

VII

The Future in the Instant:

How Jacobean attitudes to the supernatural were shaped and reflected in popular print and early modern drama, with specific reference to Browne's *A New Almanacke and Prognostication* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

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*This article explores a prevalent discourse of the supernatural in Jacobean England including James I's influence on cultural assumptions, as seen in the widely-disseminated Daniel Browne's 'A New Almanacke and Prognostication for the yeare of our Lord God 1621'¹ and Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'.² Prognostication thrived in the space between a contemporary Protestant narrative officially dismissive of the supernatural, James I's own complex relationship with magic and a long legacy of folklore and superstition. Browne's mix of common sense and astrological prognostications and the ambiguity in Shakespeare's use of the supernatural and prognostication in *Macbeth* reflected a society yet to fully accept the Reformation's strictures on superstition.*

Prognostication and astrological determinism should have been included in the rejection of the supernatural that followed the Reformation but were still woven into the fabric of life in Jacobean times; their prevalence is a testament to the social utility they must have carried. Predicated on the belief that the earth and its people are subject to celestial influences (figure 2), almanacs were pocket-sized annual volumes containing predictions of astrological movements and their effects on earth, together with a range of material such as saints' days and tide times. Costing no more than

¹ Daniel Browne, *A New Almanacke and Prognostication for the yeare of our Lord God 1621* (London: Company of Stationers, 1620).

² William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, ed. by Nicholas Brooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).



Figure 1. Triple Episcopacie, 1641, engraving, English School, (17th century), Private Collection, The Stapleton Collection, Bridgeman Images.

tuppence, about the same price as a seat to see *Macbeth* at the Globe, they were the single most popular Jacobean print genre, selling more than 350,000 copies a year.³ It is estimated that one in three households used an almanac, a mass media level of distribution given Jacobean literacy levels. Even the devil was said to consult them (he preferred Coley's).⁴ *Macbeth* probably had a similar reach. The Globe alone could hold 3,000 people, around 20,000 people a week went to the theatre in London and plays were also performed at court.⁵ While provincial records seldom noted a play's title, it is assumed *Macbeth* would have toured countrywide.⁶ This widespread appetite for the supernatural necessarily subsisted alongside post-Reformation religious orthodoxies.

Jacobean attitudes to the supernatural were framed by a Protestant theology which stated nothing could happen without God's permission, and which stressed a dependence on God that precluded looking for help elsewhere.⁷ This dependence rejected the idea that God traced his purposes through the stars, as it suggested constraint: 'God hath not made the heavens to that end or purpose, that man should learn of them good fortune or ill'.⁸ If God alone could influence the world then the application of prognostication to temporal issues was problematic and should have been abandoned,

³ Cyprian Blagden, *The Stationers' Company, a History: 1403-1959* (London: Unwin, 1960), p.188.

⁴ Bernard Capp, *Astrology & the Popular Press, English Almanacs 1500-1800* (London: Faber, 1979), p.23.

⁵ Shakespeare's Globe, 'Audiences', in *Globe Education*, (London: Shakespeare's Globe, 2013), <<http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/uploads/files/2017/02/audiences.pdf>> [accessed 28 Jan 2018] (p.1).

⁶ S. Maclean, 'Macbeth on tour' Email to Sharon O'Connor from the Professor of Theatre History at the University of Toronto and the Director of the *Records of Early English Drama* (REED) database.

⁷ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.90-91.

⁸ Alec Ryrie, *The Sorcerer's Tale: Faith and Fraud in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.158.

