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“Beyond this ignorant present”: the poverty of historicism in *Macbeth*

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ABSTRACT Although *Macbeth* is not *stricto sensu* a history play, its dominant concern with the paralogisms of time forces the reader to reconsider its relationship with history. Moreover, the scarcely noted fact that the debate for and against historicism—encouraged by thinkers like Hegel, Lukács, Strauss, Aron or Popper—tends to capitalize on the hermeneutic affordances of a play like *Macbeth*, brings the historical (perhaps historicist) provocation of the play all the more sharply into focus. Self-validating prophecy emerges, in this reconsideration, as the pivotal, paralogic speech act in a play that reads like a parody of verification. By exposing the logical complicity between providentialist prophecy and historicist interpretation, this article contends that Shakespeare obtained, in *Macbeth*, ironic-critical distance from contemporary historiographic teleology, and that he thus sheltered himself in advance from the progressive-moralist, at bottom apocalyptic, arrogance of neo-historicist critics like Stephen Greenblatt or Richard Wilson. In the final analysis, *Macbeth* gets the last word, one no oracular predictive or postdictive consummation is able to efface. This article is published as part of a collection to commemorate the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare’s death.

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When I was a child
I caught a fleeting glimpse
Out of the corner of my eye.

Pink Floyd

A Time for such a Word

In the first chapter of *Natural Right and History* (1950), philosopher Leo Strauss launched a memorable attack on “historicism”. The “historical school” emerged, he argued, in reaction to the French Revolution and “to the natural right doctrines that had prepared that cataclysm” (13). Members of that school characteristically counterclaimed that “all human thought is historical and hence unable to grasp anything eternal” (12). History no longer understood as a universal force but as a set of particular frames where every people’s past, heritage and situation is brought into focus became the only available source for objective and principled “knowledge of what is truly human, of man as man” (17). Strauss bitterly dismissed this view. He objected that “all standards suggested by history as such proved to be fundamentally ambiguous and therefore unfit to be considered standards” (18). The fact that these standards are dictated by the relative whims —“free choice”—of individuals precluded, he believed, their claim at objectivity. Human communities devoid of objective criteria to tell a good choice from a bad one became, therefore, groundless. Historicism, in sum, “culminated in nihilism” (18). To illustrate this point, Strauss conjured a literary echo:

To the unbiased historian, “the historical process” revealed itself as the meaningless web spun by what men did, produced, and thought, no more than by unmitigated chance—a tale told by an idiot. The historical standards, the standards thrown up by this meaningless process, could no longer claim to be hallowed by sacred powers behind the process. (18)

This is a problematic evocation. To be sure, the *Macbeth* lines innervating the argument have often been used to sustain the case of Shakespeare’s “nihilism”, whether *bona fide* or merely tactical. There is little doubt, moreover, that the lines aim to impart some mode of “knowledge of what is truly human, of man as man”. What is new in Strauss’s intertextual appropriation is the overlapping, at the central fold of the argument, of *nihilist humanism* and *historicism*. Do the evoked lines reveal something about the pertinence or meaninglessness of history as a frame for the human knowledge of the human? Macbeth:

She should have died hereafter.
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (5.5.17–27)¹

At stake, in short, is the question of the plausible *historicist* provocation lurking inside this imperative speech. Strauss wrongly believed that Macbeth is here complaining about the absurdity of the “historical process” understood as a “meaningless web spun” by “unmitigated chance”. This is, I fear, a misconstruction. What Macbeth reviles in the above speech is the view of the historical process as a saturated, teleological, drive

aimed to a fixed end.² This end is not simply death as the shared destiny of all human beings—“Le but de notre carrière c’est la mort” (Montaigne, 2009: 224)—but also, more importantly, the *terminus* of a “prophetic greeting” that charms and victimizes its receiver. For only yesterday’s prophecy can light fools their way to today’s death, and only within the frame of prophetic providentialism is time recorded in syllables. Tellingly, Pericles also compares Marina’s report of the providential fate she shares with her incredulous father to a *fool’s dream* (Pericles 21.148–9). Lady Macbeth’s death is, after Fleance’s flight, the second important confirmation that the “great prediction” (1.3.53) of the evil forces in fact included other stipulations beyond Macbeth’s kingship: he will not father kings, Birnam wood shall come against him, none of woman born shall harm him. The other two stipulations follow closely after. His death marks the consummation-fulfillment of a *kairoic* lapse of time, the end of a critical tale that has temporarily sequestered the political history of Scotland. Only when the tale is over can the survivors proclaim that “the time is free” (5.11.21), free, that is, from the accursed syllables pressing against a particular end, and ready herewith to resume its larger, interrupted, teleology. There is, in short, no ruling chance in Scotland. Macbeth’s single reference to accidental occurrence—“If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me/Without my stir” (1.3.142–3)—ought to be interpreted solely as an admission of freedom and contingency within the realm of finite human action. For, according to a Stoic logic refined by Seneca—“time does proceed by a fixed law (*rata lege*), but amidst obscurity”—and readapted by Boethius, this admission is compatible with belief in foresight within the realm of infinite providential knowledge, admittedly the “more [...] than mortal knowledge” (1.5.3) the Weird Sisters appear to dabble in.³ In Chaucer’s translation: “Thanne seide I no wrong that, yif that thise thinges ben referred to the devyne knowynge, thanne ben thei necessarie; and yif thei ben considered by hemself, than ben thei absolute fro the boond of necessite” (*Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V. Prosa 6, 231–37). By the time Macbeth savours this gift of chance—something, like Cawdor’s treason, that befalls “absolute fro the boond of necessite”—he is already absorbed in his own fate, a petty tale of political ambition afforded by the teleological resources of *providence* or *purveance* (Boethius, *Consolation* V.6.116). If my reading is right, Macbeth’s speech rehearses Oedipus’ parallel soliloquy in Seneca’s play:

Fate is our master: yield to fate.
Anxiety cannot alter.
The destined spindle’s threads.
What we mortals suffer.
What we effect, comes from above.
The stern hand of Lachesis guards.
The laws spun from her distaff.
All progress on paths preset.
The first day has fixed the last.
No god can change these things.
As they speed their causal web.
A fixed order proceeds for all.
Immune to prayer.
Fear itself unfixes many.
Many come to their fate.
Through fear of fate. (980–993)

It is surprising that the similarity between these two speeches has seldom, if ever, been noted.⁴ To begin with, *fatum* (from *fari*, to say) means etymologically “what is said”. Macbeth’s aria provides additional release to an anxiety that has been mounting since the instant he hears the vaticination. Let me insist: his *fatum* is *what* the sisters *said*. Anxiety and fear are to be avoided by

yielding to fate, conceivably what Macbeth tries to do, in these lines, with near-Stoic impassivity. His mocking allusion to the “Roman fool” (5.10.1) serves merely to aggravate the Stoic ecology of the hours leading to his death. The notion that all progress is preset on paths (*omnia secto tramite uadunt*) so that the first day has fixed the last (*primusque dies dedit extremum*) is echoed in Macbeth’s adumbration that “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time”. This reading, incidentally, disambiguates *pace* as “narrow passage”.

Strauss doesn’t only overlook this important dimension of the idiot’s tale; he discounts too the teleological underpinnings of historicism. This is anything but surprising. For a thinker persuaded that “natural right in its classic form is connected with a teleological view of the universe” (1953: 7), it would be unthinkable that the enemies of natural right should decide to uphold teleology. Rather than a vision of man aimed to ends, what historicists give us, Strauss contends, is the victory of “unmitigated chance”. This radical interpretation comes however into conflict with another major incongruity he presumes to discover in the historicist agenda:

The historicist thesis is then exposed to a very obvious difficulty which cannot be solved but only evaded or obscured by considerations of a more subtle character. Historicism asserts that all human thoughts or beliefs are historical, and hence deservedly destined to perish; but historicism itself is a human thought; hence historicism can be of only temporary validity, or it cannot be simply true. To assert the historicist thesis means to doubt it and thus to transcend it. As a matter of fact, historicism claims to have brought to light a truth which has come to stay, a truth valid for all thought, for all time [...] As regards the decisive insight into the essential character of all human thought and therewith into the essential character of limitation of humanity, history has reached its end. (25)

Sure enough, the apocalyptic climax of this self-consuming certainty—“history has reached its end”—mirrors the widower’s revelation: “the last syllable of recorded time”, “signifying nothing”. Yet still more relevant is the fact that it also echoes a Hegelian conception of history which, signally characterized by teleological frenzy, has also come to be identified with quintessential historicism. According to Hegel (1975), “a divine will rules supreme and is strong enough to determine the overall content” (30). The fact that this theory of history culminates in the paradox of the theorist’s climactic abstraction from the historical process and the virtual detention of history does not mean that the process thus defined is not teleological. What Strauss reads as an accidental discovery realized from the outside—the philosopher’s identification of a flaw in the theoretical edifice of historicism—may contrastively be understood as the necessary revelation of every single “unbiased historian” working inside the edifice: that, far from meaningless, the web of the historical process describes a *progressive arabesque* culminating at the historian’s desk, at the *hic et nunc* of the present interpretation. Such *limes* is, on a potential Folio rendition of the phrase, the “Banke and School of Time” (1.7.6), where an agape Macbeth is disciplined. In lieu, then, of the casual web of chance we get the causal mesh of *fatum*. In this alternate conception, teleology is a necessary condition of historicism. Indeed, Karl Popper believed as much when he described historicism as

an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their principal aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns’, the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history. (2002b: 3)

This idea of prediction is further developed in his observation that historicists “argue for historical prophecy—the prophecy of social, political and institutional developments—and against social engineering, as the practical aim of the social sciences” (40).⁵ Inebriated by ideas of progress (a tendency towards a better and happier state), bent on confusing laws of development with trends, and oblivious to the fact that the latter depend on initial conditions, historicists stipulate “absolute trends”, which “carry us irresistibly into the future”. These trends are the basis of “unconditional prophecies, as opposed to conditional scientific predictions” (118). Such mode of prognosis becomes more devious when predictions turn their back on “what is naturally pre-given” and concentrate “on situations involving political decision-making” (Koselleck, 2002: 134). To be sure, Shakespeare’s devoted reliance on Plutarch can be explained by their shared concern with historical “indeterminism”, their fascination, that is, with “how much”, in political history, “has been determined by the actions and choices of a few men and women” (Parvini, 2002: 106). On the contrary historicist view, the unconditionality of prophecies is a consequence of the inexorability informing the progress of society: “society will change but along a predetermined path that cannot change, through stages predetermined by inexorable necessity” (Popper, 2002b: 46). With this figural description of the inflexible *path* we have come full circle to Macbeth’s *narrow pace*, itself arguably a version of Seneca’s preset *trames*. Coincidentally or otherwise, Popper has something to say about Oedipus in his agitated pamphlet against historicism. What is hardly a coincidence is that the discussion of the Oedipus effect in *The Poverty of Historicism* should apply, word for word, to *Macbeth*.

