

“MOMENTARY GRACE”: THE PLATONIC UNDERTONES OF HASTINGS’ PROPHECY IN *RICHARD III*

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This paper purports to analyse Hastings’ prophecy in *Richard III* (3.5.96-107) as an instance of prophetic “inspiration” in the light of Socrates’ speech before his death as recounted in Plato’s *Apology*. This work conceives his act of foreseeing as the prophet’s partaking of the idea of divinity. Socrates’ foreboding of his accusers’ punishment is the result of a new experience after his death sentence: his progress towards the world of the dead, his contact with the universe of ideas. Socrates explains the state of death as “a migration of the soul from this to other place.” That other place, the world of ideas, is atemporal, and his visionary contact with it at the moment of death confers upon him a perspective of timeless truth. He is, therefore, acquainted with past, present, and future, all in one, and is therefore authorised to prophesy. The case of Hastings, after Richard’s death sentence against him, reproduces the Platonic text in dramatic mood and ideological structure. A detailed analysis of this crucial scene will prove Hastings’ prophecy an exceptional case in the context of the play’s use of prophetic discourse. Other uses of prediction in *Richard III* are viewed as counterpoints to Hastings’ example. Their mechanisms being made up of technical devices, (i.e. *techne*), these do not achieve the visionary character and the degree of success of divine inspiration. Other Platonic and Renaissance texts are used to explain the differences between these forms of seeing into future events. This analysis may throw light on more global interpretations of the use of prophetic discourse in Renaissance historical drama.

Shakespeare’s time was a period of great controversy as regards the various means to obtain information about future events, as well as the uses and interpretations that may have been made out of this data. A concern for future events is something common to all peoples and ages, and its praxis has always found a solid ground on a wide social spectrum. There exists, however, a great difference when the actual events concern a vast amount of wealth and empowered people. That is the case of the attempts to make prognostications about the future of a monarch and a nation. For this reason the status of a prophet at the court, as it was Merlin’s case, was always at stake, mostly in difficult times for the crown or the dynasty.

John Dee, renowned magician, provides an excellent example of this controversy, having suffered persecution by Mary Tudor, and having been consulted by Queen Elizabeth on many occasions (Dobin 1990: 1-8). There were also many works that attacked the behaviour of false prophets: in 1583 Henry Howard wrote a tract entitled *A Defensative against the poyon of supposed Prophesies*. Montaigne in the essay “Of Prognostications” (*Essais*, I, XI), first translated by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1603 (the year of Elizabeth’s death), and Bacon, following some of the arguments in Montaigne, several decades later, in 1625æwrote an essay entitled “Of Prophecies” (*Essays*, XXXV) did also denounce the same idea.

This practice of prediction was forbidden under death penalty during most part of the 16th century, and mostly when concerning the crown. A prohibition with a strong canonical precedent in the scriptures, as the books of law condemned non-priestly and non-prophetic divination : Leviticus. xix, 31; xx 6, 27; and Deuteronomy, xviii 10-12 (see also Lust 1974: 139):

And the soul that tourneth after such as have familiar spirits, and after wizards, to go a whoring after them, I will even set my face against that soul, and will cut him off from among his people. (Lev. xx,6)

Only one way of predicting the future has escaped the laws of western cultures: that is divinely inspired prophecy. That sort of prophecy is rare, at least, in comparison with the rest, abounding in astrologers, necromancers, interpreter of dreams etc., which, and I quote Bacon “should serve for Winter talk by the Fire side”.

In Shakespeare’s plays many sorts of prediction coexist, divine and non-divine. I will analyse one instance of the divine sort, which is found in *Richard III*, and then, it will be considered it in the light of Socrates’ prophecy, uttered right after his death sentence and right before his death, as recounted in Plato’s *Apology*. Socrates’ foreboding of his accusers’ punishment is the result of a new experience after his death sentence: his progress towards the world of the dead, his contact with the universe of ideas. Socrates explains the state of death as “a migration of the soul from this to other place.” That *other* place, the world of ideas, is atemporal, eternal, and his visionary contact with it at the moment of death confers upon him a perspective of timeless truth. Plato understands that the soul, winged, may move upwards and gaze upon truth, and is, from whence, bestowed with the knowledge of the divine: “It (the soul) beholds absolute justice, temperance, and knowledge, not such knowledge as has a beginning and varies... but that which abides in the real eternal absolute” (*Phaedrus*, 247,E).