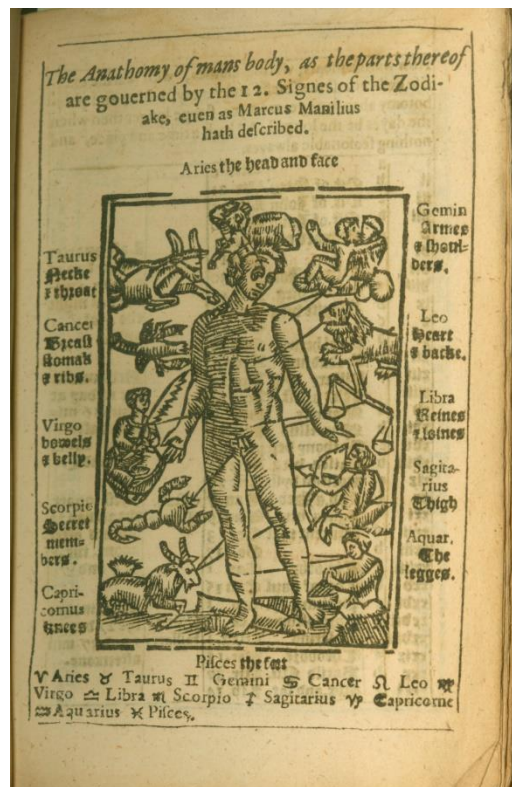


Figure 2. The anatomy of man as governed by the zodiac, Browne's *Almanac*, 1621.

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but this led to some tricky theological knots. For example, if the stars did not affect health then neither should any earthly influences, so taking steps to avoid plague was blasphemous: if your conscience was clear you would be spared. In practice the church's concept of what was superstitious was elastic and has been summarised as '[those things] it disapproved of were superstitious, [those] it accepted were not'.⁹ To resolve these inherent inconsistencies, religion forged an uneasy truce: God controlled destiny but celestial objects governed sublunary events.¹⁰ Calvin had decreed that 'the science of Astrology is honourable' because 'all creatures [...] are subject to the order of heaven, [the stars] were the beginning and cause of the accidents which are sent here on earth', thus allowing prognostication to persist.¹¹ On their side, astrologers agreed that the stars inclined but did not compel.¹² Browne, for example, conflates two psalms to declare: 'The heavens declare the glories of God, and the firmament sheweth the work of his hand [...] when I behold thine heavens, even the works of thy finger, the sonnes, Moone, and the Stars, which thou hast ordained'.¹³ Thus, was a model created for people to interact with the supernatural, and both the almanac and the playhouse have relevant affordances.

⁹ Thomas, p.55.

¹⁰ E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp.60-62.

¹¹ Ryrie, pp.167-68; Thomas, pp.94-95.

¹² Thomas, p.17, 396.

¹³ Browne, p.[1,33].

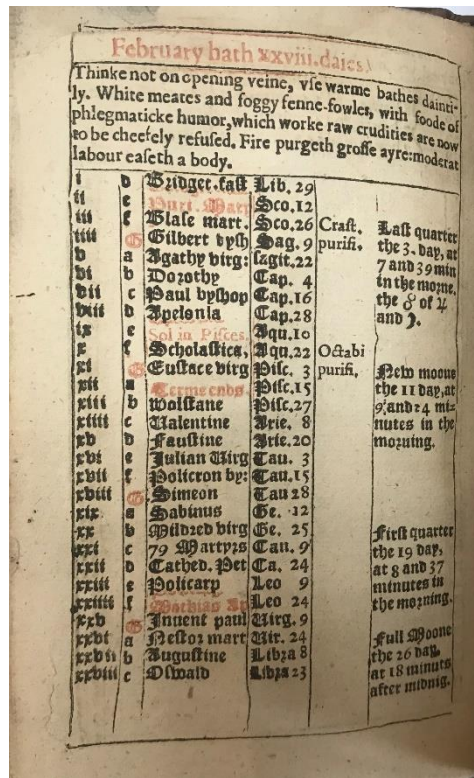


Figure 3. February, Browne's *Almanac*, 1621.

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Daniel Browne was a self-described 'wellwiller to the Mathematickes and sometimes a scholler'.¹⁴ His 1621 *Almanac*, a small, duodecimo volume, comprising forty-eight pages in two sections, is a typical example of the genre and contains a compendium of information including both *theorick*, the astronomical calculations of the planets and *practick*, the astrological interpretation of those measurements, though both terms were used interchangeably at this time. The first section includes the 'characters' of the planets, a *kalendar* of saints' days, 'red letter days' of notable events, the moon's phases, moveable feasts, and two pages for each month with space for the user's own notes. The second section contains astrological prognostications for the weather, agriculture and health and includes 'favourable days' for many procedures, from bloodletting to sowing broad beans.¹⁵ Using February as an example: Browne tells us in the calendar section exactly when the sun moves into Pisces and in the concomitant prognostication that 'Pisces is cold and moist...tending to destruction'. He predicts illnesses will include 'Cathars [catarrh], Coughs and paine in the heart'.¹⁶ He admonishes: 'Thinke not on opening veine', and bids us refuse 'White meates and foggy fenne-fowles' (figure 3).¹⁷ This combination of common sense and astrology is common to Browne's prognostications: it will not

¹⁴ Browne, p.[1].

