Author’s Note

All primary quotations drawn from unedited early modern texts have been modernised and their orthography standardised throughout. However, primary quotations drawn from modern editions retain the style of that edition. Titles of primary works take modernised and abridged form in my prose but can be found in full in my bibliography. Speech prefixes in drama extracts have been presented in a uniform style. Where it has not been possible to cite line numbers, page numbers or signature marks are given. All references to Shakespeare are taken from The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986; 2005), unless otherwise specified. All references to Shakespeare’s First Folio (1623) are to the digital facsimile of the Bodleian First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays, Arch. G c.7, accessed at firstfolio.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/. All Bible references are to the King James Version.

1 Introduction: Given to Lie

a very honest woman, but something given to lie.

(Antony and Cleopatra, 5.2.246–47)

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

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

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

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

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

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

This contingency is neatly captured by Shakespeare’s perhaps best-known visionary women, the witches of *Macbeth*. The witches offer only balanced contradictions (‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’, 1.1.10) that equate prophecy with fallacy: if foul is fair, then all semantic distinctions are lost and anything and its opposite could be true. This contradiction is also evident in their decision to meet ‘When the battle’s lost and won’ (1.1.4). That prophecy is at once easily proved true (they reappear, as of course the dramatist can ensure, at the end of the battle) and impossible to prove (if the battle is won by Macbeth, it will not be ‘ere the set of sun’, 5: that victory won’t be apparent until after he has killed Duncan). It is also a logical redundancy: if someone has lost a battle, someone has won it. Yet, despite this contradiction, the witches are alone amongst the visionaries discussed here in being believed without question. The reason for this is simple. It is not because there are three witches, able to corroborate each other’s visions (after all, as I discuss in Section 2, Cassandra and Andromache speak together). It is not because they have any demonstrable magic powers: Macbeth and Banquo only encounter three women on the heath.³ It is rather,

³ Complicating this description, Orgel discusses the ‘beards’ of the witches and the ways in which ‘The specifically and dangerously female here expresses itself through masculine attributes’ (1996: 110). The witches (as I also discussed in the case of Joan in Section 4) are condemned by misogynistic expectations of gender which damn them for being female and not being female enough: ‘Witches,
uninspiringly, because their prophecy is favourable: the Macbeths both hear what they want to hear, their own ambitions resounding as if in an echo chamber. The witches both demonstrate the role of prophecy as a means for women to speak, however obscurely, on politics, and also that the chances of that prophecy being believed is contingent not only on the scepticism with which women’s voices are met, but on the content of the prophecy itself: it is easier to persuade someone who is already inclined to agree, as the many visionary women discussed in the following often find out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.1 Believe Women: A Methodology

The vision on stage claims a strange temporal position, existing as it does in the past, present, and future. Shakespeare’s visionary women, even those drawn from history, speak their own destinies aloud, in their present moment. Cleopatra, for instance, imagines a fate in which her life is treated as the subject of a comedy. In describing her prediction, Cleopatra invokes the