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Issue 12 (2021) - Communities & Margins**Witchcraft and Prophecy in Scotland****Julian Goodare****Introduction: Prophecies in Shakespeare's Macbeth**

[1] In Scotland between about 1370 and 1690, numerous narratives told of prophecies made by 'witches' or witch-like prophetic women. This article examines both the prophetic witches themselves and the prophecies they made. The main protagonist of most stories was a male political figure who sought a 'response' from a witch or witches; the prophecy was embedded in a narrative of his downfall.

[2] Let me begin with the most famous prophecies said to have been made by Scottish witches: those in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606). Although *Macbeth* is known today as 'the Scottish play', it is of course an English play, and is also fiction. My concern in this article is with Scotland and with non-fiction. However, Shakespeare provides a useful point of entry to the subject.

[3] *Macbeth* narrates two relevant sets of witches' prophecies. Early on, the witches tell Macbeth that he has become Thane of Cawdor, and that he will be 'king hereafter' (Shakespeare 2015: 141 (I.3, line 50)). Macbeth initially disbelieves, but, when he finds that the prophecy about Cawdor has come true, he realises that the 'king hereafter' prophecy will come true also – and hastens to bring it to pass.

[4] Later, the witches give Macbeth a second set of prophecies, about his defeat and death. They conjure up apparitions that tell him that 'none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth', and that

Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until
Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill
Shall come against him (Shakespeare 2015: 241-242 (IV.1, lines 79-80, 91-93)).

Macbeth believes the prophecies, later saying:

I will not be afraid of death and bane
Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane,

and:

But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn,
Brandish'd by man that's of a woman born (Shakespeare 2015: 283, 292 (V.3,
line 60; V.7, lines 13-14)).

[5] Shakespeare got this material (indirectly) from Scottish chroniclers giving non-fiction accounts of Scottish history, and his prophecies illustrate the structures that I shall be analysing. Shakespeare streamlined the story's prophetic characters, even though he made the story much longer than his sources. In the Scottish accounts, and in Holinshed who used these accounts and from whom Shakespeare derived the bulk of his material, the first set of prophecies (about becoming king) was made by three weird sisters – fate women – who were not stated to be witches and who were probably not human, while the second set (about his defeat) was made by a separate witch or witches.

[6] This article focuses on prophecies that were ascribed to witches or witch-like prophetic women. It will already be apparent that this will raise questions about the nature of a witch,

about the status of witch-like figures for whom the sources do not use the word ‘witch’, and about whether these figures are human or not. It will also raise questions about the nature of prophecy, since the sources do not always use the word ‘prophecy’ for the predictions that they narrate. I shall come back to the Scottish Macbeth story, but Shakespeare brings out the main types of prophecy that I want to discuss.

Two Types of Narrative Prophecy

[7] Narrative prophecies are embedded in narratives told in the past tense. They should be distinguished from ordinary written prophecies, which are not part of a narrative; they just sit, waiting for someone to solve the puzzle or identify the event to which they refer. The fulfilment of one of Nostradamus’s prophecies, though it may confirm his reputation as a sage, does not constitute a single narrative leading from him to the fulfilment. Numerous prophecies of the Nostradamus type circulated in Scotland, some distinctively Scottish like those of Thomas the Rhymer, others international like those of Merlin (Riordan 2020; MacDonald 2013; Moranski 2004; Lyle 2007: 18-26). There were also orthodox religious prophecies, mostly made by prophetic ministers (Todd 2002: 391-399). Related to these were scholarly studies of Biblical prophecies, particularly the vision of the future in the Book of Revelation (McGinnis & Williamson 2010; Thornton 2006). Such prophecies are only indirectly relevant to narrative prophecies.

[8] The two principal characters in narrative prophecies are the prophet and the recipient of the prophecy. This article is concerned with the witch as prophet. But, for most of the stories themselves, the interest falls mainly on the recipient. The prophet is not always identified explicitly, but the recipient always is. The prophecies in these narratives are not like weather forecasts, usable by anyone; they affect, and are addressed to, a specific person or persons.

[9] There are two types of narrative prophecy, with two distinct routes to the prophecy’s fulfilment. Fulfilment of the prophecy is an essential ingredient of the story of a narrative prophecy; as Richard Stoneman puts it, ‘Oracles in stories always come true’ (2011: 11). But they come true in different ways. The two types may be called *inexorable* and *enigmatical*. The Macbeth prophecies form good examples of these; the first set is inexorable, the second is enigmatical.

[10] With an inexorable prophecy, the recipient is told clearly, but they either don’t believe it at all, or they think that they can get round it. The princess *will* prick her finger on a spindle, though her parents think they can get round this by destroying all the spindles in the kingdom. The wooden horse *will* be the ruin of Troy, though the Trojans think it’s a gift. Macbeth *will* become Thane of Cawdor and then king. The inexorable prophecy makes its dramatic impact through the hearer’s disbelief in it. Shakespeare’s Macbeth initially says:

to be king
Stands not within the prospect of belief,
No more than to be Cawdor (Shakespeare 2015: 143 (I.3, lines 73-75)).

Only once Macbeth discovers that he *has* been made Thane of Cawdor does he conclude that he will also become king – ‘the greatest is behind’ (Shakespeare 2015: 146 (I.3, line 118)). In some ways, this prophecy is a variant, because it is a favourable prophecy for the recipient; inexorable prophecies are usually unfavourable. Inexorable prophecies add dramatic interest to a narrative for the readers or hearers.

[11] So the trajectory of the inexorable prophecy can be summarised as follows:

1. The prophet makes an inexorable prophecy to the recipient.
2. The recipient reacts with disbelief, or with insufficient belief, to the prophecy. They either

dismiss the prophecy entirely, or they try to get round it. Meanwhile they prosper in the short term.

3. The prophecy is fulfilled.

[12] An enigmatical prophecy, by contrast, operates not through the hearer's disbelief, but through dual meanings embedded in the prophecy itself (for the term see Thompson 1955-58: no. M305). There is a false meaning on the surface, which the recipient believes, and a true but hidden meaning, which the recipient discovers when it is too late. Macbeth believes that the prophecies about his downfall make him invincible. Disbelief forms no part of the narrative structure.

So the trajectory of the enigmatical prophecy is:

1. The prophet makes an enigmatical prophecy to the recipient.
2. The recipient believes in, and reacts to, the surface meaning of the prophecy. Meanwhile they prosper in the short term.
3. The hidden meaning of the prophecy is fulfilled.

Both inexorable and enigmatical prophecies function, dramatically speaking, as tales told after the event. The inexorable prophecy has to be fulfilled. The enigmatical prophecy impresses us when the surface and hidden meanings have been revealed. Neither kind of prophecy can be left hanging, waiting to be fulfilled. Indeed, it may be only after its fulfilment that we can be sure which kind of prophecy it was – though alertness to the narrative structure may enable us to see what's coming next through the way in which the recipient reacts to the prophecy.

[13] In both types, there may be an additional episode at the beginning of the story. Before the prophet makes the prophecy, the recipient may ask her or him a question. Narrative prophecies are rarely ancient; they are usually made in the recipient's lifetime, or even just a day or two before their fulfilment. The recipient who seeks to know his or her fate is a common character in these narratives. Alternatively, the prophet may confront the recipient with an unsolicited warning. Either way, the prophet's qualifications for their task are likely to be relevant. As we shall see, many of these prophets were witches or witch-like figures.

Sources and Methods

[14] The principal sources for the main part of this article are Scottish narrative accounts of the past. Chronicles in narrative form are first found in Scotland in the late medieval period, and shade gradually into 'histories' during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Mason 2006). Most take an interest in prophecy until the later seventeenth century. The following survey covers most instances of narrative prophecies involving witches.

[15] The survey takes in, not only prophecies and other such predictions attributed explicitly to witches, but also those attributed to witch-like figures. Similarities and differences between witches, weird sisters and other such figures are important. There was a fluid vocabulary available to designate such figures, so the actual word 'witch' is not necessarily crucial to the analysis. A distinction can be drawn between words designating people who were always bad, such as 'witch', and words designating people who might be bad or good, such as 'divineress' (Goodare 2016: 17-19). There was a similarly fluid vocabulary available to describe prophecies. As we shall see, some writers wrote explicitly of 'prophecy', but others wrote of 'divination', or described a prediction as a 'response'. This fluidity of vocabulary will be discussed further below, but it should be considered as subsidiary to the structural patterns revealed by a survey of these various narratives.

[16] The survey includes narratives presented as true. In principle, explicitly fictionalised narratives (as with Shakespeare) are excluded. In practice, though, the boundaries are

blurred (cf. Roberts 1996). Many narratives believed to be true were shaped like narratives known to be fiction. Conversely, fictional narratives were also shaped like true ones, though that is less directly relevant here. The narrative itself possessed the power to compel belief and to shape action.

