

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

Scene 2

Whether scene 1 is used as an overture or not, it is a sad fact that the main action of the play begins with a scene which cannot fail to bewilder the audience. It is not coherent with itself, nor with the scenes that follow. I think we can be sure that scene 2 was heavily cut about -- by the actors, not by Shakespeare -- before it arrived at the state in which it survives. (There are numerous lines which fail to scan, but that is a minor issue.) I am willing to believe that the cuts were made for a reason. In its original form, perhaps, the scene was excessively long, too much like a lecture on eleventh-century Scottish history. If they could see that audiences tended to get restless, the actors might have been justified in deciding that the scene had better be shortened. I do not blame them for making cuts; I blame them for making a terrible job of it.

Nevertheless, from the mutilated version of this scene that we find in the printed text, I think we can get some idea of the shape of the scene as Shakespeare wrote it. The king informs us that we are in Scotland, that he is indeed the king, and that some of his subjects are revolting. The army is ready for action. In the hope of avoiding bloodshed, however, he has sent one of his nobles, Macduff by name, to persuade the rebels to stand down --

(1) and here he comes now. Unhappily his mission has failed. Accompanied by just one soldier carrying a flag of truce, he went to speak to the rebels, but they would not listen. Worse, they tried to take him prisoner, and he had to fight his way out, with the help of the soldier who was with him. After that, he started back towards the king, and the army, the last he saw of it, was preparing to engage with the rebels. Macduff has hardly had time to finish his report when

(2) a wounded soldier arrives -- too badly hurt to continue fighting, but not too badly hurt to carry despatches to the king. (From the fact that he is wounded, the king and Macduff infer at once that he comes from the battle; from the fact that he is a common soldier they infer that the battle was still in progress when he left.) This is the same soldier who helped Macduff escape from the rebels. Macduff recognizes him. He tells him to tell the king how the battle was going when he left. "Doubtful it stood", says the soldier, beginning a speech which ends when he starts to faint. Just as he is being helped off the stage,

(3) a noble named Ross arrives unexpectedly, in a great hurry -- not from the battle (the others know that he was not with the army) but from some other direction. He brings the appalling news that a Norwegian army, commanded by the king of Norway himself, has come ashore in Fife. But then, while the shock is still sinking in,

(4) another noble arrives, Angus by name, a young aide-de-camp who has been given the honour of reporting to the king the army's double victory -- first over the rebels, and then over the Norwegians. So the king and everyone else draw a double sigh of relief.

A third crisis has also been resolved. At some point in this scene, the king has to tell us that one of his most trusted advisers, the thane of Cawdor (whom we do not need to meet), has been caught in some conspiracy (the nature of which is never made clear to us), imprisoned in some nearby castle, and condemned to death. At the end of the scene, the king signs the warrant for Cawdor's execution and confers the forfeited title on one of the commanders of the army, in reward for his conspicuous gallantry.

(I ii 2) "Alarum within." Flourish, not Alarum. We are nowhere near the battlefield. (The army spends at least one night on the road as it marches back to Forres.)

(I ii 5) "What bloody man is that?" The printed text promotes him to captain (because it intends to let him announce a victory), but in fact he is a common soldier.

(I ii 8) "This is the sergeant." This speech, which the printed text gives to Malcolm, seems to me to belong to Macduff; and the same goes for a speech at the start of scene 4. The censored version of the play wanted to build up Malcolm's part; but by doing that it turned Macduff into a nobody. He gets no chance to speak until scene 10. (Seeing that Macduff had to have something to say, Kemble (1794) gave him all the speeches in scenes 2--3 which the printed text gives to Ross. I agree with the diagnosis but not with the remedy.)

(I ii 18--19) "From the western isles." The printed text goes haywire here. Kerns and gallowglasses did not come from the western isles: they came from Ireland. Everyone knew that; Shakespeare certainly did. As Holinshed's Chronicles make clear,* it was the revolting peasants who came from the western isles; the Irish mercenaries volunteered to help, for reasons of their own.

* Makdowald, as Holinshed (1587:169) tells it, got together "a mightie power of men: for out of the westerne Iles there came vnto him a great multitude of people, offering themselues to assist him in that rebellious quarell, and out of Ireland in hope of the spoile came no small number of Kernes and Galloglasses, offering gladlie to serue vnder him, whither it should please him to lead them."

(I ii 44) "If I say sooth, I must report they were." The line is verbiage, and worse than that. It throws the syntax out.

