls to his death in the next scene.

As Pandolf’s ‘prophetic spirit’ suggests, Constance is not exceptional in her vision; the idea of Arthur’s imminent deaths spreads throughout the play as if contagious. Gina Bloom has pointed out that, although Constance is dismissed from the rest of the play, her ‘vocal agency ... seems to linger on as an agent of critique even when, perhaps especially when, her body is absent’ (2005: 139). Once Constance has predicted the death of Arthur, such prophecies seem to spill from scene to scene. Prophets are, apparently, everywhere. In Act 4, Peter of Pomfret enters for some thirty lines (his entire role) to be held up by the Bastard as a ‘prophet’ (4.2.147) and yet is immediately imprisoned for predicting that King John will give up his crown. The vignette serves to show the danger of offering unwanted truths, and yet, within moments, Hubert (who has just escorted Peter from the stage) offers visionary reports of his own. An omen of five moons in the sky has prompted widespread future-gazing, as if the fate of Arthur is so inevitable as to be written in the night sky:

Old men and beldams in the streets
Do prophesy upon it dangerously.
Young Arthur’s death is common in their mouths. (4.2.186–8)

Like Constance’s proleptic fear of Arthur’s death, this prophecy is both false and true. Arthur will appear alive in the very next scene, only to die. In a play in which prophecy spreads through the streets and is ‘common’, future truth is not a scare resource, although it is a dangerous one.
Loose haired and unrestrained in her final, visionary speech, Constance offers the typical spectacle of the visionary woman. Like Cassandra, Constance unbinds her hair to reflect Arthur’s own imprisonment through the spectacle of her body and its own constraints (as she has used her body to protest before, sitting motionless on the ground). Like Cassandra, she internalises the accusations of madness levied against her: she utters the word ‘mad’ and its variants seven times in sixteen lines, and yet, like Cassandra, she embraces her raptured state, swept towards higher truths in her state of grief. Madness is even a blessing of sensory deprivation, held against the extreme sensory awareness which Constance experiences ‘too well’ (3.4.59). And, madness, or rather the rage of oracular passion, might also bring with it the capacity to command attention. Constance laments her own mundanity of expression in lacking the oracle’s ‘thunder’s mouth!’ (38) which might ‘shake the world’ (39). Elsewhere, Shakespeare describes the ‘ear-deaf’ning voice o’th’oracle, / Kin to Jove’s thunder’ (Winter’s Tale, 3.1.9.10), but Constance cannot command such a sound.

After her articulation of grief, Constance is, like so many visionary women, removed from the stage. And yet, when the eventual death of Arthur plays out – although not without false starts and hesitation – it seems a resolution of Constance’s insistence that ‘therefore never, never / Must I behold my pretty Arthur more’ (3.4.88–9). Despite resting uncomfortably between vision and intuition, Constance’s words emerge as starkly realist. Unable to envisage seeing Arthur again, except as an unrecognisable spectre or formless manifestation of grief, Constance will not be swayed by social or spiritual chiding. Ignoring the seven interruptions from Pandolf and Philip which puncture her speech, Constance leaves the scene unable to find resolution. Her interior thoughts have burst forward onto the public stage; now, retreating, Constance exits to grieve within. Her offstage death, announced by a messenger in 4.2, is due to ‘frenzy’, if rumour can be believed (4.2.122). If true, even her madness has something of prophecy about it, as she once wished for madness herself: ‘I am not mad; I would to God I were, / For then ’tis like I should forget myself’ (3.4.49). However, the madness Constance longs for does not give her the satisfaction of forgetting: it means she is forgotten. She is dismissed, dying in a frenzy.
which undercuts her true fears; however reasonable her grief was, it will be remembered as hysteria.

5.3 Conclusion

Those who see sooth-dreams, Epistemon insists in *Daemonology*, have ‘not been sharply enough examined’ (1597: 75). Such claims demand scepticism and scrutiny, and this is certainly what they receive in the first tetralogy and in *King John*. Both Margaret and Constance speak warnings and curses to powerful men (indeed, to multiple rising and falling kings) and both are consequently accused of madness and witchcraft. Both women comment on and predict the political fate of those around them, taking on a choral role within their tragic world. Both women operate not only as warnings to men, serving as an onstage reminder of the dangers associated with claiming the throne, but also as accountants of loss, tallying the royal dead. They are, as the Duchess of York puts it, an ‘abstract’ of the past, summarising the deaths which have happened and, because of this knowledge, imagining the deaths which will come. The sooth visions of Margaret and Constance, in which they meditate on and wish for death and at moments seem to see spectres of the living, are possible because of what they have experienced. These instances of hyper-imagination are not solely a way of expressing inner turmoil: they are a rational response to a lifetime of violence.