[17] Witches, by and large, were assumed to be human. However, some beings described as ‘witches’ may in fact have been non-human folkloric figures (Goodare 2016: 133-135). Some of the prophets fall into this non-human category – notably the ‘weird sisters’ (‘weird’ meaning ‘fate’), who were not described as witches before Shakespeare. Some of the prophets had non-human aid; orthodox Christian prophets received foreknowledge from God, while, in demonology at least, human witches enlisted the aid of the Devil (though the Devil was usually held to lack genuine foreknowledge). Finally, the gender of the prophet could be significant. Most of those convicted of witchcraft were female, but there was a male minority – 15 per cent in Scotland (Goodare 1998). There was a similar preponderance of females among the prophets in the narratives that follow. Moreover, in the narratives, all the actual ‘witches’ who were given a gender were female. Comparing them with other female prophetic figures can be rewarding. To a survey of the narratives containing these figures we now turn.

Witches’ Prophecies in Chronicles and Histories

[18] The earliest prophecies relevant to this study come from John Barbour (c.1330-95). In his epic poem celebrating King Robert Bruce written in the 1360s, Barbour related two enigmatical prophecies. The first concerned the Scottish king’s great enemy, Edward I, who had ‘a spyryt that him answer maid’ – a demon, rather than a witch-like figure (Barbour 1997: 161 (book 4, lines 201-20)). Barbour then added a long account of a similar prophecy given to Earl Ferrand of Flanders by his mother, who was a ‘Nygramansour’ and raised ‘Sathanas’ to foretell his fate (Barbour 1997: 165 (book 4, line 242)). The Devil was still involved, but so was a female necromancer. Both prophecies turned out badly for the recipients.

[19] Andrew of Wyntoun (c.1350-c.1422), who completed his chronicle of Scotland in about 1420, gave the first recorded account of the Macbeth prophecies (Farrow 1994). Macbeth was a real Scottish king (r. 1040-57) who featured prominently in histories. In Wyntoun’s time, he was seen as a significant king from whom the current royal line did *not* descend; it was important to the pedigree of later monarchs that they descended from Malcolm III (r. 1058-93) and his queen, St Margaret. Macbeth was portrayed negatively, as a usurper.

[20] According to Wyntoun, Macbeth saw ‘thre werd sisteris’ in a dream; they prophesied to him that he would become Thane of Cromarty, Thane of Moray and then king. The story implied that he initially disbelieved: it was only when he received these two thanages that ‘Than thocht he nixt for to be king’. Macbeth himself was apparently ‘gottin on selcouth wiss’ (in an extraordinary manner), for his father was ‘a deuill’, who told his mother that ‘na man suld be borne of wif / Off power to reif him his lif’. Wyntoun was not committed to this tale of Macbeth’s parentage, however; ‘I wait nocht’ (I know not), he said, whether that story was true (Andrew of Wyntoun 1903-14: IV:272-281). Finally, Wyntoun related the Birnam Wood prophecy, but without giving it a provenance – Macbeth’s enemies simply knew that he ‘trowit ay in sic fantasy’ (always believed in such fantasy) (Andrew of Wyntoun 1903-14: IV:298-299).

[21] So far, then, the prophets shown to us by Barbour and Wyntoun are a female necromancer, the three ‘weird sisters’ – evidently not human – and the Devil. The first of these might be a witch, though the word is not used. However, the rise of the intellectual idea of the witch during the fifteenth century would lead to increasing attention being paid to witchcraft (Bailey 1996; Kieckhefer 2006). It is thus significant that narrative prophecies in Scotland begin to be attributed more clearly to witches during this period.

[22] Our next prophecies come from a contemporary Latin account of the assassination of King James I, in 1437, which survives in a translation by the English scribe John Shirley (c.1366-1456). The assassination was foretold by two prophecies, one of which came from a possible witch. The king was about to cross the Firth of Forth, on his way to Perth, when he was warned by ‘a womman of Irland, whiche clepid herselfe a sothesaiere’ that ‘and [i.e. if] yee passe this watur ye schulle neuyr turne ageyne onlyve’. The king was astonished, especially since he had ‘redde it in a prophesie that in the selfe same yer the kinge of Scottes schuld be slayn’. He crossed the water nevertheless, encouraged by one of his knights who told him that the woman was a ‘drunken foole’. Reaching Perth, James encountered another of his knights who was nicknamed the ‘King of Love’, and told him that ‘It is not long agoone sithe I redde a prophessie in a olde booke, that I sawe howe that this yere schulde a kinge be slayne in this lande’; he warned the nicknamed knight to take care, since he himself would ‘ordeyne for my seure keping sufficeauntly’ (Connolly 1992: 54-55).

[23] Shirley thus related both an oral prophecy and one written in a book. Both were inexorable, though the second had enigmatical elements. Here we need to focus on the first prophecy, given orally by the ‘womman of Irland’. She was probably a Gaelic-speaking Highlander rather than an Irishwoman. Was she a witch? Later in the narrative, she came to Perth to make a second attempt to warn the king; Shirley said then that she ‘clepid herselfe a devinresse’ (Connolly 1992: 57). The Latin terms lying behind Shirley’s translation are unknown, and further vernacular terms may lie behind the Latin, but these terms, like ‘soothsayer’ and ‘divineress’, were probably distinct from the term ‘witch’ (or Latin ‘*malefica*’) understood as a worker of evil. They seem more likely to have been terms that a woman might plausibly have applied to herself – Shirley was explicit that she did so – or have allowed others to apply to her.

[24] The assassination gave rise to a second story of prophecy, concerning the Earl of Atholl, one of the conspirators, who was among those executed for the deed. Shirley said that Atholl at his execution was ‘corowned with a corowne of iren’ (Connolly 1992: 65). He did not mention a prophecy, but here his account needs to be read alongside that of another contemporary, Walter Bower (1385-1449). At the end of his chronicle written in the 1440s, Bower also told the story of James I’s assassination. He mentioned that Atholl hoped to be king, ‘because (as is commonly said) he believed for a long time previously on the strength of a statement by a certain woman fortune-teller [*mulieris sortilege*] that he ought to be crowned with the splendid crown of the kingdom’. Bower did not explicitly mention Atholl’s mock coronation, but he compared Atholl’s fate with two other stories (one English, one German) of people being led astray by the Devil’s false promises, the second of which involved a mock coronation, and concluded that ‘this earl had a wholly similar experience’ (Bower 1987-98: VIII:330-331 (book 16, ch. 36)). This was thus an example of an enigmatical prophecy by a ‘woman fortune-teller’.

[25] John Mair (1469-1550) gave another account of Atholl’s prophecy in his *History of Greater Britain* published in 1521. According to this, ‘a certain witch [*magice mulieris*]’ is said once to have declared to him that before he died he should wear the crown; and to her prediction he trusted not a little’ (Major 1892: 365; Major 1521: fol. 136v). This, however, was Mair’s only such story; he related the story of Macbeth without mention of witches or prophecy.

[26] Two connected writers in the early sixteenth century provided a group of narrative prophecies. Hector Boece (c.1465-1536) published a *History of the Scots* in Latin in 1527, which in 1531 was translated into Scots by his younger contemporary John Bellenden (c.1495-1545×8); the freedom which Bellenden exercised in his translation gives both versions independent interest here (Royan 1998). Boece’s work included detailed accounts, probably invented by him, of Scotland’s legendary early kings. One of these, Natholocus, was the victim of an unusual witch’s prophecy. The king ‘turnit him to wicchis, divinouris

and spa men [*divinantium, auruspicium, præstigatorumque opera*]' to learn his fate. He sent a courtier to Iona, 'quhair ane crafty wiche [*anum quandam necromantica arte insigne*]' was duelland for the tyme'. The witch told the courtier that the king's fate would be to be slain by one of his own followers, namely himself. This horrified the courtier, but he soon realised that the king might suspect him if he heard the story, and so felt compelled to kill the king out of self-protection (Boece 1938-41: I:222; Boece 1527: fols. 92r-93r).

[27] Bellenden's phrase 'wicchis, divinouris and spa men' may include an element of pleonasm, but the 'wicchis' were presumably female, like the one on Iona, while the 'divinouris' may have been male, like the 'spa' (spae, i.e. prophetic) men. Boece's Latin original began slightly differently, with three largely interchangeable masculine terms, all meaning 'diviners', before introducing a female figure, for whom a more literal translation would be an 'old woman noted for the art of necromancy'. Her residence on Iona made her a Highlander, like Shirley's soothsayer – an exotic figure for most of Boece's readers. Her prophecy was unusual in containing within itself so much of the dramatic energy needed to bring it to pass; it was both more than a prediction and, in some ways, less than a prediction.

