

# KALEIDOSCOPIIC WITCHES: STREAMING THE FOLGER THEATRE'S *MACBETH*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic closed theaters globally for over a year. Some companies continued to serve the public good by making available streamed live-captured performances. One such offering is the 2008 *Macbeth* codirected by Aaron Posner and Teller. The production emphasizes the horrific elements of the play and conceives of the witches as skeletal monsters who strongly evoke associations with dark tourism fixtures, such as the Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo, Italy, and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* amusement park ride and film franchise.



The Folger Theatre's 2008 production of *Macbeth* had its origin in a pop culture association that developed into a stage spectacle with multiple resonant allusions. The magician Teller, from the Las Vegas-based act Penn and Teller, pitched *Macbeth* as a “supernatural horror thriller” to veteran stage director Aaron Posner (Folger 2020d). The resulting show was nominated for the 2008 Helen Hayes Award for Best Resident Play and has been revived multiple times, most recently in 2018 at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater. The Folger announced in March 2020 that they were making a live-capture stream of the original production available during the COVID-19 pandemic as a public service (Folger 2020a). Teller identified the witches as the key to the play because the creative team was interested in accentuating the horrific elements of the work. He recalls, “There was a moment where this production kind of had its birth. An image flashed through my mind. And it was of Macbeth and Banquo walking across a battlefield covered in corpses. We wanted the sense that these creatures had been walking around pulling clothes off dead people” (Folger 2020e). Ian Merrill Peakes, the actor portraying Macbeth, is even more specific with his identification of the witches: “I think in our production they are sort of the undead. And they are of the battlefield and they are, you know, the people who Macbeth has killed” (Folger 2020e).

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From Peakes’s remark, it is clear that at some point during the process, the witches were reconceptualized from desperate human scavengers to actual supernatural entities, at least in the eyes of Macbeth. Of course, Peakes’s Macbeth may be an unreliable gauge. Before the start of the Folger performance, staff member Amy Carr read from a typed prologue promising those assembled that they would all “experience the world through the eyes of a madman, but keep our sanity” (Folger 2020b). If Macbeth is a madman, however, he does not begin the play “mad.” The meeting between Macbeth and the witches in 1.3, occurs when Macbeth is sane. Banquo also sees the witches in that scene and shows no evidence of insanity.

At the start of the play, there is no reason for the audience to believe that Macbeth has behaved in any other way than as an honorable, law-abiding thane. There is likewise no reason to question his soundness of mind. He has not yet rebelled against the king, betrayed his comrade, or ordered the deaths of women and children. If the witches are Macbeth’s vanquished foes, who have returned to walk the earth, then they are very likely rebels who Macbeth has killed justly. The implication being that even though Macbeth is merely carrying out his lawful duties when he kills, the violence inherent in those duties brings on a future of violent consequences. In this context, Posner and Teller’s witches are not outsiders breaching the military world as external threats. Rather, they come from the same stock as Macdonwald, Macbeth, and Macduff, suggesting that the threat of corruption originates within the culture itself. Thus, by witnessing what happens to Macbeth, we can infer what has happened to Macdonwald and anticipate what might happen to Macduff with the bloody instructions of *Macbeth’s* culture perpetuating this cycle of murder and rebellion.

In the prologue to the Folger production, Carr argues that “Stage violence allows us to look death in the eye and live to tell the tale” (Folger 2020b). After more than a year of the COVID-19 pandemic, death is nothing to go out of one’s way to “look in the eye.” Nonetheless, the Folger’s 2008 Macbeth was created within a long popular and theatrical tradition that revels in the presentation of enjoyable violence and cathartic death. Recalling this tradition allows for a better understanding of how murder and mayhem are depicted in the play. This paper will explore Posner and Teller’s thematic engagement with violence and rebellion by examining the way the Folger *Macbeth’s* witches are painted with allusions to pop culture horror. In particular, the two pentimenti that bleed through the images of Posner and Teller’s undead witches are the self-fashioned zombies of the Capuchin Catacombs and the skeletal pirates from Disney’s *The Pirates of the Caribbean*.