In Shakespeare’s play, Richard of Gloucester draws innumerable plans to usurp the Crown. His plans include getting rid of everyone that may potentially be heir to the crown, and, of course, eliminate those who willingly or accidentally may interpose in his way to the throne. Hastings, loyal to Richard’s family, is reluctant to the idea of skipping the order of right heirs to the crown, and his consequent opposition earns him his condemnation to death.

As Hastings is about to be put to death by Richard’s decision, he delivers the following prophetic speech:

O momentary grace of mortal men,
Which we more hunt than the grace of God.
Who builds his hope in air of your good looks
Lives like a drunken sailor on a mast,
Ready with every nod to tumble down
Into the fatal bowels of the deep. [...]
O bloody Richard! Miserable England,
I prophesy the fearfull'st time to thee
That ever wretched age hath look'd upon.
Come, lead me to the block: bear him my head.
They smile at me who shortly shall be dead. (3.4.96-107)

The fact that Hastings seems capable to deliver such a clearly prophetical speech, boasting such clairvoyance, does not seem congenial with his character as it is represented in the rest of his part in the play. Hastings has been one of the many who have tried to remain true to the crown and its conventions, though once his loyal attitude has begun to represent a hurdle in Richard of Gloucester's way to the crown he has been sentenced to death under the accusation of treason. In this scene Hastings' character seems to be rather the counterpoint of the true, dull and short-sighted Hastings who fails to appreciate and understand the clearest signs that for the audience, on the contrary, are meaningful. Thus he comes short in reading King Richard's most forward and clear intentions that for the rest are made visible simply in his looks:

HASTINGS. His Grace looks cheerfully and smooth today:
There's some conceit or other likes him well
When that he bids good Morrow with such spirit.
I think there's never a man in Christendom
Can lesser hide his love or hate than he,
For by his face straight shall you know his heart.
STANLEY. What of his heart perceive you in his face
By any livelihood he show'd today?
Marry, that with no man here he is offended,
HASTINGS. For were he, he had shown it in his looks. (3.4.48-57)

From hence, the audience may infer a character whose innocence exceeds all the rest; an ingenuous character that is easily fooled; one who is shallow, plain, and even a simpleton in this particular moment. His inability to read people's faces correctly translates into his own ineptitude to hide his own feelings and thoughts under complex or inflated speech. His oratory lacks rhetorical training, and his language is the language of truth: not intricate but straightforward. His speech is not mediated by any technical devices, conceals nothing at all, but plainly exposes his heart. He lacks, therefore, the art "techné" of a language with double intentions, both to speak and to read concealed messages. *Techné* could be described as craft, art, or technique, which in pre-platonic literature was a fundamental part, together with inspiration, in poetic composition (Murray 1996: 8-10). Plato denies the technical aspect of composition, and he brings forth a comparison between the rhapsode and the prophet: both depend not on *techné*,

but on a divine force (*Ion* 533D-Eæ534 A-D, and 536 A).

Furthermore, Hastings is not acquainted with the language of the supernatural. He shows an extreme ineptitude in reading supernatural signs, omens that are very telling for other characters, as it is for Stanley:

HASTINGS. Cannot my Lord Stanley sleep these tedious nights?
 MESSENGER. So it appears by that I have to say.
 First, he commends him to your noble self[...]
 Then certifies your lordship that this night
 He dreamt the boar had razed off his helm;[—]
 Therefore he sends to know your lordship's pleasure
 If you will presently take horse with him
 And with all speed post with him toward the north,
 To shun the danger that his soul divines. (3.2.5-17)

In this case Hastings refuses to ascribe any meaning to these signs: he proves rational, but it is this rationality the main cause of his failure to understand the irrational. He denies any meaning to “the mockery of unquiet slumbers” (III.ii.26) and does not accept them as “signs” until they are fulfilled. Omens and signs of the future are made present to Hastings’ potential perceptibility in two separate stages. At a first stage signs appear only as signifiers: void of meaning. And it is so that Hastings cannot make up any rational conclusion from their perception. On the second stage the signified is revealed, and Hastings makes an eloquent speech arranging together signifiers and signifieds:

HASTINGS. Woe, woe for England; not a whit for me—
 For I, too fond, might have prevented this.
 STANLEY. did dream the boar did raze his helm,
 And I did scorn it and disdain to fly;
 Three times today my foot cloth horse did stumble,
 And started when he looked upon the Tower,
 As loath to bear me to the slaughter-house. (3.4.80-86)

On another occasion Hastings makes an attempt to foresee future events, but the play will prove his failure.