[28] Boece and Bellenden told a detailed version of the Macbeth story. In the opening prophecy, Macbeth and Banquo encountered 'thre weird sisteris or witches, quhilk come to thame with elrege clothing [*tres apparvere muliebri specie, insolita vestitus*]', telling Macbeth that he would be king and Banquo that he would be a progenitor of kings. Neither believed at first. 'Nochttheles, becaus all thingis come as thir wiches divinit, the pepill traistit thame to be werd sisteris [*Verum ex eventu postea parcas aut nymphas aliquas fatidicas diabolico astu predictas suisse interpretatum est vulgo, quum vera ea que dixerant evenisse cernerent*]' (Boece 1938-41: II:150; Boece 1527: fols. 255-258). In translating Boece's '*parcas aut nymphas aliquas fatidicas diabolico astu predictas*' (which might more literally be translated 'Fates or nymphs with some diabolical prophetic gift'), Bellenden may well have taken the phrase 'weird sisters' from Wyntoun. Bellenden's phrase 'elrege clothing' emphasised magic more than Boece did; the word 'eldritch' meant something like 'otherworldly' (Hall 2007). Bellenden's word 'witches' was an even freer translation, since the adjective '*diabolico*' was the closest that Boece approached to the concept of witchcraft, and he had made it fairly clear that the apparitions 'in the shape of women' (*muliebri specie*) were not human. As for the later Macbeth prophecies, concerning the king's fate, Boece and Bellenden respectively attributed them to '*muliercula futurorum prescia*' (literally 'a little woman with foreknowledge of futures') and to 'ane wyche' (Boece 1938-41: II:157; Boece 1527: fol. ccxli [sic; follows fol. cclx]). Again Bellenden was more confident than Boece that he was dealing with human witchcraft.

[29] Boece closed his chronicle with the execution in 1437 of the Earl of Atholl. Here, Boece and Bellenden were closer together in their terminology. As part of the Earl's ritual humiliation, 'thai crounitt him with ane croun of haitt irne, becaus ane wyche [*Saga*]' sayid to him, he suld be crounit afoir his deth, throw quhilk he levitt all his life in vane hoipe, traisting ay be vane illusionis to conques the croun' (Boece 1938-41: II:401; Boece 1527: fol. 368). Thus Atholl's prophecy had not only become clearer than before, it had also been attributed more clearly to a witch.

[30] A second translator of Boece, William Stewart (fl. 1499-1541), completed a metrical version of his chronicle in the 1530s. Like Bellenden, he adopted the newer vocabulary of witchcraft, though less comprehensively. The witch in the story of Natholocus, though in league with the Devil, was still not a conventional lower-class woman:

Baith Erss and Latyne scho culd reid and wryte, [*Gaelic*]
 And in that craft wes cunning and perfyte;
 Thingis to cum perfiltie scho culd tell,

So hamelie wes with the angellis of the hell. *[intimate]*
 (Stewart 1858: I:518-519)

Stewart did not call Macbeth's initial apparitions witches; they were three women with clothes 'of elritch hew, / And quhat tha war wes nane of thame that knew'. They vanished and went to heaven or hell, and were thus not human. The Birnam Wood prophecy, however, came from 'witchis'. The Earl of Atholl's prophecy came from 'ane fals propheit' whose identity was unspecified (Stewart 1858: II:636-637; II:656; III:561).

[31] John Knox (c.1514-72) wrote his *History of the Reformation in Scotland* mainly in the 1560s. His most detailed account of witchcraft and prophecy arose from the rebellion against Queen Mary by the Catholic Earl of Huntly in 1562. The royal forces, based at Aberdeen, fought Huntly's at Corrichie. Defeated and captured, Huntly fell from his horse and died in his captors' presence, perhaps from heart failure or apoplexy. So much is part of the historical record. Knox's account continued:

The Earl, immediately after his taking, departed this life without any wound, or yet appearance of any stroke whereof death might have ensued; and so, because it was late, he was casten over-thorte [i.e. across] a pair of creels, and so was carried to Aberdeen, and was laid in the Tolbooth thereof, that the response that his wife's witches had given might be fulfilled, who all affirmed (as the most part say) that the same night should he be in the Tolbooth of Aberdeen without any wound upon his body. When his Lady got knowledge thereof, she blamed her principal witch, called Janet; but she stoutly defended herself (as the devil can ever do), and affirmed that she gave a true answer, albeit she spoke not all the truth; for she knew that he should be there dead: but that could not profit my Lady. She was angry and sorry for a season, but the Devil, the Mass, and witches have as great credit of her this day [in margin: '12 June 1566'] as they had seven years ago (Knox 1949: II:61).

This was a remarkably circumstantial narrative of enigmatical prophecy. Since Knox had expertise in theology, it is appropriate to glance at its theological implications. The 'principal witch', Janet, was explicitly in league with the Devil. However, she was clearly presented as having had correct foreknowledge. Her prophecy was not a curse: she had not caused Huntly's defeat and death, only known of them in advance. It could be argued that Janet had caused Huntly's fate indirectly, luring him on with maliciously deceitful words. But a more straightforward reading would be that she was courteously attempting to avoid bearing bad tidings. Lady Huntly seems to have forgiven her, accepting her good intentions. There was even a suggestion of inexorable fate in the statement that Huntly was placed in the tolbooth 'that the response that his wife's witches had given might be fulfilled'. But in other writings Knox explicitly denied the existence of 'fortune', 'adventure' or 'destinie', which he regarded as pagan concepts (Knox 1848-64: V:32, V:119; cf. Kyle 1986: 409). So where did Janet obtain her information? Evidently from the Devil.

[32] Yet it was a theological commonplace to deny that the Devil could foretell the future – or, more precisely, to point out (as Calvin did) that any foreknowledge he had could come only from God (Calvin 1583: 533-534; cf. Clark 1997: 189). God, of course, also shared His foreknowledge with His prophets, who very much included Knox himself. Knox had in 1548 implied that his own foreknowledge was superior to the Devil's: 'The head of Sathan shall be trodden down, when he beleeveth surely to triumphe' (Knox 1848-64: III:10). Knox's keen sense of his own prophetic vocation should perhaps have sensitised him to the falsity of the Devil's claims in this department (Dawson 2015: 34-35, 47, 52, 288-291; Goodare 2005). He condemned the 'Mervallis of Merlin' and the 'dark sentences of prophane prophesies' (Knox 1848-64: III:168). However, he seems to have accepted this particular prophetic narrative without question.

[33] Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie (c.1532-c.1586), in the 1570s, wrote a continuation of Boece's history of Scotland. This brought him into the reign of James III (r. 1460-88), concerning which he related a narrative prophecy. James's courtier 'Cochrane', seeking to poison the king's mind against his brothers,

caussit ane witche to come and pronunce to the king that he sould be suddenlie slaine witht ane of the neirest of his kin of the quhilk the king was werie effeirit and desyreit of the witche how scho had that experience of him or gif ony man had caussit hir to speik the samin, and scho denyit that ony man caussit hir bot that scho had the rewelatioun thairof be ane familiar spreit (Lindesay 1899-1911: I:166).

As a result James had his brothers arrested. However, he later faced a rebellion in which his son took part:

he rememberit the wordis of the witche that said to him befor that he sould be distroyit and put doune be the neirest of his kin, quhilk he saw appeirandlie for to come to pase at that tyme; and be the wordis of the forsaid witch elustrine [i.e. illusion] and intisment of the dewill he tuik sic ane waine suspitioun in his mynd that he desyrit and haistalie tuik purpos to flie (Lindesay 1899-1911: I:207).

Pitscottie seems to have thought that the witch had real powers, although she had been suborned by Cochrane, and despite the phrase 'waine suspitioun'; these powers came from a 'familiar spreit' (a personal demon), and James also experienced 'intisment of the dewill'. He later moralised that the episode provided a lesson to kings not 'by inchantment of sorcerie or witchcraft to seik knowledge or support of the devill as this febill king did' (Lindesay 1899-1911: I:210).

[34] John Leslie (1527-96), Bishop of Ross, made less use of prophecies in his *History of Scotland*, written in the 1560s and 1570s. He did relate the story of Natholocus, attributing the prophecy to '*anum quandam nigromanticae artis peritam*' (an old woman skilled in the arts of necromancy), which his contemporary translator James Dalrymple rendered as 'a certane alde witche' (Leslie 1675: 111 (book III, ch. 30); Leslie 1888-95: I:181). However, Leslie omitted the prophecies concerning Macbeth and James III. He told the story of the Earl of Atholl's mock coronation, briefly attributing the prophecy to '*Sagæ*', which Dalrymple rendered as 'the witches'; the definite article may be significant, as we shall see (Leslie 1675: 267 (book VII, ch. 101); Leslie 1888-95: II:46).

