

Political Power and Magic

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Abstract

This paper considers how magic power - as a political resource, and as a metaphor for political power - is implicated in current and past thought about sovereignty and domination. Shakespeare's treatments of politics, magic, sovereignty and domination are an illuminating source, relating as they do to the Machiavellian tradition, and to later treatments of the themes by Hobbes and Weber. The question is raised how articulated scepticism about political power relates to scepticism about alleged magic; and how the conduct of Shakespeare's magicians casts light on their conduct qua political actors.

Keywords:

Sovereignty, Domination, Shakespeare, Magic, Power.

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1. Introduction

Considerations of William Shakespeare's contributions to political thought have tended to focus on his partisanship, or, at least, the partisan positions that seem to be supported in his dramas. Debates have focussed on whether Shakespeare (1564-1616) gives voice and space to feminist challenges to patriarchy, or whether, rather, the plays encode in their language and plot structures the inevitable and rightful reassertion of patriarchal domination. (Jardine,1989) Critics have asked how the plays encode sympathy for or condemnation of crowds and the claims of the poor (Dollimore and Sinfield, 1985) and how the dramas with republican or monarchical settings stage distinct versions of sovereignty and different patterns of political domination and challenge. (Tennenhouse,1986) More recently, with revived focus on republicanism in academic political thought and theory, there has been enhanced focus on questions about how Shakespeare understood republican politics and constitutions, and their significance in the context of Tudor and Stewart disputes over the claims and scope of sovereignty. (Hadfield,2005; Armitage Condren and Fitzmaurice eds.,2009)

In this paper I focus on how Shakespeare's dramas go beyond consideration of such questions of constitution and sovereign power, to his wider political concern with the sources of dominating power and resistance. Thus, in my analysis, 'Shakespeare's politics' has much to say about the enlarged field of contestation of authority, and competition not only for the power to govern but also for the power and resources to undermine and subvert, as well as to directly contest and challenge, that power. (Frazer 2016) Here I focus particularly on how one possible source of dominating power - uses of or at any rate a reputation for magic - raise normative as well as phenomenological questions about political power. I do this by reading how magic power is figured, used, and criticised, in *Macbeth* (composed around 1605-6) and *The Tempest* (composed around 1611).(Shakespeare, 1990, 1987)

On the whole, Shakespeare undoubtedly is sceptical about politics. He reserves explicit references to what is 'politic' for ironic comment.(Frazer 2016:510-511) His politicians are mostly machiavellian manipulators (Frazer 2016:511-4; Greenblatt,2009:17), rabble rousers, or windbags. If sovereigns hold on to power, they do it through might and charisma. Often they lose it - victims of violence, or the machinations of rivals. Good rule is susceptible to the turn of fortune's wheel - and, more importantly, to the character flaws of the ruler, and the cunning and ruthlessness of his enemies. There are also numerous suggestions in Shakespeare's dramas that economic clout, or established social status such as that of patriarchs, or military violence, are the effective resources that underpin the power to govern. There are contestations of such power, of course, essential to the plots and narratives, and there are promises of virtuous and wise rule to come, after the play is over. The Aristotelian and Ciceronian ideals of the values of public life, collective decision making, and shared responsibility for state affairs, are not absent from Shakespeare's visions of politics - although they are elusive. It is reasonable to take it that Shakespeare was as familiar with these ideas, as much as he was familiar with renaissance rhetoric and popular machiavellianism. (Nuttall,2007:186; Skinner,2014; Dewar-Watson,2004; Elton,1997). But in the end, patriarchy, or dominance based on wealth, or military might, account for who rules. In my analysis, though, there is always ambivalence, in Shakespeare, about this thesis that political power is reducible to something else. This ambivalence and ambiguity is particularly clear in the dramas in which magic power comes into play in relation to politics.

A relationship between politics and magic is common, both in canonical political theory and also, as we shall see later in this paper, in popular political cultures both historical and contemporary. In Elizabethan and Jacobean Britain magic loomed large, as a factor of the everyday, as a factor in state rule, and as a matter for sovereign concern - by way of the intellectual status of the monarch, and also the sovereign duty to safeguard the state and society against wrong. Study, which connects human learning with natural powers, was thought of as the proper pursuit of monarchs.(Orgel,1987:1; Brooks-Davies, 1983:4-5) Study can result in the discovery and mastery of

the occult powers of natural substances, which produces three dilemmas. First is how to distinguish between good, well intentioned magia, and maleficium or witchcraft used for evil purposes. Maleficium conjures with evil spirits, even the devil himself, to aid with the control of occult powers. If the magus has contact with the spiritual or supernatural world at all (as opposed to gaining understanding of occult powers by way of human wisdom) he engages with angels.(Seymour,1989:30) Second is how to tell the difference between scholarly and lofty, forward looking, study of natural properties (which can be understood as a kind of proto modern science) and commonplace traditional purveyance of spells, forecasts, potions and amulets in the market place (folk superstition, which becomes less salient in societies as levels of uncertainty, risk and want decrease).(Thomas,1971; Henry,2008; Kassell,2005; Macfarlane,2000). The third dilemma is how to distinguish between genuine magic powers (whether maleficium or magia) and the bogus trickery of charlatans and hoaxers.(Greenblatt,1988a:98-9; Butterworth 2008)