¹⁵ Browne, p.[45], sig. A^r.

¹⁶ Browne, sig. B3^r.

¹⁷ Browne, p.[10].

be dangerous to eat grapes in September, the ‘falling evil’ (epilepsy) will afflict people when the sun is in Aries, Taurus or Gemini, and colder mornings in October ‘do call for warmer apparel’.¹⁸ To distance himself from any inaccurate prophecies Browne often frames his predictions with equivocal riders: ‘if they bee skilfully applyed’, ‘if they be warily chosen’, ‘for a time’.¹⁹

Prognostications drive the plot in *Macbeth*. Like Browne’s, some are precise: Macbeth will be king; Banquo’s line will reign (figure 4).²⁰ Others have a plurality of meaning including, of course, different interpretations to those Macbeth originally chooses. ‘Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be, until | Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill | Shall come’²¹ is seen to be not an impossibility but a clever military tactic, a camouflage of portable branches. ‘None of woman born | Shall harm Macbeth’²² is disambiguated when Macduff discloses his Caesarean section: he was ‘from his



Figure 4. Macbeth with witches, show of kings, and Banquo’s ghost, 1709, engraving.

By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

¹⁸ Browne, sig. B3^r.

¹⁹ Browne, p.[12], sig. B^v.

²⁰ *Macbeth*, I.3.50, 67.

²¹ *Macbeth*, IV.1.108-09.

²² *Macbeth*, IV.1.94-95.

mother's womb | Untimely ripped'.²³ These ambiguities give the prophecies a liminal status; we are never sure whether events can be directly attributed to prognostication or to more commonplace reasons; perhaps this is why the apparitions, rather than the witches themselves, speak them. They also speak to the antithetical space prognostication occupied in early modern culture, a space of both credence and scepticism. Shakespeare's audiences, used to balancing their religion's strictures on astrology, their daily use of almanacs, the contemporary treatment of witches, and folkloric heritage, would have been receptive to these multiple valences.

Macbeth's understanding of the predictions in the play undergoes post hoc re-evaluations, and this tendency to reorganise data to suit a narrative is a common one. We see it in our own daily lives: the dream forgotten until a detail seems to 'come true', the horoscope remembered when it seems to 'fit'. Indeed, both Macbeth and Banquo hear the witches' prognostications but only Macbeth reacts to them, recognising the dark thoughts that match his own. Just as Browne's predictions can invite either a rational or a supernatural explanation (that January will be 'noysome and hurtfull to all seedes' seems like common sense but may have looked more like divine providence if your neighbour ignored the prognostication while you followed it),²⁴ so 'none of woman born' can seem to denote supernatural control or a riddle of a more prosaic event.²⁵

Everybody wanted to know what the future held, from the husbandman to the divinely-ordained monarch, and all levels of society were comfortable interpreting and evaluating prognostication. King James's interest in the supernatural is well documented: he 'sought out of certain books a sure way to attain knowledge of future chances'.²⁶ In 1618 he summoned mathematicians to discuss a comet and then proceeded to predict the Thirty Years War and the fall of the Stuarts,²⁷ and in *Daemonologie*, his manual for the supernatural, he identified the power of prophecy and the ability to travel through the air as supernatural indicators.²⁸ Shakespeare's witches possibly 'hover',²⁹ but they do not fly, making them less overtly supernatural, more mundane, than Jamesian witches and although Shakespeare valorised them in other ways, they generally appear closer to the modulated supernatural explored in Browne's *Almanac*. In the First Folio they are referred to as witches only in the paratext not in the play proper;³⁰ Shakespeare's source, Holinshed, represents them as three ordinary women (figure 5); and

²³ *Macbeth*, V.7.46-47.

²⁴ Browne, sig. B3^r.

²⁵ *Macbeth*, IV.1.94-95.

²⁶ James Shapiro, *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), p.71.

²⁷ Thomas, p.354.

²⁸ Pamela Bickley and Jenny Stevens, *Essential Shakespeare: the Arden Guide to Text and Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.178.