[35] George Buchanan (1506-82), in his *History of Scotland* published in 1582, relied principally on Boece but added his own line of political analysis, particularly concerning tyrants and their relationship with the political community. According to him, the courtier who killed Natholocus wished to rid the land of a tyrant. However, Buchanan related the prophecy, attributing it to an 'old woman' ('*anum*'), and adding that the story 'bears a greater resemblance to fable than truth' (Buchanan 1829-32: I:197; Buchanan 1582: fol. 35r).

[36] Buchanan was also partially sceptical about Macbeth's prophecies. The initial prophecy he related thus: 'Macbeth, who had always despised the inactivity of his cousin [King Duncan], cherished secretly the hope of seizing the throne, in which he is said to have been confirmed by a dream'. In this, 'three women appeared to him of more than human stature [*tres foeminas forma augustiore quam humana*]', of whom one hailed him Thane of Angus, another, Thane of Moray, and the third saluted him king' (Buchanan 1829-32: I:338; Buchanan 1582: fol. 73r). Macbeth evinced no disbelief, and the prophecy merely encouraged him to put into effect a deed that mundane motives had already led him to contemplate. Buchanan rejected the later Macbeth prophecies altogether: 'Here some of our writers relate a number of fables, more adapted for theatrical representation or Milesian

romance than history, I therefore omit them' (Buchanan 1829-32: I:343; by 'Milesian romance', he meant the stories of the sons of Míl, the legendary founders of the Irish nation).

[37] Buchanan repeated Boece's story about the execution of the Earl of Atholl, concluding: 'Thus the prediction was either fulfilled or eluded [*vel impletum, vel elusum est*']; and truly such predictions have often similar accomplishments' (Buchanan 1829-32: II:52; Buchanan 1582: fol. 115v). By '*elusum*' Buchanan meant 'baffled' or 'foiled' – the earlier sense of the English word 'eluded'. This was an intriguing interpretation of the enigmatical prophecy: it could be said to have been fulfilled, or not to have been. Buchanan may have been drawing attention to the prophecy's double meaning, or perhaps expressing scepticism about such prophecies more generally – though the logical clarity of his phrasing fell short of its rhetorical elegance. It is not entirely obvious that he wished to give his readers a single clear explanation of this prophecy.

[38] Buchanan's story of James III mentioned witches, but subordinated them to 'One Andrews, a physician, who was reported to have great skill in astrological predictions', who came to the Scottish court.

By this astrologer, it is said, the king was told, that he was in imminent danger of death from his own relations; and the oracle agreeing with a response of some witches [*maleficarum mulierum*], – to whose arts he was immoderately addicted, – who had prophesied, that the lion should be killed by his whelps, he degenerated ... into a most insatiable tyrant (Buchanan 1829-32: II:140-141; Buchanan 1582: fol. 138r).

However, neither astrologer nor witches appeared again, and the king's downfall occurred without reference to prophecy. James's tyranny was important to Buchanan, but he saw it as essentially political; James was wicked and dangerous, not weak and foolish.

[39] Buchanan presented James III's tyranny as leading up to the alleged contemporary tyranny of Mary Queen of Scots. He attributed few or no magical or prophetic motives to her. However, he related one curious episode of narrative prophecy, when Scottish and English witches commented on her proposed marriage to Lord Darnley, which would take place on 29 July 1565:

In order to accelerate the marriage, the predictions of some witches in both kingdoms [*maleficarum ex utroque regno*] were likewise urged, who prophesied, if the nuptials were consummated before the end of the month of July, great advantage would arise to the kingdoms; but if delayed beyond that time, great loss and disgrace would be the consequence. Rumours were at the same time spread everywhere, respecting the death of queen Elizabeth, and the day even mentioned, on which she would die – a prediction apparently more portentous of a domestic conspiracy than of the art of divination [*divinationem*] (Buchanan 1829-32: II:414-415; Buchanan 1582: fol. 208r).

Possibly Buchanan intended this as an enigmatical prophecy, but, if so, it was an unusual example of the genre. The story seems to have originated in a report circulated at the English court before the marriage (Parry 2012: 41). Buchanan may have failed, or been unwilling, to shape it into a fully retrospective narrative, in which the prophecy moved towards fulfilment. The prophecy was not obviously fulfilled – unless Mary's overthrow in 1567, the climactic event towards which Buchanan's whole *History* moved, could be interpreted as the 'great advantage ... to the kingdoms'. Ultimately, Buchanan seems to have kept his readers guessing.

[40] In 1594, the Earl of Argyll received a royal commission to lead his Highland army against the rebellious Earl of Huntly (grandson of the rebel of 1562) in north-eastern Scotland, in which Argyll was defeated at the battle of Glenlivet. Alexander McQuhirrie, a member of Huntly's army, wrote an account of the campaign that described a 'witch' (*venefica*) or 'enchantress' (*incantatrix*) employed by Argyll. She

delivered oracles to Argyle, worthy a Pythian spirit: One of her prophecies was, that, on the following Friday, which was the day after the battle, Argyle's harp should be played in Buchan; and the bagpipe, which is the principal military instrument of the Scottish mountaineers, should sound in Strathbogie, Huntly's seat. Nor were her vaticinations entirely vain; for both the harp and bagpipe sounded in Strathbogie and Turef; but the General was not there to enjoy their most agreeable music (Dalyell 1801: I:150-51; for the original Latin, see NLS, Adv. MS 33.2.36, fol. 51r).

This was a characteristic enigmatical prophecy, recorded by a writer who seems to have met the witch in person.

[41] John Spottiswoode (1565-1639), Archbishop of St Andrews, in his history written mainly in the 1620s, gave a new and remarkable narrative prophecy. This came in his account of the killing of Captain James Stewart in 1596. Stewart's enemy James Douglas of Torthorwald heard that Stewart was travelling nearby, having boasted that he would not leave his way for any of the name of Douglas.

He made after him with three of his servants, and overtaking him in a valley called Catslack, after he had stricken him from his horse, did kill him without any resistance. It is said that when Captain James saw the horsemen following, he did ask how they called the piece of ground on which they were, and when he heard the name of it, he commanded the company to ride more quickly, as having gotten a response to beware of such a part (Spottiswoode 1847-51: III:40).

This was a strikingly clear example of an inexorable prophecy. No prophet was named, but Stewart was clearly supposed to have consulted someone about his destiny, and to have received a 'response' from that person.

[42] In the early seventeenth century, the poet and scholar William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649) revised the story of James III. When James's followers deceived the king, they, 'knowing him naturally superstitious, an admirer and believer of Divinations, suborn an aged woman one morning as he went a hunting to approach him, and tell, she had by Divination, that he should beware of his nearest kinsmen'. There was also 'a Professor of Physick, for his skill in Divination brought from Germany', who 'told the King, that in Scotland a Lyon should be devoured by his Whelps'; the Archbishop of St Andrews, too, gave the king warnings through his knowledge of geomancy (Drummond 1681: 135). However, as with Buchanan, the story did not culminate in the prophecies' fulfilment; instead the warnings petered out, and, when James was eventually overthrown, prophecy played no part.

[43] What was new was that Drummond intended his readers to understand that the prophecy of the 'aged woman' was false, and that all such prophecies were 'superstitious'. His concluding analysis of James's character included a telling statement: 'He was of a credulous Disposition, and therefore easie to be abused, which hath moved some to Record he was given to Divination and to inquire of future accidents: which if it be credible was the fault of those times' (Drummond 1681: 179). This last phrase was crucial; he was in fact historicising the whole topic of prophecy.

[44] Sir John Scott of Scotstarvit (1585-1670) was Drummond's brother-in-law and occasional scholarly colleague. He compiled his book, *The Staggering State of Scottish Statesmen*, towards the end of a long public career. By turns racy and moralistic, it was a meditation on the mutability of fortune as illustrated in the careers of Scotstarvit's contemporaries and recent predecessors in public office. In it he included two narrative prophecies. The first concerned the Earl of Morton, Regent of Scotland in the 1570s. Morton

got a response to beware of the Earl of Arran, which he conceived to be the Hamiltons, and therefore was their perpetual enemy; but in this he was mistaken, seeing, by the furiosity [i.e. insanity] of the Earl of Arran, Captain James Stewart was made his guardian, and afterwards became Earl of Arran, and by his moyen Morton was condemned, and his head taken off at the market-cross of Edinburgh (Scot 1872: 37).

What Morton had failed to realise was that James Hamilton, 3rd Earl of Arran, was insane, and in October 1581 (shortly after Morton's execution) Captain James Stewart would be made Earl of Arran in his place. Captain James briefly dominated Scottish politics in the mid-1580s. His countess, Elizabeth Stewart, was a flamboyant and much-resented figure in her own right, and several contemporaries accused her of involvement with witchcraft (Grant 1999: 98-99; Baer-Tsarfaty 2019: 47-48). Scotstarvit told the following story of the pair:

His lady got a response from the witches, that she should be the greatest woman in Scotland, and that her husband should have the highest head in the kingdom; both which fell out; for she died, being all swelled in an extraordinary manner; and he, riding to the south, was pursued by the Lord Torthorald ... and was killed, and his head carried on the point of a spear (Scot 1872: 43).

