

# ‘The Scottish Play’ has bewitched audiences for centuries, so why is it still so powerful?

*‘Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires.’*

Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* has been filmed for TV or cinema at least 16 times since 1900. Today, a new adaptation by Justin Kurzel opens in cinemas around the UK, starring Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard as the malevolent title couple.

The play is a haunting tale of supernatural powers and human ambition; witches and ghosts stalk its pages, compelling Macbeth to murder the king, and his own best friend, in pursuit of Scotland’s crown, and driving his wife to madness.

The supernatural, for Shakespeare’s contemporary audience, was not just a theatrical device. Bad harvests, plague outbreaks and unexplained fires would often be blamed on witches — usually women who were executed for their ‘crimes’.

And it has always been women who are blamed for Macbeth’s crimes too. The Scottish warrior may be the one to stab the king in his sleep, but it is Lady Macbeth who manipulates him into doing so, and the witches who first give him the idea. But while the first performance in 1611 opened with the witches’ sinister first meeting, Kurzel’s film begins with a different kind of ceremony: the funeral of the Macbeths’ infant son.

In this modern adaptation Lady Macbeth is driven by grief, as much as ambition or superstition, to pursue her malicious plan; and it is the trauma of the bleak Scottish battlefields which seems to unhinge Macbeth. The ambitions are ‘more to fill something, or replace something, as opposed to the hunger for power,’ said Kurzel. ‘That felt very human.’

The play is so notorious, and so closely associated with the supernatural powers it depicts, that many actors and superstitious viewers still refuse to speak its name aloud. Four hundred years after its first performance, the story appears to have as much potency as ever.

## **Toil and trouble**

It is the exciting, fast-paced tale of regicide, war and the supernatural which captivates audiences, some argue. It is exhilarating to watch the Macbeths claw their way to the greatest heights, only to be torn back down to a world of madness and violent retribution. The classic battle of good versus evil is taken to the utmost extremes — so we return to it again and again.

Others think that the play's power lies in more everyday themes. The twisted relationship between Lord and Lady Macbeth is one of the most fascinating ever written. And we can all identify with tales about ambition; everyone has some kind of vision for their future. The question is how far they are willing to go to achieve it. That is why this newest version, which focuses on the characters' most 'human' motivations, has been so well received by critics.