Historicism, Popper argues, is alive to the complexity of social prediction not only on account of the complexity of social structures, “but also on account of a peculiar complexity arising from the interconnection between predictions and the predicted events” (11). This interconnection is one of causal determination: “a prediction may have influence upon the predicted event”. This is, Popper admits, an old idea:

Oedipus, in the legend, killed his father whom he had never seen before; and this was the direct result of the prophecy which had caused his father to abandon him. This is why I suggest the name ‘*Oedipus effect*’ for the influence of the prediction upon the predicted event (or, more generally, for the influence of an item of information upon the situation to which the information refers), whether this influence tends to bring about the predicted event, or whether it tends to prevent it. Historicists have recently pointed out that this kind of influence may be relevant to the social sciences; that it may increase the difficulty of making exact predictions and endanger objectivity. (11)

It seems reasonable to suggest that the plot logic of *Macbeth* is distinctly beset by the Oedipus effect. Indeed, if “a prediction is a social happening which may interact with other social happenings” to the point of coming to “*cause* the happening it predicts” (11), then Macbeth’s first crime is a happening one, largely caused by the oracular *dicta* in *Macbeth* 1.3. In a remarkable 1987 essay, critic Kirby Farrell argued that predictions in Shakespeare’s history plays are open to censure because they are “attempts to seize the future by force” (1987: 21).⁶ With *Macbeth* specifically in mind he describes *self-validating prophecies* as “collaborative acts of storytelling which tried to counter paralyzing cultural taboos against self-aggrandizement and make history obey the power of wishes” (18). Agnes Heller observed that, in Shakespeare plays, “a strong statement uttered with confidence, even if it does not satisfy the criteria of sound prediction” can impress characters

“as if it were a kind of goal”, leading them “to the realization of the predicted event” (2002: 128). This realization spawns, moreover, unexpected (ontological, dramaturgical) effects beyond those of the predicted event, because philosophical and literary statements “font effet dans le réel” (Rancière, 2000: 62). More specifically, these statements may define models of word or action, as well as regimes of sensible intensity. And if *Macbeth* is, as phenomenology-oriented critics would concur, a magnificent “régime d’intensité sensible” (Rancière, 2000: 62), this ontological reorganization of sensible experience is only achieved because an oracle has been cast. David Norbrook likewise speaks, in what remains the most helpful essay ever written on *Macbeth*, of an “ambition to force events, to cut through due process of time” (1987: 100). Banquo credits as much when he suggests that Macbeth propitiated, through murder, the confirmation of the prediction: “Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all / As the weird women promised; and I fear / Thou played’st most foully for’t” (3.1.1–3). The vicissitudinal latitudes of Providence (*pronoia*) are inscrutable, and the omens could have been confirmed by other means. But Macbeth rashly chose a speedy murder. This makes a difference. It marks, I believe, one of Shakespeare’s chief innovations on the historical chronicles he presumably consulted. For he was not only interested in the psychological effects of soothsaying in the mind of a historical agent, but also intrigued by the factual effects of prophetic utterance, itself a residual practice of providentialist historicism, in the secular course of history.

Frank Kermode read *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* as plays of “protracted crisis” rather than closed apocalypse:

The millennial ending of *Macbeth*, the broken apocalypse of *Lear*, are false endings, human periods in an eternal world. They are researches into death in an age too late for apocalypse, too critical for prophecy. (2000: 88)

I believe, contrarily, that *Macbeth* yields no false ending. Unlike *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, *Macbeth* is critical of apocalyptic closure by being thoroughly, because ironically, overdetermined by prophecy. Indeed, Kermode astutely observed that *Macbeth*—a play “uniquely concerned with prophecy”—is actually “a parody of prophetic equivocation” (83). But this discerning contention went, still goes, sadly unheeded.

A Child of his Time

Macbeth’s sources mention three *nymphs* hailing the historical Macbeth. The fact that Shakespeare more or less transfigured them into topical witches reveals indifference rather than interest in the social morphology of the creatures. What mattered, for him, is that they had access to prophetic utterance, a performative register that reigns over the plot’s unfolding in so absolute and uncontested a manner that the text of *Macbeth* can indeed be seen as a “composite’ redistribution of the witches’ lines” (Goldberg 2003: 160). What happens in the play is exactly what the *weird women*, a great deal less obscurely than is commonly alleged, predict. They are both the “generators of the text” (Goldberg, 2003: 175) and the purveyors of the events therein embodied. Their critical reputation as equivocators befooling Macbeth to his downfall is utterly unearned. In an environment vitiated by double-speech and dissembling, they remain remarkably dependable and forthcoming: they are as good as their words (Macbeth shall be king; Banquo shall get kings) and these words are no Latin, and less Greek. Not their fault if Macbeth decides to ignore the coda. New historicist critics have spent much time assessing the ontological, phenomenological, historical and even social reality of the Weird Sisters, famously described by Terry Eagleton

as “radical separatists” (1986: 3). That is, I believe, a misguided critical venture. The witches constitute an unquestionable dramaturgical and ideological presence, meaningful to everyone including Macduff, who refers, at the play’s close, to “the angel” (meaning Hecate) whom Macbeth “[has] served” (5.10.14). To interrogate the reality and political nature of the witches is as futile as to query the opportunity, gender and rank of the Chorus that opens *Romeo and Juliet*, another theatrical prop intended to provide, in a vatic capsule, the entire unfolding of the plot.⁷ But more on neo-historicist witches later.

It is the significance of prophecy that rests, then, open to examination. Prophecy is the speech-act that impregnates, and renders cogent, the sequence of causation in the otherwise casual *de casibus* plot of *Macbeth*. The playgoers’ expectations are also shaped by a prophecy that is, in point of fact, little more than the retro-projected cause of a sequence of events that includes both Macbeth’s present and, further down into the future, the present of the play’s premiere. Those attending, presumably including King James, know that Macbeth will be king and that Banquo will father a line of kings that culminates in James. More than any other thing that may or may not materialize onstage, the (historical) time of the performance is the most palpable validation of the play’s inaugural statement—the *prophetic greeting*.

In sum, the question is not *whether* Macbeth will be king, but rather *how* will that “chance” eventuate. Not *whether* Macbeth will relinquish the throne to a dynastic future actuated by the seed of Banquo, but *how* exactly will that regime change occur. While the *whether* is a matter of factual chronicle (*Geschichte*) processed by Stuart propagandists as providential design, the *how* in *Macbeth* becomes, *ab initio*, an ostensible affair of heuristic providentialism (*Historie*). The latter interpretation is first concocted, in a self-organizing imaginative interaction, by the witches’ prediction (first happening) and Macbeth’s crime (second happening). In this reading, *Macbeth* tentatively emerges a *parody of verification* of a historical prediction, which comes to be true only because the involved agents endeavour to “verify” the hypotheses—otherwise put, to actuate the forecasts—they have inductively and fortuitously obtained. This performative misapprehension, which Popper calls the Oedipus effect, had, as I shall explain below, momentous political implications in Shakespeare’s own historical time. Incidentally, the reading I am here proposing is also at odds with the standard “humanist” identification of the play’s agon as one of “outside-in causation”, with the “immemorial, pre-academic, pre-intellectual” witches acting solely as an external “trigger” to Macbeth’s dormant ambition.⁸

Strauss apparently dismissed Popper as an incompetent reader of Plato’s *Republic* (Lane, 1999). However, in spite of this major dissent, these two liberal intellectuals came surprisingly close in their more or less explicit recourse to *Macbeth* while inveighing against historicism. The recourse may well be unmotivated. In the case of Strauss, it partly is. And yet the coincidence bears, I surmise, further examination, forcing us to a questioning: what is the relation between *Macbeth* and historicism? Does *Macbeth* berate historicism, as these episodes of liberal–humanist co-optation appear to suggest? A positive answer to these questions would get further leverage from an enlarged liberal camp including fierce anti-historicists like Raymond Aron, who was actively defending the freedom of personal moral choices in the face of a determinist (Hegelian–Marxian) conception of history. Of course, as Aron himself often pointed out, *historicism* is not a stable concept, but rather a portmanteau misnomer identifying various, often incompatible, conceptions of history. Still, the indisputable fact that it has swayed, since its inception in the eighteenth century, between “la révolte utopique et le fatalisme

soi-disant lucide" (Aron, *Introduction*, 1938: 368), exposes *historisme* to charges of connivance with the metaphysical extremisms of *utopian fate*.⁹ It may not be coincidental, then, that John Rawls should exemplify the liberal exorcism of metaphysics that serves as prelude to his original-position thesis with a reference to Shakespeare's play.¹⁰ Nor is it a matter of chance that Aron's and Popper's parallel defence of "indeterminism" reads so closely as traditional-humanist estimation of the tragic dimension of *Macbeth*; or that Francis Fukuyama's disconsolate paean to lost *megalothymia* should be punctuated with questions that keep reminding us of the Scottish thane: "But does the granting of liberal rights by itself constitute the fulfillment of that great desire that led the aristocratic master to risk death?" (2006: 302). It is in no way casual, moreover, that Lukács should draw a parallel between Rosa Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* and Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* (the title behind Popper's opuscle) attributing to both texts the courage to brandish dialectical totalities against bourgeois defensive naturalizations of the social *status quo*, and to Luxemburg's book more specifically, the ability to broadcast "how the last flowering of capitalism is transformed into a ghastly dance of death, into the inexorable march of Oedipus to his doom" (1971: 32–33). Yet behind standard historicist and anti-historicist arguments, and their attending myths, lies invariably a Hegel parable uncannily reminiscent of Macbeth's predicament:

Whatever happens, every individual is a *child of his time*; so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overlap his own age, jump over Rhodes. If his theory goes beyond the world as it is and builds an ideal one as it ought to be, that world exists indeed, but only in his opinions, an unsubstantial element where anything you please may, in fancy, be built. (2008: 15)

A Charmed Life

To determine the exact nature of the relationship between Shakespeare's play and historicism I will build an extreme case. I will contend that *Macbeth* procures, openly if ironically, exuberant resistance to hermeneutic annexation by historicist thought. My case is premised on an analysis of the role of time, and by extension historical time, in the play.

Macbeth is soon ghosted by a "great prediction / Of noble having and of royal hope" (1.3.53–54). Understandably, Banquo is led to believe that the witches can "look into the seeds of time / and say which grain will grow and which will not" (58–59). This organicist figuration of temporality—time as the cycle of germination—is in keeping with Shakespearean troping elsewhere, but does not receive full development in *Macbeth*.¹¹ More becoming to the play's agenda of pragmatic urgency is the disclosure of the witches' true scholarly-cum-eschatological credentials. Their divinatory power is either a transcendental suspension of necessary *fatum* through chanceful fortuity—chance being, for Boethius, "produced by random motion and without any sequence of causes" (*Consolation* V.1)—or a transcendental confirmation of *fatum* as providential destiny. It is presumably in their capacity of collaborators of providence that Banquo addresses the sisters of destiny (*weird*).¹² And it is not only the order of the predictions, but also the teleological drive organizing standard providentialism that authorizes Macbeth to believe that, indeed, "the greatest is behind" (1.3.115). The greatest is that he "shalt be king hereafter" (1.3.48), with *hereafter* spelling, syllable by syllable, "the coming

on of time" (1.5.8). Macbeth is not one of those "hommes étonnés [de] leur fortune" (2009: 169) pictured by Montaigne as routinely rushing to consult divination: he is rather a man struck by *praevisio* who is bound, in consequence, to miss fortune and misfortune alike. In this sense, his play is neither a conventional tragedy nor a Christian *Trauerspiel*, but rather a fast-motion *de casibus* pageant. From the instant of the *ex machina* prediction, the action tenses like a bow drawn at its *terminus*. The arrow is "brave Macbeth". The "worthy gentleman" capable of "disdaining fortune" (1.2.17) and appointing "chance" (1.3.142) is now flung into a story of fixed ends, delivered to his private apocalypse. No longer a heroic, virtuous warrior set off against Fortuna, he becomes the minion and recipient, respectively, of "fate and metaphysical aid" (1.5.27). He—this is important—never asked for it. In the play's logic, to be fooled by Fortuna is to "float upon a wild and violent sea / Each way and move" (4.2.21–22), and to resist Fortuna is either to exert military virtue (the Machiavellian solution) or royal grace, this latter the exclusive prerogative "Of the most pious Edward with such grace / That the malevolence of fortune nothing / Takes from his high respect" (4.1.27–29).