In Shakespeare, magic practices are both taken for granted as a reality, and are the object of scepticism - there will be more on this when we examine magic in *Macbeth* and *Tempest*. Scepticism is unambiguously expressed by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who laments that ordinary people don't understand science - thinking of geometry as conjuring, a magic art.(Hobbes,1996:32(ch5,S18); Skinner,2002:82) Skinner understands Hobbes to be echoing a complaint of writers of the previous (that is, Shakespeare's) generation - Skinner quotes John Dee, whose science, magic and politics will be discussed in a later section, making much the same point. More subtly, Hobbes deploys magic as a metaphor for the hierarchy of the roman church under the pope which 'may be compared not unfitly to the kingdom of fairies; that is to the old wives' fables in England, concerning ghosts and spirits, and the feats they play in the night.' (Hobbes,1996:463(ch47,S21)) Hobbes' own aim is to account for absolute sovereignty without recourse to divine right, as a construction of analytic reason and logic alone, repudiating metaphysics and metaphor.(Hobbes,1998:139-40(chXII,S12); Skinner,2002:78) Yet of course, in writing *Leviathan* Hobbes recognises that logic alone will not do,

and has recourse to arresting metaphor in his effort to persuade readers - and citizens - that sovereignty must be absolute. (Skinner,2002:80-86; Stillman,1995)

Shakespeare's representations of sovereign power can informatively be brought into relation with Hobbes' theory of absolute sovereignty. The views of sovereignty - that it can or should be shared, that it cannot be 'absolute', that the bearer of sovereign office is himself subject to the law - that Hobbes sets out to repudiate were explicitly articulated, for instance by Edward Coke (1552-1634) whom Hobbes aims at and cites.(May,2012:226) (Coke's judgement on the limits of sovereign power in the Case of Proclamations 1611 is cited as precedent in the UK judicial review decision about procedures for exiting the European Union in 2017)¹ That the source, the nature, and the limits of sovereignty were open questions is clear from Shakespeare's dramatic treatments of monarchy (Kastan,1986) and, as we shall see, are salient in *Tempest* and *Macbeth*.

Another notable account of the relationship between magic and political powers, of course, is Max Weber's (1864-1920).² The sociological recognition of magic performances and reputation is central to his theory of political domination.(Weber,1978:53,215) Although the use of violence is the defining feature of a political organisation, and in particular of states (political organisations which control territories and the people and resources in them by way of the monopolisation of legitimate violence) the actual use of violence is the last resort, and actual domination is achieved by all kinds of means - control of economic exchange, institutions of law, claims to religious or supernatural authority among them.(Weber,1978:54-6) The authority of magi and prophets, relatively unconstrained by norms or laws, can be sufficient to enforce, and to legitimise, judgements or pronouncements.(Weber,1978:647) Charismatic authority results from the intersection of an individual's special qualities, their successful claim to, and audiences' attribution to them, of 'supernatural, superhuman, exceptional', powers. Typically, these powers are regarded as divine in origin, and the person as having magical capabilities.(Weber,1978:242) Importantly, Weber's analysis constantly emphasises the intersection of forms of power: religion can be used as a

means of intimidation, spirit manifestations to dazzle, and magic power as a threat. In such cases 'magic' is a mask for straightforward violence.(Weber,1978:907)

For Hobbes, sovereignty is based on reason, and on the rightful transfer of natural individuals' power over self, by authorisation, to the public, artificial, individual authority. Shakespeare's dramas articulate scepticism about claims of sovereignty, and in particular show the fictional and performative nature of sovereignty which can only be underpinned by dominating power. For Weber, sovereignty, like other conceits of political theory such as social contract and general will, are fictions.(Kalyvas,2002:122) Weber offers sustained sociological analysis of the ways in which domination is done - and also how it institutes itself politically. Notably, among these possibilities, and particularly salient for the twentieth century, is the form of 'caesarism' in which a single ruler achieves domination over society and institutions, and claims, and secures popular endorsement of, his own charismatic power.(Baehr,2008:59-91; Weber,1978:1125-7; Weber,1994:127-9) Baehr contextualises Weber's evolving conceptualisation of 'caesarism' in the long discourse of what was wrong and right about Caesar's power, with its roots in the republican tradition beginning with Machiavelli.(Baehr,2008:11-13; Machiavelli 1970,1961) Notably, Machiavelli - or, rather, machiavellianism - is a significant source for Shakespeare's representations of political action.(Grady,2000; Frazer 2016:511-514) Further, Shakespeare's representation of Julius Caesar (composed 1599) has decisively made its way into popular understandings and representations of uses of divinity, charisma, political manipulation, and military distinction, as the basis of sovereign claims.(Shakespeare,1984).

This paper focusses on a distinct set of questions regarding the liminal relation between magic and political power. In *Macbeth* and *Tempest* Shakespeare plays a number of bases and dynamics of the power to govern against one another. In what follows we shall see how Macbeth's, the weird sisters', and Prospero's uses of magic in pursuit of domination or, in the case of the weird sisters, subversion, come into relation with alternative bases of political power and ways of ruling - with visions of christian kingship, and with the violences of tyranny, but notably also with an ideal of

open, just, government. The plays explore the problems - to put it mildly - that dog those who deploy a magic shortcut to rule.³ Weber's characterisation of politics as work, labour - 'slow, strong drilling through hard boards' (Weber, 1994a:369) is less legible, less showy, than politics as machiavellian scheming, ducking and diving, or princely riding of the wave, or the exercise of military brilliance to legitimate domination - or magic. But these shortcuts to political power mean that something is lost. What is lost, when the magic shortcut is resorted to, is a question posed by the plays. Considering the question brings into view what kind of political actors, as well as what kind of magicians, Prospero and Macbeth are. More generally, the questions are posed how we should understand magic in relation to political power - as the sign of credulity and confusion in the polity? as the work of charlatans and tricksters? or as a deeper metaphor for a certain ineffable quality of political power itself?

We begin, in section 2, with an examination of how the central struggle for the power to govern is embroiled with magic power, in the two plays. Section 3 puts the dilemmas of the two plays, and questions of how we should interpret them, into the wider historical context of the continuing force of the relationship between magic and politics, whether magic power is taken materially as a political resource, or whether it is understood more metaphorically as an illumination of how politics works. It seems to me that elements of both the material and the metaphorical account of politics and magic are apropos. In the concluding section I turn to how the theatricality of political power sheds light on the constant but shifting, so it seems, imbrication of politics with magic.