A clearer example of enigmatical prophecy could scarcely have been devised. Yet Captain James's killing was the same event about which, as we have seen, Spottiswoode had related an equally clear tale involving an inexorable prophecy.

[45] The last prophecy relevant to this survey comes from the natural philosopher George Sinclair (d. c.1696). In 1685, he published his *Satans Invisible World Discovered*, a collection of tales of witchcraft and demonism. He included an account of Major Thomas Weir, the notorious former covenanter executed for incest in 1670. Being told of a 'Mr. Burn', Weir 'started back' and 'repeated the word Burn four or five times'. He was also said to have avoided the Liberton Burn. 'Some have conjectured, that he had advise to be ware of a Burn, or some other thing, which the equivocal word might signify, as *burn in a fire*. If so, he has foreseen his day approaching' (Sinclair 1685: appendix, unpaginated; emphasis in original). This narrative circulated in several versions, and James Fraser, minister of Wardlaw, was more definite in his: 'men have conjectured and not a miss [sic] that he had been advised to beware of a Burn' (Larner, Lee & McLachlan 1977: 262).

[46] The idea of witches' prophecies faded among the elites of later seventeenth-century Scotland. Reasons for this will be discussed later, but just now it can be noted that Sinclair's interest was narrowly focused on the need for mutual reinforcement of science and religious orthodoxy; he was concerned to prove the existence of the Devil, not so much of witches. The period also saw a flurry of new, more recognisably scientific interest in the related phenomenon of second sight. Second sight was not normally attributed to witches (Hunter 2001a). In the early eighteenth century, Robert Wodrow amassed anecdotal material on 'remarkable providences'; this ranged widely but included no recognisable witches' prophecies of the kind that had been told and retold for the previous three centuries (Wodrow 1842-43; for providence more generally see McGill & Raffe 2020).

Structural Analysis

[47] These narratives of witches' prophecies form a rewarding group for structural analysis. This can be carried out in several ways: by character, by plot and chronology, by mode of narration, and by the function of the prophecy itself.

[48] Claude Bremond has offered a classification of characters in narratives: the Hero, the Ally and the Adversary (Bremond 1980: 394-396). Anyone in a narrative can be treated as their own 'hero', but here it is most useful to consider the recipient of the prophecy – the central protagonist – in this way. The prophet thus becomes the 'ally'. The ally may be motivated by benevolence towards the hero, or by reward, past or future. This is relevant because some of the witches' prophecies, usually the inexorable ones, were unsolicited warnings, while others were commissioned by the recipient as patron of the witch. The 'adversary' is either a direct enemy of the hero, or else an alternative beneficiary if the hero's preferred outcome does not materialise.

[49] It is worth asking whether there is a further 'ally' in the form of the agent who brings about the prophecy: implacable Fate, or fickle Fortune? God, or the Devil? Then, if (for instance) it is Fate, does Fate merely know the future, or also cause it? The question of agency adds dramatic interest, although an agent is rarely specified in narratives of prophecy. Boece attributes Natholocus's declining prospects to 'unstable Fortune' (*instabilis fortuna*), but does not link this specifically with the prophecy (Boece 1527: fol. 92v). A clearer exception is William Stewart, whose witch in the Natholocus story says that her prediction is the 'will of God' (Stewart 1858: I:520). She is then called a liar, but at least the question is raised. In folktales, certainly, events do not occur by chance. Given the unfavourable outcomes of many of these prophecies, it might even be suggested that an agent who brings them about is actually an 'adversary'. A similar suggestion might be made about the prophet herself, at least in the case of the enigmatical prophecies – though there is little evidence of moral condemnation of the witches who give such prophecies. Nevertheless, among the morals to be derived from prophetic narratives, the theme of women's untrustworthiness should not be overlooked.

[50] Bremond has also offered a classification of plot structure. His initial states for a narrative are 'Amelioration to obtain' or 'Degradation expected'. This is then subdivided; the first may progress to either 'Amelioration obtained' or 'Amelioration not obtained'. Progress may also be interrupted by an 'enclave' – a phase of reverse movement, such as a temporary setback suffered by the hero – which can then be analysed as a separate component of the plot (Bremond 1980: 390-394).

[51] Most of the inexorable prophecies (which are usually unsolicited) are unfavourable, thus establishing for the recipient an initial state of 'Degradation expected'. The enigmatical ones sometimes start that way too, when the prophecy is merely about avoidance of death, so that the hoped-for outcome is 'Degradation avoided'. Sometimes, however, there is a more direct promise of success (such as victory in battle), and these can be categorised as beginning with 'Amelioration to obtain'. There is then usually an amelioration of the protagonist's position, followed by an ultimate phase of degradation.

[52] Although the narratives are mostly very short, some of them employ what Gérard Genette calls 'anachronies', narrating events out of chronological order (1983: 35-48). Typically these occur when the chronicler begins, not with the prophecy itself, but *in medias res*, explaining towards the end that the protagonist had received an earlier 'response' – a warning against such a person or place. Anachronies are uncommon in folktales, but often encouraged in literature. This may help us to see these narratives as products of a literary culture.

[53] The narratives can also be analysed for the level of knowledge or interiority that they display about the protagonists (Genette 1983: 161-211). Do the narrators tell us what the protagonists are thinking? Wyntoun displays a high level of interiority. He knows Macbeth's

thoughts, and so do Macbeth's enemies. Boece and other narrators of the story of Natholocus rehearse the courtier's conflicting thoughts and motives in detail, just as a modern novelist might do. Indeed, most of the narrators assume the same omniscient stance towards their characters.

[54] A few narrators take a different position. Barbour does not profess to know Edward I's thoughts – the main reason that he brings in the story of Earl Ferrand is to explain Edward by analogy; but he does take the conventional position of knowing Ferrand's thoughts. More distinctively, Shirley merely describes what James I does and says, and attributes no motives beyond those that James expresses. The fact that Shirley (or, strictly, the author whom he is translating) stops short of giving the whole story of the Earl of Atholl's prophecy may also indicate his stance as an observer. McQuhirrie, similarly, positions himself as an observer of the Earl of Argyll's witch. Sinclair's account of Major Weir explicitly uses external observation of Weir's behaviour to infer the prior existence of a prophecy. If Sinclair's account indicates that the traditional omniscient position had become harder for narrators to maintain, this may go far to explain why the tradition died out at this point.

[55] Several of the narrators include a framing phrase like 'It is said that'. This does not prevent them from knowing the characters' thoughts, but it may indicate a reluctance to commit themselves to the story. Wyntoun makes this explicit in his discussion of Macbeth's parentage, though this appears to be unusual. Knox's 'as the most part say' may also be unusual in suggesting a popular origin for the story. For most of these writers, 'It is said that' seems to do little more than to indicate that this is the story as they have it – which is, indeed, the normal epistemological status of their texts, none of which are burdened with much in the way of source citation or analysis. The growth of record scholarship in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries would eclipse this kind of narration of the past, as we shall see.

[56] Some narrators, notably Spottiswoode, position their account of the prophecy at the end of the story to which it relates, making it a kind of optional extra. This practice, too, became unsustainable with Sinclair; he professed to document his sources, such that 'It is said that' was no longer a credible source. Overall, then, 'It is said that' is not a seriously sceptical phrase. The question of scepticism will be discussed further below.

[57] The question of the characters' point of view, related to the question of interiority, may shed light on the nature of the plot. Anne Wilson has argued that the pursuit of a 'single point of view' is characteristic of a 'magical plot' – a plot driven by a magical structure, as opposed to one that just uses magical devices (2001: 4-5, 9-10, 17-22 and *passim*; quotations at 17). There is no need to pursue the question of a 'magical plot' far here, but magical characters with no 'point of view' of their own are certainly noticeable in some of our narratives. The weird sisters appear before Macbeth for no obvious reason, and have no motive to deliver their prophecy to him. Macbeth has a point of view, but the weird sisters do not. Shirley's soothsayer may wish to prevent a tragedy when she arrives to warn James I, but that hardly explains her function in the story. The witch on Iona may conceivably wish to supply accurate information about Natholocus's future for the sake of her professional reputation, but the story certainly does not give her that or any other motive, and only the courtier really has a point of view. Not all the narratives have such a clearly magical structure; some of the witches seem to have distinct motives as they try to please their patrons. There is thus a gradation in the extent to which magical structures enter into these narratives.

[58] How did prophecies actually work? A structuralist approach to this question might begin by considering whether the prophecies are 'functional', connoting action, or 'indicial', connoting mood and character (Barthes 1975: 247-250). Do they drive the plot, or explain it? This links back to the question of agency – whether, for instance, implacable Fate has

decreed what will happen to the protagonist. On the whole the prophecies are ‘indicial’. The very fact that the outcome has been foretold means that interest must fall more intensely on the protagonist’s attitudes as the plot unfolds – their hubris, suspicion, jealousy and so forth.

