

THE SCOTTISH PLAY

The Scottish Play

The Scottish play and *The Bard's play* are euphemisms often used for Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Saying 'Macbeth' inside a theatre is often considered taboo, as it is thought to bring on the curse associated with the play. The euphemism is so named because *Macbeth* is set in Scotland. Another variation of the superstition forbids direct quotation of the play while within a theatre. Additionally, all productions of the play are thought to be prone to difficulties and often serious accidents.

There are a variety of traditional rituals used to ward off evil when the play is mentioned, such as spitting, turning three times, swearing, or reciting a line from another of Shakespeare's plays, often "Angels and ministers of grace defend us," (*Hamlet* 1.iv), or "Fair thoughts and happy hours attend on you" (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.iv). When the name of the play is spoken in a theatre, tradition requires that they must leave, perform one of a number of rituals, and be invited back in.

Productions of the play itself are said to have been plagued with accidents, many ending in death. According to legend, this dates back to the original performance of the play, in which prop daggers were mistakenly swapped for real ones, resulting in a death. Those who believe in the curse of *Macbeth* claim its origin to be in the three Witches, who in the play are said to be casting real spells. It has also been suggested that the inclusion of the character Hecate, frequently cut from productions of the play due to questions about her part's authorship, will intensify the effects of the curse.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scottish_Play

Theatrical Superstitions

Actors are cautioned not to mention Shakespeare's *Macbeth* backstage, and therefore are required to refer to "the Scottish Play" instead. In a recent News Group posting, Jim Atkinson speculated that the reason for not mentioning *Macbeth* is because the play itself is actually dangerous to perform.

The play has more than 8 scenes requiring combat, usually with Celtic weapons (axes, daggers, broad swords, etc.) with actors in Chainmail. Atmospherically, there is usually fog or smoke (making the stage slippery or visibility impaired) , and very dim lighting. Combine this with flying trapdoors, fire, pyrotechnics, and the like -- and it is NOT surprising that more accidents happen in this play than say, *Hamlet*.

<http://www.ovationtv.com/artszone/programs/ivanov/wild.html>



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The Curse of the Play

by Robert Faires

The lore surrounding *Macbeth* and its supernatural power begins with the play's creation in 1606. According to some, Shakespeare wrote the tragedy to ingratiate himself to King James I, who had succeeded Elizabeth I only a few years before. In addition to setting the play on James' home turf, Scotland, Will chose to give a nod to one of the monarch's pet subjects, demonology (James had written a book on the subject that became a popular tool for identifying witches in the 17th century). Shakespeare incorporated a trio of spell-casting women into the drama and gave them a set of spooky incantations to recite. Alas, the story goes that the spells Will included in *Macbeth* were lifted from an authentic black-magic ritual and that their public display did not please the folks for whom these incantations were sacred. Therefore, they retaliated with a curse on the show and all its productions.

Those doing the cursing must have gotten an advance copy of the script or caught a rehearsal because legend has it that the play's infamous ill luck set in with its very first performance. John Aubrey, who supposedly knew some of the men who performed with Shakespeare in those days, has left us with the report that a boy named Hal Berridge was to play Lady Macbeth at the play's opening on August 7, 1606. Unfortunately, he was stricken with a sudden fever and died. It fell to the playwright himself to step into the role.

It's been suggested that James was not that thrilled with the play, as it was not performed much in the century after. Whether or not that's the case, when it was performed, the results were often calamitous. In a performance in Amsterdam in 1672, the actor in the title role is said to have used a real dagger for the scene in which he murders Duncan and done the deed for real. The play was revived in London in 1703, and on the day the production opened, England was hit with one of the most violent storms in its history.

As time wore on, the catastrophes associated with the play just kept piling up like Macbeth's victims. At a performance of the play in 1721, a nobleman who was watching the show from the stage decided to get up in the middle of a scene, walk across the stage, and talk to a friend. The actors, upset by this, drew their swords and drove the nobleman and his friends from the theatre. Unfortunately for them, the noblemen returned with the militia and burned the theatre down. In 1775, Sarah Siddons took on the role of Lady Macbeth and was nearly ravaged by a disapproving audience. It was *Macbeth* that was being performed inside the Astor Place Opera House the night of May 10, 1849, when a crowd of more than 10,000 New Yorkers gathered to protest the appearance of British actor William Charles Macready. (He was engaged in a bitter public feud with an American actor, Edwin Forrest.) The protest escalated into a riot, leading the militia to fire into the crowd. Twenty-three people were killed, 36 were wounded, and hundreds were injured. And it was *Macbeth* that Abraham Lincoln chose to take with him on board the River Queen on the Potomac River on the afternoon of April 9, 1865. The president was reading passages aloud to a party of friends, passages which happened to follow the scene in which Duncan is assassinated. Within a week, Lincoln himself was dead by a murderer's hand.

