Questionable lines in Macbeth

There are lines in "Macbeth" which are bad. There are lines which are unspeakably bad -- or so they seem to me. They are wrong for the character, wrong for the situation, or just plain wrong. I cannot imagine standing in front of an audience and uttering those words. But who am I to judge? I am not an actor; I do not aspire to teach the actors their business. If the actors think that they can deliver these lines without embarrassing themselves, of course they are free to try. And of course they are free to change their minds, if the experiment fails. No one should feel obliged to speak a line just because it got itself printed in 1623. There has to be more thought to it than that.

There are two questions here, and it is important to try to keep them distinct, even where they overlap. On the one hand, there is the question of authenticity. In the text of "Macbeth" as we have it, was every single line written by Shakespeare, or are there some which were written by somebody else? On the other hand, there is the question of excludability, if I may call it that. (By exclusion I mean that some portion of the text is to be differentiated in print -- put in brackets, in smaller type, in a footnote, whatever -- or omitted in performance.) To say that some passage <u>is not</u> authentic is very nearly the same as to say that it <u>is</u> excludable -- that it could be dropped, and probably should be dropped, unless there is some strong enough reason for retaining it. But the converse does not hold. To say that a passage <u>is</u> authentic is not to say that it <u>is not</u> excludable. If there is some good enough reason for dropping it, it ceases to signify whether this passage is thought to be authentic or not.

From the very beginning of the play's career, the actors have been allowing themselves to take liberties with the text. In the theatre, their need for rapport with the audience outweighs their responsibility to the author. They have, for example, felt free to skip the obnoxious scene with Macduff's wife and son (IV ii), to shorten the tedious dialogue between Malcolm and Macduff (IV iii 1-139), to stop the superfluous English doctor from hurrying across the stage (140-59), and so on. Quite rightly, they think that they are entitled to make changes of this kind, without for one moment denying, to themselves or to anyone else, that these scenes were written by Shakespeare.

Aside from Pope,* the first editors who raised the question of authenticity were Clark and Wright -- not in their critical edition (1865),† but in the school edition which they produced later for the Clarendon Press (1869). In their preface they

included a list of the passages which seemed to them to be spurious or suspicious (Clark and Wright 1869:ix–xi).‡ That edition was kept in print for more than forty years (the latest impression that I have seen is dated 1901); during that time and later, versions of the same list, more or less condensed, were reproduced by other editors and commentators.

* It is a peculiarity of Pope's edition that any passages thought to be "excessively bad" were put into smaller type and "degraded to the bottom of the page".** In "Macbeth", all the Porter's speeches were given this treatment; so were four single lines.

** "Some suspected passages which are excessively bad, (and which seem Interpolations by being so inserted that one can intirely omit them without any chasm, or deficience in the context) are degraded to the bottom of the page; with an Asterisk referring to the places of their insertion" (Pope 1725 1:xxii).

† Some lines are queried in the footnotes to that edition, but I do not feel obliged to take account of "anonymous conjectures".

‡ "It would be very uncritical to pick out of Shakespeare's works all that seems inferior to the rest, and to assign it to somebody else" (Clark and Wright 1869:ix). An unwise thing to say, one might think, when that is precisely what they were about to do.

Up to a point, it is more or less generally agreed that Clark and Wright were talking sense. The passages in which the character called Hecate appears -- one whole scene (III v) and one small part of another (IV i 39-43) -- were denounced by them as interpolations scripted by some other writer. That had not been said before (as far as I am aware); once it had been said, however, it was difficult to disagree with. Since then, no one has seriously supposed that the Hecate passages are authentic, any more than the songs which they were written as preludes to.

But then we come to the hard part. How much further are we willing to go? Are there other lines, not so obviously incongruous, not so obviously separable from the rest of the play, for which Shakespeare was not responsible? Opinions vary, and are sure to continue to vary, as long as academics can build careers for themselves by contriving disagreements with one another. Admittedly some passages may be open to suspicion -- "But surely no critic[s] can seriously persuade [the]msel[ves] that [t]he[y] ha[ve] a sense of style delicate enough to determine whether they are Shakespeare's or not" (E. K. Chambers 1893:170).* Some will find that attitude commendably cautious; some will see it as a failure of nerve.