[59] One of the prophecies does drive the plot. Natholocus’s courtier has had no thought of killing the king until he hears the prophecy that he will do so. This prophecy is unusual in that it can be interpreted as psychological trickery – though the trick only works if Natholocus, at least, believes in prophecy. Comparable prophecies are hard to find; there may be material in Greek or Roman legend, but a detailed study of this topic is beyond the scope of the present article. There is at least one comparable Scottish story, related by Robert Kirk in 1692 in his treatise on second sight. A man in Killin, Perthshire, entered an alehouse in which a seer was sitting. The seer rose hurriedly and was about to leave, when he was asked the reason for his haste. He ‘told, that the intrant man should die within two dayes, at which news the named intrant stabb’d the seer and was himselfe executed two dayes after for the fact’ (Hunter 2001b: 89). This is not a psychological trick – which suggests that trickery is not essential to the Natholocus story; but the prophecy does drive the recipient’s subsequent behaviour in the same way.

[60] The Natholocus story bears comparison with the weird sisters’ prophecy to Macbeth. These two narratives have been linked as instances of ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (Royan 2000: 80-81). To some extent they are, but the weird sisters’ prophecy is unusual in being a positive prophecy. And Macbeth, unlike Natholocus’s courtier, is not placed in an inescapable dilemma. Here it should be mentioned that the weird sisters really know that Macbeth will be king; they are not just putting a policy proposition to him. Buchanan, unusually, presents the story in the latter way, but even this still gives the prophecy an illustrative role in the development of Macbeth’s character.

[61] One narrative adds an additional detail about causation and contingency, and in doing so illustrates the seemingly inescapable logical contradictions implicit in narrative prophecies. Shirley says of James I that ‘fortune was to hym aduerse’ when he finds himself without a weapon when the assassins burst in (Connolly 1992: 61). But to infer that this is a personified ‘Fortune’ who has impelled the soothsayer to warn him, and has impelled his knight to counsel him to disregard her warning, would be erroneous. The king’s predicament is simply, as we would say, ‘unfortunate’. Shirley means his readers to understand that James might well have happened to have a weapon with which he could have fended off his attackers. Yet this would have nullified the prophecy, which is illogical; it is not a valid prophecy if it can be nullified. Although it is couched in conditional language (‘If you cross this water ...’), it is still not a practical warning (‘Make sure you have a weapon ...’). Indeed, to be a prophecy, it cannot be a practical warning. Whether inexorable or enigmatical, it has to be fulfilled. The logical contradictions are obscured only because when we reflect on the story we already know that James’s adverse fortune did, in fact, leave him without a weapon. This exercise in partial deconstruction of Shirley’s narrative illustrates the extent to which prophecy narratives, like narratives of time travel, are hard to articulate in a consistently logical fashion from the point of view of causation.

Scepticism

[62] A simple model of how the prophecy stories changed over time might be that their hearers moved from belief to disbelief. At the beginning of our period, the stories were thought to be true, while, at the end, they were thought to be untrue, or were moved to a realm of fiction. This model is acceptable as a broad outline, but it requires qualification and development. Throughout the period, there were sceptical currents of thought (Stephens 2013; Bailey 2013).

[63] The earliest line of scepticism was theological – which we find articulated in the fifteenth century by a poet, Robert Henryson (c.1420-c.1490). His ‘Orpheus and Eurydice’ included a passage against foretelling events ‘quhilk [i.e. which] nane in erd [i.e. earth] may knaw bot god allane’, and attacking ‘wichcraft, spaying and sorcery / and superstitioun of astrology’ (Henryson 1906-14: III:85-86 (‘Orpheus and Eurydice’, lines 576, 588-589)). Beside this, Wyntoun’s doubts about Macbeth’s parentage look positively credulous; he had no doubts about prophecies as such, merely an objection to a particularly unlikely one.

[64] Renaissance Scots were well aware of the idea of the enigmatical prophecy, and sometimes used this to criticise prophecies in general. *The Complaynt of Scotland*, an anti-English political tract of c.1550 probably written by Robert Wedderburn (c.1510-1555×60), attacked the English for giving ‘ferme credit to diuerse prophane propheseis of merlyne and til vthir ald corruppit vaticinaris’, and said that ‘al propheseis hes doutsum and duobil expositionis’. Wedderburn cited four examples: Caiaphas (from John 11:49-52); Croesus, King of Lydia; Pyrrhus, King of Epirus (this and the last from the Delphic oracle); and Ferrand, Earl of Flanders (whom we have already encountered from Barbour). However, any actual scepticism was subordinate to Wedderburn’s political purpose. He argued that the English prophecies of Anglo-Scottish union *would* take effect, ‘bot nocht to their intent’; rather the Scots would conquer the English (Wedderburn 1979: 64-67).

[65] In the later sixteenth century, Buchanan tried to present himself as a more sustained sceptic. He reduced the role of prophecy as a motor in his narrative. He was, among other things, a dramatist, so it is interesting that he rejected part of the Macbeth story because it was like a drama. His contemporary, Leslie, was less open in his scepticism, but his omission of so many prophecy stories is surely significant. Also noteworthy is his translator Dalrymple’s attribution of the Atholl prophecy to ‘the witches’ – an abstract phrase rather like ‘the weather’ or ‘the midgets’. Whoever Atholl’s witches were, Dalrymple did not think that they were identifiable individuals. Scotstarvit, too, wrote of ‘the witches’ in an abstract way.

[66] King James VI, in his book *Daemonologie* (1597), displayed firmer theological scepticism. He wrote that the Devil’s predictions were ‘parte true, parte false: For if all were false, he would tyne [i.e. lose] credite at all handes; but alwaies doubtfulsome, as his Oracles were’ (James VI 1982: 15 (book I, ch. 6)). This echoed the *Complaynt of Scotland* in its statement that all prophecies were ‘doutsum’, though it perhaps lacked the philosophical sophistication of a scholar like Martin Delrio who discussed in detail how demons could use their natural skills and experience to make predictions with a ‘degree of probability’ that partly made up for their lack of true foreknowledge (Del Rio 2000: 153-154 (book IV, ch. 2, q. 2)).

[67] James’s main discussion of prophecy came when he wrote of witches and fairies. Witches, he thought, experienced visits to fairy hills (which were, in his view, demonic illusions); from the fairies they gained knowledge, ‘fore-telling the death of sundrie persones’. James, knowing from theology that the Devil lacked true foreknowledge, was uneasy, but did his best to explain:

I thinke that either they haue not bene sharply inough examined, that gaue so blunt a reason for their Prophesie, or otherwaies, I thinke it likewise as possible that the Deuill may prophesie to them when he deceiues their imaginaciones in that sorte, as well as when he plainely speakes vnto them at other times[,] for their prophesying, is but by a kinde of vision, as it were, wherein he commonly counterfeits God among the Ethnicks (James VI 1982: 52 (book III, ch. 5)).

James thus thought that witches could prophesy, that they believed that they received the power to do so from fairies, and that their main purpose in doing so was to foretell people’s deaths.

[68] With Drummond, in the early seventeenth century, we enter a new and more fundamental phase of scepticism. He historicised prophecies: people believed in them in those days, but we don't believe in them now. Ironically, Drummond's contemporary and brother-in-law Scotstarvit did believe in them – but Scotstarvit was among the last to use narrative prophecies as clear motors for his stories. Euan Cameron has argued that the discourse of 'superstition' shifted in this period from being false and demonic to being false and ignorant (2010: 247-269). This is the fundamental difference between James VI and Drummond: it was only Drummond who portrayed witches' prophecies as false and ignorant.

[69] The classical manner of historical writing, as a continuous narrative without citation of sources, declined during the seventeenth century. Newer styles of history engaged with disciplines like law and philology (Grafton 2007: 189-254; Hicks 1988: 120-131, 150-165). The value and methods of history were debated, with increasing concern to establish veracity. To distinguish history from fiction and to avoid charges of bias, historians increasingly cited documentary evidence and displayed a critical attitude towards their predecessors (Burke 2012). A Scottish contribution to this debate came from the theologically-minded mathematician John Craig, who in 1699 formulated mathematical equations and axioms to measure the amount of 'suspicion' attaching to various 'witnesses' to history (Craig 1964; see in general Allan 2012).

[70] Drummond, writing in the 1640s, was the last Scottish representative of the older tradition of historical narration. He invented speeches, cited no sources, and derived his material from previous narratives rather than documents (Rae 1975: 26-27, 36-37). Narratives of witches' prophecies had flourished in this genre. After its decline, there was no natural home for the prophecy narratives. News reporting, which increased in the later seventeenth century and might have included prophecy narratives, did not in practice do so. In Restoration England there was increased elite scepticism about prodigies, portents and prophecies (Walsham 1999: 218-224). Scottish witches' prophecies were not argued out of existence, but it seems to have been similar scepticism that caused their decline.