(I ii 53) "Enter Ross and Angus." The printed text makes them enter together. In fact they should enter separately, from different directions -- Ross first, with news of the Norwegian invasion, Angus a few lines later, with news of the two battles.

(I ii 34) "Mark, king of Scotland, mark!" Does one really instruct a king to pay attention?

(I ii 78) "Go, pronounce his present death." This order is addressed to two or more nameless attendants ("those in commission" I iv 5), not to Ross and Angus. That needs to be made clear.

(I ii 80) "I'll see it done." Ross makes his exit at once, accompanied by Angus. (Angus knows where the army is to be found; Ross does not.)

(I ii 82) "Exeunt." To be accompanied by a flourish, as usual.

Scene 3

(I iii 29--32) "Look what I have." I don't see the point of this passage. It seems more effective to me if "tempest-tossed" is followed immediately by the sound of the drum -- the sound which denotes an army on the march, just out of sight of the audience. (Does the drum continue beating, louder and louder, until Macbeth and Banquo appear? Probably not. I suspect that the army takes a breather -- during which the witches have time to prepare their charm without any background noise.)

(I iii 38--9) "Thrice to thine." As in some acting editions (Kemble 1794:9 for example), these lines should be distributed among the witches. (They are performing some sort of over-and-under dance, so as to wind up their charm.)

(I iii 41) "Enter Macbeth and Banquo." The witches release their charm. A violent thunderstorm ensues. The army (we imagine) breaks ranks and runs for cover. As fate would have it, the two commanding officers -- just the two of them -- take refuge in a nearby cave. They have reached the centre of the stage (shaking off the rain from their cloaks) before they become aware of the witches' presence.

(I iii 43) "What are these?" I put the speech-prefix here; the printed text puts it at "Speak if you can" (I iii 52). The audience can be expected to understand that these two characters are the captains spoken of by the king ("our captains, Macbeth and Banquo" I ii 40) but it cannot be expected to know which is which. (If the actor playing Macbeth is famous, then of course some audiences will recognize him; but that is accidental.) Because they do not know, they will assume that the character who has the first long speech is Macbeth; and I arrange things accordingly. The printed text conveys a wrong idea: by giving these lines to Banquo, it makes him seem more important than Macbeth, and then it undercuts itself by making the witches refuse to speak to him.

(I iii 73) "So all hail." Here again, the speech-prefixes need to be adjusted (as in Longman 1806:12).

Scene 4

(I iv 6) "My liege." As in scene 2, I give back to Macduff a speech which the printed text gives to Malcolm.

(I iv 53) "From hence to Inverness." There is a hole in the text here (Inverness means nothing to the audience), and the actors have to work around it. The audience needs to understand that the king, on the spur of the moment, is inviting himself to Macbeth's castle.

Scene 5

(I v 33) "The king comes here tonight." The speaker is (as he says) a servant passing on the news brought by a messenger; the messenger himself was almost too exhausted to speak. (Macbeth travels fast -- too fast for the king to catch up with him (I vi 29). The messenger sent ahead has to travel even faster.)

Scene 6

(I vi 2) "Enter King." The "oboes and torches" of the printed text are wrong -- right at the start of the next scene, but definitely not right here. The scene should rather begin and end with a flourish.

(I vi 2--3) "Malcolm, Donalbain." The king is accompanied by two young boys who -- from their clothes, from their way of staying close to the king -- must evidently be his sons. In the uncensored version of the play, we have not met them till now. The king, we gather, has brought them with him on this impromptu outing. They are of similar age: we can hardly tell them apart, except, perhaps, that one is a little taller than the other.

Scene 7

(I vii 63--8) "I have given suck." Do we really want the lady to say this? It sounds impressive, but is it at all to the point?

(I vii 93--6) "I am settled." This speech sounds to me as if it has been improved by the actors.

Scene 8

(II i 2) "Enter Banquo." This being the middle of the night, Banquo is preceded by a servant carrying a torch. The printed text calls the servant Fleance, but that is wrong. (In some production, perhaps, the actor who played the servant here was the same who played Banquo's son in scene 16. Possibly true -- but not relevant.) Their conversation is as between master and servant, not between father and son. (There is no reason why Shakespeare would think of introducing us to Banquo's son at this point. Besides, if he were going to do it, he would need to make someone say something to establish the fact.)

(II i 73--4) "Whiles I threat he lives." Surely not Shakespeare.