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In the last 135 years, the curse seems to have confined its mayhem to theatre people engaged in productions of the play:

In 1882, on the closing night of one production, an actor named J. H. Barnes was engaged in a scene of swordplay with an actor named William Rignold when Barnes accidentally thrust his sword directly into Rignold's chest. Fortunately a doctor was in attendance, but the wound was supposedly rather serious.

In 1926, Sybil Thorndike was almost strangled by an actor.

During the first modern-dress production at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1928, a large set fell down, injuring some members of the cast seriously, and a fire broke out in the dress circle.

In the early Thirties, theatrical grande dame Lillian Boylis took on the role of Lady Macbeth but died on the day of final dress rehearsal. Her portrait was hung in the theatre and some time later, when another production of the play was having its opening, the portrait fell from the wall.

In 1934, actor Malcolm Keen turned mute onstage, and his replacement, Alistair Sim, like Hal Berridge before him, developed a high fever and had to be hospitalized.

In 1936, when Orson Welles produced his "voodoo Macbeth," set in 19th-century Haiti, his cast included some African drummers and a genuine witch doctor who were not happy when critic Percy Hammond blasted the show. It is rumoured that they placed a curse on him. Hammond died within a couple of weeks.

In 1937, a 30-year-old Laurence Olivier was rehearsing the play at the Old Vic when a 25-pound stage weight crashed down from the flies, missing him by inches. In addition, the director and the actress playing Lady Macduff were involved in a car accident on the way to the theatre, and the proprietor of the theatre died of a heart attack during the dress rehearsal.

In 1942, a production headed by John Gielgud suffered three deaths in the cast -- the actor playing Duncan and two of the actresses playing the Weird Sisters -- and the suicide of the costume and set designer.

In 1947, actor Harold Norman was stabbed in the swordfight that ends the play and died as a result of his wounds. His ghost is said to haunt the Colliseum Theatre in Oldham, where the fatal blow was struck. Supposedly, his spirit appears on Thursdays, the day he was killed.

In 1948, Diana Wynard was playing Lady Macbeth at Stratford and decided to play the sleepwalking scene with her eyes closed; on opening night, before a full audience, she walked right off the stage, falling 15 feet. Amazingly, she picked herself up and finished the show.

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In 1953, Charlton Heston starred in an open-air production in Bermuda. On opening night, when the soldiers storming Macbeth's castle were to burn it to the ground onstage, the wind blew the smoke and flames into the audience, which ran away. Heston himself suffered severe burns in his groin and leg area from tights that were accidentally soaked in kerosene.

In 1955, Olivier was starring in the title role in a pioneering production at Stratford and during the big fight with Macduff almost blinded fellow actor Keith Michell.

In a production in St. Paul, Minnesota, the actor playing Macbeth dropped dead of heart failure during the first scene of Act III.

In 1988, the Broadway production starring Glenda Jackson and Christopher Plummer is supposed to have gone through three directors, five Macduffs, six cast changes, six stage managers, two set designers, two lighting designers, 26 bouts of flu, torn ligaments, and groin injuries. (The numbers vary in some reports.)

In 1998, in the Off-Broadway production starring Alec Baldwin and Angela Bassett, Baldwin somehow sliced open the hand of his Macduff.

Add to these the long list of actors, from Lionel Barrymore in the 1920s to Kelsey Grammer just this year, who have attempted the play only to be savaged by critics as merciless as the Scottish lord himself.

To many theatre people, the curse extends beyond productions of the play itself. Simply saying the name of the play in a theatre invites disaster. (You're free to say it all you want outside theatres; the curse doesn't apply.) The traditional way around this is to refer to the play by one of its many nicknames: "the Scottish Play," "the Scottish Tragedy," "the Scottish Business," "the Comedy of Glamis," "the Unmentionable," or just "That Play." If you do happen to speak the unspeakable title while in a theatre, you are supposed to take immediate action to dispel the curse lest it bring ruin on whatever production is up or about to go up. The most familiar way, as seen in the Ronald Harwood play and film *The Dresser*, is for the person who spoke the offending word to leave the room, turn around three times to the right, spit on the ground or over each shoulder, then knock on the door of the room and ask for permission to re-enter it. Variations involve leaving the theatre completely to perform the ritual and saying the foulest word you can think of before knocking and asking for permission to re-enter. Some say you can also banish the evils brought on by the curse simply by yelling a stream of obscenities or mumbling the phrase "Thrice around the circle bound, Evil sink into the ground." Or you can turn to Will himself for assistance and cleanse the air with a quotation from *Hamlet*:

"Angels and Ministers of Grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Being with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable shape that I will speak to thee."