Credibility

[71] This discussion of contemporary scepticism can be followed by a question that may seem paradoxical in the extreme. Could some of these narratives of witchcraft and prophecy, after all, be true? Or at least partly true?

[72] Most of the stories, of course, are not remotely credible today. Their very use of standard narrative patterns is an indication that they have been fictionalised. The two different foretellings of the killing of Captain James Stewart – an inexorable prophecy according to Spottiswoode, an enigmatical one according to Scotstarvit – cannot both be right; but they indicate how this process of fictionalisation occurred. People saw the hand of Providence (or Fate or Fortune) in Stewart's precipitate rise and fall, and sought to construct a prophetic narrative that would express their feelings about it and give meaning to it. Unusually, they failed to reach a consensus as to what the precise meaning was, so we have two alternative narratives. We know a good deal about how narratives could be shaped and reshaped by people with an interest in a particular version of a story, so it is not surprising to find such a process occurring in these prophecy narratives – and to find the results being treated as credible (Davis 1987; Rosenthal 2003).

[73] Yet this last point is a reminder that these narratives of witches' prophecies were told as true, or as probably true, and evidently carried some credibility at the time. No doubt they had moralistic or entertainment value, like media reports about today's 'celebrities', and were not necessarily read primarily for their veracity. But, again like media reports, they may well have had some connection with reality; reports that were completely incredible would not have been valued. Narratives of the defeat or downfall of a prominent political

figure – Atholl in 1437, Huntly in 1562, Argyll in 1594 – were definitely news (Pettegree 2014: 4). Thus, individual stories may have been just stories, but behind them may lie a general pattern. With this in mind, it may be argued that a few of the narratives stand out: they were written by contemporaries, and have at least some possibility of connection with reality.

[74] The first contemporary narrative is Shirley's account of James I's assassination. This is full of circumstantial detail that is usually corroborated by other sources. Some details are missing from his account of the Highland soothsayer – the names of the two knights involved, the title of the old book – and these parts of the narrative may well be retrospective inventions. But his story of Atholl's prophecy is much more credible. Both Shirley and Bower gave lengthy accounts of the conspirators' elaborately-staged and gruesome public executions, and Atholl's mock coronation surely did occur as they described it. We also know from other sources that the assassination had been planned with care and in detail (Brown 1992). From this, it is not a large step to infer that the planning, like that of some other conspiracies, could really have included the enlisting of prophetic aid, and that the authorities could have learned of the prophecy of Atholl's coronation either from his own confession or from the confessions of the other conspirators.

[75] Knox's narrative of Lady Huntly's witches is also contemporary. Knox did not participate in the Corriche campaign, but he was in touch by letter with the English ambassador, who did, while the royal army was led by several of his Protestant confidants who might well have provided him with information (Thomas Randolph to Sir William Cecil, 24 Sept. 1562, Bain 1898-1969: I:653-4; Knox 1949: II:60). Tellingly, there is further, independent evidence of Lady Huntly's reliance on prophecy. Shortly before Mary's return to Scotland, in August 1561, the Countess circulated a prophecy that the queen would never set foot in Scotland (Randolph to Cecil, 24 Sept. 1561, Bain 1898-1969: I:555). The final point in Knox's account of Lady Huntly was that 'the Devil, the Mass, and witches have as great credit of her this day [in margin: '12 June 1566'] as they had seven years ago'. This indicates that Knox had further, more recent information about her. Knox seems also to have had earlier episodes of prophecy in mind, since Corriche had been less than four years ago. Probably, therefore, Lady Huntly did consult women, whom others called 'witches', for prophetic purposes.

[76] Another credible contemporary narrative is McQuhirrie's account of Glenlivet. The fact that he was on the spot gives it high credibility. He evidently did not hear Argyll's witch deliver her prophecy, but she was presumably interrogated after her capture, with enough information being obtained from her to establish that she should be considered to be a witch. She is stated to have died, and there is no suggestion of a trial, so she may well have been killed out of hand; Lowlanders did not always recognise Highlanders as deserving legal protection. Her anonymity, similarly, fits with Lowlanders' known reluctance to record Highlanders' barbarous and unfamiliar names (Goodare 2004: 233-236). Overall there is nothing particularly incredible about this story.

[77] Several other members of the elite are known to have consulted witches, or people likely to have been known as witches, though a desire for foreknowledge is not specified in the sources. Archbishop Patrick Adamson in the 1580s repeatedly consulted Alison Pearson, a reputed witch, for purposes of healing (Parkinson 2003; Maxwell-Stuart 2001: 98-107). Katherine Ross, Lady Foulis, in about the same period, consulted magical practitioners in order to make away with her stepson; these practitioners were described as 'witches' at their trial, and may have been identified as such even before then (Sutherland 2009: 29-58).

[78] If people known as 'witches' were really making prophecies, how does this relate to our perception of witchcraft as an imaginary crime? Scholars studying witch-hunting have generally argued that people did not call *themselves* witches; 'witch' was what their

aggrieved neighbours called them. ‘Witch-hunting always began with the pointing finger extending away from the self’, as Christina Larner wrote (1981: 135). Scholars have also assumed that, when someone was called a witch, this was likely to lead to that person being arrested, tried and eventually executed for witchcraft. But the narratives in this study focus on the comeuppance received by the recipient of the prophecy; they rarely involve the prosecution of the witch. The witches executed in early modern Scotland form a largely separate group from the prophetic witches in these narratives.

[79] There were, however, prophecies made by magical practitioners, usually called ‘charmners’ in Scotland. Charmners’ work in folk healing often involved the giving of prognoses. Prophecy also entered into love-magic when people wanted to know the identity of a future spouse (Miller 2002; Davies 2008). Many cases that the authorities treated as ‘witchcraft’ involved magical practitioners who had ‘foreknowledge’ and gave ‘responses’. John Stewart, in Irvine in 1618, was interrogated ‘upon quhat foreknowledge he had forespokin’ a person’s death (*Trial* c.1855: 4). The presbytery of Deer in 1624 ratified an act against charmners, diviners and ‘seekares of responses’ (Cramond 1930: 11). Various accused witches claimed foreknowledge that came from fairies (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 182). John Fraser, minister of Tiree, recorded in about 1700 that an old woman in his parish ‘was accustomed to give Responses ... which were found very often true, even in future contingent events’ (Hunter 2001b: 196).

[80] It seems likely, therefore, that some members of the elite really consulted magical practitioners about their future, and that the prophecy narratives studied in this article provided a cultural framework within which these consultations were recognised and discussed by others. Some of these practitioners were recognised as ‘witches’, or allowed themselves to be thought of as ‘witches’. And some of the practitioners’ advice was recognised as ‘prophecy’, or looked like ‘prophecy’ (a term that was used in some, but not all, of the narratives surveyed above). The use of the evocative but perilous appellation ‘witch’ may well have been a fluid issue, subject to negotiation – and, perhaps, to evasion and circumlocution. The modern magical practitioners and their clients studied by Jeanne Favret-Saada rarely used direct words like ‘witch’, and habitually spoke of the subject with circumlocutions (1980: 98-99). Overall, then, these narratives of prophecies by witches display connections to real magical practices.

Conclusions

[81] In most of the narratives analysed in this article, the main protagonist was a male political figure like King Macbeth who sought a ‘response’ from a witch or witches or other prophetic figures. The narrative told of his downfall, and of how this had been ominously foretold. A structural analysis shows that the prophecies embedded in these narratives were of two contrasting types: ‘*inexorable*’ – which the recipient disbelieved in – and ‘*enigmatical*’ – which the recipient believed in, but misunderstood.

[82] As for the ‘witches’ themselves: the older stories told of female figures with magical powers, but these figures were not unequivocally called witches, and sometimes they were not human. Over time the prophecy narratives show a rise of the ‘witch’, so called. Yet these ‘witches’ were rarely presented simply as evil. This article extends the cultural range within which late medieval and early modern witchcraft can be understood.

[83] The cultural dynamic of these prophecy narratives lies in their interaction between elite and popular culture. As Peter Burke has argued, the upper classes also participated in popular culture, at least until the later seventeenth century. They attended popular festivals and listened to folksongs. Elite men, those with most education, were connected to much popular culture by their womenfolk – mothers, wives and female servants (2009: 49-56). This interaction between cultures is built into the narratives themselves, in two related ways.

[84] The first point of interaction concerns the social class of the protagonists. In narrative after narrative, an elite man obtains a prophecy from a lower-class woman. He could have sought foreknowledge in some more erudite way (astrology and geomancy are occasionally mentioned), but he chooses to consult an uneducated woman with witch-like special powers. The woman *speaks* her prophecies, with their oral delivery prominent in the narrative. This contrasts with the textual nature of prophecies like those of Merlin.

