From this point onwards, the top of column 141b, the Folio text was set throughout by compositor B. Spellings of the kind diagnostic for A (such as "trecherie" with final "-ie") are still in evidence towards the bottom of the previous column; spellings of the kind diagnostic for B (such as "maiesty", "society" with final "-y") start appearing within the first few lines of this column. So it seems clear enough that A dealt with column 141a, arranging things so that the end of scene 16 coincided with the end of that column, and then stood down.

The text can be seen to take on a more finished appearance now that B is in charge. From what is known of his modus operandi with other plays, it is safe to say that he was editing the script as he went along. He meant well -- but the presumption has to be that whatever corrections he made were made on the spur of the moment, out of his own head. (It is not to be supposed that he was consulting a second manuscript or taking advice from the actors.) On the whole, we would have preferred to do the correcting ourselves, rather than have him do the correcting for us. It is, however, too late to tell him that.

Scene 17 (III iv)

Later that evening, in the great hall at Dunsinane.

There is not much point in performing the play unless one can deploy the level of resources needed for scene 17. This is not a dinner party given by Macbeth and his wife for a few of their friends. This is a state banquet given by the king and queen. The entire Scottish nobility is invited. Except for Macduff, who declines, and Banquo, who fails to show up, the entire Scottish nobility is in attendance. Possibly their wives are invited too (see below). A swarm of servants -- supervised by a master of ceremonies, as in scene 7 -- discreetly ply the guests with food and drink.

Though Folio does not say so, "Oboes" and "Torches" are called for here, just as they were in scene 7. There should certainly be some music, now as then. On that occasion Duncan was having his supper in the next room and the musicians were heard, not seen. On this occasion, however, they ought to be visible to the audience.* If the stage has any sort of balcony, that is where they ought to be.

* It is reported that in Charles Kean's production there were "seven old men in druidical costume ... exhibited aloft in a gallery with their harps" (Illustrated London News, 19 Feb 1853, 142). That sounds a touch excessive.

Some furniture is needed too, though we are not given any clear hint as to how it should be arranged. Thrones are to be provided for the king and queen, tables and stools for the guests. (Lady Macbeth and Macbeth both speak of stools (III iv 85, 102) when they might rather have been expected to speak of chairs.) When Banquo fails to appear, one of these stools remains vacant.

(III iv 2-3) Enter ... It was Kemble's (1794:38) idea that the lords should be accompanied by their wives. Why indeed would they not be? Why would the queen be the only lady present? The question is not unimportant: the whole mood of the scene will be different if there are women sitting among the men.

(III iv 7) Ourself will mingle ... The formality of the occasion is in contrast with Macbeth's exaggerated attempts at informality. Prowling around the stage, he makes the lords feel uncomfortable even when he is trying to do the opposite. (That is his weakness: he thinks he is a good actor, but he always overdoes it.)

(III iv 7) Our hostess ... Lady Macbeth takes the throne provided for her -- at the back of the stage, presumably. (She must not be left sitting there all alone. She ought to have some attendants with her -- perhaps a lady-in-waiting and a page.)

(III iv 14) See, they encounter thee ... The lords have been supplied with wine, and now they toast the queen. (Do they stand? If etiquette says that they should, that is what they should do. However strangely Macbeth behaves, the lords must conduct themselves with perfect propriety throughout.)

(III iv 15) Here I'll sit ... In taking their seats, it seems, the lords have left a place in the middle for Banquo -- the king's "chief guest" -- in case he does eventually arrive. That is where Macbeth proposes to sit. (Perhaps he does not grasp the reason why there is a vacant place here, and the lords do not like to tell him. To them it looks as if he is already sure that Banquo will not be needing anywhere to sit.)

(III iv 17) There's blood upon thy face. Macbeth now veers off to the side of the stage, where one of the murderers has been trying to attract his attention. Folio says that this is the "first" murderer; but that cannot be right. If First

and Second were disposed of at the end of the previous scene, this has to be Third.

