

# Shakespeare's smoke and mirrors tricks solved

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The longstanding mystery of a floating dagger in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* may now have been solved thanks to the detective work of an ANU researcher.

*Image: Professor Iain Wright has found a possible inspiration for the floating dagger scene in Shakespeare's Macbeth. Photo: Belinda Pratten*

Professor Iain Wright, from the ANU Faculty of Arts, has uncovered a potential source of inspiration for the famous scene. The source is a description contained in a book edited by one of the fathers of modern science, John Dee, who was fascinated with how the eye could be deceived by tricks of the light.

“*Macbeth* is a great enigma,” Professor Wright said. “It’s a bigger

mystery than Hamlet. We don't have any record of its first production.”

Professor Wright estimates that Macbeth was written and first performed in 1606, soon after Scottish monarch James I assumed the throne of England. He made Shakespeare's players the official royal company, meaning the bard would have been under pressure to please his royal patron.

The new king and his family had a great appetite for theatre, especially masques, which combined music, performers and special effects to create an elaborate and illusion-rich amusement for the aristocracy.

Professor Wright argues that although Shakespeare kept his distance from the emerging masque hype, the bard acknowledged the trend by incorporating references into his later works, and tailoring his plays for performances in the closed, exclusive space favoured by the king.

“You notice at once that Macbeth is full of optical illusions — there are floating daggers, the ghost of Banquo, ghostly kings, and ghostly cauldrons. I thought, surely if that's the case, Shakespeare is probably saying to himself, ‘What sort of special effects are available to make these more spectacular?’.”

This train of thought took Professor Wright to the library at the University of Cambridge where he picked up a copy of Euclid's Geometry edited by John Dee. A contemporary of Shakespeare, Dee is now regarded as one of the fathers of the modern age because of his talent for what was then called natural magic – science. He was especially interested in how specially modified mirrors could create tricks of the light, making things appear as if by magic.

“In the preface, Dee takes a survey of the state of modern science. There is a whole section called the art of perspective, which is what they called

optics. In that, I suddenly ran up against this description of a man starting back with amazement at a floating dagger, and of the 'marvellous glass' that produced it. Finding it was pure chance really, a lucky break," Professor Wright said.

Professor Wright argues that Shakespeare would undoubtedly have been aware of such tricks of the light when writing *Macbeth*, and may even have used a device like Dee's to create the effect of a floating dagger. Similar optical effects might also have been deployed to create the many ghosts who pop up during the play.

"The possibility that Shakespeare set out to fool the senses would mean he was very much aware of the sceptical trend of the day, which questioned the reliability of what our senses can tell us about the world.

"In the context of the witch hunts from the period, it's highly possible that Shakespeare was railing somewhat against the idea of magic and external evil by demonstrating how easily the senses can be fooled."

Professor Wright's discovery is outlined in the latest edition of *Heat* magazine.

Source: Australian National University

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