²⁹ *Macbeth*, I.1.12.

³⁰ Shakespeare, 'Macbeth', *The Bodleian First Folio* (2012), Arch. G c.7.



Figure 5. Holinshed witches: Macbeth, Banquo and the Three Witches, *The Historie of Scotlande*, 1577, woodcut, English School, (16th century), Private Collection, Bridgeman Images.

the contemporary astrologer Simon Forman called them fairies or nymphs, not witches. Forman also recognised ambivalence elsewhere in *Macbeth* and concluded that Macbeth's agency drives the play.³¹

For a Protestant artefact, Browne's *Almanac* contains a surprisingly large number of saints' days but as well as being useful for dating documents, saints' days were used for supernatural purposes, e.g. fasting on St Mark's day was supposed to provide protection against fire or lightning.³² Almost as numerous are the *Almanac's* 'red letter days' (figure 3) which include not only feasts such as Twelfth Night but also significant political events such as the 'Powder Plot' and the Gowrie conspiracy, a widely-contested story that James, at risk of assassination, had pre-emptively (and conveniently) killed members of the Ruthven clan, who were said to have used 'astrological aids' against him.³³ Macbeth too knows that important days are marked in the almanac: when the vision of James's line appears, he exclaims 'Let this pernicious hour | Stand aye accursed in the calendar!'.³⁴

Understanding the weather was vital for farming and astrology played its part; an almanac without weather predictions was 'like a pudding without suet'.³⁵ Celestial calculations form the framework for Browne's 'Husbandly elections in planting, grafting and sowing' (figure 6) and he dispenses advice such as 'Cut coppies [coppice] the first Quarter of the Moone', or 'cut vines the Moone well aspect in February'.³⁶

³¹ Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, MS 208, Simon Forman, *The Booke of Plaies and Notes therof performance for Common Pollicie*, 1611, folio 207^r.

³² Thomas, p.35.

³³ 'Gowrie, John Ruthven, 3rd Earl Of', *Britannica Online Academic Edition*, (Encyclopædia Britannica: 2017); Thomas, p.276.

³⁴ *Macbeth*, IV.1.148-49.

³⁵ Capp, p.63.

³⁶ Browne, sig. A^r.

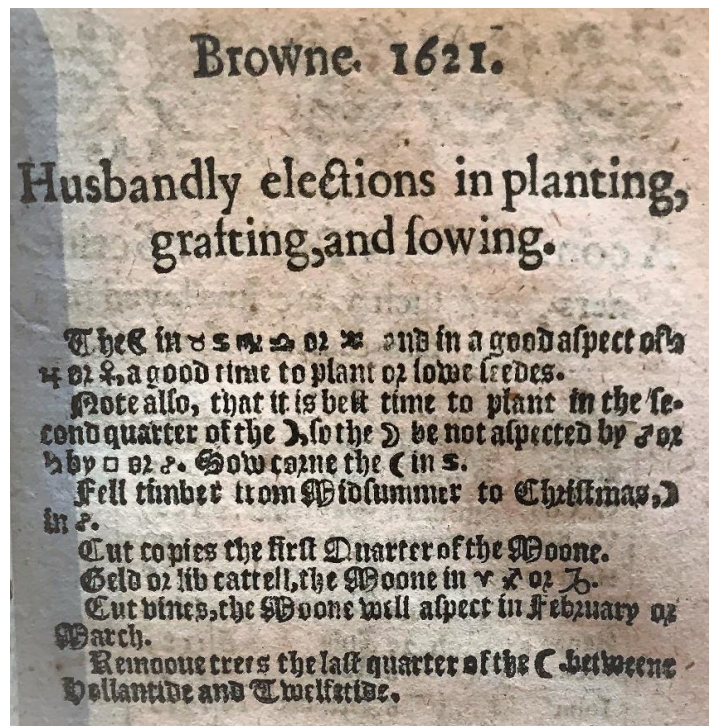


Figure 6. Husbandly elections, Browne's Almanac, 1621.³⁷

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Middleton stated 'This farmer will not cast his seed ith' ground | Before he looks in Bretnor'³⁸ and the idea of weather forecasting is taken further in *Macbeth* where the weather is understood to be in the control of witches. 'Howe'er you come to know it' Macbeth asks, 'Though you untie the winds, and let them fight | Against the churches'.³⁹ When the witches ask 'When shall we three meet again? | In thunder, lightning, or in rain?', Shakespeare's audience would have readily understood the conflation of prediction and weather, from their own daily attempts to bend the weather to their will.⁴⁰