2. *Macbeth and The Tempest*

Both of these plays focus on the central character's struggle for the power to govern. Macbeth seeks to achieve kingship, and, having achieved it by regicide, to maintain it. His enemies suffer under his violence and tyranny, regroup to consider their options, pool forces (or not), and eventually overcome him with military power, enabling Malcolm the rightful heir to the murdered

King Duncan to take the throne with the promise of better rule to come. In *Tempest* Prospero has been deprived of the dukedom of Milan. This, by his own admission, is partly because he did not attend to the discharge of his duties in government nor to maintaining his power to govern effectively. But also he had been displaced, and the governing power usurped, by his scheming brother Antonio. Arriving on the island, Prospero continues with his book study and the augmentation of his powers. Effectively he exchanges republican rule as a duke in Milan for authoritarian and absolutist rule in his restricted domain on the island. He enslaves Caliban and keeps Ariel in bondage, exploiting Caliban's bodily labour and Ariel's spiritual magic. He dominates his daughter, both as a child and then later by planning - and arranging - that she marry Ferdinand, the son of Alonso, King of Naples. Following a deal in which Antonio had secured Alonso's support in his overthrow of Prospero, Milan now pays tribute to Naples. Prospero's plan involves bringing about the marriage and simultaneously regaining the dukedom of Milan - thus securing a lasting alliance between Milan and Naples.

Second, though, both plays deepen the layers of politics, beyond this competition for the power to govern, to rehearsal of a range of alternative ways of ruling, which are juxtaposed and contrasted within the action. Macbeth's struggle for sovereignty, his tyrannical power, and his dealings with the witches (and thereby Satan), contrast with the saintly Christian kingship of Edward the Confessor of England, and with the feudal kingship of Duncan in Scotland. The web of established feudal relationships of obligation, allegiance and personal service between Duncan and the thanes at the beginning of the play is fragile, and the play stages a number of disruptions. Individual military distinction and heroism, the kind exemplified by Macbeth during the war at the beginning of the action, gives him a claim to greatness which disrupts the feudal order just as it is central to the logic of that order. Most significantly, feudalism is disrupted by treachery and rebellion - exemplified by Macdonald and then Cawdor (1.2), and then by Macbeth's regicide and usurpation (2.1). The corollary of terror and tyranny is surveillance, spying, and the destruction of social trust and open political dialogue - dramatised in 3.6 when two lords cautiously discuss the

state of Scotland.(Brooke,1990:22) The dispersed power and authority, webs of allegiance and rights of feudal loyalty contrast, in turn, with the pushes to centralisation, unification, sovereign power over the state (represented by Macbeth's aspiration to dominating sovereignty), and the new forms of political allegiance that are so significant in Shakespeare's historical context.(Lowrance,2012)

Tempest, similarly, can be read for the way distinct patterns and ideals of rule crowd together. The basic generative political theme of usurpation (Antonio's usurpation of Prospero's authority and office), is made ambiguous by Prospero's own testimony that his rule as duke had been inadequate, whereas Antonio was the cannier political operator.(1.2.89-96; Orgel,1987:15) The ideal of rule of an autonomous city state - the desideratum of machiavellian princely politics - is compromised by inter-state relations. In the end Prospero regains his dukedom but secures a future in which Milan will be tied to Naples(1.2.110-6,121-7; Orgel,1987:3) Prospero's loss of Milan is exchanged for his domination of the island and its inhabitants. Coby argues that here his rule is 'architectonic' in the Aristotelian sense - designing, controlling, and determining lives and territory.(Coby,1983:218) A more appropriate (not ideally Aristotelian) way of putting this is that it is absolutist and tyrannical - in particular taking into account his punitive rule of Caliban and, later, of Ferdinand.(1.2.325-30, 1.2.461-5) His domination of Miranda is straightforwardly patriarchal. And his governing style, as Greenblatt puts it (and relates to sixteenth century discourses of royal pardon), is to generate and distribute anxiety.(Greenblatt,1988b:129-130,142-124,147)

From a republican point of view, Prospero wields arbitrary power over those around him - they are dependent on him for good will, kindness (or absence of cruelty, at any rate), and pardon and freedom. Whether these will be delivered by him is quite unpredictable. And in a further Shakespearean twist, freedom and pardon, when they are delivered, are of ambiguous quality. His forgiveness of Antonio is as much withheld as delivered (5.1.126-9,130-134); Ariel is set free (5.1.316-8), but Caliban can be interpreted as simply abandoned.(5.1.290-310; Orgel,1987:26) From the point of view of right and justice in property and territory, Prospero's uncompromising denial of

Caliban's claims - whether these are couched in terms of occupation or of property (1.2.331-2; Orgel,1987:25) - raises questions which can only be answered by reference to the so-called 'right' of the stronger. To be sure, that 'right' is elaborated, and justified, by Prospero by reference to Caliban's devilish parentage and dangerous nature.(1.2.282-4, 1.2.319-20) Prospero's sovereignty over the island is shadowed by the erstwhile rule of Sycorax, Caliban's witchlike mother.

