

SHAKESPEARE'S
KING · PHYCUS



Dramaturgical packet

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Shakespeare's King Phycus:

A history of the text

While dating texts from the Elizabethan era is extremely problematic, it is believed that the first draft of *King Phycus* was written in 1588. There are number of theories as to what Shakespeare's activities were prior to his arrival in London in c. 1590, the most likely of which is that the budding bard was teaching grammar school. It was at this time, at 24 years of age, as an instructor of the classics and the faculty advisor of the Thespis Club, that Shakespeare penned *King Phycus*, as a dramatic presentation for the enjoyment of his pupils and colleagues. It was Shakespeare's first, but ill-fated attempt at tragedy. After its amateur production, *King Phycus* was given one performance at the Rose Theatre in 1592. The Rose Theatre Players were requested to perform for Queen Elizabeth and thus their theatre was vacant for the first and only known professional performance of *King Phycus*. The work was entered into the Stationer's Register in London, but as spelling was not standardized in the Elizabethan era and misspelling of names was common, it is difficult to confirm. There is a mention in the official record of the Register of what is believed to be the work, described as "a booke called by Master Willam Hakepeer as his historye of the Kinge Phyass, as yt was played at the Rose vppon Twelfth Night at Christmas Last."

Responses to the first performance

The response to the first performance of *King Phycus* was a less than favorable one, and the troupe who performed the work (many of whom would later form the renowned Lord Chamberlain's Men) were shortly thereafter struck with the plague endemic to London. While the audience and critics did not give Shakespeare the warm reception and esteem that he hoped, it is notable that the work did not go without notice. Several references to the play survive in fragments, the most notable of which is attributed to the rival playwright Winifred Burbank, who refers to "the wretched follie of the kin of the apostate Kinge Phycuss." Another reference to the work appears in the Earl of Blunt's diary, recalling how "all and sundrie heeved vegetation upon the stage, demandinge the fellow penned such a dreadful verse as Kinge Phycuss be a-pilloried." Shakespeare did not take kindly to such criticism and ill turns of fate. Ever a superstitious man, it is believed that he not only forbid any further performances of the play, but placed a curse upon it and the "accursed pen that inked it" and buried it along with the original script. While the author's text was lost for many years, Shakespeare did not successfully confiscate all of the "rolls" of the actors—the individual parts written out for each actor by which they memorized their lines. These portions of the work, which we now refer to as "roles", remained in circulation, passed on from hand to hand, throughout the generations, by which many a joke and situation has found its way into our common usage, before the play itself.

The Rediscovery

How *King Phycus* found its way across the Atlantic to the United States exactly is unknown, but the text was rediscovered in the twentieth century in a trunk formerly belonging to John T. Ford, the former proprietor of Ford's Theatre in Washington D.C. Along with the text of the play were a number of documents relating to attempts at its North American premiere. The first of these was the correspondence of British actor Charles Macready who endeavored to present and star in *King Phycus* at the Astor Place Theatre on May 12, 1849, following his performance of *Macbeth*. Due to the Astor Place Riots, however, which left 25 dead and more than 100 injured, the presentation of *Shakespeare's King Phycus* was indefinitely postponed. The second of these documents discovered in the trunk was a letter from Edwin Booth to his brother John Wilkes. Edwin had acquired a number of trunks from Astor Place, and in one had discovered the text of *King Phycus*. The theatrical family was famous for their performances of Shakespeare, and Edwin endeavored to premiere the lost Shakespeare play with himself in the title role, with his brother John Wilkes as Brutus. But Fate or the devil would have his due, and *King Phycus* was subject to the clashing tides of history.

King Phycus was slated for a performance at the Ford's Theater in Washington D.C. on April 15, 1865, as both Edwin and John Wilkes Booth were regular actors at the theatre. The latter had intended to commit the assassination of the President at the performance of Shakespeare's play, because it was believed Lincoln would attend the momentous occasion. However, with the surrender of Robert E. Lee only days before and the end of the Civil War, the President and Mary Lincoln decided to attend the performance of the more jovial, comedic *Our American Cousin* on April 14th instead. Being informed of this change at Ford's theatre where he collected his mail, John Wilkes Booth thus decided to strike down the president during *Our American Cousin*. Following the national tragedy of Lincoln's death, the theatres were closed and *King Phycus* would return to obscurity for another hundred years. It is worthy of note that when John Wilkes Booth was apprehended for the murder of the president, there were twenty pages missing from his journal. It is these pages that scholars have conjectured may have been the text of Booth's role as Brutus in *King Phycus*.