[85] The second point of interaction between elite and popular concerns the narratives themselves. Juliette Wood has argued that 'folkloric patterns are an integral part of the chronicle form'. She finds a variety of 'traditional' material in Scottish chronicles, including 'anecdote, legend, personal-experience narrative and accounts of portents'. She distinguishes portents from written prophecies, which are uncommon in folklore – but narrative prophecies also require to be distinguished from these written ones (1998: 130, 131; cf. Hancock 1999/2000). Such prophecies overlap with portents in some traditional tales (Bruford 1979: 163). Prophecy narratives exemplify the diachronic interconnectedness also found in popular proverbs predicting future weather. In these narratives, past and future are interconnected (Fox 2000: 154-158; Wood 1989: 60-62).

[86] People at all social levels told stories of prophetic witches. The surviving written narratives are from the elite, but the common folk often told stories of downfalls of prominent men – stories that might well incorporate narrative prophecies. Popular ballads were interested in downfalls of prominent figures (e.g. Child 1884: nos. 178, 181, 195, 196, 203). Most of these stories were forgotten once the downfalls faded from the headlines, but a few survived to attract wider attention. And the tradition could generate new prophecy stories. Buchanan repeated stories from previous authors, but Spottiswoode's and Scotstarvit's stories were new.

[87] The written prophecy narratives are also likely to have influenced popular culture directly. This is hard to demonstrate from the Scottish evidence, but a case-study from northern England illustrates the likely processes. The prophecies of Mother Shipton, which seem to have originated in print in the 1640s, were being spoken among the common people of Westmorland in the 1680s (Fox 2012: 337). Mother Shipton is also notable as being a prophetic woman, often described as a witch, who was not considered straightforwardly evil (Oldridge 2010: 220-222).

[88] This leads to a crucial point about the idea of the 'witch'. In these narratives, the witch is rarely an evil figure. The great man who listens to her prophecy, and whose downfall ensues, usually gets his just deserts. Macbeth, the Earl of Atholl, the Earl and Countess of Arran, Major Weir and numerous others: they are the bad guys. The witch occasionally attracts a mildly disapproving adjective like 'crafty', but she is rarely condemned outright. Nor is she ever brought to trial. Readers of these downfall stories regarded the fulfilment of her prophecy with satisfaction.

[89] On the other hand, the witch in the narratives is not a *good* figure. She is still a witch, or (in the earlier stories) a woman employing magical means that are probably unacceptable in orthodox religion. The very fact that she consorts with bad characters like Lady Huntly connotes moral dubiety. She may have told her patron the truth (directly or indirectly), but that hardly makes her a mouthpiece for divine providence.

[90] There were two kinds of uncertainty or perhaps ambiguity in these prophecy narratives. Firstly, there could be uncertainty as to whether a given prediction came from God or not. Secondly, even if the prediction was certainly not from God, there could be uncertainty as to where it did come from. Theologians recognised that the Devil had some predictive ability, even if this derived merely from his superlative natural skills and experience. Thinkers influenced by folklore, or more versed in the classics than in theology, might be willing to admit a wider range of predictive abilities, with ideas such as oracles,

Fate or Fortune being hard to ignore. It could in theory have been argued that all predictions other than divinely-inspired prophecy were simply 'vain' and empty, but in practice almost all writers in this period recognised a range of genuine predictive powers – and were often prepared to leave open the question of how these powers operated. But one thing was clear: the predictions in the narratives mostly came from women. How should those women be understood?

[91] Over time the prophecy narratives show a clear rise of the 'witch', mainly occurring in the early to middle years of the sixteenth century. The older stories told of female figures with magical powers, but these figures were not unequivocally called witches, and sometimes they were not human. Boece, who did not usually write about witches, exemplifies the older tradition; his younger translator, Bellenden, who did, exemplifies the newer one. Before Bellenden, there were hardly any explicit witches in the prophecy narratives; after him, most of the narratives were explicitly about witches, or were about 'responses' that seem to have come from witches. This is what we might expect, given that this period was one of increasing witch-hunting. But this was not just about witch-hunting, and Lyndal Roper has called for witchcraft to be studied within a broader cultural range. Roper's own study shows how demonologists used humour and fantasy to create ideas that were both horrifying and entertaining (2006). Here we see that witchcraft ideas were taken up by writers in further genres – chronicle and history writers.

[92] To recognise a prophetic woman as a 'witch' was one thing, but the narratives that do so do not take one further step that was theoretically available to them at that point. They do not comment in a generic or analytical way on what a 'witch' is, or on witchcraft generally. Pitscottie's 'familiar spreit' and McQuhirrie's 'Pythian spirit' may allude to the best-known woman diviner in the Bible, the so-called witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28:3-25; for discussion see Zika 2005). The witch of Endor was well known to demonological writers in Scotland, who used her to comment on witchcraft generally, but Pitscottie and McQuhirrie are the only narrative writers who even allude to her. This vagueness about the theory of witchcraft is linked to the vague way in which the prophetic women in the narratives are characterised as individuals; hardly any of them have names, for instance. In this the 'witches' of the later narratives may well retain some of the otherworldly attributes of the earlier prophetic females who are not called witches.

[93] Narratives of witches' prophecies, therefore, arose in Scotland out of an earlier tradition of narrative prophecies ascribed mainly to non-human beings – either the Devil or magical females. How far back that tradition goes is unclear. The models of inexorable and enigmatical prophecy seem already familiar to Scotland's earliest narrative chroniclers in the fourteenth century. However, this tradition may be less likely to have been accompanied by the seeking of 'responses'; the earlier stories, by identifying non-human figures as the normal source of foreknowledge, offered fewer opportunities for their characters to seek out a human magical practitioner for this purpose. The prophetic women in these stories have affinities with the late medieval 'lady' who makes prophecies for Thomas of Erceldoune in the romance of that title: she is a composite figure, part fairy queen and part classical Sibyl (Malay 2010; these are not narrative prophecies, however). There were at least some real prophetic women at this time, since the Earl of Atholl seems to have consulted one in 1437. But late medieval conspiracies more often employed male necromancers or learned magicians (Harris 1996; Kittredge 1929: 79-84). During the sixteenth century, narratives about human witches making prophecies became normal, and stories of downfalls shifted to incorporate human female witches as prophets.

[94] Were there patterns in the vocabulary used for prophecy itself, as opposed to the vocabulary used for prophetic women? Not all the writers denominated individual prophecies by a definite noun, and the choice of a specific noun does not seem to have been important. Buchanan and McQuhirrie used the terms 'prophecy' and 'oracle'

interchangeably, with Buchanan also using 'prediction'. Shirley too wrote of 'prophecy'. The single most common term was 'response', used by Knox, Spottiswoode and Scotstarvit (Barbour's 'answer' and Sinclair's 'advice' may also be taken as equivalent to 'response'). Other terms included 'revelation' (Pitscottie). Some writers used generic terms like 'divination' (Drummond). Overall, the fluidity of vocabulary for prophecy in the narratives displays fewer patterns than the transition towards 'witchcraft' in the vocabulary for prophetic women.

[95] Some points may be made about the role of witches' prophecies specifically in elite culture. Renaissance themes emerged in some of the narratives; Wedderburn and McQuhirrie mentioned the Delphic oracle. There is a contrast in register between Boece's elaborate Latin vocabulary – '*auruspices*', '*præstigiatores*', and so on – and the demotic terms preferred by his translator Bellenden – 'spae men', 'weird sisters'. But Boece also used the non-classical term '*necromantica*'. There may be more to be discovered about these narratives' use of classical sources.

[96] Philosophical considerations also present themselves, since some of the narratives' authors were distinguished thinkers. Mair, Boece and Buchanan had European reputations, and several others had high intellectual attainments. If they had been asked how witches' prophecies worked, how would they have replied? Knox's and Buchanan's narratives tried hardest to address this question, but it can hardly be said that their answers were entirely clear or consistent. Knox hinted at an abstract force shaping events, but it looked less like divine providence than it should have done; while Buchanan hedged his bets. Overall, the question of how prophecies worked was conspicuously left open. Which perhaps it had to be, given the magical nature of prophecy and the strong intellectual tradition of hostility to magic.

[97] By about 1700, prophecy narratives had disappeared from educated discourse, and elite men no longer consulted magical practitioners about their future. Popular stories about prophetic witches may well have continued, but the cultural link across the classes traced by this article had been severed. The link seems to have been strongest in the sixteenth century. The earlier narrative prophecies had concerned magical women who were not necessarily human, and thus did not offer such a plausible model for action. If the growing interest in witchcraft led to more narrative prophecies being ascribed to witches, perhaps this could be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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