Prospero's use of his magic arts to control the island's spirits, eventually to control the weather, and to control Ariel, Miranda, and Caliban, has to be seen in contrast not only with Sycorax's rule of the island, but also with the reality, and the ideal, of dukely rule of Milan. It is also juxtaposed with the abundance of Cockayne (Weimann,1978:20,106ff) and the theme of ideal government in utopia, raised explicitly by Gonzalo (one of the shipwrecked party), who dilates on the possibilities of ideal social and political relations in a new land. (Orgel 1987:31; (2.1.145-54)) But Shakespeare never articulates a utopian vision without revealing its shadow side. Gonzalo's vision, his companions point out, is contradictory to begin with.(2.1.154-5). Similarly, themes of utopian 'new' forms of voluntaristic love and marriage, and Cockaygnian material plenty, which are disclosed later in the plot are simultaneously debunked by the reality of Prospero's control of Miranda, by his arrangement of her marriage (3.1.92, 4.1.5-8), and by the fact that the feasts and cornucopia, the pageants and revels, are illusions.(4.1.148-58) The possibilities of the utopian island are also juxtaposed with the reality of Caliban's and Ariel's servitude, and Prospero's punishments of Caliban and of Ferdinand. (1.2.325-30, 461-5)

The 'machievellian' style of political action is never far from Shakespeare's depictions. The stock machievellian is a ruthless, crafty, manipulative plotter and strategist who uses lies and subterfuge.(Anglo,2005:292-294) Both Macbeth and Prospero can be counted among Shakespeare's machievellians in this sense. But the prince envisioned by Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) will use exemplary violent power only in the service of the good and the glory of the state itself, putting a significant constraint on violence, and casting an unfavourable light on Macbeth's motivation of power for himself, and Prospero's project of revenge.(Machiavelli,1961:162-3(XIX:111,VIII);

Philp,2007:39) Machiavelli's ideal prince contrasts explicitly with the christian prince, whose characteristics Malcolm finds it difficult to find in himself. (*Macbeth* 4.3.91-7; cf also 4.3.139-59) The courage of Machiavelli's prince involves taking chances, being alive to kairos or the critical moment, as well as aware of chronos, the way over time fortune ebbs and flows. (Machiavelli,1961:131(XXV); Berry, 1997) This theme of kairos is ironised in *Macbeth*, where Macbeth's aspiration to timely and decisive action 'if it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well 'twere done quickly' [1.7.1-5] runs up against the reality that actions have unpredictable, uncontrollable ramifications. (Greenblatt,2009:72; Berry,1997).

3. Magic and Politics

We can certainly read *Macbeth* and *Tempest* as plays about characters who are embroiled in the uses of magic to achieve and maintain their power to govern. The shipwrecked party in *Tempest* are subject to Prospero's power - in thrall to him. Ariel, Caliban, and Ferdinand are subjected by him, by the use of punitive spells. The weird sisters in *Macbeth* can be interpreted as opponents of Macbeth, perhaps of the class of thanes altogether, perhaps of all social and political order. They use magic as a way to victimise Macbeth, to sabotage rule, to undermine the order of the state. Macbeth chooses to be guided by their prophecies into acting to seize the kingship he thinks they have foretold.

An obvious way to understand the structure of these plays is by analysis of the intersection of supernatural power and forces with a natural order - in particular as landscape and beauty are explicitly invoked in Shakespeare's poetry. (*Macbeth* 1.6.1-10; *Tempest* 3.2.133-41;4.1) We are misled, however, if these two categories dominate our interpretation. Within the category 'natural', Shakespeare intersects the nature of the island and of the scottish moors and glens with material technologies - the weapons that are used for killing, the product of Caliban's labour, the attacking forces' use of camouflage to confound Macbeth's military strategy. The supernatural and the natural both intersect further, with (magic as) technology. The weird sisters summon winds from 'all

quarters' (1.3.11-17), Prospero calls forth 'the mutinous winds' (5.1.41-8]) More importantly for my thesis, we must take into account the intersection, with natural and supernatural, of the political and social worlds - the worlds in which human relationships are established, institutions built, social norms enforced and violated, orders of inequality challenged and refashioned. As I have argued, these plays, like other Shakespeare dramas, feature a proliferation of alternative and competing ideas of how this order should work.

The juxtaposition of magic and the supernatural not only with the natural world but with this social and political world of organised authority and power poses questions about the intelligibility and predictability of 'nature' and of polity and society alike. The theme of magic can be understood to function as critique of political thought and design. This can be from the exogenous standpoint of 'there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (*Hamlet* (Shakespeare, 1987a) 1.5.174-5) - which is certainly one plausible way of reading Shakespeare's ghosts and magicians. Equally plausibly, in my view, the critique can be endogenous: to speak of 'the natural' presupposes speech about the non-natural - the technological, the artificial, the supernatural. The limit or boundary irresistibly invites an imaginative and poetic - not to mention a downright resistant or dissenting - mind to push at the boundary, to explore its permeability. In the case of polity and society, Shakespeare's dramas constantly push at the limits of patriarchy (with his themes of voluntarist, love-based marriage, or refusal to marry), at the limits of kingly authority (with his weak kings, his corrupt kings, and the imagination of republicanism), at the limits of political resistance (which meets state violence and is overwhelmed), at the way republican princely authority is defeated by violence, or money - and so on and so forth. In *Macbeth* and *Tempest*, Shakespeare pushes at the boundary between magic and politics.

Three ways of reading 'magic' in relation to politics in the two plays can all be supported interpretively. First, magic, and a reputation for it, are straightforward resources for political domination, or for maintaining political sovereignty. This is the way Weber approaches magic and related phenomena, and there are instances ready enough in political cultures, including

Shakespeare's own and others nearer to our own time, which I discuss in what follows. Second, 'magic' can be approached sceptically, as trickery or delusion. What looks like the effect of magic can be explained as the effect of something else - psychology, or rigged appearances. Third, magic can operate metaphorically in relation to politics. The power of the ruler, the political competitor, and even of democratic actors (although *Macbeth* and *Tempest* are not among Shakespeare's plays that are relevant here) is 'like magic'. Where it works, political power has a mysterious quality - and 'magic', in texts like Shakespeare's, and in political comment and discourse, emphasises this.