A two-track sequence suggests itself: on the one hand we have the line of events as *pragmata* or *res gestae*, a meaning covered by the old term *Geschichte*; on the other hand we have the spun or tale pre- and post-projected over the line of events, the telling, fore-telling and re-telling of the events commonly captured in the term *Historie*. The latter sequence is a *hermeneutic* and tendentially providentialist elaboration on the former string of actions—the *proairetic* plot of chanceful occurrences where dwells Macbeth before he meets the sisters. The meeting is literally fateful. He becomes the object of a history—of a hermeneutic *fatum*, their saying. And so he dismally concedes: "I bear a charmed life" (5.10.11). His mind and body will be torn by the often incompatible and always non-synchronous demands made by these two sequences, that of *res factae* (facts) and that of *res fictae* (fictions).¹³ Also Lady Macbeth, whom the "letters have transported [...] beyond / This ignorant present" so far that she feels "the future in the instant" (1.5.54–6). Macbeth similarly sees himself arrested in the "bank and shoal of time" eager to "jump the life to come" (1.7.6–7). These bank and shoal are the areas of shallow water that impair the rapid flux of river time, itself a symbolic stand-in for the hermeneutic sequence (*Historie*). Macbeth would not be in that river if he had not been conned by the reception of his own story. Only to someone awash in ebbs of interpretation can "the time" of night "suit with" the "present horror" (2.1.58–59) of a crime that is but implied in a past prediction and deployed in a future action. Only someone in thrall to proleptic hermeneusis (providentialist *Historie*) can come to believe that "time [anticipates his] dread exploits" (4.1.160). The hero's new obsession, like that of the lover driven to *ejaculatio praecox* by "expectation of plenty", is that of synchronizing climax: to "come in time" (2.3.4–5).¹⁴ But he lacks the *kairotic* charisma of "true event" (5.4.15), a shortfall his wife is quick to advert (You lack the season of all natures, 3.4.140) and he not slow to concede: "my way of life / is fall'n into the sere" (5.3.23–24). By contrast, Macduff—who "knows / The fits o'th' season" (4.2.16–17)—is likelier "to live the lease of nature, pay his breath / To time" (4.1.115–16) and accordingly fulfil the *telos* of his *floruit*. Macbeth likewise aims to "be master of his time" (3.1.42), but after the first crime his time-syllables enter a vicious circle of moral remorse. In terms of Walter Benjamin, his fate (*Schicksal*) becomes "the entelechy of events (*die Entelechie des Geschehens*) within the field of guilt" (1998: 129). Macbeth becomes a nodal point in this field of negative consummation—of depleting *kairos*—where time is only apt to climax in detrimental saturations: "Let this pernicious hour / Stand aye accursed in the calendar" (4.1.149–50).

Reference to the “true event” proves that, here and elsewhere, Shakespeare intimates that only through factual, unforeseeable *eventuation* can time become meaningfully consummated and properly known.¹⁵ But, I insist, the play labors in an opposite direction of prospective, not retrospective, meaning-investment. The “woeful time” is full of “prophesying” (2.3.53–55), and Macbeth craves his own plenitude. The murder of Duncan follows and a first confirmation of the prediction is completed: Macbeth becomes King. Banquo hereupon recalls that “it was said” (3.1.3), it was the *fatum*, and that a modicum of fiction has probably prompted the outcome. The factual crime, he suspects, is Macbeth’s fictional elaboration on the prediction. But now Macbeth, agitated by the incompleteness attendant on his “fruitless crown” (3.1.62), summons a new “fate” (3.1.72) upon his fate, thus hoarding, as it were, fiction upon fiction, with the aim of readjusting the witches’ prediction about “Banquo’s issue” (3.1.66). But fate is not fortune. The fact that Macbeth believed chance (*casus*) had furthered his fate—“If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me / Without my stir” (1.3.142–43)—doesn’t mean it actually did.¹⁶ The play’s logic strongly suggests otherwise. As the first murderer conjectures, chances can only further fortune: “And I another, / So weary with disasters, tugged with fortune, / That I would set my life on any chance / To mend it or be rid on’t” (3.1.111–14). Macbeth soon becomes aware that the play’s logic—thst is, his tale’s logic—is *causal* not *casual*, the sequence of causes dictated by the necessity of the *fatum*, and the spirits apprised of “all mortal consequences” (5.3.5). After Banquo’s flight he is “bent to know / By the worst means the worst” (3.4.133–4). This involves visiting the weird sisters and learning how “all causes shall give way” towards what he calls “my own good” (3.4.134–5), which is either a happy future outcome or a spirit of resignation to mishap. Hecate, who has learnt of Macbeth’s desire “to know his destiny” (3.5.17), is offended by his selfish interest in “his own ends” (3.5.13), and contrives a new show to make him “spurn fate” (3.5.30). This will indeed occur at the play’s close, but it is important to remark that while availing himself of the consultancy services performed by Hecate and his cohort of sorcerers, Macbeth eagerly espouses the vatic (apocalyptic) rationale that underwrites his own *fatum*. His conjuration to the witches (4.1.66–77) foresees a scenario of radical destructiveness—churches brought down by wind, navigation confounded, corn harvests ruined, castles destroyed, palaces and pyramids with their heads sloped to their foundations. This apocalyptic vision of *mundus inversus* brings to mind the anti-Lutheran dialogue by Giordano Bruno, *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*, where a similar vision of destruction, conjured in an assembly of pagan gods, is put to the service of a moral *renovatio mundi* (1985: 120–24). This dialogue, published in London in 1584 and dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney, could have easily reached Shakespeare. If this was the case, then the “bond of fate” (4.1.98) Macbeth rushes to take enticed by the “sweet bodements” (4.1.112) of the apparitions strikes the playgoer as a concession to the twin theses of interiority and predestination promoted by Protestant divines. The taste for apocalyptic cognition in the form of intimate fore-knowledge—“Heaven knows what she has known” (5.1.41)—was greatly encouraged in radical-protestant circles, and such Calvinist leanings ushered in calls to passivity—“To bed, to bed, to bed” (5.1.57)—Bruno bitterly despised.

The play’s closing scenes register the near-apocalyptic consummation (freedom) of time. As the day gradually becomes Malcolm’s—“The day itself almost professes yours”—a feeling of termination and inactivity prevails: “And little is to do” (5.9.3–4); “what else remains to do” (5.6.5). The remains of the day are all strewn across the limited time horizon Macbeth is accorded: their consummation siphons away his own plenitude leaving him deplete, face to face with the idiot-tale (the *fatum*) of his fore-

ordained mortality, a tale dried down to “lees” (2.3.91) and bedeviled with “toys” (2.3.90) tossed by “juggling fiends” (5.10.19). Let me insist on this point: the life that is full of sound and fury is not everyman’s life; it is the life of the poor player (Macbeth) duped by the vocal fury of the witches, dancing to the tune of those who “charm the air to give a sound” (4.2.145). If he sees his tale as any man’s tale it is because he has been catapulted by the prophecy to eschatological heights. As Lukács haughtily upheld, only from the vantage ground of teleological holism can the reckoning of everyday trivia successfully take place: “Just because the inherent meaning of reality shines forth with an ever more resplendent light, the meaning of the process is embedded evermore deeply in day-to-day events, and totality permeates the spatial-temporal character of phenomena” (1971: 23).

Intimate with a Nymph

The field of agency and occurrence in *Macbeth* is overdetermined, and eventually calcined, by a providential tale (*fatum*) that rules the whole in the way of scheduled eventuation (*Historie*). There is no room in this tight theodicy for the really contingent, whence the resulting absence of genuine moral agency. For out-and-out historicists, let me insist, “a situation in which the ‘facts’ speak out unmistakably for or against a definite course of action has never existed, and neither can or will exist” (Lukács, 1971: 23). This explains their impatience with “humanist” interpretations of heroic action based on the rating of empirical-factual choices. Assuredly, nothing proves more sinister to a historicist than “the empirical inexperience of the future” (Koselleck, 2002: 133), which is probably why *open societies* stake their stability on devoted vindications of chance (Ramey, 2015). The question, then, is not: will Macbeth be king? The question is *how* he will force that particular occurrence—that, in his own terms, “chance”. We know that, in the rash logic of fatal (providential) time, he has little time left. But is there any other mode of temporality available to him? Is there non-hermeneutic, non-transcendental, non-apocalyptic time at his disposal? This mode of empirical-historical time, what is described above as *Geschichte* or *res gestae*, is also often referred to as *secular*. Lady Macduff may have it in mind when portending “I am in this earthly world” (4.2.75), meaning a place where justice does not hold. This world is, in Shakespeare’s ontology, a domain ruled by an efficient—not final—causality (Spinoza) akin to the (fatal) *natural law* posited by Stoics like Seneca.¹⁷ Another intimation of this secular temporality occurs when Macbeth alludes to “olden time / Ere human statute purged the gentle weal”, of times when crimes were performed and the victims “would die, / And there an end” (3.4.74–79). Now, instead, complains Macbeth, the dead rise again and push kings from their stools. *Now* is indeed the site of his apocalyptic *Einbruch* (Carl Schmitt’s term for temporal irruption in *Hamlet*). And yet such debacle does not alter the wider chronological tide, as the “woeful time” of Macbeth’s reign is to be replaced by the “free time” of a new king (Malcolm). *Woeful time* and *free time* are complementary modes of temporality alike vitiated by the plenitude of all-seeing Providence, the eye that oversees the world in the frontispiece of Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World* (1614).¹⁸ The parallel is inescapable: the assistance the witches provide to Macbeth is in no way dissimilar from the help the medicine man of the English tribe (King Edward the Confessor) gives to Malcolm. In both cases, help is aimed at advancing providential designs. In both cases, I submit, Shakespeare was repelled.