Scene 9

(II ii 13) "Who's there?" The printed text, wrongly, gives this line to Macbeth, making him enter to speak it. Macbeth does not enter till later ("My husband!" II ii 19). Possibly the actor speaks this line while waiting to make his entrance, but if he does, he needs to muffle his voice. It is not Macbeth speaking. It is a random shout, from somewhere in the distance.

(II ii 21--3) "Didst thou not hear a noise?" I adjust the speech-prefixes here, to catch the rhythm of the dialogue.

Scene 10

(II iii 46) "Our knocking has awaked him." Rather than letting Macduff answer his own question, I give this line to Lenox.

(II iii 48) "Good morrow both." The printed text does not mark an exit for the Porter, but he needs to be got off the stage as soon as possible.

(II iii 90) "Banquo and Donalbain, Malcolm, awake!" It seems to me that the names are out of order. Malcolm should be mentioned first; Banquo and Donalbain should not be paired together.

(II iii 104) "Enter Banquo." Not just Banquo. Lords, attendants, servants, all come pouring onto the stage at this point. The lords are wearing their dressing gowns (and slippers, I suppose), but nothing more than that; the others are in various states of deshabbille. (Garrick refused to let anyone appear with bare legs, for fear of rude remarks from the gallery. But Shakespeare's intention is clear. Macduff and Lenox are dressed. Everyone else -- especially Macbeth -- looks as if they have just got out of bed. We cannot think straight, says Banquo, until we have "our naked frailties hid, That suffer in exposure" (II iii 155--6).)

(II iii 111) "Enter Macbeth, Lenox, and Ross." Not Ross. He is not present in this scene.

(II iii 119) "What is amiss?" The printed text gives this line to Donalbain and "Oh, by whom?" to Malcolm. The two characters are barely distinguishable so far, but it seems better to me if Malcolm is made to speak first.

(II iii 146) "Why do we hold our tongues?" Here again I transpose the speech-prefixes, so that Malcolm becomes the more decisive character.

Scene 11

Scene 12

(II iv 24) "'Tis said they eat each other." The speech-prefixes need adjusting. Ross may have heard about this, but he cannot possibly have seen it.

(II iv 55--6) "God's benison go with you." The printed text keeps the Old Man on the stage -- nodding from side to side, without speaking or getting spoken to -- so that he can end the scene by delivering this feeble couplet. Is that really a good idea?

Scene 13

Scene 14

(III i 85) "Enter Servant, and two Murderers." Not professional murderers, just ruffians. Macbeth aims to persuade them to commit murder -- but, as we discover later (scene 16), does not trust them to get the job done.

Scene 15

(III ii 64--5) "Thou marvell'st at my words." Another scene which has had its ending improved by the actors.

Scene 16

(III iii 2) "Enter three Murderers." The third character is one of Macbeth's hired thugs, sent to make sure that the murders get done. (Presumably the plan is for him to kill the two ruffians, once Banquo and Fleance are dead, and then to arrange the four bodies in such a way as to suggest that they all killed one another. And presumably he follows that plan, despite Fleance making his escape. But we never hear anything about the discovery of Banquo's corpse.)

(III iii 15) "Then 'tis he." This line comes best from the thug (Third Murderer). He is the one who knows what is happening indoors.

Scene 17

(III iv 13) "Enter first Murderer." Probably this should be Macbeth's thug (Third Murderer) rather than one of the ruffians. (They are probably dead by now. If they are alive, why do they not both appear?)

(III iv 170--2) "Strange things I have in head." More bombast.

Scene 19

(III vi 24--5) "And 'cause he failed." Even with this shortened version of the scene, this line sounds wrong to me. Are the lords ready to start calling their king "the tyrant"? They call him that in scene 24 -- but by then they are in open revolt. Do they call him that now? I doubt it.

Scene 20

(IV i 28--31) "Liver of blaspheming Jew." Third Witch does rather overdo it. I think one might dispense with these lines.

(IV i 159) "Enter Lenox." Not Lenox. It is unthinkable that Macbeth would take one of the nobles with him on this visit to the witches. A king -- like any gentleman -- has to have somebody with him to hold his horse, but this is just a servant. (In some production, perhaps, the actor who played this character was the same who played Lenox in other scenes. Possibly true, but not relevant.)

(IV i 181--2) "No boasting like a fool." More bombast.

