The tragedy of Macbeth -- a first revision of the script -- notes

In points of detail, the changes that I have made are few, and mostly unoriginal. Of the readings introduced by me, only one might be said to alter the meaning significantly: at I ii 31 I have altered F1's "whence" to "when", since I cannot see that "whence" makes any sense. I am thoroughly doubtful about Theobald's "lov'd Mansionry" (I vi 10),* and about Rowe's "which way they walk" (II i 70); but I have allowed these readings to stand. Some emendations become so deeply entrenched that there is no longer much chance of them being dislodged.

Scene 1

(I i) "When shall we three meet again?" It hardly needs saying -- though it has quite often been said -- that this is a powerful little scene. Suitably staged, it will put the audience into a suitable mood.

The scene is problematic nevertheless, because it conflicts with the beginning of scene 3. If scene 1 did not exist, that would be our first encounter with the Witches. Three men dressed as dishevelled old women -- withered and wild in their attire -- come bounding onto the stage. We laugh. Shakespeare wants us to laugh. Thirty lines later, we are wishing that we hadn't laughed. Within that lapse of time, the Witches have transformed themselves from figures of fun into monsters of malevolence. How successfully the transformation is made will largely depend on the performance of First Witch; but Shakespeare has provided some carefully contrived material for the actor to work with. Just from reading the script, just from catching the rhythm of the lines, it is possible to get some sense of what Shakespeare had in mind for this scene. There is a crucial moment at line 17, where First Witch shifts into a type of incantatory verse -- rhymed couplets of four-beat lines --

    tum ti tum ti tum ti TUM,
    tum ti tum ti tum ti TUM --

which from here onwards becomes the Witches' normal way of talking to one another. I call it witchspeak.

If scene 1 is included -- if we have already met the Witches in their transformed state, if we have already heard them talking witchspeak -- the beginning of scene 3 becomes pointless. Worse, it becomes confusing, because the witches who come bounding onto the stage at the beginning of this scene seem to be different characters from the witches that we met in scene 1. And indeed they <u>are</u> different characters: they only become the same later, after the transformation has taken place.

The actors, I assume, will choose to retain this scene. I am not going to say that they are wrong. But I do think that they should ask themselves whether the beginning of scene 3 does not

need to be cut.

And then there is another question. If the play begins with this scene, ought it not to end in a similar way? The ending of the play, as it was printed, is understood by everyone to be unsatisfactory. It resembles the ending of a history, with Macbeth as Richard III and Malcolm as Henry Tudor. Malcolm, so to speak, believes that the play is a history, and that he is the hero of it. We know better. The play is a tragedy, and Malcolm is merely one instrument made use of by the forces of darkness to bring about the destruction -- defeat, death and eternal damnation -- of their chosen victim. The Witches, surely, need to be brought back onto the stage, to exult over their success. They have to have a chance to gloat. Should one think of repeating scene 1 at the end of the play?

Scene 2

(I ii) "What bloody man is that?" This scene has been cut about in an astonishingly incompetent manner. Though the damage is mostly irreparable, I have some thoughts as to what mending might be done. For the moment, however, I mention just the worst blunder, the lines

> Assisted by that most disloyal traitor,
> The thane of Cawdor,

which make nonsense of the scene. On the face of it, they mean that Cawdor was accompanying the Norwegian army. But that is absurd. In scene 3, despite having just defeated the Norwegian army, Macbeth and Banquo are unaware of any misconduct on Cawdor's part: it is dramatically necessary for them to be ignorant (since otherwise the Second Witch's prophecy will fall flat), and ignorant is what they are. The king, conversely, knows more than he should. He knows that Cawdor is under arrest -- and nothing that we have heard him being told will justify him in assuming that Cawdor was taken prisoner, rather than being killed or making his escape. Before the scene was mutilated, therefore, it must have been clear to the audience that Cawdor's treason was known about first by the king, and that the news of it was carried to Macbeth and Banquo by the king's envoys.

Scene 3

Scene 4

(I iv 46--53) "Sons, kinsmen, thanes." The king cannot be allowed to utter these words. If they are spoken, they give the audience an altogether wrong idea. The title "prince of Cumberland" is supposed to be a courtesy title (parallel to "prince of Wales") conferred upon the heir to the throne. People who have read Holinshed will know that; people who have not read Holinshed can be relied on to get the message, with a little help from the actors. (To make sure that the audience understands, "All bow to Malcolm" -- a piece of stage business reported by Oxberry (1821:13).) Duncan is designating Malcolm

as his successor.