There is then little in *Macbeth* to suggest the ready enforcement or available effectiveness of *contingent, secular time*.¹⁹ The *exister* Macbeth is overpowered by the (Hegelian) necessity of necessity, unfitted to entreat the *necessity of a*

contingency that could break the spell and undo his tale.²⁰ The coercive foresight of comprehensive providence dictates a watertight immanence—a thoroughgoing conformity of transcendental *verba* to historical-dramatic *res*—unlikely to result in leaks, whether in the realm of prophetic words or in the domain of contingent deeds. Adorno rightly detected an “implicit metaphysics of adjustment” (2001: 61) informing divinatory advice. The providential inflation of the *aevum* broods, like the Holy Spirit in Milton’s epic, over the vast, abyssal depletion of the *seculum*, making it pregnant. Once saturated by such plethora, there remain only things (*res*) died in black or white magic: *nothing else is*. It is untrue that, as Norbrook contends, Macbeth is “consciously rejecting” a “transcendental order” when he begins to plan Duncan’s murder or that his wife “strips any moral or supernatural aura from political action” when she instigates Macbeth to “perform” (1987: 101). Their indissoluble link “with the moral and sexual disorder of the witches” (101) proves that the married couple remain always inside a transcendental order, always under supernatural aura. No progressive, revisionary stance can manage, I fear, to naturalize the hags as agents of secular chaos or rebellion. They are, with Edward the Confessor, the transcendental allies to the Scottish state, not its enemies. The fact that “the Stuart succession is preordained” (105) can never be, as Norbrook suggests, bad news to ladies whose only dramaturgical task is to convey such news. To affirm that Shakespeare’s departure from his sources is to accord the witches a desire to “challenge the authority of the state” (105) is, therefore, a crude overstatement. Yet it remains, signally, the core critical misconstruction of present-day historicism.

Although Shakespeare consistently adheres elsewhere to a cyclic—repetitive, exemplary—version of historical time, this conception is only negatively operative in *Macbeth*, as a realm of contingent occurrence occluded by transcendental overwriting.²¹ Yet by ironically undoing—through caustic Stoic asides and sheer tropical excess—teleological inflation, he makes room for a return of Fortuna the play can solely enact through its nihilistic implosion. When E.M.W. Tillyard observed that Macbeth engages in “vain conflict with an overruling Providence” (1969: 319) he was unwittingly intimating that the play’s true ordeal lies less in its protagonist’s attempt to fulfil the prophecy than in his longing to evade the rule of *fatum*—his desire, that is, to repossess the luxury of *instants* and *chances* only “mortality” dispenses (2.3.89). But the longing is frustrated. The play affords no leakage. Tillyard best understood that the much-celebrated unity of the play consists not so much in its poetic tension or symbolic congruity but rather in the transcendental all inclusiveness of *übermenschlich* foreknowledge: the political theme remains consistently “the instrument through which Providence works and is one of the motives that combine to make the play so rich” (1969: 319–20). And providence makes itself known through forecasts that beacon cretins their way to death. So, if the play’s richness begets, as it does, its hero’s poverty—all is but toys, a poor player, a tale told by an idiot—and if this hero deserves, as he does, the playgoer’s sympathy, then why not hazard that Shakespeare was ironically abstaining from his own play’s “rich east to boot” (4.3.38)? In other words, the fact that his apocalypse (*Macbeth*) is aesthetically faultless does not necessarily mean that he ideologically approved it.²² While there is no reason to suspect Aretha Franklin’s sincerity when commending *Amazing Grace* to a near-regal audience in the White House, Shakespeare’s praise of “the grace of Grace” before the Stuart potentate remains impenetrable and potentially ironic.²³

Northrop Frye rightly noted that the cyclical conception of history implicit in the image of wheel of fortune allows only to idealize the past not the future. To be sure, Shakespeare’s

compulsive use of the available past (Greek, Roman, British) evinced solely a hortative, didactic idealization, shorn of forthright ideological commitments. However, Fry argues, providentialist history set out to correct this imbalance “by glamorizing the present as the warrant of an ideal future that shall remain identical with this present” (1988: 62). Such correction, the warranting of the future by an embellished present, or in more dramatic terms, the incitement of the future by a turbulent present, hinged upon the performative effectiveness of prophecy. But other, related, means were also accessible. We have come to understand, with Pocock (2003: 31–48), that the bottom agenda of classical republican thought was the securing of the future against the contingent whims of Fortuna. This need to master chance was indeed keenly felt, not least because the alternate monarchical solution to the problem of stabilizing the forthcoming—dynastic continuity—was inherently specious. It was the self-assigned task of republican intellectuals like George Buchanan to persuade his British readers that hereditary monarchy was more exposed to the instability of Fortune than an elective monarchy. While the former relied on a genetic-biological survival, open both to interruption and decay, the latter manifestly allowed for “a greater degree of rational choice” (Norbrook, 1987: 88). The actual historical transit, only dimly invoked in Shakespeare’s play, from an elective monarchy to a new system of hereditary succession that is to climax in the triumph of the Stuart dynasty, helps reposition the character of Macbeth as the best-suited candidate to legitimately hold the throne. With Malcolm, the historical chronicles tell us, the new system of succession became irreversible. With rational consensus banished, and contingency back in office, the construal of a meaningful account of human action in history was once again deferred to historicist ideologues. If Shakespeare read, as he likely did, Buchanan’s Scottish chronicles, he must have been intrigued by the speculative concern with the control of historical time underpinning Buchanan’s republican theses. But I believe, contra Norbrook, that traces of Buchanan’s “critical rationalism” (91) animate rather than conflict with Shakespeare’s decision to memorize a Scottish Golgotha (*Macbeth* 1.2.40). Rather than “substitute a mystical and legitimist version of Scottish history for the rationalist and constitutionalist version” of James’s old tutor (Buchanan), what Shakespeare seems to be doing in *Macbeth* is—ironically, rationally—exposing the insolvency of mystical history by having it deflagrate from within—by making it *catch with its success, surcease*.

To grasp the epochal latitude of this irony, it may be worth recalling that belief in the rule of accident inside empirical-historical temporality was in Shakespeare’s time incompatible neither with confidence in compensatory action (by human virtue or superhuman grace) nor with pragmatic, underhanded reliance on oracular wisdom. Machiavelli, who urged that “princes of a republic or a kingdom should maintain the foundations of the religion they hold” and that “all things that arise in favor of that religion, they should favor and magnify, even if they judge them false” (1996: 37), offered his readers the example of Numa:

One sees that for Romulus to order the Senate and to make other civil and military orders, the authority of God was not necessary, but it was quite necessary for Numa, who pretended to have been intimate with a nymph (*simulò di avere domestichezza con una ninfa*) who counseled him on what he had to counsel the people. (1996: 35)

Intimate with a nymph: there’s a title for a credible next Macbeth-film production, juicy with cash-affluent evocations of *Interview with the vampire* ... Machiavelli’s mondaine, pragmatic, expediency is moreover compatible with the skepticism of,

say, Montaigne, who celebrated the Christian abolition of prognostications, portents and augurs, and despised the “obscure, ambiguous and fantastical jargon” of “insane prophecies” (*ces folles prophéties*) (2003: 42–45; 2009: 166). In line with these two Renaissance thinkers, Shakespeare’s theatrical resort to a *jargon prophétique* should be taken, I believe, less with “a pilot’s thumb” (1.3.26) than with a grain of salt.

The Hours Ripe on Earth

The logic that connects imaginative-textual depictions of near-apocalyptic crisis centred on a troubled hero, the recording of transcendental—whether demoniac or divine—prophecy, and the providential foundation of empires whose present-day conductors are the honorary beneficiaries of the imaginative text tendering the connection, is admittedly an epic logic. A classical instance is, of course, the *Aeneid*. But so are Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* and Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, three dissident variations on Virgilian script that abundantly capitalize on demonic dynastic-prophecy. I want to argue that this epic strain exerts as well a considerable sub-textual pressure on *Macbeth*.²⁴ Andrew Hadfield rightly observed that Shakespeare’s early history plays constitute an English *Pharsalia* (2005: 103–129). Indeed the three parts of *Henry VI* (1590–1592) are Shakespeare’s closest try at an (his) epic poem—something to compete with Spenser’s first half of *The Fairie Queene* (1590) and with what Daniel would later do in *The Civil Wars* (1595). Yet in the way of *epic tragedy* his best shot was demonstrably *Macbeth*, a play that equivocally nurtures “the imperial theme” (1.3.127) of British Union. This conjectural parallel brings home the all-too-evident, and all-too-frequently overlooked, affinities between *The Fairie Queene*, the *Henry VI* plays, and *Macbeth*. To be sure, some critics have noted, with a passing nod, that 3 *Henry VI* houses an eminent French witch—an embryo version, as it were, of the Scottish hags.²⁵ What is not often emphasized is that 2 *Henry VI* harbours too an ambition-incensed duchess ready to call upon witchcraft in order to advance her husband’s political rise to the throne. She aims to play her part “in fortune’s pageant” (1.2.67) to obtain “this world’s eternity” (2.4.91) but is fooled by schemers that “buzz [...] conjurations in her brain” (1.2.99), “oracles” that are “hardly attained / And hardly understood” (2.1.58–59). Yet no sooner are the schemers and the lady mentioned—and afforded brief cavort—than they are pushed offstage at a stroke. Shakespeare offhand way of sweeping witches and conjurers out from his pageant bespeaks pragmatic incredulity. His viewpoint is no different from the king’s: “O God, what mischief works the wicked ones, / Heaping confusion on their own heads thereby!” (2.2.196). Still, unlike Shakespeare, King Henry did believe the Devil stood behind the actions of the “wicked ones”. And so did King James, whose *Daemonologie* argues against fraudulent witchcraft in ways that secured the cachet of real necromancy. James justified the persecutions of witches on grounds largely furnished by “the apocalyptic interpretation of scripture which was becoming increasingly influential among the Presbyterians and which James himself, up to a point, supported” (Norbrook, 1987: 105). So this concern with occultism is less the fleeting craze of a man hung up on the supernatural cause of shipwrecks than the fixation of a magistrate anxious to ensure that the “claims of scientific historiography” emerging in his realm do not replace the “residual providentialism which identifies the controlling gaze of an all-seeing divinity” (MacLean, 1990: 4). Indeed, for all the “oppositional poetics” developing between 1603 and 1660, Stuart poets were not prevented from “writing as if kings were Absolute Subjects, interpellating those over whom they rule from their divinely ordained position of transhistorical Otherness” (MacLean, 1990: 15). To be sure, in *Macbeth* Shakespeare played so

consummately the part of one such Stuart poet that the king must have inwardly demurred, “Why do you show me this?” (4.1.132)