Modern Revival

It was not until 1986 that the script was discovered in a basement in Caldwell, Idaho. The great grandson of the owner of Ford's Theater, College of Idaho Drama Professor Emeritus John Ford Sollers, donated a trunk of Ford's Theater memorabilia to the Library of Congress, but the script of *King Phycus* was returned as it was mistakenly believed to be a fraud. The oft-vilified script has been discredited by a number of misguided scholars who have failed to take into account of the overwhelming evidence of its authenticity. After being rejected by the Library of Congress, the play was eventually entrusted to Boise-area Shakespeare enthusiast Tom Willmorth for scholarly editing. It is this remarkable journey that makes up the production history of *Shakespeare's King Phycus*.

The text and the curse...

The text of *King Phycus* was recovered, in its entirety (albeit fragmented) in a rotted leather case, along with the "cursed pen" that wrote it, a ribbon believed to be Anne Hathaway's, and an unexplained tooth. On the first page of the document was Shakespeare's curse, most likely added by the author after the unfortunate first professional production at the Rose. It reads:

"Buddiee for mye sake forbear
To cut the verse encased here
Fie be he who mounts mye play
And doth mye wishes thus betray

Along with the script, various ephemera have survived including the rolls, a letter and a photo...

Two actors "rolls" from *King Phycus* have survived, that depicting the "who's on lute" scene, later made famous by the comedy duo Abbott and Costello as "who's on first" and the scene made famous by Meredith Wilson in *The Music Man*.

A Letter from Edwin Booth to his brother John Wilkes has survived, discovered in the latter's journal, after he was apprehended for assassinating the president. Missing from the journal were twenty pages, believed to be the text of Booth's role as Brutus in *King Phycus*.

The only known photo of the intended Booth production has survived, a tintype of John Wilkes Booth as Brutus in *King Phycus*. (It is not a photograph of a performance, but a promotional photograph taken many months before the ill-fated production's intended premiere, as was the practice in the 19th century theatre and today.)

Shakespeare's King Phycus Timeline :

- *King Phycus* written by William Shakespeare in 1588
- Amateur production of *King Phycus* by Shakespeare's pupils, 1589
- First (and only) performance, Rose Theatre, 1592
- Intended Charles Macready production at New York's Astor Place Theatre, May 12, 1849
- Intended production at Washington D.C.'s Ford Theatre by Booth Family Players, April 15, 1865
- Discovery of documents in John T. Ford, former proprietor of Ford's Theatre, 1986
- Authentication and editing by Tom Willmorth, 1986-2009
- First modern professional production, 2010

“Reviews”

"Those in attendance at M. Shakespeare's latest worke should be gladde to tell you that much enjoymente was hadde by alle, excepting those in the audience."

- Jean of Shallott, Croyden town crier
Croyden Historical Society

"A man whos name now is now pummelled with rancor begat such a squallid verse that we in the audience becriede 'Fie' upon he who sullied our ears with such sot of ignoramusses."

-Letter from the calligrapher Robert Burbank to his betrothed Meredith Price
University of Birmingham

"The worke revolves itself upon the wretched follie of the kin of the apostate Kinge Phycuss, who himselfe can turne upon turne neither morally right himself, nor least provide a fellowe with a mouthful of goode humour as e'en the infant playwrighte shoulde."

-Winifred Burbank, playwright
University of Leicester, Special Collection (Burbank papers)

"Suche moral turpitude was not knowne before now uponn the boards of The Rose but betwixtt the bedfellowes of Broadstreet" [the houses of ill repute in South London].

-Sir Mortimer Wilburforce, diary
Anonymous private collection

"As it 'twas three and one quarter hours hence the wretched programme began, all and sundrie heeved vegetation upon the stage, demandinge the fellow penned such a dreadful verse as Kinge Phycuss be a-pilloried."

-Earl of Blunt, diary
Kingston upon Hull Historical Society

“Scholarly reactions”

It is likely that the text of Shakespeare’s *King Phycus* was indeed one penned by the Bard for one unlikely reason, albeit existing amongst a host of other reasons in which it appears unlikely. The most definitive factor which certainly accredits the text with authenticity is that it was discovered almost entirely intact, having lived under the earth for centuries without suffering the ravages of time, due to its ritualistic burial and happenstance preservation.

Before discussing the specifics of the *King Phycus* documents, it is worth noting another example, which shares in common with *King Phycus* the preservation methods which we now know may have contributed to their survival. The case is that of the discarded verses of a young William Shakespeare as discovered by a Mr. Paul Dixon, who unearthed a wrapped bundle under the cornerstone of the Old Globe, during a construction project on the East bank of the Thames, in the late summer of 1808. The contents under the wrappings were four single sheets of papyrus of a few roughly scribbled handwritten notes, which may have been the drafts of a dramatic composition or sonnets in progress. Among these were the cryptic verses which show hints of the now well-known phrases, including: “Beware the Ides of Juno.” “Richard-no hump, perhaps an eyepatch?” “MacBeth and Back Again” “A Donkey, A Donkey, my kingdom for a Donkey” and “A Rose by any other Smell I would still call a Rose.” A wispy note at the bottom of the third sheet reads “WS.”

