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# Theomancy: Prophecy by Foretelling Events

I am sick of the future. Up to here with the future. I don't want anything to do with it; don't want it near me.

No one used to have to deal with this much future. I mean, the future, so far as they could imagine, would have been fairly like the past: harvest, solstice, snow, trees coming into bud. They would get older and die, but the cycle would begin again. We have to live with this rising tide of future, leaking and sopping over everything, claiming cities and sectors, until we're in the future, already – that dystopian future of surveillance, video calls and VR headsets, and viral epidemics spread by globalization, and the 24-hour news saying AI extinction event gene-modification the collapse of civilization.

So it is that, somehow, one winter night, I find myself standing in my kitchen, hissing shrilly at my husband: *I don't know if my son will even live to middle age.*

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Something can be melodramatic and true at the same time.

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In Delphi, gods spoke through oracles. Delphi is in Greece, on multiple plateaux along the slope of Mount Parnassus. The myth says that Zeus wanted to find the centre of Gaia – the Greek personification of the Earth, our primordial mother – so sent two eagles soaring from the east and west. The spot where their flight paths crossed over Delphi was declared the navel of Gaia, sometimes also known as the Omphalos.

Delphi belonged to Gaia, then, but Apollo slayed the dragon who guarded it, the Python (from the verb *pythō*, ‘to rot’), and stole the land from her. To legitimize his theft, a sanctuary was built for him above the deep, zig-zagged chasm into which he had pushed the Python’s dying body. There they later installed the Pythia, a priestess named after that rotting-dragon smell. The famous oracle of Delphi. By custom, she was an older woman – what we might call middle-aged – and often poor. Someone who had led an ordinary life but who was willing to sever ties with her husband or children completely and erase herself. To become a blank; become instrument.

Before the oracle could begin there was a ritual: priests sprinkled a goat with cool water. If it didn’t shiver there would be another month’s wait; if it shivered, they could proceed, sacrificing it and burning the flesh. Rising smoke signalled the oracle was open.

Next, the Pythia was purified by fasting and bathing in a spring. They seem to have burned laurel leaves to cleanse

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her, or else she chewed them. Purple veiled, she was taken down into a dark, enclosed inner sanctum and placed on a gilded tripod that teetered over the fissure. I wonder if her heart was panting? I wonder if she was afraid? The room was low and dim, she trembled as fumes rose from the decomposing dragon; sly, sweet, lifting vapours that lurched her into a blood-thumping blur or violent trance, her limbs loosened from her own control.

She jangled above the pit, enlarging. Apollo moved the bones of her jaw, her clump of tongue, to speak through her mouth – a male voice issuing furious barks, a roar.

The historian and essayist Plutarch, who worked as a priest at Delphi, attributed her ecstasies to the *pneuma*: the breath of the fault in the rock. He wrote rather memorably that she looked like a windswept ship.

It was probably anaesthetic, the rock's breath – sugared ethylene or ethane, a heavy, crawling asphyxiant. The sanctuary lacked oxygen. And therefore, lo: the future spilt from her mouth –

## Theia Mania: Prophecy by Divine Madness

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes suggests that our urge to look into the future is rooted in our terror of ‘death, or poverty, or another calamity’; that this fear gnaws at us like the eagle gnawed Prometheus’ liver.

I’m not sure. Teenagers, for example, swoon over stars in magazines because they *want* the future. When we are young, we visit the palmist to hear of tall, dark men and dazzling success – to imagine ourselves as adults finding love, adventure, vocation. Predictions are a form of day-dreaming, of dragging the future a little closer. They were for me at least. I kept a dream journal with a dream dictionary next to it; bought tarot cards; even tried to cast a few spells, as if the future could be summoned. Supposedly the most basic spell is the ‘glamour’, but I had a hooked nose and hairy arms and it didn’t seem to work that well for me.

One of the few things I know about my father is that he said he was psychic. Is that why I’ve always sought out oracles? Perhaps it’s in my blood. My father died when I was two, I don’t remember him. Apparently he was fun, what people call ‘the life and soul’. His party trick was reading palms and when he read my mother’s he said:

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*You're going to marry me.* He drank himself to death on purpose. He said he didn't want to stop – he knew he was going to die, must have felt it in his insides, but he chose to keep on drinking as though it was his destiny. As though he couldn't cheat the gods. A kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, I suppose, like that of the Italian astrologer Girolamo Cardano, who committed suicide to prove his prediction he would die at the age of seventy-six correct.

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Clairvoyance can be divided into roughly three classes.

*Retrocognition*: the ability to see past events.

*Remote viewing*: the perception of contemporary events outside the range of normal perception.

*Precognition*: the ability to predict future events.

When Croesus, king of Lydia, sent emissaries to seven oracles, to ask each on the same day what the king was doing at that very moment, the Delphic Pythia famously declared: 'I count the grains of sand on the beach then measure the sea; I understand the dumb so hear the voiceless.'

After this, she correctly reported that the king was making a lamb-and-tortoise stew. I would class this as remote viewing.