Scene 22

(IV iii 2) "Enter Malcolm and Macduff." Two characters enter. One of them we recognize as Macduff; since we know from the last scene that Macduff has "fled to England" (IV i 169--70), we are expected to work out for ourselves that this scene is taking place in England, and that the other character is Malcolm. But Malcolm is an adult now -- no longer the frightened teenager that we last saw in scene 11 -- and I take it that he should be played by a different actor. (In the censored version, however, scene 11 was just a few weeks ago.)

(IV iii 46--129) "Be not offended." This scene is far too long: every acting edition makes some cuts. It is perfectly fair for Malcolm to start by suspecting Macduff and needling him into a rage; it is unnecessary for him to repeat the process by boasting of his vices (and then expecting Macduff to believe him when he says that he was lying).

(IV iii 138--48) "For even now." If the lines just mentioned are cut, these lines must be cut too.

Scene 24

(V ii 2--3) "Enter Menteith, Caithness, Angus, Lenox, Soldiers." From the dialogue it becomes clear that three of these characters have been sent ahead to make contact with the English army. Now they report back to the fourth character, whom the printed text calls Caithness, the commander of the rebel army.

Scene 25

(V iii 6--12) "The spirits that know." Added or improved by the actors.

(V iii 13) "Enter Servant." A servant who makes the mistake of getting in Macbeth's way.

(V iii 24) "Take thy face hence." The servant gladly does as he is told.

(V iii 39) "I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked." Macbeth cannot possibly say this. He is not intending to fight. His plan is to sit tight and wait for the English to give up and go home. (And even if he does think something of the sort, he is not going to say it to Seyton.)

(V iii 44) "Give me my armour." Shouted out after Seyton as he exits.

(V iii 45) "How does your patient, doctor?" The printed text makes Doctor enter at the start of the scene. It is better if he enters now.

(V iii 59) "Come, put my armour on." Macbeth's armour is brought onto the stage, carried by one or two servants.

(V iii 60) "Seyton, send out!" Macbeth is shouting again. Seyton is not on the stage at the time.

(V iii 71--4) "I will not be afraid of death and bane." Surely not Shakespeare.

Scene 26

(V iv 2--4) "Drum and colours." There seems to be something seriously wrong with the start of this scene. An English army invading Scotland encounters a Scottish army. On any other occasion the two armies would immediately come to blows. On this occasion they fraternize. The printed text does not let us see anything of that. All we get is two strange lines from Malcolm, which make little sense as they stand.

(V iv 29--30) "Thoughts speculative their unsure hopes relate." Two lines of doggerel, best forgotten.

Scene 27

(V v 2--3) "Enter Macbeth, Seyton, and Soldiers, with drum and colours." The printed text, wrongly, would have us suppose that Macbeth and his army are on the march. On the contrary, Macbeth is not (yet) intending to leave his castle. (He changes his mind at the end of this scene.)

(V v 12) "It is the cry of women, my good lord." Having said this, Seyton goes off to investigate, returning a few lines later. The printed text fails to make this clear. Acting editions (Bell 1773:64--5 for example) supply the necessary directions; the first scholarly edition to follow their example was Dyce's (1857).

(V v 20) "The queen, my lord, is dead." Having said this, Seyton exits again, either at once or two lines later.

(V v 32) "Enter a Messenger." He does not bring a message; he reports what he has seen with his own eyes.

(V v 48) "I care not if thou dost for me as much." The soldier

should exit after this, leaving Macbeth to soliloquize.

(V v 54--7) "If this which he avouches does appear." Improved by the actors, I think.

Scene 28

(V vi 14--15) "Make all our trumpets speak." Again, the end of this scene sounds to me as if it was improved by the actors.

Scene 29

Scene 30

Scene 31

Scene 32

(V vii 80--1) "Before my body I throw my warlike shield." An unspeakable line.

Scene 33

(V vii 122--4) "My thanes and kinsmen." An odd thing for Malcolm to say; part of the attempt, I think, to reframe the play as a history. From Holinshed's Chronicles, Shakespeare would have known that the earliest Scottish earldoms dated from the reign of Malcolm III.* But of course it was not being suggested that Malcolm distributed earldoms on the battlefield, indiscriminately, to everyone within earshot, before he had even been crowned. And has he not just warned his creditors (V vii 120--2) that they will have to wait a while before they get repaid?

* Holinshed (1587:176) has this: "He created manie earles, lords, barons, and knights. Manie of them that before were thanes, were at this time made earles, as Fife, Menteth, Atholl, Leuenox, Murrey, Cathnes, Rosse, and Angus. These were the first earles that haue beene heard of amongst the Scottishmen (as their histories doo make mention.)"