* He was speaking in particular of the first line quoted in purple below. (I have thought it fair to adjust the pronouns, because Chambers's casual sexism is not the issue here. As far as I know, he was not exceptionally inconsiderate in this respect, in comparison with other men of his

generation and class.) I think it is clear what Chambers's problem was: not having a good ear for verse himself, he did not understand that other people might have better ears than he did.

Here, printed purple, is one of the lines to which Clark and Wright took exception (V viii 32-3). It comes from Macbeth's final speech:

> Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
> And thou opposed, being of no woman born,
> Yet I will try the last. Before my body
> I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
> And damned be him that first cries Hold, enough.
>   [Exeunt fighting.

It seemed to Clark and Wright that the speech would sound more authentic without this line than with it:

> Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
> And thou opposed, being of no woman born,
> Yet I will try the last. Lay on, Macduff,
> And damned be him that first cries Hold, enough.
>   [Exeunt fighting.

I think so too. Is this purple line something that Macbeth would be likely to say, in the situation where he finds himself? Of course he is going to make sure that he is holding his shield in front of him before he resumes the fight. That is what we would expect him to do. That is what we see him do. Why does he insist on telling us that he is doing it? (And why say that the shield is warlike? How could it be anything else?)

Here, printed purple again, is a block of four lines (two rhymed couplets) from an earlier speech of Macbeth's (V v 47-50):

> ... and now a wood
> Comes toward Dunsinane. -- Arm, arm, and out! --
> If this which he avouches does appear,
> There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here.
> I 'gin to be aweary of the sun
> And wish the estate of the world were now undone.
> Ring the alarum bell! -- Blow wind, come wrack,
> At least we'll die with harness on our back.   [Exeunt.

Clark and Wright were inclined to cancel these lines, which seemed "singularly weak" to them. ("How much better the sense is without them!")

> ... and now a wood
> Comes toward Dunsinane. -- Arm, arm, and out! --

Ring the alarum bell! -- Blow wind, come wrack,
At least we'll die with harness on our back. [Exeunt.

Again, I agree. Having suddenly decided to spring into action, Macbeth is not going to pause to utter these feeble couplets before exiting.* Besides, the sentiments that he is made to express are not in keeping with his situation. On the contrary, he still has options. He can run away; he can let himself be besieged; or, if he chooses, he can sally out of his castle and engage the English army in battle. He may no longer be quite so sure that he is invincible, but he is very far from desperate. And therefore the speech sounds better -- not just better but more authentic -- without the purple lines. Or so I suggest. What do the actors think? Let them make up their own minds -- but let them think about it first.

* As for this passage, "The line 'I 'gin to be aweary of the sun' does not strike me as at all 'singularly weak'" (E. K. Chambers 1893:169). In a different context, perhaps, it might be passable. But what about the line which rhymes with it?

Since there is no danger of anything that I may say causing anyone to change their mind, I do not need to maintain an air of impartiality. I aim to deal fairly with Shakespeare, and with any readers who may see this; so I will say plainly that the lines printed purple in the list below are, in my opinion, all spurious. Shakespeare should not be accused of writing them; no one should feel any obligation to read or speak them, still less to pretend to admire them. Some of them seem hardly to belong here at all: what happened, I suspect, is that a line or two was occasionally borrowed from some other play, written by some other author. (The play had flopped -- but the actor had made a hit with this line and did not like to see it go to waste. So he inserted it into the script of "Macbeth", in some more or less suitable place.) But of course that is all just guesswork, and nobody is under any compulsion to agree with me.

The following excerpts comprises (i) the lines queried by Clark and Wright (1869:ix-xi), (ii) some further lines queried by Fleay (1876:251-6),* and (iii) some further lines again which seem questionable to me. Each excerpt could have an essay written about it. For some I have supplied a sketch of such an essay. Some, I think, can be left to speak for themselves.

* It is not fair to say that Fleay "has since withdrawn" his support for Clark and Wright's "proposals" (Herford 1899:152), nor that he "afterwards retracted" (D. L. Chambers 1903:21n4). It is true that he "modified his published views" (E. K. Chambers 1893:170), but only to the extent of denying that these lines were later additions. Instead, he thought that the text of "Macbeth" might include some snippets which Shakespeare had chosen to retain from an earlier play (Fleay 1886:241-2).

I ii 36

  If I say sooth, I must report they were
  As cannons ...

