## Scene 21 (IV ii)

Some time later, in Macduff's castle in Fife.

This scene is so bad in so many ways that it is hard to know where to start. The simplest solution might be to pretend that it does not exist. Why perform it? Why even read it? For no reason that I can see. If Shakespeare thought it worth writing, however, I suppose we have to pay it some attention. So what is there to say?

We can say, first, that the scene is unnecessary. It is a mere cameo for Wife. It tells us nothing -- beyond what we already know -- that we need to know at this point. The play is a better play (is it not?) if news of the massacre comes as a shock in the following scene, as much to us as to Macduff.

Second, the scene is not just uninformative: it is positively misinformative. What we see happening in this scene is not what is supposed to happen. In the previous scene, Macbeth told us what he was intending to do ("The castle of Macduff I will surprise"). In the next scene, Ross will tell us what he has done ("Your castle is surprised"). That is plain enough. Macbeth's wife and children are not murdered by two or three nameless thugs. The slaughter of Macduff's family is only one incident in a larger atrocity, the harrowing of Fife; and that is carried out by Macbeth's household troops, under Macbeth's command.

Third, the scene is sick. Two characters that we have not met before -- Wife and Son -- are introduced to us as this scene begins. And of course we understand at once who these people are. They are the next victims. They are only here so that we can see them brought to a horrible end. We have seen this scene so many times. For no particular reason, two strangers appear. They are allowed a few minutes to prove how likable they are -- and then the killer bees arrive and polish them off. (Or perhaps it is a rabid grizzly. Or giant spiders. Or the blob.) This scene belongs in a horror movie, not here.

In all these ways, scene 21 fails to engage with the rest of the play. I think we can be sure that it is an interpolation, an addition made on some occasion when the play was being revived. The audience had to be promised something new -- and this, regrettably, was it.

My opinion of this scene is not very different from that

expressed, in fewer words, by Francis Gentleman. The whole scene "is, if I can be allowed the phrase, farcically horrid" (Gentleman 1770:97). Shakespeare has given us "a most trifling superfluous dialogue, between Lady Macduff, Rosse, and her son, merely that another murder may be committed, on the stage too" (Gentleman in Bell 1773:51).

A shortened version of the scene (Davenant's version, more or less, with Shakespeare's lines substituted for Davenant's) was being performed at Drury Lane in the 1770s (Bell 1773:51-2, 1774:112-13). Son was brought onto the stage but not allowed to speak; he and his mother made their exit without waiting for the murderers to arrive. If it has been truncated to this extent, however, there is really no point in performing the scene at all; and it was already being "entirely omitted, at some theatres" (Gentleman in Bell 1774:112). That became the normal thing. It was regarded as a novelty when Phelps reinstated this scene in 1847.* But he did not persevere with the experiment, and Lady Macduff disappeared again, taking her child with her.

* The complete scene, apparently, including the chitchat between Wife and Son. "Lady Macduff, in itself an unimportant part, was rendered very important by the excellence with which it was enacted by Miss [Fanny] Cooper. A talented little child, a Miss [Lizzie] Mandlebert, made quite an impression in her performance of Macduff's son; it was a clever impersonation" (Lloyd's Weekly, 3 Oct 1847, 10b).

(IV ii 2) Enter ... As the scene begins, three characters appear, a woman, a child, and a man. The stage direction identifies them as "Macduff's Wife, her Son, and Ross" -- but we, watching the play, do not know that. The man we vaguely recall having met before. (He could be the same man who brought news of the Norwegian invasion in scene 2. Or he could be somebody else.) We do not recognize the woman and child. From her first line -- "What had he done, to make him fly the land?" -- we are expected to infer that the woman is Macduff's wife. (The words "wife" in line 10, "husband" in line 20, are there to dispel any doubts.) We knew that he had run off to England; now we discover that he ran off without even a word to his wife. (He assumed, it seems, that Macbeth would draw the line at killing women and children. And perhaps that was a fair assumption before the witches got to work on him.) Ross has come to break the news and give the wife such comfort as he can. The child, evidently, is one of Macduff's children: he has several (three or more), but (mercifully) we only get to meet one of them. (Perhaps the others are with their nursemaid. Surely there have to be some servants somewhere?) And the scene, evidently, is taking place at Macduff's castle -- the castle

which we have heard Macbeth threatening to attack.