But obviously that does not happen. If it did, Macbeth would immediately mention the fact to his wife in the following scene. There is, he would say, no longer any point in murdering the king, because that would just put Malcolm on the throne. They never have that conversation. For Macbeth and his wife, Duncan's sons (which is which?) are of no political account. In scene 10, similarly, after the murder has been discovered, nobody thinks of Malcolm as the new king, nor even as a candidate for the kingship. He and his brother (which is which?) are told that their father is dead -- and then they are ignored and forgotten, while the grown-ups talk among themselves.

This passage in scene 4 is the clearest indication that the play has undergone some serious distortion, in response, I suppose, to expressions of annoyance from on high. In Holinshed's account of Scottish history, Macbeth reigns for seventeen years. He starts out well, but finally degenerates into a tyrant. His people turn against him and revolt. He is pursued and done to death by one of his own subjects. Shakespeare's play, as it was originally written, told a similar story. But that story did not harmonize with the king's conception of kingship. For James VI and I, there were no circumstances -- none whatever -- in which a king's subjects were justified in rising up against him. Apprised of the king's displeasure, so I imagine, Shakespeare made some adjustments to the script, the sense of which is that Macbeth was never rightfully the king. When Duncan breathed his last, his eldest son became king at the same instant. Macbeth was a usurper, rightfully overthrown and rightfully killed. The script was not revised systematically, however, just retouched here and there. Throughout the second half of the play, Macbeth is referred to repeatedly as "the tyrant". Only once is he called "the usurper" (V.vii.114).

(I iv 60--2) "The prince of Cumberland!" These lines have to be omitted, not because they are feeble (though they are), but because they are consequential on the previous passage. Is this speech of Macbeth's not very much more effective if it starts with the words "Stars, hide your fires!"?

Scene 5

(I v 1--14) "'They met me in the day of success.'" This is the scene where Lady Macbeth makes her first appearance. As she enters, she is reading a letter. The printed text makes her read it aloud, but there is no need for her to do that, and the gee-whiz tone of the letter is altogether wrong. (By the way, what do we think was said in the first part of the letter -- the part she had read before coming onto the stage?) It is, of course, not true that Macbeth has made inquiries about the Witches. Even if he and Banquo had not agreed to keep the whole business secret, he would not have had any opportunity to ask around.

We discover later, in scene 7, what the letter says: Macbeth

tells her that he has made up his mind to go through with the plan that they have discussed, as soon as he can contrive an opportunity.

> When you durst do it, then you were a man --
> And, to be more than what you were, you would
> Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place
> Did then adhere, and yet you would make both.

He promises her that he will not change his mind -- or at least his wife chooses to understand him in that way.

If the lady enters reading the letter to herself and then bursts out with

> Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
> What thou art promised.

is not that much more effective?

Scene 6

Scene 7

Scene 8

Scene 9

Scene 10

(II iii 27--43) "And drink, sir, is a great provoker of three things." This speech of the Porter's should certainly be cut, not because it is unfunny (teenage boys have been known to snigger) but because it interferes with the action. Macduff is under orders to awaken the king. After having had to knock repeatedly on the door, he is worried that he may be too late. He is not going to let the porter engage him in some idle conversation.

Scene 11

(II iii 167--82) "What will you do?" For the reasons explained elsewhere, I think we can be sure that Shakespeare intended this line to be the start of a new scene. Malcolm and Donalbain were supposed to make their exit, unobserved by the grown-ups, as soon as they had exchanged their few whispered lines (II iii 146--53). Now they reappear, fully dressed, ready to make their escape.

Scene 12

Scenes 13--14

(III i 3) "Thou hast it now." This is the place where the violence done to the text is at its maximum. In the uncensored version of the play, scene 13 is Macbeth's moment of triumph.

He and his wife are wearing their crowns and their coronation robes. The Scottish nobles (except Macduff) and their wives (except Macduff's) are all present, all in their fanciest clothes. Trumpets sound, bells ring, everybody cheers. That is the end of Act II. After an intermission, Act III begins on a very different note. A good few years have elapsed. Guilt has made Macbeth paranoid; paranoia has turned him into a tyrant. A sequence of events is about to begin which will end with his downfall and death. The tragic arc is complete.