### What Seemed Melted Is Again Corporal

Further exploring Peakes’s depiction of the witches, they seem to occupy the liminal space between ghosts and zombies. Ghosts typically retain the consciousness and spirit of a deceased person, whereas zombies generally lack those facilities and reanimate the physical body alone. Posner and Teller’s witches are either corporeal ghosts or conscious zombies. Between those two possibilities, conscious zombies seem more likely. Corporeal ghosts tend to retain their appearance from when they were alive, such as in the French

television series *Les Revenants* (2012–2015) directed by Robin Campillo, where decades of deceased residents from one small village unexpectedly return back home from a gorgeously tranquil mountainside. They look identical to their former living selves. When they return, they resume jobs, have conjugal relations with the living, and speak in detail about their memories. Their only distinction is a voracious hunger for food. They are accepted back by the community as resurrected residents and the major dramatic tensions in the show come from characters trying to wrestle with the theological implications of the returns.

On the other hand, in the British series *In the Flesh*, written and created by Dominic Mitchell (2013–2014) the returned are depicted as conscious zombies. They burrow their way back to the surface from their graves. Their bodies are partially decomposed and they must be injected daily with drugs to arrest further decay. Families often reject their returned loved ones, so they must live in government housing. And instead of study groups reading scriptures to understand why God has sent their loved ones back to life, as in *Les Revenants*, in the British *In the Flesh*, local militias are formed to hunt and re-kill the undead. It is evident throughout the series that the close juxtaposition of the living and the dead serves only to reinforce the unsurmountable barrier between them. Of these two species of undead, Posner and Teller's witches appear to be more like the outcast cognitive zombie variety.

With the knowledge that Posner and Teller's witches are the castoff undead, an extratextual scene at the start of the Folger production becomes clearer in its intent. It shows Macbeth and Banquo battling rebels as the witches circle around Macbeth, keenly observing the havoc he creates. As Macbeth runs his sword through a man on his knees, perhaps the rebel leader Macdonwald himself, one of the witches grabs the impaled man and kisses him firmly on the mouth before letting him fall dead. Throughout the scene, the three creatures display the sort of fixation one might expect from the reanimated war dead watching their slayer dispatch others. Yet, the witches are not wearing the uniforms of the fallen, but are instead wearing frilly dresses complete with veils suitable for first communion or a wedding.

If Peakes is correct and the witches are those killed by Macbeth before the beginning of the play, then this "kiss of death" might simply be a "welcome to the club" for Macdonwald. A gesture of communion. To those familiar with the play, it might be additionally understood as a foreshadowing of the play's conclusion. It should be noted that Macbeth and Banquo do not appear to be cognizant of the witches' presence in this added scene. Perhaps the bewitching kiss is the act that completes the rebel soldiers' transformation from fallen spirits to witches in the flesh. These undead witches will haunt Macbeth for the rest of the play.



Fig. 1. A witch watches Macbeth kill a rebel (Folger 2020b).

This decision to position the witches as undead rebels ripples across other scenes in *Macbeth*. Most notably, Banquo is murdered (3.3) on orders from the king and appears to Macbeth at the banquet scene (3.4). In Posner and Teller’s production, Banquo does not “Enter and sit in Macbeth’s place” as the stage directions (3.4.42) instruct. Instead, he appears out of nowhere, when those assembled part in two banks in front of Macbeth’s throne. On the recorded performance, one can hear audible gasps at the moment Banquo is revealed. In the dagger scene of act 2 (2.1) and act 3’s banquet scene (3.4), Posner and Teller’s production makes good Carr’s statement that the audience will see through the eyes of a madman. Whereas the witches are supernatural creatures who actually exist and speak to Macbeth, the ghost of Banquo is more akin to the floating dagger. No one else in the room can see Banquo, just as no one else would have seen the dagger. Posner and Teller’s prologue to the show instructs the audience to be ready to discern between the supernatural creatures of a haunted Scotland and the vivid delusions of a madman. The fact that the witches were also invisible at the beginning of the play suggests that the line between magic and madness in this production is very thin.

