

## **The Curse of Macbeth**

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Theatres have always had their superstitions, from not whistling near the stage to wishing actors to “break a leg” instead of wishing them good luck before a show. Some superstitions serve a purpose. Whistling, for instance, is how stagehands used to communicate before modern times brought walkie talkies and other technologies. An outside whistler could cause numerous disasters to occur, such as curtains falling or rising at the wrong times, or even props falling and injuring the actors. Wishing an actor to break a leg, however, has a less straightforward background, and most likely spawned from the superstition of jinxes. However there is one play which all theatres feel responds more to superstitions than any other. That play is Shakespeare's Macbeth.

No other play is known to boast the lengthy record of mishaps associated with Macbeth (Theatre). There has been everything from lost voices to history making storms, injuries from actors walking off the stage to real murders on the stage. Perhaps it is the amount of blood and violence in the play that causes so many accidents on stage. Or perhaps it is the play's topics of deceit, tyranny and war that make it something to be feared. Perhaps it is the presence of ghosts and witches that make “The Scottish Play” so prone to superstition. Whatever the reason, the curse of Macbeth has been a strong presence since the play's incarnation.

William Shakespeare wrote Macbeth sometime between 1603 and 1606 for King James I (Macbeth). This is known because of the lack of cursing owing to the Acte to Restraine Abuses or Players, which was passed by a puritan influenced Parliament in May 1606 (Kernan). It can be concluded that the play was written for King James I not only because he was the patron to Shakespeare's company, making them The King's Men in 1603, but also due to the way the play relates the traces the royal Stuart line through the character of Banquo (Macbeth). Also, Shakespeare added the three witches in order to appeal to the Kings interest in demonology (Faires). It is the latter aspect that many owe the origin of the curse. It is said that Shakespeare included incantations from actual witchcraft in Macbeth (Faires). The play begins with a meeting of three witches foretelling of things to come. These incantations curse the play each time it is reenacted, they curse the play even as progresses.

However others theorize that it was real witches who cursed the play when the first saw it. The legend goes that the witches, (real ones, not the fictional) were so angered when they learned that their spells were being used in a play, a public play, that they invoked a curse upon

Macbeth. When a group of modern witches attempted to reverse this curse, all fell victim to different mishaps preventing them all to make to their meeting (Faires).

Whatever the cause of the curse, it is said to have existed since the first performance. As - told by John Aubrey, during the first showing for King James I, the boy playing Lady Macbeth fell ill and died backstage. Left with no leading lady, Shakespeare himself had to take up the part, it is said that King James I so disliked the play that he banned it from showing for five years (Faires). How long until the play became popular is unknown; however, at the next recorded production in 1672 in Amsterdam, the actor playing Macbeth murdered the actor playing Duncan on stage. It was said at first to be an accident, that the stage daggers were replaced with real daggers, however it soon came out that there was a bizarre love triangle going on between the scenes as well. In any case, once slain, the actor was dragged off stage and the show went on (Huggett).

There are many superstitions of how the Macbeth curse can be brought about. Speaking the name of the play in the theatre is key among them. This superstition is the reason for the many other names which Macbeth is referred to, such as "The Unmentionable," "The Comedy of Glamis," or simply, "That Play." However the most common nickname is, "The Scottish Play," though "The Scottish Tragedy" or "The Scottish Business" fit as well (Dex). Saying the names of the lead character, Macbeth, can also bring about ill will as well referring to the leading lady by her character name. For this reason, during rehearsal Macbeth is commonly referred to as "The Thane," "The Big M" or "Mac," while Lady Macbeth is referred to as simply "Lady M" (Theatre). The name of the play and its lead players are not the only spoken words forbidden within theatres during rehearsal. Quoting any verse from the Macbeth does the same in invoking the curse.

To counteract the curse, one must go through a series of events before the performance can rid itself of a future of unforeseen mishaps. First, the guilty party must leave the theatre and once outside, turn three times and then spit and curse the foulest words one can think. Once that ordeal is carried out, the invoker of the curse must knock on the theatre door and wait to be invited back in (Huggett). Another way to reverse the curse is to recite line from one of Shakespeare's other plays; Hamlet is preferred.

It is interesting the things which thespians consider sacred or superstitious. A cat on stage is considered bad luck, but if a cat leaves its waste in a dressing room, the act will go well. Flowers on stage are bad; they are also bad before the show. So many of theatre's superstitions

could be explained in a logical way. Obviously if a cat walks onto stage during a performance, it could distract not only the actors but the patrons as well and thus interfere with the performance. Saying it is good luck for a cat to defecate in a dressing room eases the anger of an actor, allowing him to carry on with the performance. Macbeth however holds a different kind of superstition; it possesses a curse that has carried on for centuries. Ask around and you are sure to find stories involving insurmountable incidences of bad luck associated with a production of Macbeth. In 1703 on opening day, one of the most violent storms in London's recorded history hit England, canceling the show. In 1721, a patron who was assaulted by one of the actors returned to the theater with militiamen and set the place ablaze. In 1849, an infamous riot occurred involving two showings of Macbeth on the same night in different theatres, in the end twenty people died and over thirty people were injured. Incidences of the curse go on and on, from heavy counterweights crashing on stage to Charlton Heston's tights being set ablaze during a realistic attack on the castle at the ending of the play (Dex).

Despite the frequent occurrences of accidents associated with Macbeth, many believe there is no such curse. Many of the curse-induced accidents can be shrugged off as mere circumstance. The difference is that these accidents are recorded more often. The play involves fight scenes with give opportunity for accidental stabbings. Even the numerous occurrences of actors, directors and stage help enduring deaths or family members, or dying themselves could be no more than mere chance. It is said that the reason ill fate follows Macbeth is because it is so often performed when theatres are in dire need of funding. Failing theatres will put on Macbeth because it requires few actors, is short, and therefore easier for actors to remember, and also because it draws (Faires). Unfortunately, time has taught it does not do the trick but rather includes the possibility of bringing other forms of bad luck along with it.

Whether one is superstitious or not, it is hard to resist the temptation to believe in the curse of Macbeth. As Greg Dixon writes, "it is more likely the superstition comes from the history of its playing rather than the play itself." The play itself invokes the darkest domains of humanity. Because of this, humans feel the need to look toward stories of the supernatural to compensate. Superstitions help comfort us when faced with such unquestionable horrors as presented in Shakespeare's *The Scottish Tragedy*. There are no reasons and no excuses for Macbeth's actions. Not even ego or greed. Rather his actions are perpetuated from one horror to the next, ending ultimately in his descent into madness and thus, his demise. Perhaps it is because of this that the curse of Macbeth lives on.

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