In the censored version, Macbeth is not permitted to enjoy his moment of triumph. Scene 13 is cut short. Only Banquo's soliloquy is kept, and that is turned into an opening for scene 14. There is little lapse of time between the murder of Duncan and the murder of Banquo. Macbeth's usurpation does not last for long -- hardly for more than a few weeks, the length of time it would take for an English army to be mustered and marched to Scotland.

Nevertheless, the hints in the text which imply a much longer timescale were not edited out. The point which Shakespeare emphasizes most strongly is the change in the relationship between Macbeth and his wife. He no longer consults her advice. When she wants to speak to him, she has to make an appointment. When she asks to be taken into his confidence, he laughs.

Scene 15

Scene 16

Scene 17

Scene 18

(III v) "Why, how now, Hecat?" The less said about this scene the better. It is an obvious interpolation, obviously not by Shakespeare. It exists only to serve as an excuse for the musical extravaganza at the end of this scene, and for a superfluous song in scene 20 (see below). I have said all that I want to say about these musical interludes in a separate paper.

Scene 19

(III vi 26--43) "Sir, can you tell." Something has gone badly wrong here. The character to whom this question is put possesses knowledge which he cannot possibly possess. He cannot know that Macduff has made a run for it; still less can he know that an English army is about to make its move. But that is only the first of three difficulties. Even if we could think it possible for this character to know these things, it would still be wrong for him to share his knowledge with us. The news that Macduff has fled to England should come as a surprise to us, just as it does to Macbeth, at the end of scene 20. The news that an English army is ready to march towards Scotland should come as a surprise to us, just as it does to

Macduff (and then to Ross) in scene 22. If we have been told those things in scene 19, those surprises both fall flat. And thirdly an odd thing happens. By the end of this scene, both characters have forgotten the news. The character who hopes that Macduff will keep his distance is plainly not aware that he has left the country. The character who hopes that an angel will fly to England is plainly not aware that Macduff has made the journey already. They are, that is, just as ignorant as they ought to be: the surprises that should lie in wait for us lie in wait for them as well.

Without doubt, the whole of this speech needs to be excised. When that cut is made, the dialogue which follows will need to be redistributed, but I have not done that here.

Scene 20

(IV i 41--7) "Oh, well done." More music which does not belong. (It belongs in a different play, not this one.) To be deleted along with scene 18 (see above).

(IV i 115--46) "Sweet bodements -- good!" From this speech onwards, scene 20 goes off the rails. We know what the Witches' intention is: they aim to lull Macbeth into a false sense of security, letting him think that he can act on impulse, without regard for the consequences. With the help of the apparitions, who warn him against Macduff, and then promise him that he is (on certain conditions) invincible and invulnerable, they goad him into committing the atrocity which will bring about his death. Having done that much the Witches have achieved their aim. Having said what they meant to say, no more, no less, they should vanish without further ado. That is what they did in scene 3; that is what they ought to do here.

But no. Macbeth has a question for them: "Shall Banquo's issue ever reign in this kingdom?" The Witches know the answer, because, being witches, they can see more than 600 years into the future. (Even for witches, that seems a bit of a stretch.) They do not pretend to be ignorant, though Macbeth had more or less offered them that option ("Tell me, if your art can tell so much"); they invite him to withdraw the question ("Seek to know no more"). They do not laugh at him when -- as if they have not already sold their souls to the devil -- he threatens them with damnation ("Deny me this and an eternal curse fall on you"). They let themselves be browbeaten into giving Macbeth an answer, even though they realize that it will frustrate their purpose. (They are, it seems, not permitted to tell outright lies, and they cannot think of a suitable half-truth.) So they let him see the "show of kings", conscious before it even begins that it will "grieve his heart".

(IV i 147--55) "Ay, sir, all this is so." With Macbeth now reduced to a state of utter despondency, the Witches decide that something will have to be done to retrieve the situation ("Come, sisters, cheer we up his sprights"). Weirdly, they perform a dance -- and after that, finally, they vanish. More weirdly still, the dance has the desired effect. As soon as he

hears that Macduff has run away, Macbeth reverts to the euphoric mood which the Witches had been aiming to induce in him. By the end of the scene, he has forgotten all about the show of kings. We should certainly do the same. (There is a bonus: the money which might have been spent on costumes for the eight kings can be put to better use elsewhere.)