Banquo’s appearance is actually the second time in the production that a character suddenly appears and then disappears. Near the end of Macbeth and Banquo’s initial meeting with the witches, Macbeth orders the creatures to reveal the source of their prophecies (1.3.78–81). Instead of answering, the witches vanish. In the Folger production, Banquo stabs through one of the witches, perhaps in contempt of its monstrosity, or perhaps instead to coerce one of the other witches to answer Macbeth’s question. The thrust is to no

avail; the witch vanishes and Macbeth is left holding an empty cloak. Although this scene might simply be an effective visual shock for the audience, it may offer additional meaning if the witch is one of Macbeth's previous rebel kills, as it directly foreshadows Macbeth's lines soon after, when he asks why Ross "dresses him in borrowed clothes" (1.3.114–15). To the extent that robes connote identities and titles, not only is "Cawdor" transferable, but so is "traitor." We see here for the first time Macbeth draped in the cloak of a traitor, well before we see him grasp the dagger of a regicide.

The concept of one's robes, one's attire, signifying the continuity and transferability of identity pervades all genres of theatre. In the case of the Folger "horror show" *Macbeth*, two texts illuminate the production in a kaleidoscopic fashion: the self-fabricated zombies of the Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo and the skeletal pirates from Disney's amusement park ride and film franchise *The Pirates of the Caribbean*. The first one shocks viewers as an unintentionally macabre attempt to retain identity, while the second lures viewers into the dangerous mindset of debauchery and equivocation, but both originate in the world of dark tourism. In the prologue to the Folger production, Carr suggests that "When we share in the power of creative make-believe murders and monsters, we are celebrating the health, safety, and moral strength of our real lives." (Folger 2020b). This is the goal of dark tourism. To devote one's leisure time to seeking out terrifying experiences in order to purge those anxieties from everyday life.

### The Palermo Crypts

Folger company actor Andrew Zox has noted that costume designer Devon Painter was inspired by the famous Palermo mummies found in the Capuchin Catacombs of southern Italy (Folger 2020e). Tourists flock each year to this Sicilian staple of the dark tourism trade, just as theatregoers flock perennially to the "cursed" tragedy of *Macbeth*. This bizarre attraction was created hundreds of years ago, when priests began the practice of burying their departed in the open underground. The local climate and the physical makeup of the stone catacombs surprised the monks by preserving bodies to the degree that they appeared mummified. To that natural process, the priest added more deliberate dehydration practices and simple vinegar washes, filling entire wings devoted to priests and nuns.

Eventually, members of the wealthy middle and upper class in the area requested mummification, too. A.A. Gill describes these desiccated corpses as "hanging from the walls, propped on benches, resting in their decrepit boxes. [. . .] They're dressed in their living best, the uniforms of their earthly calling" (122). The *Financial Times* reports that many of the citizens who paid to be mummified stipulated in their wills that their clothing be regularly changed ("Postcard from . . . Sicily" 2011, 6). The wealthy Italians who ordered such rituals must have thought that the rotating attire would make them seem more lifelike, but the everchanging "clothes" are viewed by tourists more or less as "costumes" that the deceased borrow from their former living selves. Centuries after the practice of creating mummies ceased in Palermo, the inhabitants of the catacombs are visited by tourists instead of loved ones who remembered them when alive. The

Italian middle class intended to perpetuate themselves through mummification; instead, they transformed themselves into life-sized *memento mori*.



Fig. 2. A vault in the Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo, Italy (Morton 2014).

According to Ella Morton, the organizational template of the catacombs became much more complicated once the church started burying citizens beyond the religious. If one visits today, they will see mummies cataloged by “age, sex, occupation, and social status” (Morton 2014). Bob Brier suggests that these corpses “are ghoulish because they are not doing what they are supposed to be doing— they play at being alive”. The witches in the Folger *Macbeth* likewise play, in the sense of playacting, at being living creatures. Their playacting causes Banquo to seriously inquire whether the three creatures before them are “inhabitants ‘o th’ earth” (1.3.42). In most productions, that line suggests that the three women witches are so distinctive in their appearance that they barely look human anymore. When the same line is addressed to Posner and Teller’s witches, it strikes the audience instead as a self-evident recognition that these creatures are not human.

With respect to the Palermo mummies, for whatever reason, their ghoulishness has not deterred tourists, just as the uncanny Folger witches do not deter Macbeth. A. A. Gill (2009) draws a clear distinction between the nature of the mummies’ presentation in Palermo with the even better-known catacombs in Rome. Gill observes that in Palermo, “the bodies were always meant to be seen, and they charge you a small fee for the pleasure” (123). The Folger’s witches likewise present themselves as self-fashioned spectacles to Banquo and Macbeth, dressed in splendid attire so that they might have the maximum visual impact on the two thanes as they attempt to influence them.