(IV ii 3) What had he done ... Wife starts whining, then she starts bleating, and then she starts whining again.

(IV ii 27) I take my leave ... Ross has had enough. He promises to be back before long, pats the child on the head, and makes for the exit.

(IV ii 34) I am so much a fool ... Wife tries to prolong the conversation, but Ross is not to be deflected. He makes his escape.

Just think of all the useful things that he might have said at this point. He might have said: I had better stay with you for a few days, until the dust has settled. Or: You had better come and stay with me. Or: You had better go and stay with your parents. Or: you had better take shelter in a church. Or: At least make sure that your doors are locked and bolted and your servants are on the alert.

Instead all he says is: If I stay any longer I'll start crying, and that would be embarrassing for me and upsetting for you. So: "I take my leave at once." Could anything be feebler than that?

(IV ii 37) Sirrah, your father's dead ... After a pause, Wife strikes up a desultory conversation with Son. (Son kept quiet while the adults were talking, but chirps up willingly now.)

The conversation which follows is all to be treated as prose -- printed as prose, read and spoken as prose. A small child was not expected to be able to cope with blank verse; so Son speaks prose and Wife adapts herself to Son's way of speaking. Admittedly both characters do, now and then, come up with what could pass for a line of verse. (For example, Wife has this line: "And yet, i'faith, with wit enough for thee", and Son has this: "And must they all be hanged, that swear and lie?") But that is normal for Shakespeare. He could write verse without intending to.

There are critics who have persuaded themselves that this chitchat is highly entertaining. Any normal person will quickly find it tiresome. If the audience are forced to listen to much of it, they will be on the murderers' side. (There is something grotesque -- is there not? -- in her telling her child for a joke that his father is dead.)

Some time needs to elapse, after Ross's exit, before anything else can happen. (He has to be supposed to be some distance away, out of sight of the castle, when the murderers appear.) But the Messenger supplies that need well enough; this chitchat can be cut short.

(IV ii 75) Enter a Messenger ... Though Folio calls him "Messenger", he is not bringing a message from somebody else: he is bringing a warning of his own. He has seen something to alarm him -- enough to make him suspect that the lady is in danger, not enough to be sure of it. (Perhaps he has come across some villainous strangers drinking in the village pub.) Out of decency he comes to warn her -- but then he makes his escape. He is just a "homely man": he is not in any condition to protect her. (Apparently Ross must have gone the other way: he did not encounter the murderers.)

(IV ii 80) Be not found here ... Where is "here"? Are they inside the castle? If so, why are there no servants on hand,* no locked doors to prevent visitors from wandering in unannounced -- messengers with kind intentions, murderers with unkind ones? (Perhaps Wife and Son are in a garden, near a gate which can be spoken through, or forced open from the outside. Just a thought.)

* In Davenant's version the messenger's arrival is managed with more decorum. A servant comes on to announce: "Madam, a gentleman in haste desires / To speak with you." And Lady Macduff replies: "A gentleman? Admit him." (The "homely man" has been turned into a gentleman; in fact he has been turned into Seyton, who has a much larger part in Davenant's play than in Shakespeare's.)

(IV ii 85) Whether should I fly? ... Warned of the danger, does Wife spring into action? No, she does not. She starts whining again. (F1's "Whether" is right; F3's "Whither" is a miscorrection. Wife is asking herself whether to run away or not. If she decides to run away, the question whither will arise; but it has not arisen yet.)

(IV ii 92) What are these faces? ... The last few lines, after the arrival of the murderers, are usually printed as verse but could just as well be prose. (Folio should not be taken too literally here: the compositor needed to fill up the column, and might have started breaking lines in the middle for that reason.)

C.F. Oct 2025