3.1. Magic as a political resource

Prospero can be understood, and in performance has often been played, as a magus-ruler, whose wisdom and book study have enabled him to develop the powers over natural substances and phenomena that will enable him to regain his political status as ruler.[5.1.54-7; 1.2.72-7] The magus is a recognisable figure in early modern politics and culture alike. John Dee (1527-1608) advised Elizabeth I from 1555 when 'he performed angelic magic to divine the immediate political future and to assist Princess Elizabeth's preparations for a succession crisis threatened by the apparent fulfilment of Queen Mary's phantom 'pregnancy'.'(Parry,2006:645) He later wrote manuscripts which collectively set out a vision of a 'British empire' presided over by Elizabeth as empress. This vision was based on his reading of the Arthurian precedent, and generated the expectation that Elizabeth would reveal the philosopher's stone.(Parry,2006 645-7,665; Brooks-Davies,1983:3) Elizabeth and her ministers sponsored alchemy, including Dee's work; and during the crisis of discovery of a catholic/witch plot against Elizabeth in 1578 he performed counter-magic on her behalf.(Parry,2006:668)

We can see Dee's magic as an important resource for him politically, gaining him centrality in the court and proximity to the monarch. But we must emphasise also his usefulness to the Elizabethan government. His reputation for magic, and his participation in magic practices and study, opened up opportunities for the government to employ Dee in intelligence gathering, under the guise of consulting experts in other countries on witchcraft and counter-magic, affording ways

and means in foreign policy. (Parry,2006:668-9; Clark,1997) So neither Dee's imperial writings nor his magic writings can be understood independently of Elizabethan domestic and international politics.(Parry,2006:674)

In the case of Dee, we see a route between the role of magus and that of purveyor of magic goods and services. When changes in court opinion marginalised his ideas of empire, as far as English policy was concerned, he too was marginalised. He continued to try to secure a hearing from the monarch - by publishing new angelic revelations. But out of favour he had to revert to a traditional trade, making a living by scrying, astrology, and other kinds of natural magic.(Parry,2012) From one point of view we can see this as a loss of his place in the practices that were continuous with the development of science. But although Newton could be lambasted by nineteenth century romantics for having destroyed mystery and beauty with his rationalist analysis - reducing the rainbow with the prism - it is, of course, notable that alchemy was subjected, by him, to all his considerable powers of reason, scientific record keeping and mathematical analysis, for his whole working life.(Henry,2008:1) So the idea that the one is a 'rational' and the other a 'superstitious' practice cannot hold. Both are rational, to the extent that they bring a return, or profit, to the practitioner.(Kassell,2005;2007)

Late twentieth century examples underline the power, and the ambiguity, of a reputation for magic power. In Yoruba society, as in other past and contemporary African contexts, engagement with occult powers, the continuity between living, dead, and spirits, and belief in (some) individuals' potency and cosmic influence is ubiquitous.(Adebanwi,2014:81-86; Crais,2002; Ellis and Haar,2004:90-99; Włodarczyk,2009.) Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1987) the political figure whose party and movement is the subject of Adebanwi's study, was believed to have some properties of ancestor or orisa while still an elder - rather than, as a powerful elder, enlisting the help of orisas and ancestors, which would be the more usual story. (Adebanwi,2014:84) He fuelled speculation about his occult powers, cultivated a preoccupation with spiritual matters and 'sought to sacralise himself' (Adebanwi,2014: 86) For Awolowo's admirers, the fact that he could be seen in

the moon was affirmation of his 'omnicompetence, potency, and cosmic influence'. But for his opponents, it was proof of his evil genius and perfidy. (Adebanwi,2014:86)

In Romania under communism, witchcraft was banned, and some witches imprisoned. With the fall of communism, proposals were made to prevent witches from TV advertising, and, eventually, to tax their income and hold them individually liable for prophecies that did not come to pass. Organised witches, including one who in 1977 had been imprisoned, conducted a ritual to curse the government.(Laycock,2011). This example of the use of occult power for straightforwardly political purposes is complicated, as is often the case, by the way it tracks lines of ethnic cleavage. Unlike the Awolowo case - of a powerful person deploying magic power to augment his dominance - this is a case of a power of the powerless. It is closer to the frame of reference that makes sense of the marginality and the seeming malice of women like Macbeth's weird sisters.(Roper,1994; Ellis and Haar,2004:60-61)

Macbeth and Prospero deploy 'magic' as a political resource, for their political ends as dominators, as sovereign rulers. The weird sisters are engaged with oppositional political ends - undermining the political and social order - using magic means. The way performances and invocations of spirituality intersect with the inversions of carnival has been evident in much counter-cultural politics. Tagonist examines episodes from the history of persecuted or dispossessed people's resort to apocalyptic thinking, which generates culture and ritual to urge on the end times, and to refuse or evade the material and political power of the oppressors. (Tagonist,2017) In the second half of the 1960s, especially in the USA, the idea that both art and magic are 'spooky' attracted members of the literary intelligentsia to events such as the antiwar march on the Pentagon in 1967, which had the avowed aim of protestors, in various kinds of fancy dress, encircling the building, levitating it 300 feet into the air, and exorcising its evil spirits. (McCann&Szalay,2005:436-437) From the point of view of Norman Mailer and others, opposed to the way the left had accepted a 'programmatic managerial ethos', this was a way to fight the clear distinction between 'symbolic' and 'real' political action, and to recover the lost value of spontaneity.(McCann&Szalay,2005:455-6)

The growth of the new left into a mass movement involved a 'new political vision built in large part on the appeal of the spontaneous, the symbolic, and, ultimately, the magical.' (McCann&Szalay,2005:436). In feminist pacifism in the late twentieth century, motifs of weaving and witchcraft were set to work against the overt violent power of the patriarchal military industrial complex. (Cresswell,1994; Frazer and Hutchings,2014:10-11)