Meteorological control of a more malevolent nature was familiar to James too. The 1591 pamphlet *The Newes of Scotland* records the North Berwick witches who 'did arise such a tempest in the Sea' that the king almost perished.⁴¹ In *Daemonologie*, witches can 'rayse stormes an tempests in the aire',⁴² so it is no surprise that Shakespeare's witches make their victim's sea-journey 'tempest-tossed'.⁴³ Almanacs only claimed to forecast the weather not control it but the supernatural discourse can still be seen: beware 'hearbes do wither' under the influence of Virgo; 'bid Physicke adiew whilst

³⁷ Browne, sig. A^r.

³⁸ Thomas Middleton, *Masque of Heroes*, in *Thomas Middleton the collected works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p.1328, l.241.

³⁹ *Macbeth*, IV.1.65-67.

⁴⁰ *Macbeth*, I.1.1-2.

⁴¹ James Carmichael, *The Newes from Scotland* (London: [By E. Allde?] for William Wright, 1592), sig. C1^r.

⁴² James I, *Daemonologie*, (London: Aspley and Cotton, 1603), Bk II, Ch. 5, [p.46].

⁴³ *Macbeth*, I.3.25.

scorching Sirius uttereth his outrage'.⁴⁴ In *Macbeth*, Lennox identifies Duncan's murder as a collusion of nature, astrology and agency:

The night has been unruly: where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down; and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i' the air; strange screams of death,
And prophesyings with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events
New hatch'd to the woeful time: the obscure bird
Clamour'd the livelong night: some say, the earth
Was feverous and did shake.⁴⁵

The assumption that the heavens have a relational affinity with Macbeth's deeds is underlined by the pathetic fallacy and personification of nature, and reinforced by Ross's use of *predominance*, the recognised astrological word for superior influence:

Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
Threatens his bloody stage. By the clock, 'tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp;
Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
That darkness does the face of earth entomb
When living light should kiss it?⁴⁶

All this is not to say people were credulous about astrology, more that events were understood on a continuum from natural to supernatural as opposed to magic and reason being binary; everything existed in the same realm, as we see in Burton's division of the causes of melancholy into natural and supernatural, with further subdivisions including 'from God immediately', 'mediately by magicians, witches' or from the stars 'proved by aphorism'.⁴⁷ People were habituated to celestial analysis and James himself was aware that some people veered towards one or other end of that range, in 1606 he had joked that people had interpreted a pair of eclipses as divine portents, the subtext being that he himself understood these to be uncontentious, naturally-occurring phenomena.⁴⁸

Though prognostication was firmly lodged in the collective conscious and people wanted to 'know in advance the state of the crops and the price of commodities',⁴⁹ making a direct link between buying almanacs or watching *Macbeth* and a belief in predictions should be avoided. Consumption

⁴⁴ Tillyard, pp.35-37; Browne, sig. B4^r, p.[22].

⁴⁵ *Macbeth*, II.3.55-62.

⁴⁶ *Macbeth*, II.4.5-11.

⁴⁷ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (London: Vernor et al, 1806), pp.82, 118.

⁴⁸ Shapiro, pp.82-83.

⁴⁹ Thomas, pp.353-56.

does not necessarily correlate to credence and people may have been comfortable with a more nuanced perspective. We know from the many parodies produced that almanacs were not treated as holy scripture, and their inaccuracies were common knowledge: ‘thou lyeest worse than hee that made the last Almanacke’ says one of Chamberlain’s characters.⁵⁰ Montaigne teased prognosticators by pointing out that they made dozens of predictions, some of which were bound to come true.⁵¹ Yet inaccuracy does not seem to have dented their popularity and astrology remained highly salient. Sceptics such as Reginald Scot may reflect a widely-held view: ‘if one of these Prognostications fall out right, then they triumph above measure. If the Prognosticators be found to forge and lye always...they will excuse the matter’.⁵² Certainly when Macbeth realises there are alternative explanations for the witches’ prognostications he tells Macduff: they ‘palter with us in a double sense’ and his use of the word *palter*, meaning to equivocate or deal evasively, echoes the idea that prophecies are open to interpretation.⁵³ Early modern audiences, believing that it is possible both to foretell the future and that human agency plays a part in events, would have been responsive to this reading.