Sadly, screening a production in 2021 that evokes Italian burial culture cannot help but stir up mixed feelings due to Italy’s national experience with COVID-19, especially in the early days of the pandemic. It was one of the first countries turned inside out and overwhelmed by the coronavirus. Instead of having the opportunity to die surrounded and cared for by loved ones, like those found in the Capuchin Catacombs, many Italians in 2020 died alone and isolated from their families. Inhabited coffins lined the walls of hos-

pitals, waiting for internment (Giuffrida and Tondo 2020). One prominent story reported that cemetery workers were charged with digging up bodies in order to resell the graves (Tondo, 2020). A grieving Italian described the unique misery of death during COVID-19: “Usually you would be able to dress [family members] and they would stay one night in the family home. None of this is happening” (Giuffrida and Tondo 2020). Throngs of tourists have flocked to Palermo for years to visit graves of men and women with whom they have no relationship, yet intimate family members recently have been left to process the grief and attendant guilt of their loved ones’ isolated deaths. In *Macbeth*, such pitiable circumstances are the norm. Malcolm and Donalbain must flee Scotland before grieving for their slaughtered father. Fleance must abandon his father as he is killed. Macduff hears from others that his wife and children have been killed. Macbeth has only the space of a brief soliloquy to ponder the queen’s demise. No dead or dying characters in this play depart with the attendant care of loved ones. Long after the COVID-19 pandemic ends, that cruelty, made necessary by circumstance, will linger in our world.

### The Guidelines of Witchcraft

Although the Folger creators identify the Capuchin Catacombs as the direct inspiration for the witches’ appearance, another analogue of horror is worthy of exploration. In both dress and attitude, Posner and Teller’s witches closely resemble the damned skeletal crew in the Disney amusement park ride and the film franchise *The Pirates of the Caribbean*. Chris Land has called the pirate “a figure in full sympathy with the Zeitgeist of the early 21st century” (169). At the time Posner and Teller staged their *Macbeth*, pirates were enjoying a decade-long popularity at the top of both adult and children’s Halloween costumes (CNBC 2008). In the Folger Theatre production, when Macbeth returns to visit the witches (4.1), they do not simply wear dresses in this scene, although some semblance of that feminine attire remains, but they also more closely resemble swashbuckling pirates, with bandanas around their heads, scabbards around their waists, and nooses around their necks, signifying the fate of many pirates.

The Disney pirate films are adaptations of the amusement park ride of the same name that opened at Disneyland in 1967 and at Disney’s Magic Kingdom in 1973. Although the films have been seen by many more viewers than the attractions, it is the original ride at Disneyland that most closely resembles Posner and Teller’s *Macbeth* in tone and in its assumptions about audience. In the final sections of the ride, skeletons in pirate uniforms sit atop piles of gold coins and precious jewels, forever surrounded by, yet separated from, the treasures they violated the law to gain. These *memento mori* physically resemble the skeletal witches in Posner and Teller’s production. If we are to interpret the witches as rebel thanes that Macbeth has killed in the past, then the pirates and the witches also share in the transgressive causes of their deaths. Similarly to the once-loyal thane, pirates were often trained and commissioned as lawful sailors who only later abandoned the law.



Fig. 3. The witches resembling pirates in *Macbeth* (Folger, “Part 2,” 2020).



Fig. 4. A skeletal pirate and his booty at Disneyland (disneyirates 2011).



Just as the witches scour the battlefield, occasionally wearing bizarrely discordant frilly dresses, so to does the undead crew of the Black Pearl don women's dresses during a pivotal scene of the franchise's first film. While on the surface the Disney pirates wearing women's clothing might come across as merely humorous in its emasculation, this image further illustrates the destabilization one feels after sacrificing one's identity. The crewmen were sailors turned pirates. Then pirates turned zombies. They become as untethered from their original identities as Macbeth does from his identity as loyal Thane of Glamis by the middle of the play. Erin Mackie reminds us that "the trope of piracy has always been highly mobile, a marker of the very instabilities of those lines that define social and ethical standards (29). As discussed earlier, the witches in *Macbeth* are the very embodiment of instability.