HASTINGS. But I shall laugh at this a twelve-month hence,
 That they which brought me in my master's hate,
 I live to look upon their tragedy. (3.2.55-58)

These moments may serve as a draft of Hastings’ character, and especially having proved his inefficiency to understand and build up a discourse that is not strictly rational. It must follow that the prophecy above quoted is an extremely odd utterance in his discourse. It is a duty to discern the conditions that make him speak thus: so tellingly and accurately. In order to do so, it seems convenient to draw a parallel instance from another work: Plato in *The Apology* tells the trial of Socrates, who was unjustly sentenced to death. Socrates makes his defence forwarding the argument that he refuses to use rhetoric in order to move the audience to clear him. He defends, as Hastings, the lack of rhetoric or technical devices in speech:

Perhaps you think, gentlemen, that I have been convicted through lack of such words as would have moved you to acquit me, if I had thought it right to do and say everything to gain an acquittal. Far from it. And yet it is through a lack that I have been convicted, not however a lack of words, but of impudence and shamelessness, and of willingness to say to you such things as you would have liked best to hear. (*Apology* 135)

It may be a mere coincidence in their moral disposition towards speech and appearance, but there is a further coincidence which suits better our purpose. As they are both about to be executed, about to say their last speech, their language undergoes a sudden change, and they speak of a revealed truth:

And now I wish to prophesy [crhsmwdhsai] to you, O ye who have condemned me; for I am now at the time when men most do prophesy, the time just before death. And I say to you, ye men who have slain me, that punishment will come upon you straightaway after my death, far more grievous in sooth than the punishment of death which you have meted out to me. (*Apology* 39 C)

Both death speeches share similar characteristics: they represent the exposition of a divine truth. It is a speech which has been inspired by God, and which therefore requires no technical skills on the part of the speaker. This is an idea that may be supported by the actual use of the word *crhsmwidoi* (prophecy), which Plato meaningfully selects for this speech. As opposed to this, in other instances in Platonic texts dealing with prophecies, we find other words like *mantiz* (divination), or *projhtai* (interpreter of sacred books or oracles) (Murray 1996: 105, 120).

In the *Ion* 533-534 Plato plays with the idea of poetry and prophecy to emphasise the complete passivity of the poet, based on the necessity of divine inspiration. *crhsmwidoi* and *geomanteiz* appear together in the same kind of context at *Apology* 22C and *Meno* 99C. Both refer to inspired seers, and the latter is opposed to the other term *manteiz*, which is the seer that requires *techné* (*tecnh*): a craft or art (Bluck, quoted in Murray 1996: 120). Another case for different messages implied in the terminology selected is in *Phaedrus* 244 B-D, where there is also a distinction between prophecy that depends on technique, and prophecy that is divinely inspired.

In *Richard III*, prophecies such as the Galfridian prophecy (using animal symbolism) in the dream of the Boar above mentioned, or Richard himself setting "drunken prophecies", and Clarence's prophecy about "G", are all cases that require technical applications for both their elaboration and understanding. On the other hand, Queen Elizabeth's consulting the astrologer for a propitious coronation date in 1559, is a pure case of technical divination, which Plato called "mantikhz" in the *Timaeus* 24D. They are obscure or not plainly readable and require a skilful interpretation. Socrates and Hastings' prophecies, on the contrary, are clear enough not to require interpretation, which is a sign that theirs are divinely inspired, which "presents itself as the perfect referential text: A correct meaning" (Dobin 1990: 22). However Galfridian symbolism (as called by Rupert Taylor in *The Political Prophecy in England* 1911, quoted in Dobin 1990) of the type seen

in the dream about the boar, or the “G” prophecy affecting Clarence, abound in obscurantism; using symbols with loose interpretations and meanings, and therefore escaping any plausible interpretation. What may be explained, according to Dobin (1990: 25), is, in Derrida’s words “the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*” (Derrida 1970: 249). This type of prophecy is also considered by Montaigne, who describes it for the use of a language “obscur, ambigu et fantastique”, to which the authors ascribe no clear sense or meaning so that in the future they may do it as they please (*Livre I, XI*, 45). However, Montaigne, a few lines below, also associates prophecies of divine inspiration to Socrates.