The practice of, or a reputation for, occult power, then can undoubtedly be one form of political action; it can bring material, and political, pay-offs. The question how to oppose state, economic and military power continues to generate rival and conflicting responses from political thinkers and activists. Are these episodes of magic as politics? or are they instances of the displacement, the evasion, of politics? For counter-cultural critics of instrumentalism, materialism can only ever capitulate to the power of the oppressors and exploiters. (Frazer and Hutchings 2014:12; MacCann and Szalay,2005:440-1) For critics, the resort to spirituality, let alone to 'magic', is a profoundly anti-political move, with some symbolic effect at best, but unable to deliver any programmatic politics proper. Ambivalence and ambiguity - about value and verisimilitude - are difficult to disentangle from a similarly ambivalent understanding of political power as such: 'Political power, like spiritual power, is regarded ambivalently, since it can be used to do good or to inflict harm. Hence successful politicians are both admired and feared.' (Ellis and Haar,2004:92)

3.2. Sceptical understandings.

Accordingly, another way of thinking about *Tempest* and *Macbeth* is via Shakespeare's sceptical voices - sceptical about the pretensions of rulers, and the prospects of politics, and about the claims of magicians. Many readings of Shakespeare's tragedies and late dramas emphasise that character is key. The individual and political drama is complex, and also plausible, enough without the magic. Macbeth's downfall is a result of his complex relationship with his wife and with himself, of his failures of insight and foresight, and, indeed, from the political theory point of view, of his neglect of the critical political relations of action in concert, shared deliberation, forgiveness and

trust, and the like. (Brooke,1990:4-5; Tonge,1932:236,244-236) According to such rationalist readings, the plots can be disenchanting, practically without loss.

In *Macbeth*, the question whether the weird sisters are women who are strange and malicious, or are witches, which is to say in touch with the supernatural via techniques such as spells, is arguably answered within the play by 4.1 when they meet with Hecate, who is associated with sorcery and necromancy. But 4.1 is generally agreed to be an addition.(Brooke,1990:64-6) It is not clear that it is Shakespeare's own writing. The fact that the weird sisters are referred to as just that - although in some editions they are listed as 'witches' - suggests that the author's intention is to be non-categorical about them. The foul weather might have been conjured up by the weird sisters; equally, it might be just weather, which contributes to Macbeth's confusion about what is apparent and what is real. In *The Tempest*, the nature of the storm is also ambiguous. Prospero is presented as having conjured it, while ensuring that its victims are not really physically harmed. Yet he also says: 'By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune, now my dear lady, hath mine enemies brought to this shore'. [1.2.178-80] He could be a normal, dominating, ruthless, manipulative, character, who by a combination of trickery, violence and - crucially - luck, overthrows the usurper.

We can also focus on Prospero's political performance, and, more significantly, on the inescapability, the non-optionality, of political role. Prospero fell short as duke; but political life comes with him to the island, where he takes the tempting course of absolute authority, tyranny over those around him, and the use for domination of the ordinary social and psychological powers which enable him to enslave Caliban and to punish him, and later to dazzle and confuse the bewildered shipwreck victims.(Brown,1985:59-68) The play is about political failure, and about the ethics of domination - what happens when one person has too much power over others (as colonialists have too much power over the people whose lands they dominate).(Brown,1985) Macbeth experiences the dagger - but he knows it is not there.[2.1.39-40]. He sees, but the other characters do not, Banquo's ghost.[3.4.60-3] Birnam Wood does seem to come to Dunsinane, but in an instance of perfectly ordinary military tactics.[5.4.44-6; 5.6.1-2] In the end Macbeth must fully

understand the material basis of his downfall - the ambiguous meaning of a caesarean 'birth', military subterfuge. He also must understand its political basis - as king he loses all loyalty and allegiance, and his violence spreads fear, mistrust and enmity. Macbeth is too unfocussed to engage in the slow hard drilling of political work; he relies on his capacity for violence, and on the promise of the women who seem to speak with the authority of the supernatural. Politics requires relationships that sustain action in concert. Like Prospero, Macbeth has foregone the work they demand.

3.3. Magic as metaphor

The metaphor of magic has an unshiftable place in political discourse, including the study and the practice of politics, in modern and postmodern societies. Of British prime ministers, Lloyd George (1863-1945, PM 1916-1922) was known in his time as the Welsh Wizard, an epithet that invokes Merlin, and is also applied, because of his family antecedents, to John Dee. In contemporary British popular culture the term more usually applies to sports stars.⁴ Strikingly, for a sports star the term is entirely approbatory. 'As if magic' in sport, or music, is an unalloyed good thing. About a politician, however, it always conveys ambivalence, an admixture of disapproval.

Influential and pervasive ways of talking about politics in the twenty first century and before, also see all politicians, as such, but especially those who gain state office, as 'by definition dishonest'. 'All politicians lie.' (Graeber, 2012) Recently, according to Graeber, this commonplace mendacity has developed into 'an essentially magical style of political performance', and what is at stake in this performance is bringing to 'reality', by way of an incantation, an oath, spell or other locutionary device, a state of affairs or object whose existence relies on people 'believing something when in fact they don't, or thinking that they don't believe something when, in fact, they do.' The premise that 'politicians lie' means that dishonesty and deception are at the heart of this process: the audience's attention is distracted from the true mechanisms of the trick. A number of commentators concur with this observation. (Curtis, 2016; Lichtenstein, 2017; Jillette, 2011) Success depends on the willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience, but this suspension is itself cleverly

brought about by the magician, or the politician, their support teams and those who invest in them. It's not so much 'magic' as 'conjuring' then, that carries the analogical weight in the politics is magic metaphor.