Scene 21

(IV ii) "What had he done, to make him fly the land?" A dreadful scene, so bad that I refuse to itemize all the ways in which it is bad. (When Francis Gentleman was trying to find some way of saying how bad it was, "farcically horrid" was the expression that occurred to him (Gentleman 1770:97). Most acting editions have the good sense to omit it.) Two characters whom we have not met before are brought on to the stage to be gruesomely done to death for our entertainment. They are supposed to endear themselves to us before they meet their fate, but they do not even do that. Macduff's wife whines and whines; her child is insufferably cute; after a few minutes of their company we are glad to see the murderers arrive and put us out of our misery.

Even for a less jaded audience, the scene is all wrong. It gives a false account. Macduff's wife and child (or children) are not murdered by a few nameless thugs. Far from it. In the preceding scene Macbeth tells us what is going to happen:

> The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
> Seize upon Fife, give to the edge of the sword
> His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
> That trace him in his line.

In the following scene Ross tells us what has happened:

> Your castle is surprised -- your wife and babes
> Savagely slaughtered. ...
> Wife, children, servants, all that could be found.

The point is that Macbeth no longer cares who knows that he is responsible for the atrocity. When he was plotting the murder of Banquo, we saw him taking elaborate precautions to avoid incurring suspicion ("always thought, that I require a clearness"). Now, deluded by the Witches' promises, he thinks he can safely come out into the open, drop the disguise, and perform whatever evil deed he likes, on the spur of the moment. We are meant to understand that the attack on Macduff's castle is carried out by Macbeth's household troops, under his personal command. He is suspected of other crimes -- but in the end he is only <u>suspected</u> of them. Of this crime he is known for certain to be guilty because he has made no effort to hide his guilt.

Scene 22

(IV iii 157--80) " Well, more anon." An obvious interpolation, designed to titillate the vanity of James VI and I. It is

generally supposed that this addition was made with a view to a performance at court. Perhaps so. Not being at court, we do not need to be introduced to this doctor.

Scene 23

(V i) "I have two nights watched with you." This is one of the most famous scenes that Shakespeare ever wrote; "Out, damned spot!" is one of his most famous lines. And yet, rather obviously, the scene does not really belong. If it is omitted, the last we see of Lady Macbeth is at the end of scene 17. In scene 25 we learn that she is under a doctor's care because she is suffering from insomnia. In scene 27 we are told that she is dead. In scene 33 we hear that she is believed to have committed suicide. It may well be the case that Shakespeare, rather than letting the lady just fade away, decided to write this farewell scene for her; it may well be the case that we approve of his decision. But it remains true that this scene fails to articulate properly with the rest of the play.

For all that, I am not going to suggest that this scene should be omitted in performance. Lady Macbeth will mutiny if she is not allowed to do her imitation of Mrs Siddons. The audience, if it has the slightest knowledge of the play, will riot if it does not hear her say "Out, damned spot!" But I do have one suggestion. I suggest that this scene should be put before scene 22, rather than after it. If the actors are prepared to make the experiment, I think they will find that the dénouement works much better. Instead of being dissipated during scene 23, the momentum built up towards the end of scene 22 will carry forward into scene 24 and beyond.

Scene 24

Scene 25

Scene 26

(V iv 1) "Cousins, I hope the days are near at hand ..." At this crucial moment, as the revolting Scots meet up with the English army -- for once they are glad to be invaded -- this is all that Malcolm can think of to say. There has been some cutting, I suspect.

Scene 27

Scene 28

Scenes 29--33

(V vii 1) "They have tied me to a stake." After this, the printed text stops marking scenes; but we can mark them for ourselves without any difficulty, because the rule is clear. If "Exit" or "Exeunt" clears the stage, "Enter" starts a new scene. (There is nothing optional about this. A scene is a scene, whether or not it is marked as such in the printed text. If it isn't, that is just carelessness.) Shakespeare has us

jumping around the battlefield, in a sequence of short scenes, waiting for the moment when Macduff catches up with Macbeth.

(V vii 7--21) "What is thy name?" Seyward's son has not spoken before, but he was pointed out to the audience in the previous scene. On the face of it, his fight with Macbeth is unnecessary, and in contradiction with scene 33, where we are given to understand that he died in the thick of the battle -- not in single combat with the enemy commander. But I do not mean to be a spoilsport. If the actors think that the audience might enjoy seeing an extra sword-fight at this point, let them retain this passage. If they do that, however, I hope they will drop the bombast from the end ("But swords ... woman born)"; and they may also wish to drop one line from Ross's speech in scene 33 -- "In the unshrinking station where he fought" (V vii 94) -- which conflicts with what the audience sees happening here.

C.F. Sep 2021 -- last revised Dec 2024