Mere verbiage -- useless and worse than useless, because it makes nonsense of the syntax. "As cannons" is meant to be the start of the sentence ("As cannons ..., so they ...").

I iv 48-53

Macbeth. The prince of Cumberland! That is a step
  On which I must fall down or else o'er-leap,
  For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!
  Let not light see my black and deep desires.
  The eye wink at the hand -- yet let that be
  Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. [Exit.

Queried by Fleay (1876:251-2). The lines relating to Malcolm's unexpected promotion are (as I understand it) part of an interpolation which, even though it was made by Shakespeare himself, should nonetheless be cancelled (script 1). The line about "black and deep desires" is something of a tongue-twister, but I would not go so far as to delete it.

I v 68-9, 71

                    ... and you shall put
  This night's great business into my dispatch,
  Which shall to all our nights and days to come
  Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.
Macbeth. We will speak further.
Lady. Only look up clear.
  To alter favour ever is to fear.
  Leave all the rest to me. [Exeunt.

Try the experiment. Do you not agree that this sounds better without the purple lines?

I vii 79-82

Macbeth. I am settled, and bend up
  Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

Away, and mock the time with fairest show.
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.
Exeunt.

The first two lines sound spurious to me. The concluding couplet is slightly odd, because it echoes what was said to Macbeth by Lady Macbeth at the end of scene I v. Why would he think of giving his wife the same advice that she had already given him?* (But one of them will have to have something to say as they make their exit.)

* Hunter (1845 2:180) was half inclined to credit these lines to Lady Macbeth. He thought she might be repeating her own advice.

II i 60-1

And take the present horror from the time
Which now suits with it. -- Whiles I threat, he lives.
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.
A bell rings.
I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell. [Exit.

Queried by Clark and Wright (1869:x, 105-6).

II iii 142-3

... There's warrant in that theft
Which steals itself when there's no mercy left. [Exeunt.

Queried by Fleay (1876:252). It sounds acceptable to me.

II iv 37-41

Macduff. Well, may you see things well done there. Adieu! --
Lest our old robes sit easier than our new.
Ross. Farewell, father.
Old Man. God's benison go with you, and with those
That would make good of bad and friends of foes. [Exeunt.

Both couplets were queried by Fleay (1876:252). The first one sounds right to me, though I agree that the second line -- "Lest our [new] robes sit [less easily] than our [old ones]", turned inside out for the sake of the rhyme -- is awkwardly expressed. As for the Old Man, he has been kept on the stage, neither

speaking nor spoken to, altogether ignored by Macduff, for the sole purpose of delivering the last two lines. But they are not just platitudinous: their meaning, such as it is, bears no specific relation to the context. Is there any scene in any tragedy which could not be made to end with some such words? It is surely best for these lines to be deleted, and for the Old Man to exit (with a shrug) once he has seen Ross turn away from him and start talking to Macduff.

III ii 54-5

Good things of day begin to droop and drowse
While night's black agents to their preys do rouse. --
Thou marvell'st at my words -- but hold thee still.
Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.
So, prithee, go with me. [Exeunt.

Queried by Clark and Wright (1869:126).

III iv 139-40

... I am in blood
Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
Strange things I have in head that will to hand,
Which must be acted ere they may be scanned.
Lady. You lack the season of all natures, sleep.
Macbeth. Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self abuse
Is the initiate fear that wants hard use.
We are yet but young in deed. [Exeunt.

The couplet is dismal. I have my doubts about the lady's line as well, which Macbeth seems not to hear. Fleay (1876:255) was unhappy with the ending of this scene (III iv 132-44): he thought that it had been reworked.

IV i 96-101

Who can impress the forest, bid the tree
Unfix his earth-bound root? Sweet bodements -- good!
Rebellious dead rise never till the wood
Of Birnam rise -- and our high-placed Macbeth
Shall live the lease of nature, pay his breath
To time and mortal custom. Yet my heart
Throbs to know one thing. Tell me, if your art
Can tell so much -- shall Banquo's issue ever

Reign in this kingdom?