What has decided conclusively that Paul Dixon’s recovered bundle was indeed the fledgling work of a young William Shakespeare is that, like *King Phycus*, it was unearthed intact, without suffering the natural stages of decay, though having been under the damp earth for over 200 years. It has since been determined that the wrapping’s of the texts, consisting of a pressed lamb pancreas, may have suffered the desecration of the Bard, who due to the unyielding demands of the playwright’s craft, may have relieved himself upon the package. Unbeknownst to him, but later discovered by scientists, was that the chemical composition of urine proves to be a superior preservative for papyrus; guinea hen urine, for example, was used by the Incas as both a fire retardant and preservative.

“Pissing on the Papyrus: the Preservation Function of Urine in the Elizabethan Era”

-Regina Billingsworth, University of Leeds.

Some truth to the legitimacy of *King Phycus* can be inferred from historical documents available to the modern scholar; for example, an entry in the ledgers of the Rose Theatre from 6 January, 1592, show that a production ran for one night which was "by W.Shakspear [sic]." Additionally, a letter dated 20 December, 1591 was discovered in 1921 from one H.R. Halfaxe, solicitor, addressed to Anne Hathaway, in which a "more substantiel retayner [sic]" is requested for legal services "in connexion with M. Shakespeare's latest Phycus."

Many scholars have dismissed both documents; first, they say, it is well known that "W. Shakspear" was theatre shorthand for Christopher Marlowe, though certainly nothing of the sort is known. Further compounding the problem is the fact that a one-man show was also performed as a matinee by William "Slyte Will" Sharkspar, a flatulence-based comedian of the time popular with various divinity students and children of the working classes. Sharkspar's famous catch-phrase "hold thee that to drink!" coupled with an overbroad eye-roll was parroted by many an Elizabethan youth.

Second, the letter from the solicitor refers to Shakespeare's "latest Phycus" can be taken in two ways, due in part to a spot on the page which could be a comma, and the poor standardization of spelling prior to Dr. Johnson's dictionary nearly two centuries later. First, as referring to his latest play, *King Phycus* (his "latest, Phycus."), or relating to his recent legal troubles (his "latest fracas")-- many Chancery and Exchequer Court documents of the time show that Shakespeare had frequent difficulties with libel suits, and theft of services charges....

-From "Lost and Found: the Apocryphal Shakespeare, Etherage and Fletcher" by C. Dale Slack, VanPeldt Chair of British Theatrical History, University of Washington at Pomeroy.

A partial list of scenes from *King Phycus* and their corresponding Shakespeare scenes

Phycus	/	Shakespeare
Act I, Scene 1		Romeo and Juliet, Act I, Scene 1
Act I, Scene 2		King Lear, Act I, Scene 1 Hamlet Act I, Scene 2 Macbeth, Act I, Scene 7
Act II, Scene 1		Julius Caesar, Act I, Scene 2
Act II, Scene 2		Hamlet, Act I, Scene 4 Hamlet, Act I, Scene 5
Act II, Scene 3		Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Scene 5 Romeo and Juliet, Act I Scene 3
Act III, Scene 1		Macbeth Act IV, Scene 1
Act III, Scene 2		Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2 Romeo and Juliet, Act I, Scene 5 Hamlet, Act III, Scene 2 King Lear, Act III, Scene 7 Hamlet, Act III, Scene 3
Act IV, Scene 1		Macbeth, Act I Scene 7
Act IV, Scene 2		Romeo and Juliet, Act II, Scene 2 Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Scene 1
Act IV, Scene 3		Hamlet, Act IV, Scene 1
Act IV, Scene 4		Romeo and Juliet, Act V, Scene 1
Act IV, Scene 5		Romeo and Juliet, Act IV, Scene 3 Hamlet, Act IV, Scene 5
Act V, Scene 1		Julius Caesar, Act III, Scene 1
Act V, Scene 2		Henry V, Act IV, Scene 3
Act V, Scene 3		Macbeth, Act V, Scene 1 Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5
Act V, Scene 4		King Lear, Act IV, Scene 6
Act V, Scene 5		Macbeth, Henry V, Richard III battle scenes
Act V, Scene 6		Hamlet Act V, Scene 1, and all of the above...