For all their similarities, including their propensity for curses, Margaret and Constance are a demonstration of different responses to a weakened position. Whereas, at least earlier in the tetralogy, Margaret is often a successful petitionary and political player (working, for instance, to bring down Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester), Constance is never a successful advocate, not least because she is fashioned both visually and verbally as a madwoman: full of women’s fears, not future truths. Whereas Margaret wills Richard’s death, and that death occurs, Constance wills her son’s survival and is disappointed. Yet, both women ultimately take the same position, sitting on the ground, refusing to move in a world that allows no space for them. There is a moment of stability for both Margaret and Constance, but they must inevitably rise and face more death, moving as
their own sooth-dreams, their own living ghosts, through plays that are forgetting them.

6 Conclusion: Looking Back

In the summer of 2012, standing outside in the Old College Quad in Edinburgh, I saw Teatr Biuro Podroży’s *Macbeth: Who Is That Bloodied Man?* I watched as three witches moved through the standing crowd on stilts. From a distance, the figures appeared to walk across the tops of the audience’s heads, moving with precision despite the gauzy white veils covering their eyes. The closer the witches drew, tottering at an uncanny height, the more difficult they were to see in full. The planes of vision were destabilised, with no angle of sight satisfactory. I recall the sight of bodies moving above bodies: stacked and surging around me. I have looked back on this strange, hallucinatory experience many times in the decade since. The witches, subject to an audience’s gaze and yet able to look quite literally above our earth-bound heads, were able to see with unmatched perspective, and, at the same time, required perspective to see. To see the witches in their entirety, and not just from below, one would have to stand apart, at the periphery of the yard. Visionary women, too, stand both apart and above, but, for all that, are able to see more clearly. This is not, however, an argument in praise of peripheral space. Shakespeare’s visionary women are relegated to the periphery, only to be given a moment of revelation for which they inevitably pay.

Available to the visionary only, and impossible to prove, the vision becomes a concentrated example of the many sensory experiences and private traumas to which women are often compelled to stand as witness, both in Shakespeare and, of course, offstage. Yet, visionary women are treated as ill and unbalanced for having access to those visions. Shakespeare’s visionary women emerge from their experiences with empty hands, able to articulate their experiences but unable to prove them. The vision is then a double-edged encounter with the truth, opening up central questions of witnessing and testimony before an audience, who are themselves cast in the role of dream-readers or even, in the cases of Katherine and Joan, as co-visionaries. Visions are then at once dismissed
and, at the same time, wrenched from the rhetorical control of the women who experience and explain them and circulated as shared property. The vision becomes a malleable substance to be passed amongst interpreters, all of whom can draw different subjective meaning from its abstract imagery and in this way claim a kind of ownership over another’s sensory experience. Yet, the blame for such visions and their warnings still lies with the visionary woman.

The visionary scene – the intercessory woman pleading with a powerful man based on the promises or threats of a vision – is played out again and again in Shakespeare, each time with slightly different circumstances which open the vision to different kinds of scrutiny. It is also, to afford due power to the many articulate female characters discussed here, an opportunity for shows of rhetorical force and political intervention, in which women, perhaps strengthened by the perceived support of a higher power, feel able and compelled to speak out. In acting as witness to some future truth, women show themselves to be astute and intuitive political players, able to see the outcomes of a tragedy that those around them do not yet understand. Yet, these charged moments of intercession in which women speak the truth do not cohere into the lesson that women’s thoughts and intuitions on politics should be believed. Taking Margaret’s primary visionary role as playing out in *Richard III*, only one of the eight women in these sections speaks in the final act of her play, unless her role in that act is to die. Many, like Calphurnia, disappear far sooner. They are written out, exiled, and executed: to attest to the truth ultimately proves fatal. No matter how many times this visionary scene is staged in Shakespeare, nothing seems to change.

The one surviving visionary, the final girl of this horrific pattern, is Cassandra, who lingers until the fifth act, and exits (alive) of her own volition. Cassandra admits defeat and leaves the stage with a warning couplet that sounds like a curse: ‘Hector, I take my leave. / Thou dost thyself and all our Troy deceive’ (92–3). The subtle agency she claims in this use of the collective pronoun (‘our Troy’) reaffirms Cassandra as a royal princess of Troy. The play, of course, proves her warnings true in its final scene, but not as audiences familiar with the *Iliad* might expect. For all its insistence on fatality, on prophecy which must play out in a certain way, the play ends with
the brutal death of Hector, in unchivalrous circumstances not laid out by epic precedent. Here, the story goes awry, and audiences who, like visionaries, know well what should happen next, are shocked as Hector is murdered by Achilles’s men and not by Achilles himself. Cassandra lives to be proved right, but in this she is an exception. Shakespeare’s visionary women see the truth and suffer for it; they are feared for their capacity to think in the future tense. After all, the vision can only be proved true in retrospect and visionary women rarely last long enough to look back.
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For Jean, who always listens.
W. B. Worthern

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