I agree with Fleay (1876:255) that something has gone badly wrong here.* For no reason that I can see, somebody chose to make Macbeth start speaking in these clumsy rhyming couplets. But the rhymes were only achieved by doing violence to the sense. It is absurd for Macbeth to start talking about himself in the third person. Throughout the business with the apparitions, he has been dithering about Macduff -- to kill him, or not to bother? Taking confidence from the prophecies, he decides not to bother (a decision which he will almost instantly come to regret). So this is what would make sense: "and our high-placed [Macduff] Shall live the lease of nature, pay his [debt] To time and mortal custom." As for the "Rebellious dead", who knows what they are about? I cannot think that Theobald's emendations -- "Rebellious head", or perhaps "Rebellion's head" -- are any discernible improvement on the original. (The lines introducing the show of kings seem to have been worked over in the same way; but they will have to be cancelled in any case, assuming that the show of kings is to be omitted.)

* As was noted above, he developed a theory later to explain these lines (Fleay 1886:241-2).

IV i 133-4

Where are they? -- Gone? -- Let this pernicious hour
Stand aye accursed in the calendar!
Come in, without there!

This exclamation sounds spurious to me. It seems to have been foisted in without much regard for the context. Why would Macbeth think of saying this -- at this particular moment or at all? (The idea would be, I suppose, that he might be referring to the show of kings. If that is omitted, as it certainly should be, this sentence needs to be omitted too.)

IV i 153-4

That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool --
This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.
But no more sights! -- Where are these gentlemen?
Come, bring me where they are. Exeunt.

Queried by Fleay (1876:252).

V i 73

... So, good-night.
My mind she has mated and amazed my sight.
I think, but dare not speak.

Queried by Fleay (1876:252).

V ii 29-30

Meet we the medicine of the sickly weal,
And with him pour we, in our country's purge,
Each drop of us.
Lenox. Or so much as it needs
To dew the sovereign flower and drown the weeds.
Make we our march towards Birnam. [Exeunt, marching.

Queried by Fleay (1876:253).

V iii 4-10

Was he not born of woman? The spirits that know
All mortal consequences have pronounced me thus:
'Fear not, Macbeth; no man that's born of woman
Shall e'er have power upon thee.' Then fly, false thanes,
And mingle with the English epicures:
The mind I sway by and the heart I bear
Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear.

All of this sounds wrong to me. The couplet at the end should certainly be got rid of.

V iii 32

Macbeth. What news more?
Seyton. All is confirmed, my lord, which was reported.
Macbeth. I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked.
Give me my armour.
Seyton. 'Tis not needed yet.
Macbeth. I'll put it on.

How can Macbeth say this? He believes himself to be invulnerable -- and in any case he is not intending to put himself at risk of getting wounded. He plans to sit tight inside his castle, not engage the English in battle. And even

if he has black thoughts now and then, he is not going to say them out loud.

V iii 59-62

I will not be afraid of death and bane
Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane.
Doctor. Were I from Dunsinane away and clear,
Profit again should hardly draw me here. Exeunt.

The doctor's lines were queried by Fleay (1876:253); Macbeth's lines seem equally dubious to me. (But somebody will have to say something to end the scene.)

V iv 19-20

... The time approaches
That will with due decision make us know
What we shall say we have and what we owe.
Thoughts speculative their unsure hopes relate,
But certain issue strokes must arbitrate.
Towards which, advance the war. Exeunt, marching.

Both couplets were queried by Fleay (1876:253). I think the first is acceptable, the second not.

V v 47-50

... and now a wood
Comes toward Dunsinane. -- Arm, arm, and out! --
If this which he avouches does appear,
There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here.
I 'gin to be aweary of the sun
And wish the estate of the world were now undone.
Ring the alarum bell! -- Blow wind, come wrack,
At least we'll die with harness on our back. [Exeunt.

Queried by Clark and Wright (1869:xi).

V vi 7-10

Do we but find the tyrant's power tonight,
Let us be beaten if we cannot fight.
Macduff. Make all our trumpets speak -- give them all breath,
Those clamorous harbingers of blood and death. [Exeunt.

Macduff's lines were queried by Fleay (1876:253). I am not happy with the previous couplet either. What does Siward mean by "tonight"?

V vii 12-13

Macbeth. Thou wast born of woman --
But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn,
Brandish'd by man that's of a woman born.

Queried by Fleay (1876:256).

V viii 32-3

Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
And damned be him that first cries Hold, enough.

Queried by Clark and Wright (1869:xi). This is a line that I would have thought to be unspeakable. But I do not know of any actor who has refused to speak it. It appears in every acting edition that I have come across.

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