John Van Maanen describes the Disney amusement park ride experience as one where "boatloads of silent observers glide past tableaux depicting ghostly pirates hoarding their plunder, cannonballs being fired (overhead) by ships cruising the harbor, and pirates auctioning off captured and bound women whose human worth is marked by the 'Bridefor-Sale' signs worn around their neck" (14).

It would be tempting to see the ride as an instructive morality tale; however, it is equally possible that visitors come for and remember the excitement of the transgressions more than they do the warnings to avoid them. In 2018, when Disneyland removed the "Bride auction" exhibit from the ride due to its misogynistic objectification of women, a vocal minority of fans resisted. Unofficial Disney historian David Koenig is quoted at the time as objecting, "The bride auction is being removed because Disney is lily-livered. No one is really offended by animatronic pirates acting lusty. It's in-character silliness. I don't advocate gun-play, thievery, alcoholism or sexism, but I'm still able to enjoy a show in which pirates behave like pirates" (Fisher 2018). By staging *Macbeth* in such close association to the genre of horror, Posner and Teller bet that audiences not only expect to see the regicide pay for his crimes, but that they simultaneously expect to enjoy the ride as he commits those crimes, even if those crimes involve violence against women and children. While such a subjective variable is difficult to measure, one might argue that in many productions of *Macbeth*, audiences are spurred in intangible ways to relish the horror of the attack on Lady Macduff and her son much more so than they relish the very similar ambush on Banquo and his son. This is *because* the act is so transgressive.

In the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, the "pirate code" is frequently invoked, typically by outsider characters like Elizabeth Swann (played by Kiera Knightley). It is a running joke that the "rules" of the pirate code are more like guidelines that do not need to be followed to the letter. Will Turner (Orlando Bloom) is another "civilian" character who is ill-equipped at the start of the film to engage with pirates who flout the rules. When Jack Swallow (Johnny Depp) pulls a gun and fires at Turner during a sword fight, Will accuses him of fighting unfairly, to which Sparrow simply replies "Pirate!"

In this regard, Elizabeth and Will are as naïve or as gullible as Macbeth. Glamis listens to the witches' prophecies and expects them to transpire literally. At the end of the Disney film, Elizabeth and Will choose to pursue the life of piracy and the audience is strongly encouraged to celebrate the young couple's decision as a positive choice. In Shakespeare's play, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are drawn in by the witches' prophecies and become increasingly captive to their pull. They suffer the fate of the pirates on the amusement park ride: fruitless death. They do not get anything like the romantic affirmation of free living that Elizabeth and Will enjoy at the conclusion of the franchise's first film.

### Macduff Moves Center Stage

In Posner and Teller's *Macbeth*, the witches appear above stage as Macbeth dies at the hands of Macduff (5.8.39), just as they were present in act 1, scene 1, when Macdonwald was killed by Macbeth (Folger, "Part 2," 2020). Standard editions of the playtext do not indicate that the witches are in either place. These bookended scenes have been added to maximize the influence of their roles, even if the witches have no lines. Macduff stands behind a kneeling Macbeth and moves to slit his throat, just as one of the witches pours a bright red liquid from a goblet upon Macbeth's head, bathing him in what seems to be his own blood. They are again dressed in bridal dresses, perhaps consummating their relationship with Glamis, just as they had with Macdonwald. Such theatrics illustrate that the witches have been directly involved in the ruin of multiple lives.



Fig. 5. The witches hover above Macbeth at his death (Folger 2020c).



Fig. 6. The witches pour blood over Macbeth at his death (Folger 2020c).

Witnessing Macbeth's doom, one cannot help but worry for Macduff. Terry Teachout has written in the *Wall Street Journal* that Peake's depiction of Macbeth is brilliantly pulled off as "a naïve middle-manager type in a crew cut whose hunger for promotion gets the best of him." If that characterization describes Macbeth, then where does that leave Posner and Teller's Macduff? With his family gone, how can he not be susceptible to the witches' insinuations? Macduff is clearly the next logical target for the witches to add to their chain. He is weighted down by guilt for failing to save his wife and children (4.3.260–67). To believe that his trauma has not left him vulnerable in the unstable, violent world he lives in, would be a mistake. The most recognizable convention of the horror genre is its penchant for sequels, and Posner and Teller leave no doubt who the witches will visit first in the sequel to *Macbeth*.

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