On the other hand, it is possible that all three murderers should reappear. It might be said that Macbeth's lines work better if he is speaking to more than one person. Second is the murderer with blood on his face: he (we think) is the one who attacked Banquo. He claims credit for that, and Macbeth congratulates him: "Thou are the best of the cut-throats". Then he turns to First, "Yet he's good ...", expecting him to claim credit for killing Fleance. First, the one (we think) who bungled the job, looks at his feet. So Macbeth turns back to Second: Did you kill Fleance too? "If thou didst it, thou art the non-pareil." There is a pause -- and then one of them, possibly Third, confesses that Fleance got away. There is scope here for the actors to experiment.

The guests, I take it, are not greatly surprised when Macbeth wanders off. They understand that a king may have confidential business to deal with which has to be dealt with at once; so they continue eating and drinking, affecting not to notice that their host has abandoned them. The lady understands it too; she is puzzled but not yet alarmed. If this is Third Murderer, she may possibly recognize him, but she has no idea what business is being discussed. All she can do meanwhile is try to keep the guests entertained.

(III iv 27) Then comes my fit again! Macbeth, I suppose, should control himself, not raising his voice. But perhaps he ought rather to explode? If he does, if his guests hear him (and show that they have heard him, by turning their heads and then looking doubtfully at one another), this is the moment when the banquet starts to go wrong.

(III iv 39) Get thee gone. Addressed to a singular murderer, presumably Third. (Macbeth does not expect to see First and Second again. They know too much. If they have survived this long, they will surely not survive much longer.)

(III iv 41) My royal lord ... As soon as she sees the murderer leave, the lady recalls Macbeth to his duty as host.

(III iv 51) May it please ... Folio gives this line to Lennox, and subsequent lines to either him or Ross. But the assignments are all optional. It might be a good idea for one or more lines to be given to Angus, so that we are

reminded of his existence, or to the two lords -- Menteith and Caithness -- who are otherwise going to pop up out of nowhere in scene 24.

(III iv 52) Here had we now ... Not quite. Macduff is missing. But Macbeth is pretending not to notice that. (And what about the "exiled friends abroad" whom Malcolm is going to call home (V vii 126)? How many of them would have attended the banquet, in happier times?)

(III iv 53) Were the graced person ... Those lords who were present in scene 14 could see how very affable he was with Banquo. Now they are all going to see how very disappointed he is when Banquo fails to appear. That is the plan. The plan goes catastrophically wrong. The promise that he demanded from Banquo is about to come back to haunt him.

(III iv 59) The table's full. Macbeth looks for a place to sit down. To the lords, the seat "in the midst" -- the seat which he reserved for himself -- still seems to be vacant. To Macbeth, it seems to be occupied. He thinks that someone must have gone and sat in it while his back was turned. It takes him a moment to realize that the someone is Banquo's Ghost.

Shakespeare's audience were used to seeing ghosts on the stage. But not all ghosts are the same. Take Hamlet's father's ghost, for example. It can only come out at night; it chooses whether to be visible or not; it can speak, at length, when it wants to. Banquo's ghost is different in all respects. It appears whenever Macbeth utters Banquo's name; it is visible to no one except to Macbeth himself; it can only communicate by shaking or nodding its head.

It is hard to know how Shakespeare's actors would have performed this scene. All we have to go by are Folio's two stage-directions: "Enter the Ghost of Banquo and sits in Macbeth's place" and "Enter Ghost" (III iv 47, 111). The exits are not marked, but it is clear enough from the dialogue when Macbeth loses sight of the ghost (see below). Though it is known from scene 20 that the stage must have had a trap-door, there is no indication of its being used in this scene.

In D'Avenant's version, as it was performed at the Duke's Theatre, a trap-door was certainly made use of. The first stage direction is exactly the same as in Folio: "Enter the Ghost of Banquo and sits in Macbeth's place". But then "the Ghost descends", "the Ghost of Banq. rises at his feet",

"Ex. Ghost" (Chetwin 1674:38).* In Garrick's version a trap-door was used for both entrances: "The Ghost of Banquo rises, and sits in Macbeth's place", "The Ghost vanishes", "The Ghost rises again", "The Ghost vanishes" (Bell 1773:40-2).

* In Thomas Otway's "Venice preserv'd", first performed at the same theatre in 1682, ghosts appear at the end of act 5, as the heroine loses her mind. "Jaffeir's Ghost rises. ... Ghost sinks. ... The Ghosts of Jaff. and Peir. rise together both bloody. ... Ghosts sink" (Otway 1682:72).