James’s interest in witchcraft echoes Elizabeth’s earlier dabbling in prophetic lore. The link noted by scholars between the latter historical circumstance—the Queen apparently visited the court astrologer John Dee in 1675—and parts of the first instalment of *The Fairie Queene* rubs in the second textual analogy I wish to uphold: the profound resemblance, routinely winked by critics, between the mantic episodes in *Macbeth* and the prophecies delivered to Britomart in *The Fairie Queene*, Books III and V.²⁶ The “mirror plaine” or “glassie globe that Merlin made” (III.ii.21.1), used by the Arthurian wizard to interpret Britomart’s vision prefigures the “glass” Banquo carries in his hand in the dynastic parade—“a show of eight kings”—that climaxes the apparitional pageant in *Macbeth* 4.1. The prophetic narratives in Spenser’s poem deliver too a *national history*, with Britomart and Elizabeth standing “at opposite ends of the narrative laid out by Merlin: for the one it is prophecy, for the other history” (Van Es, 2000: 6). In an excellent article, critic Bart Van Es contends that “for the Queen there is nowhere to look but on the picture of herself as embodied in ‘antique history’: she must ‘feed on shadowes’ presented to her by the poet”. Still, the critic avers, “to compass her future ‘by ciphers, or by Magycke might’ is an exceptionally dangerous enterprise” (8). The danger was primarily logical, as the move invited an abuse of good sense. For one of the greatest paradoxes surrounding the practice of political prophecy was that it disguised history as prophecy, transformed the latter into “history written in the future sense”, with the historical events treated as they had not yet occurred (8–9). Yet this paralogic escamotage pumped up a further, downright political, danger. A subset within a broad field of practices that included apocalyptic street-rantings, almanacs, and Puritan biblical exegesis, political prophecy was “not simply a way of understanding the present” (Jansen, 1991: 18) but a way or violently shaping it. Related to “popular, unofficial, and potentially seditious traditions of prognostication” (Van Es, 2000: 15), political prophecy coddled “dramatical divinations” of revolutionary nature and met therefore the censorious response of Tudor authorities. Parliament strengthened in 1581 the 1562 measures against it, and by 1590 prophecy was “both suppressed and harnessed by the Elizabethan establishment” (28). Yet not completely, as vatic traces lingered in poetic texts. Spenser was, Van Es exhorts, a “ringside observer” of the “strange dynamic” started by the “dangerous unpredictability of prophecies—texts which can recoil upon the prophet, just as they impact upon society” (23). Such *perlocutionary impact* identifies, we have seen, the Oedipus effect at work in historicist interpretation. Van Es (2000) rightly suggests that the anomalous puissance of literary prophecy exceeds the heuristic calculations of providential history (13), but he nonetheless concedes that Spenser’s magic finely heeds the grammar of historiographic providentialism. And this grammar, let me insist on this point, is in no way dissimilar to historicist grammar.

I want to suggest, in short, that Shakespeare’s open resort to political prophecy in *Macbeth* qualifies as a successful attempt to capitalize on, and potentially surpass, Spenser’s ambivalent response to the “strange dynamic” of prognostication; that Shakespeare’s later but parallel response overtly burlesques the irrationality of providentialist historiography: the conceited and fraudulent use of the present as a confirmation of past prophecies tailored in (for and from) the present; that this response also included an oblique but concerned caveat against the role present prophecy plays in the shaping of the future. Indeed *Macbeth* stages a concern that is to reappear in Hobbes, a blunt philosophical opponent of history (and historicism) who alerted that prophecy is “many times the principal cause of the events

foretold" (1839: 399). Hobbes was writing at a turbulent time when England had become, in Christopher Hill's memorable phrase, "a nation of prophets" (1991: 87).²⁷ Both responses help recast Shakespeare in the role of a conservative ironist that resists both the lure of revolutionary, historical eventuation—no progressive reading attenuates the grotesquerie of the Cade rebellion in *2 Henry VI*—and the appeal of Tudor and Stuart historicist-providentialist propaganda. The former resistance does not nurse exclusively ideological scruples, as it may well spring from Shakespeare's unceasing exposure of the illogical connectivity at work, in processes of temporal unfolding, between past words, present thoughts and future deeds, the way a statement like "My former speeches have but hit your thoughts, / Which can interpret further" (3.6.1-2) is likely to usher in the tragic deeds of an overinterpreted future.

Shakespeare's ironic use of prophecy, in *Macbeth* and elsewhere, reveals his profound distrust of the teleological consolations of conceited, overdone historiography, his skeptical aversion to "the glib rationalizations of human history upon which providentialists too often depend" (Kastan, 1982: 16).²⁸ He was possibly wary of the effects that a combination of realism, semi-erudition and paranoid fantasies could have on the actual behaviour of people. The opaqueness and inscrutability of providential sources conjures up, as Adorno observed, "the image of some absolute power" (2001: 57) mortal monarchs were all too eager to act as brokers of. This way, the new actions "which would be planted newly with the time" (5.9.32) at the close of *Macbeth* stand testimony to a habit of mastering the future—and, eventually, of totalizing time—that is in studied connivance with social oppression: "the irrationality of the fate that dictates everything and of the stars that offer advice is really a screen for society with both threatens the individual and grants it its livelihood" (Adorno, 2001: 80). It is no accident, then, that Shakespeare's parodic stance in *Macbeth* should resemble—not prefigure—Adorno's campy and excursive *blitzkrieg* against reactionary Californian crystal-gazers. Both seem to underscore the conspicuous role that pseudo-rationality plays "in totalitarian social movements, its calculative though spurious adaptation to realistic needs" (51). So, to beguile the time, first do it (Hail, Hail, Hail), next look like the time:

Don't attempt to tell someone what you think of them or to criticize unfavourably. Be wise and know that silence is the best part of valor today. Put your energies into some needed work or a job that has been awaiting your attention.²⁹

It is through such blending of sheer divinatory silliness and downright Machiavellian *realpolitik* that the very questionable Malcolm contrives to "unspeak [his] own detraction" (4.3.124) and make it, the messianic re-founder of a glorious dynasty, to the Scottish throne. Thus, "the English apocalyptic myth of the 'godly king'" (Norbrook, 1987: 85) is conveniently transferred to the Scotts, and all of it "by the grace of Grace" (5.11.9), Shakespeare foxily concludes in a sardonic epilogue to 2,113 lines maligned with the "grace and great prediction" (1.3.53) of three midnight hags.

This claim finds support in a revisionary-critical literature that, from the 1970s onwards, has found fault in Tillyard's attempt to bring Shakespeare into line with other providence-incensed late-Tudor intellectuals. In 1982 David Scott Kastan persuasively argued that in the three parts of *Henry VI* "the inescapable providentialism of the Tudor historiographers is held up for critical examination" (1982: 17). Unfortunately, however, he fails to extend this insight to his reading of *Macbeth*, and this failure reveals a deep-seated critical reluctance to range *Macbeth* alongside the rest of the history plays. Only this affiliation, shrewdly urged by Tillyard long ago, can disclose, I think, a

momentous ideological dimension of a *de casibus* play that falls back, in more than one way, on the symbolic lure and argumentative speciousness of Tudor-nationalist historiography.³⁰ Building on important research by Ivo Kamps, Graham Holderness, and Annabel Patterson, critic Neema Parvini has recently identified, in an original study of Shakespeare's history plays, three major strains of historiography in Shakespeare's time: the providential, the humanist and the antiquarian.³¹ Providential and antiquarian historiography would share a similar telic drive, as both organize raw historical facts in progressive lines of fulfillment, respectively from God (providential) and towards the nation (antiquarian). They are forms of *Historie*, whereas the Italian-humanist strain is more respectful of factual contingency (*res gestae*, *Geschichte*). In line with Kastan's view, Parvini builds a very convincing case for Shakespeare's ironic use of providential argument. Although "the history plays give voice to popularly held beliefs about divine providence" (2002: 102), these exercises in voice-giving are fully compromised by ironic distance. They are echoic mentions of "held beliefs" rather than blanket endorsements of doctrinal points.

This brings us to problem of the affordability of Tillyard's thesis for a reading of *Macbeth*. The majority of those who sneeringly disregard Tillyard's global thesis do it, I believe, for the wrong reasons: by contrastively upholding their utopian-materialist dogma, they merely replace one transcendence with another, one smokescreen with another, Tudor historiographic providence with modern, post-Marxian, historicist providence. Nothing in the way of critical refutation is thus achieved. Tillyard's thesis on *Macbeth* would be impeccable if only he had dared say that Shakespeare was repelled by rather than exultant with the triumph of a providential order "that altogether transcends [political action]" (1969: 321). It could be objected that the distance between repulsion and exultation is significant enough to render this counterfactual claim absurd. But at least this interpretation leaves *the* problem of transcendence untapped and untouched, precisely because it identifies it as a problem, thus making it unusable as a potential solution for problems others may be willing to identify. In providential historiography, for example, the king "hath a heavenly gift of prophecy" (*Macbeth* 4.3.157). But so do the theatrical king and his eminent foe, the king of darkness, in historical drama—the augurs of a future that materializes in the present of the performance. Materialist historiography, we know, did little to repair this circularity: the gift of prophecy is but transferred to the people, and the *future* they foresee is but the *consummate present* that bursts at the desk of the interpreter, the privileged spectator of the drama of human history. The transcendence that gets thus traded in historicist transference, the transcendence that empowers the destitute and the interpreter alike, manifestly supervenes the process as a solution, never blocks it as a problem.

Let me at last return to the original quandary: what is the relation between *Macbeth* and historicism? Agnes Heller has recently stated that Shakespeare was a "splendid historicist" (2002: 118), but she was surely not construing the term in its technical sense. By refraining to do so, Heller, a distinguished legatee of the materialist-dialectical tradition, avoided the risk of awakening Hegelian associations. Unlike historicists, who still attend to "see the hours ripe on earth" (*Richard II* 1.2.8), Shakespeare showed little faith in teleology and no interest in impending historical completion. The farthest he probably got to suggest the historical situatedness of truth and ideology is in Hotspur's conception of thoughts as "the slaves of life" (*1 Henry IV* 5.4.80). Save in propagandistic concessions, very likely clouded in ironic mist, to Tudor providential myths in the history plays, he rarely put forward a view of history as a process driven by forward motion. The hyperbolic notion, urged in Sonnet 106, that

all the erotic praises conceived by old poets “are but prophecies / Of this our time, all you prefiguring” is intentionally outrageous. And the reference, in the next mysterious sonnet, to the wide world’s “prophetic soul” (a phrase also found in *Hamlet*), strikes a deeply condemnatory note. It is a fine paradox that Sonnet 107, the piece that has most contributed to scholarly debates on the dating of the sonnets, should harbour the most unreserved attack on political prophecy. Written probably in 1603, after James’s accession to the throne, its first two quatrains celebrate the self-defeat of political prophecy:

Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come
Can yet the lease of my true love control,
Supposed as forfeit to a confined doom.
The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,
And the sad augurs mock their own presage;
Incertainties now crown themselves assured,
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.

The fact that 3 years later Shakespeare sets out in *Macbeth* to mock the parallel current of divination that capitalized on the supervening *assurance* of the Stuart *crown* does not detract an inch from the intensity of his critique, in the earlier sonnet, of the outburst of apocalyptic literature (almanacs, prophetic broadsheets) preceding the Queen’s death. Monarchs die, other monarchs replace them: “Tis common” (*Hamlet* 1.2.72). Almost unexceptionally, Shakespeare’s view of time is that of a *common* natural-dynastic cycle—“nature’s changing course untrimmed” (Sonnet 18)—where exemplary historical singularity may or may not eventuate, and is likely or not to be repeated. The traction in this cycle is both forward and backward: “Such a man / Might be a copy to these younger times, / Which followed well would demonstrate them now / But goes backward” (*All’s Well that Ends Well*, 1.2.45–48). In general, then, no doctrinal or comprehensive take on history seems to emerge from Shakespeare’s texts. Still, his emphasis on the beguiling fallacy informing providence and its attending tool, prophecy, reveals no doubt a censorious interest in the speculative props—Banquo’s mirror, Merlin’s globe—of historical interpretation. At stake, for Shakespeare, was the delinquent complicity between future-looking prophecy and past-looking interpretation. He mocks the historicist tendency to find in the past the seeds of the present, and to construe this present as a necessary apotheosis of that past. He sees prophecy and providential interpretation are fictions that have the capacity of generating self-validating outcomes and promoting pernicious circularity.