Evidence that predictions were believed and followed, however, can also be inferred, not only from the extensive sales of almanacs but also because their content was replicated in specialist literature such as agricultural manuals and medical texts.⁵⁴ First-hand accounts of vernacular astrology were similarly widespread: Arbella Stuart only cut her hair on ‘the sixt day of the moone’⁵⁵ and a patient believed that ‘physick’ mistakenly administered during the dog days had caused him to be ‘not well all this summer, the sign in Virgo’.⁵⁶ Astrology’s limitations were recognised but, in the absence of any more accurate advice, it was a useful lens.

Intertextual references also testify to the symbiosis of almanac and drama in reflecting the supernatural. Bottom, for example, consulted his almanac to find a ‘good’ night for *Pyramus and Thisbe*.⁵⁷ Middleton’s nominatively-determined *Weatherwise* ‘woos by the almanac’.⁵⁸ Jonson’s *Sordido*, a farmer, uses his almanac to predict grain prices and blesses the day he bought it: ‘Never,

⁵⁰ Robert Chamberlain, *A new Booke of Mistakes. or, Bulls with Tales, and Buls Without Tales*, (London: N[icholas] O[kes], 1637), sig. C2^r.

⁵¹ Michel de Montaigne, ‘Of Prognostications’ in *Essays of Montaigne Volume I*, trans. by Charles Cotton, ed. by William Carew Hazlitt (London: Reeves & Turner, 1877), pp.46-52 (p.50).

⁵² Reginald Scot, *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London: 1584), Bk XI, Ch. XXII STC 21864, p.212.

⁵³ *Macbeth*, V.7.50.

⁵⁴ Capp, p.289.

⁵⁵ Arbella Stuart, *The Letters of Lady Arbella Stuart*, ed. Sara Jayne Steen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.119.

⁵⁶ Capp, p.289.

⁵⁷ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. by Peter Holland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), III.1.48-49.

⁵⁸ Thomas Middleton, *No Wit / Help Like a Woman’s*, I.I.112, in *Thomas Middleton the Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007) pp.783-832 (p.785).

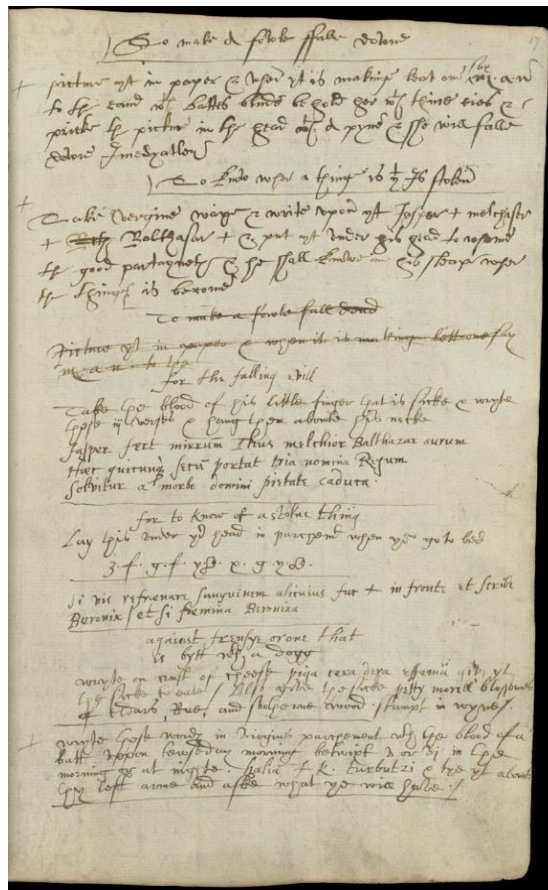


Figure 7. Henslowe's diary showing spells to make a fowl fall dead, to find a stolen thing and to cure epilepsy.⁵⁹

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never | laid I a penny better out, than this'.⁶⁰ The kind of information found in Browne's *Almanac* was so much a part of everyday life it would be a surprise were it not to be found in the playhouse; it is certainly present in the 'diary' of theatre entrepreneur, Philip Henslowe (figure 7). Amongst his business expenses we find rubrics to cast a child's horoscope, charms 'to make a fowle fall dead' and spells to find things that have been stolen and to cure the 'falling evill', the epilepsy that Browne also tries to control.⁶¹ Henslowe mostly lay used up every available space in his diary, scribbling receipts in corners or jotting notes in between other lines. The pages for spells, however, have much more white space, an attempt at formatting, and neater handwriting perhaps denoting the words have a certain value to him or were intended to be read by others (figure 7).

