***Macbeth***

**Informational Text: Witches, Superstition, and Ghosts**

In Shakespeare’s time, many people deeply believed in the power and influence of superstition, the power of magic, and in “other-worldly” creatures, such as ghosts and witches. When strange or unexplainable things would happen in the Elizabethan era, many attributed these happenings to the influence of the supernatural, whereas today, we would likely be able to explain things scientifically. Audiences would have been easily led to believe that a character saw a ghost in front of him, or that he would listen to witches’ predictions, as in *Macbeth*.

**Witches**

People from all walks of life and income levels looked to the supernatural to explain the unexplainable. In 1591, it was believed that a group of witches attempted to murder King James I of Scotland, which led to his study of the occult, and ultimately his book on the persecution and punishment of witches, *Daemonologie,* published in 1597.

Many of these superstitions and beliefs stemmed from Celtic and Viking pagan beliefs and traditions that existed thousands of years before. “White” witches and apothecaries who doled out homemade remedies, including potions and chants to heal the sick, were seen as healers, and were welcome throughout the community. By the Elizabethan era, this distinction was gone, and those who had any sort of unexplainable power were considered evil and a harmful and mischievous threat to society. People blamed witches for the Black plague, bad crops, deaths, illnesses, and fires. Those who were accused of practicing witchcraft were usually old, poor, unmarried outcasts of society, but for a period of time, fear and paranoia running rampant, accusations of witchcraft led to the torture and death of hundreds of innocent women and several men.

**Superstition**

Those in Shakespeare’s time also wholeheartedly believed in superstition. It was believed to be bad luck if they walked under a ladder. According to beliefs of the time, the ladder leaning against a wall was representative of the Holy Trinity. Walking under the ladder was considered breaking the Trinity, and tantamount to blaspheming God. Another strong superstition involved sneezing. If a person opened their mouth to sneeze, this was considered an entry point by which the devil could enters one’s body. Saying “God bless you” protected the sneezing person from the devil’s breach. Elizabethans also believed that if you stirred a pot counterclockwise, the contents of the pot would be poisoned, and could bring bad luck to everyone who ate the food.

Bad luck could also be brought upon a person by possessing a peacock feather, crossing the path of a black cat, spilling salt, or leaving a door open. Conversely, touching the hand of a prisoner who was about to be hanged, a cow’s breath, or spitting into a fire could bring good luck- as could iron, silver, fire, salt, and running water.

**Ghosts**

The Elizabethans witnessed a time of great strife throughout Europe. They were still reeling from the fight between the Catholics and the Protestants that bloodied the monarchy and led to the execution of hundreds. They saw Queen Elizabeth I’s own mother, Anne Boleyn beheaded by her own husband, when Elizabeth was two years old. And later, they saw Elizabeth herself imprison and execute Mary, Queen of Scots in 1587.

The Catholics believed that there was a place called Purgatory, which was a sort of “holding cell” for those who had died, before they were placed in heaven or hell. Ghosts were merely those in Purgatory, waiting to be cleansed of all sin before their placement. Some believe that ghosts were put on earth to serve out their time in Purgatory before they were “moved on.”

The Protestants, however, did not believe in a place called Purgatory, but rather, that souls were immediately sent to heaven or hell. Two beliefs existed: First, it was believed that the bodies of the dead were inhabited by spirits and that these spirits came back to cause havoc. Secondly, it was also believed that ghosts were a figment of the mind- that they were simply a hallucination or an illusion.

One of the most influential works of literature of the Elizabethan era that stirred the question of the existence of ghosts was Shakespeare’s very own *Hamlet*. While it is not clear whether Shakespeare himself truly believed in ghosts or spirit, he certainly enjoyed fascinating and horrifying his audiences with the ghost of Hamlet’s father in his wildly popular play.