Van Es (2000) reminds us that the prophetic element in Spenser’s poem is often taken as the structural opposite of political-historical allegory (4). Indeed, allegorical interpretation resembles reverse prophecy precisely because prophecy is itself studiously crafted as reverse allegory.³² Providentialist historiography, we have seen, strongly relied on the *ignus fatuus* catching between both mirrors. The *sad augurs* that dream on things to come are indistinguishable from the zealot savants that studiously read into the past the seeds of things that have already come. So, if providentialist historiography stands, as I have tried to show, as an early but entire successful version of standard historicism, then *Macbeth* can be seen to perform a radical attack on historicism. A typical instance of this historicist decoy is Cranmer’s prophecy at the close of *All is True*, rightly described by the complimented devisee, King Henry VIII, as an “oracle of comfort” (5.4.66). King James, who also attended performances of this final play, no doubt found more comfort in this epilogue than in the glass-show in *Macbeth* 4.1. Less buoyant is Warwick’s prediction after the ordeal of the roses in *1 Henry VI* 2.4: “And

here I prophesy: this brawl today, / [...] / Shall send, between the red rose and the white, / A thousand souls to death and deadly night” (124–127). This prophecy, actually manufactured by a playwright one century after the war of the roses ended, is, like Cranmer’s, a self-confirming prophecy, a mode of vocal escamotage doubly rooted in the fallacy of final clauses.³³ For the prophecy releases a providential wisdom that is but the projection of human intentionality on the unpredictable realm of historical occurrence. The “conservative function” of these prophecies is clear: to “invoke predictions to validate the Tudors” (Farrell, 1987: 21). By the time Shakespeare has Exeter express fear in “the fatal prophecy” of Henry V’s gains and Henry VI’s losses, he is probably fatigued by overplay and chuckling at the jape. He must have also relished the badinage of having a “high-minded strumpet” (1.8.12) exclaim, in confirmation of her own prediction, “Thus Joan la Pucelle hath performed her word” (1.8.3).³⁴ Shakespeare’s deeply amphibological treatment of this “holy prophetess” (1.6.80), at once “diabolic whore and a political-military leader of peasant genius” (Bloom, 1998: 45), is not ambivalent enough to suppress his disdain of oracular bravura. In his lively essay on the complicity between occultism and totalitarianism German philosopher Adorno scorned the “esoteric mystery” of institutionalized superstition by reminding his readers of “the old Latin adage that an augur laughs when he sees another” (2001: 50). My impression is that it is always Shakespeare that gets, after the witcheries and sorceries transacted in his drama, the last and loudest laughter. We must always—the bard smilingly protests—*defy augury*.

A Word Ill Urged

Macbeth, we have seen, is a match-castle guarded by the *motto* inscribed on the stone gate of the Brudenbrooks mansion in Thomas Mann’s novel: *Dominus providebit*.³⁵ The earlier providential guards, God and the Prince of Darkness, are no longer with us, but new lords have stepped in to perform the hard task of all-seeing. Their performance, however, runs into numerous contradictions. Neo-historicist critics have always had a hard time with Shakespeare’s great tragedies, plays like *Hamlet* or *King Lear* that, allegedly bent on dramatizing abstract concerns like moral freedom or existential achievement, have fallen traditionally within the province of “liberal-humanist” exegesis. This is paradoxical, since one would expect neo-historicist correction to be stronger precisely where humanist critics exert themselves more effectively: the brilliance of a *dissident reading* should be measured over against the power of a conservative reading. In the case of *Macbeth*, for instance, it would be characteristic of the traditional reading to accord a place of hermeneutic privilege to the “poor player” soliloquy. The persuasion that lines 5.5.17–28 are central to the play and deserve special attention has become irrevocably outmoded. Neo-historicists have little or nothing to say about them. Their standard reading of *Macbeth* routinely circumvents them as *terra damnata*—possibly because *terra incognita*. Persuaded that these verse-promontories serve the cause of indecent humanist self-congratulation, the neo-historicist reader is aimed, as it were, at lesser shores. Harold Bloom’s characterization of what he inexactly calls the “French Shakespeare” critical school is, for all its bitterness or precisely because it, particularly instructive:

the procedure is to begin with a political stance all your own, far out and away from Shakespeare’s plays, and then to locate some marginal bit of English Renaissance social history that seems to sustain your stance. Social fragment in hand, you move in from outside upon the poor play, and find some connection, however established, between your supposed social fact and Shakespeare’s words” (1998: 9).

Interestingly, however, the Shakespeare words chosen by this kind of critic are far from being the standard textual fragments selected by the humanist critics, the *lieux de mémoire* of humanist gratification. It is easy to dismiss Bloom's comment as the untimely wisecrack of an untimely intellectual. It is much harder to renounce the temptation of *ad-hominem* brush-off and to confront unambiguously the rationale of a critique Bloom shares with many other scholars, from Frank Kermode to Michael Bristol.³⁶ Needless to say, this is something seldom or never attempted by those who see themselves as the target of the critique. This is regrettable. For at stake in his attack is not merely the inconvenience of non-immanent readings of renaissance drama—to begin far out and away from the play and to move in from the outside upon it—but also, more importantly, the illegitimacy of projecting onto the play a “political stance” that is, either unconnected with the political ideology of the play's time or very tenuously connected with marginal bits of its social history. The temporal violation involved in such retro-projection is the typical historicist infraction feted today as *presentism* and implicit in Benedetto Croce's famous *dictum* that “Ogni vera storia è storia contemporanea” (14). What the infraction reveals is that, as Macbeth implies in the above lines, the timing of words is bound by inescapable circumstance, and that any attempt to disrupt it—“There would have been a time for such a word”—ushers us in the mode of critical-*kairotic* temporality where historicist utterance is invited to wax. In the hands of the historicist critic, Shakespeare's graph risks becoming “a word ill urged” (*Romeo and Juliet* 1.1.202). Untimely word-urging is justified by recourse to *retrophetic* inspiration. The critic believes to be beyond the author's ignorant present, to know more and better than the author (and the text) because history has progressed and left the author behind.³⁷ History may be, according to Hegel and Marx, a *process without a subject*, but the neo-historicist critical Subject—the self-proclaimed *telos*—is there to saturate the gaps, and suture broken knowledge.³⁸ Still, despite this constraint, an author—assuredly, the arch-author William Shakespeare—may struggle to dislocate himself from strict temporal coordinates and advance into the future, thus inscribing a *décalage*. The task of the neo-historicist, progressive critic is to track down precisely that interval—the “interim” through which the future forcibly reads itself into the past. This involves, of course, a mode of critical divination for which, argues Kermode, “fulfillment is essential: the *kairos* transforms the past, validates Old Testament types and prophecies, establishes concord with origins as well as ends” (2000: 48). The frantic Macbeth that speaks the poor-player lines manifestly slips into the mode of prophetic utterance that is largely to blame for his undoing; and this mode of critical-ecstatic utterance lingers in current neo-historicist attempts at co-opting a play whose central meaning labors precisely against all visions of time as consummation. Thus, by avoiding *willy nilly* confrontation with the speculative nub of a play like *Macbeth*, the neo-historicist critic pledges ignorance of the truth—*words have their time*—that would eventually undo his own claim at utterance. I insist: the admission that utterance and thought are time-tied is a core premise in historicist argument, but so is the notion that the closer one gets to the historian's present the nearer one is to hermeneutic absolution—the greater the chances, that is, to partake in the clairvoyance rendering the entire historical sequence meaningful. In other words, the neo-historicist critic assumes that he (Greenblatt, Wilson) is placed decidedly *beyond* Will's ignorant present, and that from that privileged epistemic position he can cast the reverse prophecy of allegorical interpretation over his plays. This interpretation involves a transcendental-apocalyptic totalization of the textual-historical domains presupposed by the text at hand. Absolute

comprehensive adequacy is speciously obtained by subjecting the seemingly casual protocols of periphery-screening and “arbitrary connectedness” to an iron allegorical-synecdochic logic that is made to rest, in turn, on infrastructural—ultimately essential—unity.³⁹ Parvini (2002: 10–29) has astutely denounced the neo-formalism this search for unity entails, and he quotes Althusser to prove that there exist ways of remaining a Marxist without endorsing Hegelian essentialism. I want to dwell on this critique because I believe that an essentialist-dialectical circularity lingers in the allegorical work of many neo-historicists. This circularity is the enabling condition of historicist braggadocio. By contrast, it is characteristic of the humanist critic both to deny full comprehension of the Shakespeare script and to suggest the cognitive superiority of its in-contemporaneous—ultimately scriptural—stance. But new historicists know better, for they inhabit a quasi-consummated present, the near-apocalyptic *nunc stans* of final truths—the eschatological “time to come” (2 *Henry VI* 4.2.119) presaged by the insurgent Cade as that of his kingly apotheosis. Their eschatological instant is that of final understanding, its suddenness reflecting back on that of past, captured chance. Walter Benjamin, in an orbicular comment on a photograph by Dauthendey, spoke of the “Here and Now, with which reality has, as it were, singed its pictorial character through and through, to identify the one perceptible spot where, in the suchness of that long-gone moment, the future still (and so eloquently) lodges today in a way that enables us, looking back, to locate it” (1998: 176). From a similar dialectical standpoint where technology and magic coincide, the critics' *retrovidential charms* are predicated on the assurance that every single bit of contingency likely to emerge during the reading process will be safely processed by their all-seeing powers. “The sole aim of philosophical enquiry is to eliminate the contingent”, Hegel grandiosely adumbrated (28), and neo-historicist critics have punctually furnished their dустcards in order to complete the necessary sweeping of the casual. No other explanation can be given for their obstinacy in promoting three peregrine bag ladies, complete with the content of their bags (toads, eyes of newt, lizard's legs, pilot's thumbs), into the true protagonists of *Macbeth*.