By that time, for sophisticated playgoers, ghosts had become an embarrassment. They saw the actor winched up slowly from beneath the stage, with a white face and a white shirt (adorned with scraps of red cloth to imitate blood), and they found the sight painfully crude (Thornton 1752:229, Lloyd 1760:15-16).* Since the ghost had nothing to say, there was, they thought, no need for it to be visible to the audience. If the actor playing Macbeth was up to the mark, he should be able to convince the audience that HE could see the ghost, even though they could not -- just as should be able to convince them that HE could see the dagger in scene 8, even though they could not. Eventually Kemble (1794:40-1) was brave enough to make the experiment; but he did not persevere with it. How could he? The ghost is required to appear in the cauldron scene (Kemble 1794:49), so how can one justify its not appearing in THIS scene? On the contrary, it has to be visible; it has to be recognizable as Banquo; otherwise how can someone seeing the play for the first time be expected to know what is giving Macbeth such a fright?

* Francis Gentleman was not so squeamish. In his view the ghost was not necessarily ridiculous. He recalled that David Ross (who played Banquo at Drury Lane in 1752-7) had "made the most striking, picturesque appearance we have ever seen, and with peculiar grace even beautified horror" (Gentleman 1770 1:111).

It is up to the actors to find some way to make the ghost come and go -- and then come and go again (see below). The audience have to be made to feel something of the dread which the ghost evokes in Macbeth. They must not be allowed to burst out laughing as soon as it appears. A nervous giggle is permissible, perhaps, but nothing more than that.

(III iv 64) Which of you ... The line is hardly verse. It seems that each word is meant to be spoken separately.

(III iv 68) Gentlemen, rise. When Macbeth starts freaking out, the lords stop eating, the servants stop serving, the

musicians stop playing. There is silence for a moment -- and then the lords stand up and make as if to leave.

(III iv 69) Sit, worthy friends. The lady is taken by surprise, just as much as everyone else. She has to make an instant decision -- either to let the banquet come to a sudden undignified end -- or else to try bluffing through. She chooses the second option. It is not exactly reassuring for the lords to be told that their king is subject to frequent fits of this kind, "and hath been from his youth". But that, in the heat of the moment, is all that she can think of to say -- and she says it.

Exchanging uncomfortable glances, the lords sit down and pick at their food. The servants spring back into action. The musicians start playing again. And the lady comes forward to talk some sense into her husband.

(III iv 74) Are you a man? Macbeth meanwhile has been staring at the stool, twitching and gibbering to himself. His wife tries to make him snap out of it.

(III iv 79) This is the air-drawn dagger ... We did not know that Macbeth told his wife about the dagger. But it turns out now that he did.

(III iv 91) ... the maws of kites. At last, he summons up enough will-power to make the ghost disappear.

(III iv 94) Fie, for shame! Thinking that the crisis is over, the lady returns to her throne, leaving Macbeth to collect his thoughts and mutter to himself for a while.

(III iv 104) My worthy lord, ... Thinking that he has had time to regain self-control, she reminds him that he has guests.

(III iv 108) I have a strange infirmity ... This was the excuse invented by his wife. How does he know that? Is she prompting him? (Lady (whispers). You have a strange infirmity ... Macbeth. I have a strange infirmity ...)

(III iv 113) And to our dear friend Banquo ... Macbeth makes the mistake of mentioning the name again -- and the ghost appears again.

Why did Shakespeare choose to have the ghost appear twice? We do not understand this scene unless we understand that.

I suppose that there is meant to be some difference in the lords' reaction to Macbeth's behaviour. The first time, they are shocked, alarmed, but inclined to be sympathetic. We are all liable to have nightmares, now and then; Macbeth just happens to be having one while he is awake. But then the same thing happens again. Twice in one night? They begin to wake up to the frightening fact that they have a madman for their king.

If there are ladies present, the contrast can be drawn more sharply. The first time, they are frightened and hide behind their husbands. The second time, they look at one another and titter. Seeing that, Lady Macbeth knows instantly what it means -- that her husband has turned himself into a figure of fun. There is no way back from that.

(III iv 121) Think of this, ... The lady is sticking to her story. But the strain is starting to show.

