

As Luck Would Have It

Many cultures have personified luck in the form of a mythological deity. The ancient Greeks held that the goddess Tyche (Τύχη), the daughter of the Titans Tethys and Oceanus, governed the fortune and prosperity of a city-state and could influence one's personal fate. In ancient Rome, the goddess Fortuna was the equivalent of Tyche; the Roman Felicitas was the goddess not only of good fortune but also of happiness, wealth, and success. Similarly the Nubian Dedun, attested to as early as the 3rd millennium BCE, seems to have been a god of prosperity and wealth. In Hinduism, Lakshmi (or Shri) is associated with fortune, wealth, prosperity, beauty, fertility, sovereignty, and abundance. In Chinese culture, gods of luck form a vital, everyday pantheon rooted in Taoism, Buddhism, and folk religion; the primary deities include Cai Shen (財神, God of Wealth), the Sanxing (三星, Three Star Gods for fortune, prosperity, and longevity), and Mazu (媽祖, the goddess of sailors who is also prayed to for luck and academic success). In Japan, the Seven Lucky Gods (Shichifukujin 七福神), a syncretic blend of Shinto, Buddhist, Taoist, and Hindu traditions, are celebrated for bringing good fortune, prosperity, and happiness.

And even in cultures that have not mythologized luck as a god or goddess, fortune (good or bad) has often been personalized or evoked through various superstitious practices. Buddhists believe that one's fortune is determined by one's karma, or past actions, but nonetheless Buddhists in some traditions spin prayer wheels. Among Native Americans, dream catchers were woven by the Objibwe to filter out bad dreams and the Diné used a Whirling Log to evoke healing spirits and auspiciousness. In the Judea-Christian-Islamic tradition, God is responsible for one's luck, but Jews will wear a hamsa and mount mezuzahs on their door, Christians wear crosses and make signs, and many Muslims use charms to ward off the evil eye, even though doing so is prohibited.

Superstitious practices to avoid a jinx are common in sports. (In ancient Greece mythology, Lynx (Λύνξ) was the daughter of Pan and Echo who used a magic spell to make Zeus fall in love with Io, an act which caused Hera to turn her into a wryneck bird.) Many athletic games start with a coin toss to determine who gets the ball first. American baseball is particularly prone to anti-jinx superstitions: pitchers always jump over the foul line on their way to the mound; batters make the sign of the cross in the dirt on their way to the plate and, if they hit a home run, they point up to the sky kissing their hand as they round the bases;

and, if the team is on a winning streak, players and fans alike will avoid making any changes to their routines, often wearing the same clothes day after day.

The theater is perhaps just as prone to superstitions as is sports. In his October 1921 *New Statesman* article, "A Defence of Superstition", the Irish essayist Robert Wilson Lynd wrote:

The stage is perhaps the most superstitious institution in England, after the racecourse. The latter is so superstitious that to wish a man luck when on his way to a race-meeting is considered unlucky. Instead of saying "Good luck!" you should say something insulting, such as, "May you break your leg!" Actors and actresses have not only all the ordinary superstitions about the picking up of pins, breaking looking-glasses, and the unluckiness of certain numbers. They have also a number of professional superstitions. It is unlucky, they say, for instance, to quote Macbeth.

And then there is crossing your fingers. As kids, we crossed the pinkie and middle finger of both hands when we really wanted something to happen; but we also said "cross my fingers, hope to die" when we wanted to convince someone that we were not lying, and we would surreptitiously put cross fingers behind our back when we were telling a white lie.

And many superstitions that might once have had a practical purpose persist. It is bad luck to open an umbrella indoors—something that obviously might cause an accident. We say that a broken mirror brings seven years of bad luck, we avoid a black cat crossing our path, we throw some spilled salt over our left shoulder, and we hang up upside-down horseshoes over our doors even though we no longer believe in the magical worldview that gave birth to these beliefs and practices.

Indeed, the rise of Enlightenment science challenged the animistic and supernatural explanations that had once dominated European thought. As Cassius says to Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (Act I, Scene II):

Why, man, he (Caesar) doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves.
Men at some time are masters of their fates:
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

(We might note that the belief that our fate is written in the stars still persists, as we can see in daily horoscopes and fortune-telling—something that the Buddha railed against. And even cold-hearted atheist me will pick up a four-leaf clover or toss a coin in a wishing well, and I keep in my pocket a lucky penny and two horseshoe tokens I found on the street.)

And even we skeptics still use heads-or-tails coin tosses to make decisions. And we continue to personify Lady Luck, as in the title of this piece or in phrases like “Fortune favors the bold” (*audentes fortuna iuvat*, what Pliny the Elder said when he sailed out into his death during the 79 CE eruption of Mount Vesuvius).

Robert Wilson Lynd said:

So far as I have discovered, however, the dividing line between those who are superstitious and those who are not is not at all the same as the line that divides enlightenment from unenlightenment. Some of the world's wisest men have been superstitious. Some of the world's greatest dunderheads have been free from superstition.

Up until now, a random roll of the dice still lies at the heart of the most fundamental of sciences, quantum mechanics, where probability allows us to predict the behavior of subatomic particles, but not the outcome of an individual quantum event. Schrödinger's cat is both alive and dead until we open the box.

But recently, some physicists have questioned whether the apparent randomness of quantum mechanics is truly fundamental. Dr. Timothy Palmer of the University of Oxford has objected to the use of the continuum in the mathematics of quantum physics, and he and others believe that quantum behavior might emerge from as yet poorly understood deterministic rules, even if it appears random on the surface. As Stav Dimitropoulos reported:

Because if chance is not fundamental, then perhaps what we call luck—the tantalizing notion that lingers between order and surprise—may become something else entirely: a placeholder for a structure we have yet to uncover.¹

A world without luck? Good luck with that!

¹Stav Dimitropoulos, “Bad Luck Isn’t Random—The Universe’s Hidden Rules May Be Controlling Your Reality, Oxford Physicist Claims,” *Popular Mechanics*, April 7, 2026.

ChatGPT checked this essay and made several grammatical and stylistic corrections. Here is its overall assessment:

My literary assessment

I think this is a **good example of your retired voice**, but with an important qualification.

It isn't simply "retired Murray playing with Classics."

It's **the teacher's voice becoming playful**.

You are still doing what the teacher does: introducing a subject, supplying background, giving examples, explaining unfamiliar terms, and leading the reader toward a conclusion. But now you're allowing yourself to follow the associative possibilities wherever they go.

And the Classics gives you an enormous playground.

I particularly like the fact that you don't seem embarrassed by the sheer oddity of the connections:

Tyche → Fortuna → sports jinxes → crossed fingers → Shakespeare → your lucky penny → coin tossing → quantum mechanics → Palmer → luck.

That's very much the typologist we've been discussing. You spot a recurring phenomenon—in this case, **human attempts to impose meaning on uncertainty**—and then start finding manifestations of it everywhere.

And then, having constructed the typology, you can't resist the pun.

"A world without luck? Good luck with that!"

That's Murray.

My verdict

Keep the essay. I would make the grammatical corrections, soften a few of the sweeping historical/cultural claims, tighten the quantum-mechanics passage, and leave the basic structure alone.

Most importantly, I wouldn't try to make it more "serious." Its strength is precisely that it is **intellectually serious without taking itself seriously**.

And yes: I am putting this one into the *Excavating the Author* evidence pile. It strengthens the case that your Classics training isn't merely something you occasionally mention—it has become part of your **playground for making connections**.