Let me briefly consider two major contributions to *Macbeth* criticism that have reached us from the quarters of new historicism.⁴⁰ Their authors, Stephen Greenblatt and Richard Wilson, are two of the most sophisticated and deservedly influential voices in Shakespeare studies today. Still, for all their merit, their stance is not unproblematic. Stephen Greenblatt's “Shakespeare Bewitched” is a characteristic exercise in historicist-allegorical interpretation. The critic adjudges the play's moral guilt from the vantage-point of a non-ignorant present shared by those who, like himself, *know* that “it is possible to identify evil in texts” (1991: 21). And, in his arbitration of moral fault, the upright barrister strikes an *absolute* key: it is evil to subject “miserable old women” to actual or potential “trial on charges of sorcery” (29). This way, so the salvationist *retrophecy* goes, Macbeth exposes to dramatic conflict the moral grounds on which the persecution of witches rested. This problem is, in the second section of the essay, transformed into the more tenuous issue of “the ethical problem inherent in staging witches” (34). The essay is tightly argued. Strikingly, however, Greenblatt is not consistent in his phrasing, which taps the very cultural confusion he seeks to denounce: should we say “staging witches” or rather “staging unsubordinated women stigmatized as witches”? It is not casual that he systematically silences the fact that Reginald Scott, whose *Discoverie of Witchcraft* he labels “the greatest English contribution to the skeptical critique of witchcraft” (23), is overcritical and condemnatory of *witches*. On the reported evidence, Scott's reactive construal of witchcraft as an imaginative deception houses a reprehensive vision of the “seelie *witch*” who

learns “anie thing in the art of cousenage” and makes “a great manie jollie fooler” (qtd. 25). Nothing in the Scott material quoted by Greenblatt suggests that the English country gentleman considered these women, whom he invariably dubs *witches*, as “innocent victims” (30). Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* rightly suggests that, lacking historical essence, a witch is anybody acting as a witch or believed to be a witch; and, more importantly, that one need not laud the witch in order to unmask the witch-hunter. *Innocence* is thus a lexical prop of Greenblatt’s apocalyptic edifice of moral absolutes. By reloading it with social meanings it certainly did not contain in Shakespeare’s time (innocence as the demotic virtue of disenfranchised *nuda vita* and masterless *labor force*), Greenblatt allegorically reads *Macbeth* as a post-Marxist morality play—something in the line of Brecht. Nonetheless, alive to the fact that his “test of progressive politics” (21) may prove too abusively disfiguring, he closes the reading with a by now characteristic, and altogether incompetent, celebration of ambiguity: the “ambiguities of demonic agency” (35) are finally not resolved in play; Shakespeare’s theatre, oscillating between “tolerating doubt” and “mystification”, places him “in the position neither of the witchmonger nor the skeptic: it places him in the position of the witch” (36). This claim is, I fear, grandiosely vacant.

While it is possible that *Macbeth* makes some room for the—social, religious, legal—debate on witchcraft, this accommodation is not central to the play. Nor are the ethical entailments derived from it at all relevant to a balanced assessment of the play’s significance and effectiveness. Deciding on the criminality or innocence of witches, and adjudicating on their judges’ good or evil intentions, are not pressing concerns for the man who penned *Macbeth*. To go on believing, as Greenblatt does, that Shakespeare implicates the witches “in a monstrous threat to the fabric of civilized life” (34) ineptly begs the question, for the play affords no version of “civilized life”—Macduff’s son is a *prisca barbaries* imp, and King Edward’s healing show is a primitive saint-book engraving out of Shakespeare’s mock-Catholic imagination. The Hecate-goaded witches are as evil—or as good, for apocalypse works to narrow the gap between absolutes—as the God-appointed monarchs. Macbeth’s fractured moral attention shifts, from the outset, *d’une sainte famille à l’autre*—to put it in Raymond Aron’s mock-Marxian terms. In a related 2003 article, Richard Wilson credits Greenblatt’s assertion about the witches’ monstrous threat to civilization and puts forward an inventive and persuasive reading of *Macbeth* as a play dramatizing the anathematization of the Jesuits as witches (2003: 136). Since witch-mongering is here replaced by the hounding of “Jesuit terrorism” (134) the minutes of this new trial prove far less ambiguous. Enthroned on the very summit of the Whig Interpretation of History, Wilson mercilessly forsakes the bard—a man tainted by “compromising proximity to the Gunpowder conspirators” (134)—on the sunless, illiberal slopes of popery. Shakespeare didn’t make it, the *retrophet* solemnly announces, beyond his ignorant present. And yet, and yet.

But the Wilson (2007) article I want to consider in more detail is another: “Blood will have blood”: Regime Change in *Macbeth*. The central thesis here is that “humanist critics” are wrong in reading *Macbeth* as a play that supports the legitimacy of Stuart sovereignty by dramatizing the rightfully violent overthrow of a tyrant.⁴¹ The play, Wilson argues, dramatizes rather the violent origin of all sovereignty. Wilson broadly subscribes to Alan Sinfield’s pioneer interpretation of *Macbeth* as a play that outruns conservative and liberal appropriations of its meaning by promoting “scrutiny of the legitimacy of state violence” (Sinfield, 1992: 106). In questioning the net-humanist reading Wilson seeks support in Kantorowicz, whom he accuses of being a “diehard conservative” because he fought with the Freikorps in 1919 as an

“agent of terror” to suppress the German Revolution (15). This off-hand indication helps identify, perhaps unnecessarily, Wilson’s stance as inimical of terror, far afield into social progress and revolutionary justice. But uncalled-for professions of anti-reactionary good behaviour are routine among neo-historicists. His resort to Derridean ideas of “future justice” and “the perfectibility of *this world*” (31) render his ultra-progressive credentials all the more visible, for both ideas are admittedly Hegelian-Marxian tropes. Wilson goes as far as suggesting that there is, in Shakespeare’s dramaturgical writing, a “vision of an art that will give “delight and hurt not” (Tem, 3.2.131), in a time to come when power renounces terror to “Leave not a rack behind” (Tem, 4.1.156)” (32). This conception of Shakespeare as an oracle of political justice is as endearing as fabulously untrue. The essay closes with another historicist misprision, originally Marxian and lately scrutinized by Jean-Luc Nancy, the affirmation of “mankind’s humanity” (34). Wilson’s mystified amplifications originate largely on his pride of place: his royal box is placed above and beyond that of other critics—Schmitt, Strauss, Kantorowicz and the host of humanist critics (see the fearsome footnote 17); he holds therefore a position beyond their ignorant present, a site of lucidity entitling him to spot the messianic incipency of a peaceful future in Shakespeare’s secular script. The utopian moral buried in Shakespeare’s prophecy can only be decoded by the progressive-historicist critic. Humanist critics are instead conservative agents that persist in the error of reading the play as a defence of legitimate terror, the error of obtuse literalness we may suppose King James himself was prone to fall into despite Shakespeare’s persistent use of equivocation. The error, in short, that underlies the contemporary advocates of “war on terror” who fail, Wilson laments, to distinguish themselves from real terrorists. Wilson’s sustained resolve to read *Macbeth* along a temporal axis with four privileged critical moments (Duncan’s Scotland, Shakespeare’s Britain, Stephan George’s Germany, and George Bush’s United States) where a rogue state analogously persecutes terrorist outlaws (rebel chieftains, Catholic agents, socialist revolutionaries and al-Qaeda terrorists) is merely preposterous and it can only be justified by considering, first, Wilson’s vested interest in Shakespeare’s crypto-Catholic patrimony, and second, his targeted concession to an impeccably progressive, German-academic readership that was still under the shock of the 9/11 events. The essay, moreover, is contradictory. The potential reiteration of the process whereby a state legitimates itself through the use of a violence that is indistinguishable from the violence employed by its virtual foes implies, moreover, that the process is transtemporal—largely the anti-historicist premise that underpins Derrida’s view—thus undoing in advance the historicist claim, furthered in his essay, to ethical-legal progress in *Macbeth*. In fact, the related notions that violence is self-perpetuating, cyclic and that originally illegitimate violence always haunts dynastic legitimacy make up the soundtrack of Shakespeare’s history plays; the melody, however, harks back to Athenian tragedy, and it probably reached Shakespeare through translations of Euripides and Seneca (Showerman, 2011).

Finished Business

Greenblatt and Wilson premise their socio-political readings of *Macbeth* on the shared assumption that “History is our judge” and that “since History and Providence have brought the existing powers into being, their might must be right”. This is Popper on Hegel in his 1945 book *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (2002a: 262). The existing powers that drive new historicist critical emendation remain those Popper identified as inimical to open society: utopianism and holistic engineering. Václav Havel, an

intellectual with first-hand knowledge of totalitarian witch-hunting, stated the following in his brief 1995 Preface to Popper's *opera magna*: "It is one thing to be aware of the interconnection of all events; believing that we have fully understood this is something completely different" (in Popper, 2000a: 13). Like the forensic barrister in a show trial, the neo-historicist critic is less eager to discover the truth than to win the case.⁴² Yet the perusal of Shakespeare textual evidence leads him to contained exasperation. Failure to identify the guilt compels him to a de rigueur absolutory celebration of aesthetic ambiguity and creative freedom—the standard closing trick in the magic show of the new *juges pénitents*.⁴³ Although their argument evinces a rehearsal of the old liberal-humanist—and eventually proto-existentialist—take on the tragic heroism of moral agency, it betrays at bottom a toxic blend of exegetic frustration and dialectical arrogance.⁴⁴ Alan Sinfield's curt remark, in relation to *Macbeth*, that "Shakespeare, notoriously, has a way of anticipating all the possibilities" (1992: 107), uncovers the way in which dialectical totalization can be used to cover the gaps and lacunae of critical ineptitude. It reminds us of Fredric Jameson's automate pretense that the postmodern is "constitutively defined by its inclusion of all possible styles" (1992: xiv). Interestingly, the book where he insists on this claim is titled *The Seeds of Time*.

Shakespeare is neither the author of *Everyman* nor Bertolt Brecht. The English poet would never have trusted that "emotions accompanying social progress will long survive in the human mind" and "further progress" (qtd. Jameson, 2000: 177). By believing to dwell at the *terminus* of that teleological progress, the avant-garde historicist critic scans the bard's moral-political emotions in search for prefigurations that confirm his vantage point, and casts his charm. Thus, through reverse prophecy, he presupposes riddles that are solved in advance. This way he reaches the hermeneutic absolution reserved for the happy few—the insurgent platoon—allocated *beyond all ignorant presents*.⁴⁵ Leo Strauss: "According to historicism, therefore, the absolute moment must be the moment in which the insoluble character of the fundamental riddles has become fully manifest or in which the fundamental delusion of the human mind has been dispelled" (1953: 29). Actually, only postulants to the holistic absolution of history—"we must see with the eye of the concept [...] which penetrates the surface and finds its way through the complex and confusing turmoil of events" (Hegel, 1975: 30)—can be irked by the persistence of *unfinished business* (Sinfield, 2006). The time, for them, is still partly unfree. But this seems not the case for Greenblatt and Wilson, two critics who assume the role of Hecate, the other all-seeing deity in the play. Vexed by the incomplete divination procured by humanist critics—"how did you dare / To trade and traffic with Macbeth / In riddles and affairs of death" (3.5.3–5)—the critic enjoins them, with the shunned "mandarin stance" of yore (Sinfield, 1992: ix), to stand testimony to the summary completion of unfinished business: "This night I'll spend / Unto a dismal and a fatal end. / Great business must be wrought ere noon" (3.5.20–22). But this business is not different from a Hegel vice the German philosopher defensively attributed to "professional historians": that of "introducing a priori fictions into history" (1975: 29).