Early modern plays generally end in a restoration of justice and *Macbeth* is no exception, though it is shaped by a particularly Christian redemption where Malcolm predicts that justice will be done 'by

⁵⁹ Dulwich MS VII, fol. 17^r.

⁶⁰ Ben Jonson, *Every Man out of His Humour* in Ben Jonson, C. H. Herford, and Percy Simpson, *Ben Jonson. Volume III* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), I.3.55.

⁶¹ London, Dulwich College Archives, MS VII, Philip Henslowe, *Henslowe's Diary, 1592-1609*, fols 017^r, 017^v, 018^r; Browne, sig. B3^r.

the grace of Grace'.⁶² This reassertion of Christian values does not extend to the supernatural, however; the witches are not punished despite the retributive punishment meted to others, and this lack of resolution leaves the supernatural still present. Like an almanac it is 'absorbed in the ordinary relations of everyday life'.⁶³ Given James's known interest it is unsurprising *Macbeth* has a pervading supernatural atmosphere; given an audience familiar with ambiguity, perhaps it is equally unsurprising that Shakespeare left that supernatural aspect unresolved, as he leaves the whole question of Macbeth's agency unresolved.

The ability to foretell the future is always attractive, not least at a time of uncertainty, and a desire for order in a seemingly random world is reflected on almost every page of Browne's *Almanac*. So too in *Macbeth* the supernatural seems to offer hope or protection, at least before disorder descends. More quotidian applications such as using the moon's phases for journeys on dark nights or using tide tables for transporting goods by sea, show astrology occupying a space in the daily routine. Whether people really had faith or whether prognostications were honoured more in the breach than the observance is difficult to uncover, but it seems that familiarity with almanacs facilitated the representation of the supernatural on the Jacobean stage, and attitudes to magic and superstition in *Macbeth* reflected an early modern understanding of the supernatural.

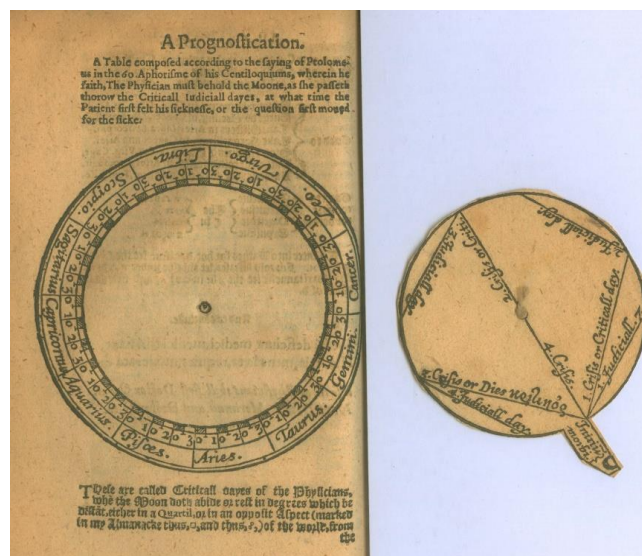


Figure 8. Astrolabe to be cut out, threaded and pasted onto a board to facilitate astrological calculation at home, Allestree's *Almanac*, 1621.⁶⁴ With kind permission of the Governors of Dulwich College.

⁶² Stephan Regan, 'Macbeth' in *Shakespeare: Text and Performance: Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Kiernan Ryan (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp.106-07; *Macbeth*, V.7.102.

⁶³ Stephen Greenblatt, 'Macbeth' in *The Norton Shakespeare Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt et al (New York and London: Norton, 2008), pp.2569-2578 (p.2575).

⁶⁴ Richard Allestree, *A New Almanacke and Prognostication for the yeare of our Lord God 1621* (London: W. Jaggard for the Company of Stationers, 1620), sig. A^v.

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