Ethically, magic and trickery are all one. Voodoo economics, spin doctors: such epithets signify disapprobation - it's all superficial, smoke and mirrors, politicians and their advisors are charlatans. These are dangerous phenomena - people are taken in by them which is clearly counter to democratic theories of citizenship and to republican ideals, but even also to the norms of authoritarian systems. Authoritarian political rule requires obedience - but obedience following from the legitimacy and power of authority. Voodoo economists and political wizards do harm by this disempowerment of critics and audiences, and because they overshadow the legitimacy of authority; and also because they are reckless as to their effects. The commonplace metaphor has to be approached critically in each case. Jones examines the analogy between how 'magic' works and the ways politics, when it does, works - the shared implications of performers, hidden mechanisms, credulous audience, and sceptical and satirical exposers of the truth.(Jones,2014-15) But he also alerts us to the historical and cultural cues that permit the magic-politics analogy to make sense in a context. For instance, as we have seen, magic and reputations for magic power make sense in some African contexts such that the phenomenon of 'Madiba magic' was inevitable (Posel,2014) while the salience of the historic show business 'negro' generated references to Obama as 'the magic negro'.(Jones,2014) 'It's not a bad thing that in their eyes I should be half-demon and half-magician' - this is said by a prime minister, a character in a 1983 British political thriller.(Hurd&Lamport,2003:378) Nelson Mandela said the same sort of thing: 'I'm not a god or a prophet, but I have to act like one'.(Posel,2014:74)

With such discourses of politics and magic in mind, we can read Prospero's domination and regaining of sovereignty, the weird sisters' mischief, and Macbeth's downfall, as comments on the nature of political power. Macbeth can be read as a tragic political character, anticipating Weber's passionate politician who perforce becomes 'involved with the diabolical powers that lurk in

violence'.(Weber,1994a:365) In Macbeth's case the devilry and violence are unconstrained by any other standards of politics than the lies, deceits, and danger of illusion and conjuring. His tragedy is intensified by the fact that, under the influence of, deceived by, diabolical powers, he goes deep into violence for sovereignty, and into the violence of sovereignty: 'I am in blood stepped in so far, that should I wade no more, returning were as tedious to go o'er'.[3.4.137-9] The weird sisters exert the diabolical power that gives politics such a bad name - think of the helplessness and consternation, as well as the disgust, that people express when they are faced with politics that they are not equal to, nor party to. Or, rather than Weber's tragedy, we can read the plays through the frame of Hobbes's deprecation of alleged magic: Macbeth is credulous; Prospero dominates characters who believe in his magic and can't see how it's done. People readily believe that dominators must have supernatural powers.(Ellis&Haar,2004:92-3) Misunderstandings of politics result in misattributions of magic powers.

4. Politics and theatre

I don't believe that we have to decide, in reading *Macbeth* and *Tempest*, between the understandings of magic as a political resource, magic as a metaphor for politics, and the debunking sceptical denigration of magic. It would be difficult to do so, as elements of plot and dialogue draw our attention to each of these; and famously, Shakespeare's plays are intelligible at multiple levels, with metaphor and symbolism being always prominent. He takes for granted the pervasiveness of daily commonsensical beliefs about magic power and witchcraft in sixteenth century Britain. Political actors do exploit magic, and the reputation for it, in their rivalries and allegiances with others. So Shakespeare straightforwardly reflects back to his audiences their sense of their world. But, there was also the practical problem of the susceptibility of 'magic' to being unmasked as mere trickery: that was generating a sceptical approach to the supernatural, one that it seems plausible to judge Shakespeare as sharing in.(Greenblatt,1988a:97-100; Butterworth,2008:705-6; Hamlin,2013; see also Montaigne,2006b cited by Butterworth).

Scepticism about magic is clearly articulated in *Macbeth*, with its deep psychological and epistemological themes of the appearance-reality distinction. The more ambiguous *Tempest* also has to be read in light of the themes of the magic of the theatre, and the role of pageant (3.3.18-52) and masque (4.1.60-142). The analogy of politics and magic is complicated enough - but we can't avoid adding in to the analysis this further, theatrical, technology. The technology of the theatre, and the King's Men's abilities and resources to mount spectacular effects, developed over time with the *Macbeth*, *Lear*, and *Tempest* storms being among the company's great achievements.(Carlson,2015:2-4) Politics deploys technologies too - from Machiavelli's recommendation of invisible ink for risky communications (Machiavelli,1961:198) to uses of magic for political ends. The practice and projects of the magus involves calming storms, controlling the seasons, controlling persons.(Orgel,1987:20; Clark,1997). Part of Prospero's magic relies on its theatrical nature. His spectacles dazzle and bemuse his audiences, narrowing, as Carlson puts it, his enemies' options until they have 'no choice'.(Carlson,2015:18).

But politics, magic and theatre, are linked more deeply in two ways. First, is the association of theatre itself with the kind of conjuring and illusion that is diabolical. (Butterworth 2008:712-3). But just as simultaneously witchcraft and magic were explicable as material (explicable by psychological propensities to see what one believes, and by straightforward trickery and hoax) as well as diabolical, so also theatre could be deceptive and illusory, and also a rational site of citizen sociability, with participation in drama as a valuable training in memory, speech, rhetoric etc. This is Montaigne's argument in his essay on education - an essay with which it is likely Shakespeare was familiar. (Montaigne,2006a; Hamlin,2013; Grady,2000) But, second, obviously, theatrical performance introduces ambiguity and complexity into the question of speech and meaning. Ambiguity regarding what is said and done, and ambivalence on the part of characters, theatre audiences, and readers alike, regarding their assuredness about what is meant, suffuse both these plays. The problem of who is saying what, to whom, pervades *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* is haunted by the ambiguity of the weird sisters' words, and their nature.(eg 3.1.56-63) He knows that what has

happened is not what he foresaw or intended.(3.4.137-9) An implicit aversion to politics can be read here. In speaking together, political actors - especially, but definitely not only, in conditions of sovereign terror - can never be sure how they will be heard or interpreted, and what will be the fate of their utterances later. This is dramatised in the circumspect political speech between thanes in 3.6 and 4.3. The more philosophical point is made by Cavell: words exceed a speaker's grasp, we are incapable of being fully responsible for what we say.(Cavell,2003:233) Political speech, and consequent actions or outcomes, do not stand in any clear, predictable, or controllable, relation of cause and effect. There is no stable relationship between the uttered symbol and the signified that is taken up by others.