Japanese writer Kenzaburo Oé explains that before the bomb exploded, *Chugoku Shinbun*, Hiroshima's most important journal, did not have printing types for the ideograms designating concepts like "atomic bomb" or "radioactivity" (1996). However alert its journalists may have been to the very unlikely contingency that was to occur on 6 August 1945, they would not have been materially—that is, historically—able to forecast an apocalyptic prophecy. In a similar manner, for all his awareness of social injustice and political unrest, Shakespeare was unable to riddle his memos with post-Marxist ideograms of social

emancipation, ideological dissidence or political resistance. To believe otherwise, and to act critically on that belief, is to naively adopt the role Shakespeare acridly refused: it is to go in for the part of the witch. When Marx augurs that it will "then" (when?) be "realised that the world has long since possessed something in the form of a dream which it need only take possession of consciously, in order to possess it in reality",⁴⁶ neo-historicists rapturously respond: Hail. Hail. Hail. Meanwhile *Macbeth* awaits—deserves—a fairer trial.

Notes

- All quotations from Shakespeare are from the Norton Edition, based on the Oxford text.
- For the opposite, prevalent reading of this speech as an incrimination of monotonous, mechanical time, see Heller, 2002: 140–141.
- See Inwood, 2005: 235.
- In his admirable reading of the Senecan echoes in *Macbeth*, Robert Miola (2001) doesn't mention this analogy.
- In this particular claim, Strauss's and Popper's views of historicism positively diverge. For Strauss on historical prediction, see *Natural Right*, 31.
- Predictions, Farrell argues, "structure history" by struggling "to control the future" (1987: 18). By denouncing this circular-vicious dynamic, Shakespeare would have exposed the conservative, self-validating, role of prophecy.
- Romeo and Macbeth are both *impatient children*—fools of time, fortune and fate—tumbling down the "highway" of life towards their pre-ordained, fatal death. Juliet's comparison applies, therefore, also to Macbeth: "To an impatient child that hath new robes / And may not wear them" (3.2.30–31).
- Nuttall, 2007: 284–285, 290. The standard humanist reading, which remains on the whole more satisfactory than the historicist interpretation, invokes issues of indeterminism and free moral agency. For Nuttall the predicament is whether "Macbeth would have killed Duncan in any case, even if he had never met the Weird Sisters" (285).
- For Aron's detailed comments on Popper's refutation of "prophétisme historique" and "les philosophies apocalyptiques de l'histoire" see *Leçons*, 1989: 239–254.
- Rawls: "When in this way we simulate being in the original position, our reasoning no more commits us to a particular metaphysical doctrine about the nature of the self than our acting a part in a play, say of Macbeth or Lady Macbeth, commits us to thinking that we are really a king or a queen engaged in a desperate struggle for political power" (2005: 27).
- There are only scattered references to time as breeder: "The worm that's fled / Hath nature that in time will venom breed" (3.4.28–9); "though the treasure / Of nature's germens tumble all together" (4.1.74–75).
- In her remarkable book on Shakespeare, philosopher Agnes Heller misconstrues the important difference between Fortuna, which is indeed a representative of chance and contingency, and Fate, which is dominated by fixed necessity. Heller assimilates the fatal necessity of *heimarmene* to chance, and opposes both to providence. This leads her, wrongly, I believe, to consider that "in Hamlet's case, fate and providence are mutually exclusive" (2002: 1–6).
- For this opposition, see Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 2004: 207. In the "History" entry in his study of historical concepts (*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*) Koselleck explores in depth the difference between *Geschichte* and *Historie*.
- For Macbeth's sexual dysfunctionality, see Barmazel, 2008.
- In his notes to the Cambridge edition of *Macbeth*, A.R. Braunmuller quotes from *Cymbeline* (3.5.14–15) and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1.2.113–115) in order to illustrate a parallel with: "The time approaches / That will with due decision make us know / What we shall say we have, and what we owe" (*Macbeth* 5.4.16–18).
- Similarly, Macbeth resorts to the term "chance" (2.3.87) as an evasive by-word for the regicide he has just committed.
- See Inwood (2005: 224–248).
- For an interesting analysis of this emblematic title page, see MacLean (1990: 20).
- Frye identified three visions of time in Shakespeare: 1) rhythmical, 2) mechanical, and 3) kairotic (the appointed, crucial time in the purpose of God) "hours ripe on earth" (Frye, 1988: 69).
- Though rare, the ontological, Heideggerian, jargon of *exists*, contingency and *Dasein* historicity has made its way into Shakespeare criticism. See Kastan (1982: 3–23) and Heller (2002: 130–42). For factuality and the necessity of contingency, see Meillassoux (2006: 113–121).
- Shakespeare appears to give full support to classical-republican recommendation to study history as a "source of political wisdom". See Skinner 1978: 169–177; 220–21.
- For a lucid and comprehensive reconstruction of critical debates on "moral dualism" in *Macbeth*, see Moschovakis, 2008.
- Time has fared badly for show-complimented magistrates: it is Queen Aretha and not Mr. President who is today allowed to trail the sovereign floor-length mink. To press my point further, can anybody in his senses believe that the Irish subaltern, crypto-Catholic and high-office scribe Edmund Burke sincerely endorsed his pastoral-apocalyptic paean to Englishness in *Reflections*? Conversely, ironic insincerity is not

- an option in the English textual apocalypses of, say, Bunyan, Blake, Emily Brontë, Tolkien or Geoffrey Hill.
- 24 Tillyard insisted on the pressure of epic constrains in Shakespeare's historical drama.
 - 25 Joan of Arc is extolled in a deviously hyperbolic manner—"The spirit of deep prophecy she hath, / Exceeding the nine sibyls of old Rome. / What's past and what's to come she can descry" (1 *Henry VI* 34–36)—and the King of France's decision "to join with witches and the help of hell" (2.1.18) is haughtily censured.
 - 26 Tillyard is again an exception (1969: 322). Another recent exception is Van Es.
 - 27 For Thomas Hobbes's "unhistorical" political philosophy see Leo Strauss (1952: 79–107). Strauss follows Hobbes in arguing particularly against the circularity of historical modes of explanation, with "standards for the test" that are "set up and proved beforehand" (105).
 - 28 Other rash dismissals of soothsaying and prophetic dreaming can be found in *Julius Caesar* (1.2.24) and 1 *Henry IV* (3.1.144).
 - 29 I reproduce part of the long quoted excerpt from the Winter Issue (1953) of the magazine *Forecast* (Daily Advice for Virgo, p.59) that Adorno banters in his essay (2001: 63). It sounds like Lady Macbeth addressing her husband.
 - 30 Tillyard reads Macbeth as "the fines of all mirror for magistrates" and dauntlessly construes "cases" in Macbeth 1.7.7 as actual murders recorded in historical chronicles (320). The closing paragraph of his brief but lucid reading of *Macbeth* emphasizes its epic dimension and sets it against a backdrop of earlier Tudor accommodations of politics into imaginative literature (Sidney, Spenser). Northrop Frye lucidly compares 1 *Henry IV*, which he dubs "the tragedy of Hotspur", to *Macbeth*. Hotspur is, like Macbeth, "a heroic warrior hemmed in by divination." Like Macbeth, moreover, he ends up asserting that "life time's fool".
 - 31 For a similar, albeit more comprehensive and nuanced, view of these historiographic positions, see Van Es (2002).
 - 32 While historicist interpretation involves retrospective necessity (the allegorical projection of teleological laws on the unshaped matter of the past), prophecy involves prospective necessity: the telic organization of future outcome. Providential prophecy is but reverse interpretation, reverse historicism. The historicist agent retro-projects the prediction as a prelude to what has already happened, thus implying that such outcome was bound to occur.
 - 33 For the idea of "an aetiology without an *aitia*", of symbolic explanations smuggled in "to fill a vacuum in the articulation of reasons, See A.D. Nuttall, 2007: 29–31.
 - 34 Other well-known instances of vatic posturing in Shakespeare are John of Gaunt in Richard II 2.1, who presents himself as a "prophet new-inspired" (31) about to foretell the king's doom. His right to do so is that he was the ancestor of the house of Tudor. The Welsh Owen Glendower in 1 *Henry IV* 3.1 describes the omens surrounding his birth within a poetic-dramatic milieu laden with evocations of Merlin.
 - 35 In a recent brilliant recreation of the play that owes much to Beckett and Dostoevsky, and is strongly evocative of Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (1998), Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey (2016) invest much in the apocalyptic image of the castle reduced to ashes. We also learn about a character striving to "find a cave and write the future".
 - 36 In a review of a Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Kermode complains: "Despite the charm of all the peripheral detail, I couldn't help feeling that there was a weakening of interest when the plays themselves were directly addressed. There is a great quantity of sexological or political sack, but only a pennyworth of interpretative bread" (1998). Michael Bristol rightly denounces "a notable lack of conviction", among neo-historicist readers, "about the value of Shakespeare's dramatic art" (2011: 644).
 - 37 Strauss mocked Colingwood's claim to "have understood the thinker of the past better than the thinker understood himself" (1953). For this discussion, see Norton 1981: 145–147.
 - 38 For the vexed dispensability of teleology in Marx's appropriation of Hegel's dialectical view of History, see Althusser, 2007: 181–186.
 - 39 Frank Kermode (1988) ironically celebrates the "charm of all the peripheral detail" characteristic of a Greenblatt essay. This attention to margins provokes "a weakening of interest when the plays themselves were directly addressed. There is a great quantity of sexological or political sack, but only a pennyworth of interpretative bread".
 - 40 Though particularly rewarding in its treatment of Shakespeare's "problem-oriented, multivocal" historiography, Paola Pugliatti's essay "Shakespeare's Historicism: Visions and Revisions" (2000) makes no attempt to stabilize the meaning of the term *historicism*. Her discussion of new historicist claims follows a line of argument very different from the one I here pursue.
 - 41 Wilson persists in reading *Macbeth* politically. But *Macbeth* is not a political play. John Rawls contended that "only ideologues and visionaries fail to experience deep conflicts of political values, and conflicts between these and nonpolitical values" (2005: 44). If this is true, then *Macbeth*, a play peopled by ideologues (the Scott nobility) and visionaries (the witches and Macbeths), registers the failure to experience politics.
 - 42 In this, and other figural elaborations, I closely build on Tony Judt's fine reading of Camus (1998: 87–136).
 - 43 Michael Bristol talks about a "characteristic dialectical style of New Historicists", marked by a studied "indecisión" and "contradictory pathos" (2011: 646–648). I believe this style is a face-saving device used only when the pressures of real interpretation (classroom synthesis, introductory remarks, lecture conclusions) are felt.
 - 44 Interestingly, Alain Badiou's recent emphasis on subjective heroism strikes, despite his Marxian credentials, a very similar note. See his attack on deified Necessity and Destiny in the Epilogue to his creative remake of *La République de Platon*, where he affirms: "Pour ce choix de sa propre vie seul est en cause celui qui choisit. Tout Autre est hors de cause" (2012: 581).
 - 45 The reality of neo-critical practice by Greenblatt, Wilson and others invalidates the general claim made by H. Aram Veeser that "New Historicists eschew overarching hypothetical constructs", that they are not "predetermined" by the "Marxist grid", and that they "threaten all defenders of linear chronology and progressive history" (1989: 12–15). One must be able to see through programmatic pronouncements into a critical unconscious informed by progressive teleology.
 - 46 From Marx's correspondence, in *Nachlass I*. Quoted by Lukács, 1971: 2.

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Data availability

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Additional information

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