In both prophecies, Socrates’ and Hastings’, there is a change of tone and rhythm with regard to the rest of the speeches uttered by the same characters. They are both characterised by a tonal elevation and an increase in harshness. Hastings’ prophecy is probably his only speech that may be considered to be made as a strong and decided statement. On the other hand, Socrates’ seriousness, but at the same time ironical discourse, achieves a climax of bitterness with a stern and harsh discourse, in a “section by far the sharpest in tone [in the whole *Apology*]” (Strycker and Slings 1994: 211-213).

The change in tone could also be explained not only by the seriousness of their concern, but also by their proximity to their next future, preparing for the departing of their soul, and consequent ascension to the world of the *primum mobile*. The contemplation of the divine world and the world of the dead brings forth a vision of the universe with no temporal distinction. As Plato explains in the *Timaeus*:

He planned to make a movable image of Eternity, and, as He set in order the heaven , of that Eternity which abides the unity He made an eternal image, moving according to number, even that which we have named Time. For simultaneously with the construction of the Heaven He contrived the production of days and nights and months and years, which existed not before the heaven came into being. And these are all portions of Time; even as “Was” and “Shall be” are generated forms of Time, although we apply them wrongly, without noticing to Eternal Being. For we say that it “is” or “was” or “will be”, whereas, in truth of speech, “is” alone is the appropriate term; “was” and “will be”, on the other hand, are terms properly applicable to the Becoming which proceeds in Time, since both of these are motions. (*Timaeus* 37D-ff.)

The entrance to the upper world, or to the non-physical world, made possible by the movement of the soul above mentioned in Socrates’ words, implies the breakdown of earthly time, and the vision of the future is made clear to the newcomer souls. It is also similar to the explanation given to Dante in the Inferno canto X, where he is explained that for the dead in inferno distant events are clear, though the present is forbidden to their sight.

El par che voi veggiate, se ben odo,
Dinanzi quel che 'l tempo seco adduce,
En el presente tenete altro modo.
“Noi veggiam, come quel c' ha mala luce,

le cose "disse "che no son lontano:
contanto ancor ne splende il sommo duce;
quando s'apressano o son, tutto è vano
nostro intelletto; ... (Inferno Canto X, 97-104)

It is the moment to consider what is the role of Hastings' prophecy within the play. Considering as well that it was presumably an extrahistorical element, since it is not included in Holinshed, nor in More's *Richard III*. The prophecy is therefore a dramatical device, serving as a counterpoint to the rest of the prophecies in the play, to "plots being laid" and "drunken prophecies" set at court, which contribute to monarchic instability, and results in seditions, and intestine division. But in this case, as in Socrates', it works as a statement of truth, and a vehicle for the speech of the gods, and vengeance and retribution. Mostly as a balance to the evils sown by King Richard's vice-like character.

There is, however, a transcendental issue involved in the uses of prophecy within a historical narrative frame. The political implications of such prophetic moments are still recognisable and valid for the audience: "the Old Testament prophet did not simply express a divine protest to an evil king; he also predicted his imminent downfall. Prophecy is essentially a form of political discourse; the prophet invokes God as the authority superior to, and more powerful than, the earthly powers of church and state" (Dobin 1990: 28).

Furthermore, this prophecy in a history play condenses within a very short time span the two moments of the divine discourse: its announcement through the voice of the prophet, and its fulfilment. There is, however, a final and fundamental coincidence in Socrates' and Hastings' prophecies. Both have something in common that is transcendental to understand the writing of history. Hastings' is presumably Shakespeare's invention, as aforesaid, and Socrates' prophecy (which is included in the so called "third speech" of the *Apology*) has been argued whether it was actually a historical piece. Presumably it wasn't. In fact, Plato originally composed a "third speech" that comprised only 39E1-42A5 (Strycker and Slings 1994: 212), which means that the prophecy, included in in 39 C, was not in the original plan.

This means that there is a special effort on the part of the writers to create a prophecy, which serves as God's mouthpiece. The use of the only non-stigmatised prediction, divinely inspired prophecy, serves the poets as a means to make God proclaim justice, and getting involved in the affairs of his people. Shakespeare thus makes God take the floor on stage, but also on the destiny of the nation. Exactly the same intentions that lead Dante to include in "Hell" all the enemies of his faction and, furthermore, to prophesy their fall. By representing the narrative of providential history, the play upholds institutionalised authority and the divine power behind it.

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