(III iv 130) If trembling I inhabit then, ... A strange expression, much discussed by the commentators. It seems to mean: "If I am frightened and stay indoors THEN, ...", i.e. when you challenge me to come out and fight).

(III iv 132) Unreal mockery, hence! Again he finds some way to make the ghost disappear.

(III iv 138) You make me strange, ... In his bewildered state, Macbeth supposes that the ghost was visible to everyone: he cannot understand why everyone else is unconcerned.

(III iv 144) I pray you, speak not. The lady gives up all hope of retrieving the situation. She cannot let anyone ask questions. Much too late, she does what she ought to have done in the first place, puts an end to the banquet and tells the guests -- orders them, begs them -- to leave.

(III iv 150) A kind goodnight to all. The lords leave, and the lady collapses. The stress of this scene has broken her. Macbeth is still too confused to understand what has happened. But she knows. The game is up, and there is nothing to say.

How much does she understand? She knows that Macbeth believes that he has seen a ghost, but does she know that it was Banquo's ghost? Does she even care? She does not ask for an explanation. Macbeth continues muttering to himself.

She says nothing. She does not tell him off, as we have seen her do before, more than once. She does not complain. She waits for him to speak.

(III iv 156) What is the night? He comes out of his reverie and snaps at her. She answers the question -- but he is not listening.

(III iv 158) How say'st thou, ... He snaps at her again. With Banquo dead and Fleance on the run -- still a threat, but not an urgent one -- Macbeth is already thinking about his next victim. Ever since Duncan's death, Macduff has been holed up in his castle in Fife, not actively opposing Macbeth, but avoiding contact with him. His refusal to attend the banquet is the final straw. Macbeth is not going to tolerate his insolence any longer.

(III iv 161) I hear it by the way. His wife replies and he responds, but his response is a lie. At the end of scene 19 we discover that he DID send to Macduff -- and that Macduff told the messenger to get lost (III vi 44-8).

(III iv 162) There's not a one of them ... A clear sign, by the way, that Macbeth's reign did not begin just weeks ago. Years have passed -- during which he has become more and more paranoid, to the point of recruiting a spy in every nobleman's house.

(III iv 163) I will tomorrow ... Macbeth takes it for granted that he will be able to find the witches without any difficulty -- simply by looking for them where he met them before. This means that scene 3 has to occur, not in the middle of nowhere, but in a place which was recognizably the witches' home.

(III iv 166) For mine own good ... A new sentence starts here. Johnson's edition (1765:440) was the first one which corrected Folio's punctuation.

(III iv 170-1) Strange things I have in head ... A vacuous couplet, which might be spoken by any tragic hero in any play -- perhaps was spoken by a tragic hero in some other play. It certainly does not belong here. The contrast with the preceding lines -- those are powerful, these are feeble -- proves it to be an interpolation, and spurious to boot.

(If you have seen the actor pause, unwind, gulp, and strike a pose before delivering these lines, you will recognize the force of this contrast. There is a seemingly unbreakable

loop which Clark and Wright (1869:xi) came up against: but there are some places where one can hope to escape from the loop, and this, I think, is one of them. Do you find it credible that the person who wrote lines 170-1 was the same person who wrote lines 167-9? Listen carefully. Does it not sound to you as if this couplet was the work of somebody else?)

(III iv 172) You lack ... And this is another line which might have been imported from a different play. She cannot possibly think that a good night's sleep will be enough to put him right. The sentiment is inadequate, and the metaphor is out of place. Besides, she seems to be speaking to herself. Macbeth gives no sign of having heard her say anything. Let this line be omitted, along with the preceding couplet; and let the scene end like this:

> ... I am in blood
> Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er. --
> 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.

(Come to that, I am not even sure about the "strange and self abuse". This is an odd thing to say (is it not?) for someone who has just spoken about wading through a river of blood. The end of this scene, I am afraid, like the end of scene 7, was so much improved by Shakespeare's actors that it is hard for us to decide how best to deal with it.)

Apart from the sleep-walking scene, which I regard as an interpolation, and where in any case she is no longer herself, this is the last we see of Lady Macbeth. Macbeth had no further use for her; Shakespeare had no further use for her. In scene 25 we are told that she is under a doctor's care. In scene 27 we are told that she is dead. In scene 33 we are told that she is reported to have committed suicide. That is all.

C.F. Sep 2025