Here, political speech is compared to the magic spell or incantation that conjures up the magician's production. Both can be intended to bring about effects; both, though, have to be cogitated, interpreted. In particular, both are implicated in riddle and wordplay which, while puzzling, might, or might not, be resolved. (Weimann,1978:137) In politics, any expectation that what is said and what is meant will unfailingly bring about intended consequences is disappointed. This is true in magic too: a curse alone will not bring about an enemy's downfall. The curse, the spell, or the magic word, has to be engaged in a series of social transactions for the harm to transpire. The curser can expect to be held accountable for their animus, in the event that harm befalls their enemy - but not because the curse directly brings about the harm. The political actor's responsibility for the outcome of their speech is despite their intention, despite their ambiguity.

The theatrical, as opposed to the political and the magical, actors' responsibility for what is said and done is even more ambiguous. Shakespeare's drama has been argued to take its own political power seriously. The plays stage political power, and invite the audience to judge the legitimacy and justifiability of power and authority on the stage, and, by implication, power and authority outside the theatre too.(Howard,2006; Finlayson and Frazer 2011:235). In theatre, audiences negotiate between the framework of the play in relation to the framework of the everyday. They comment on actors playing roles, and characters' actions. In politics, participants

comment on individuals in offices, their actions in office in relation to their actions in the everyday. Citizens negotiate what political actors say, what they mean, the multiplicity of their effects.

Prospero's epilogue adverts to himself as ruler, who did use magic power but no more, and now has to leave the enchantment of the island and journey back, under the power of sail, to the world of the rule of men.(5.1.319-388) His request to the audience 'Let your indulgence set me free' can be read as a supplication for forgiveness. But more than that, the speech contrasts the island, where he had 'spirits to enforce, art to enchant' with the political world to which he is returning, the one of freedom, mercy, crimes and pardons, of rule and being ruled. He also adverts to himself as actor, bound by the script and the production, to the stage and to the audience, whose indulgence - applause - at the end of the performance will set him free.

5. Conclusion.

Should we see politics and magic as two separate ways? Should we resist allowing the metaphor of magic to pervade our understanding, and our standards, of political action? Shakespeare's dramas push us to consider this question in tandem with a parallel one, about the extent to which the theatrical metaphor - the stage, the appearances, the effects, the performance - should be allowed to suffuse our idea of what political actors do.

I argue that our understanding of Macbeth, the weird sisters, and Prospero as political actors is imbricated with our understanding of them as magic operators. Macbeth seeks the power to rule by killing all those who stand between him and the succession. The violent shortcut is, he believes, licenced and assisted by the magic shortcut. However, he confounds appearances with how things really are. In the end it is politics - the politics that he rejected in favour of the shortcuts - that undoes him. Any allegiance and trust that he could hope to build as king is squandered by violence. His confusion regarding what is real, and what only seems to be so, is a failure of political discrimination. In the end Macduff and Malcolm find the resources for action in concert against him; and their military strategy outdoes his violence. The weird sisters can be understood as deploying

such power as they have for explicitly political ends - as people will. But this observation about the recognisable political motivation to bring down power, and therefore this identification of them as political actors, is in some tension with the view that, because of their position outside the world that intersects natural, social and political power, they rather are anti-political actors.

Prospero can be, and has been, played as a serene philosopher king, the magus; or as a mad necromancer. Or as a trapped political ruler seeking to regain his office. All are licenced by the text. Our judgement of him, qua magician and qua political actor, are bound up together. Prospero's own presentation of himself, to Caliban, to Miranda, and to us, the audience, is as the good, justified magus in binary contrast with Sycorax, the mother of Caliban, the female, evil, witch, lover and agent of the devil.(1.2.319-20; Orgel,1987:20-2). But, we only have Prospero's own word for this contrast. Furthermore, politically at least, the differences between them are not great. Both dominate the land and its spirits. Prospero inflicts corporal punishments on Caliban which are malicious, even taking into account Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda. Prospero's governance of Caliban has given Caliban language to curse with, has burdened him with labour for others, and has straightforwardly denied or ignored his claims regarding the island.(1.2.330-1; Orgel,1987:25). Caliban has lost his kin, and is now alone and alienated under Prospero's rule. As Duke of Milan, Prospero was indifferent to authority and absorbed in his learning. He does not escape politics on the island, but there he wields both his magic and his political rule, in authoritarian style. He is unforgiving of Caliban's resistance; and the only glimmer of a challenge to his patriarchy is that Miranda spontaneously falls in love with the man he intends anyway that she marry.

Politics is always in reflexive relation with itself. The demarcation and maintenance of its own boundary is an element of the fundamental business of politics and of political thought. In *Macbeth* and *Tempest* the politics magic boundary is problematised by Shakespeare in a way that is particularly illuminating of the elusiveness and ambiguity of politics itself. The weird sisters enact both destructive power which is fully political, and also an anti-political power. What's troubling about the idea of politics as inscrutable magic is the alienation of the audience from the action.

What's political about magic performances is both the exertion of power, but also the engagement of audiences' complex understanding of what's going on. Macbeth and Prospero both aspire or pretend to be sovereign dominators. The *Tempest* and the *Macbeth* audiences discuss how it's done. How we read Macbeth and Prospero depends, in part, on how we understand the relationship between magic and politics. Shakespeare's political magicians reveal what political rule is and might be. Shakespeare is definitely sceptical about the possibilities of genuine political power, just as he is sceptical of the claims of magicians. But in his unmasking of theatre, and of sovereign dominating magic, he opens up the possibility of open and mutual engagement with political power.

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¹ Miller v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union 2017: <http://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKSC/2017/5.html> s.44.

² For further articulations of magic and political power in the history of political thought: Galli 2012.

³ I am indebted to Mauritz Reithmayr who suggested the term 'magic shortcut' in comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

⁴ There's a list at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_Wizard.