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Oracles were most keenly sought, though, for their pre-cognition, despite the fact that the prophecies of oracles could be mainly understood as the gods explaining their intentions verbatim. Famous proclamations such as ‘Love of money will ruin Sparta’ or ‘If you cross the river a great empire will be destroyed’ can, in other words, be understood as the gods saying: ‘Do what we wish or we will punish you.’

Oracles didn’t, then, quite predict the future. They only provided intelligence about the plans of the most powerful, though these were, admittedly, so likely to come true as to be easily mistaken for prophecy. It was like hearing men behind closed doors, before an election, saying they are going to hack and leak, target misinformation at black women, blackmail X, disenfranchise Y, and knowing their desire will come to pass. *A great democracy will be destroyed.*

To overhear such things, it seems, made mortals mad. Divine madness, or what Plato describes as *Theia Mania*. Some report that what the Pythia uttered were in fact incomprehensible sounds that the priests would ‘translate’ into hexameters. We must not forget these machinations of the propaganda machine. As a translator myself, I find it highly likely that meaning might have changed to fit the form, not to mention suit the purposes of those translating. Language is always power. As Plato also said, ‘Those who tell the stories rule society.’

## Haruspicy: Prophecy by Entrails

I am researching prophecy in the Ancient World, for what I hope might be my next book. A Classical Reception Studies sort of thing, chapters about changing depictions of Cassandra and astrology and so on. Wikipedia says: ‘Because of the high demand for oracle consultations and the oracles’ limited work schedule, they were not the main source of divination for the Ancient Greeks. That role fell to the seers.’ Wikipedia is obviously not an appropriate source for academic work, but the tone makes me smile: ‘the oracles’ limited work schedule’.

Seers didn’t contact the gods, then. Nothing bright or monstrous sluiced through them. They just interpreted signs, like jobbing tradesmen diagnosing a problem with your electrics. Though more numerous and accessible, they were a basic service, only able to answer yes-or-no questions; often having to kill several creatures to get a consistent answer.

Haruspicy: divination by entrails.

In *Electra*, Euripides claims that Prometheus handed this art to man, a sacrilegious act for which Zeus punished him. The seers would perform the *hieria* by slaughtering a

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## DELPHI

sheep at the camp ground, then digging around in the smoked mirror of its liver for the answer: inspecting the size of the lobe, looking for a river or path, the cleft or gate in smooth, quivering meat. Following this was the ritual of the *sphagia*, often near the intended battlefield – slitting the throat of a young female goat before taking notes on its final stumbling steps, the patterned splattered blood and shit.

The seer would scratch his head and say: *A tricky one, this.* The question was always how to win.

## Rhapsodomancy: Prophecy by Poetry

The guy I called ‘dad’ when I was small was this snivelling creep called Steve. I spent my adolescence hating the present: PE, the cat-food smell of my kitchen, my mother divorcing Steve, my mother watching *Jerry* fucking *Springer* and bingeing on biscuits, the friends I had nothing in common with, Australian soaps, the mediocre minds of boys.

But my sixth form taught Latin, even though it was a state school. I’d always loved myths and legends; had gulped down all Robert Graves’ Claudius books. I was top of my year at German, with a talent for languages. We had this wonderful Latin teacher, Mrs Sykes – a skinny, husky smoker who only wore black – who read out Ovid and Catullus with relish; told us how Romans would wash their clothes in urine and eat flamingo.

The luck, in a certain light, looked as though the three Fates were spinning my thread. I remember asking the tarot cards if I would get in to Oxford to study Classics and it was a yes.

Having won a place at New College, I felt self-conscious at first, being so conspicuously not posh (from Barnsley of all places). Still, I was in my future, and it was so different

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to my previous life I couldn't help but enjoy it. My bad skin retreated and I got that rose-scented cream for your lip that burns the hair off. I suddenly felt attractive – in this change of context I wasn't even the swot but a bit of rough! Sipping college port with self-satisfied old men, deliberately shocking them with my working-class honesty. Sleeping with boys and girls in wood-panelled rooms, the scout tiptoeing in to empty our bins. O careless Mark, whose parents had a boathouse; that German student who lifted weights and came in my mouth; Pandora, with her expensively groomed hair, the sort she'd casually put up without even looking in a mirror . . .

I loved the library; its stacks; the classical reading rooms. The willows. Pimm's with chopped bits of fruit. I loved Greek tragedies best. The term 'tragedy', τραγωδία, means 'song of the goats'. I loved the chorus; the catharsis. The boy's body lying prey for carrion; the long golden pins from Jocasta's dress. Medea lifted by the 'mechane' device in Helios' chariot. Cassandra crying: *Aieeeeeeee!*

In the final term I started dating Jason, who was handsome in an almost clichéd sort of way with big features: a big chin, big man's hands. Golden hair, and because he was tall in my mind he was always stooping over me with the light pouring through it. He was toned from sport then; dabbling with running and rowing. A soft, easy gaze and self-deprecatingly witty; always knew where the parties were. He had started to DJ – House or UK Garage, dance stuff – and I remember him always shouting inside

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