Scene 22 (IV iii)

Some time later, somewhere in England.

This is a very long scene. It represents one-ninth of the whole play (280 out of 2532 lines). In performance it has, I think, invariably been shortened to a greater or lesser extent. In Garrick's version, "there are about eighty lines of this scene omitted, which retained, would render it painfully tedious" (Gentleman in Bell 1774:113). By my count, more than 90 lines of the Folio text were cut from that version (Bell 1773:52-8), more than 80 lines from Kemble's (1794:50-5). The cuts which I am about to recommend add up to more than 120 lines.

Roughly halfway through this scene, an incongruous interlude occurs (IV iii 157-80). Unexpectedly, a doctor appears: as he crosses the stage, he and Malcolm exchange a few words, and then Malcolm has to explain to Macduff what they were talking about -- the English king's supposed power to cure disease by touch, a power which would supposedly be passed on to his successors. It is generally agreed that this interlude is an interpolation, added as a special compliment to the king, perhaps with a view to a performance at court. Whether that is right or not, the interlude is pointless, and the scene is a better scene without it. It was "properly left out in the representation" (Gentleman in Bell 1774:116); as far as I know, it has scarcely ever been performed.*

* I can cite one exception: these lines were included in the script written by Trevor Nunn for a TV movie in 1979.

Without that interlude, the scene divides itself into two parts, separated by the arrival of Ross with news from Scotland: first, a conversation between Malcolm and Macduff (IV iii 1-156), second, a conversation between Ross, Macduff and Malcolm (IV iii 181-280). No one has ever seen anything much wrong with this second part. It can be -- I think it generally is -- performed exactly as printed. The first part is the part with problems.

As the scene begins, Macduff has been trying to persuade Malcolm to return to Scotland. Malcolm is suspicious -- has good reason to be suspicious. (As he tells us later, "Devilish Macbeth / By many of these trains hath sought to wine me / Into his power" (IV iii 134-6).) He would like to trust Macduff, but is not sure that he can. His plan is to needle Macduff, and keep on needling him, to see if he can

make him lose his temper. An agent of Macbeth's will let himself be insulted over and over again; an honest man will not. The plan works. Goaded beyond endurance, Macduff flies into a rage and heads for the exit -- and Malcolm holds him back. That is the result that he was hoping for; the result has been achieved. He has satisfied himself that Macduff can be trusted.

But then he starts again, on a different plan. This time round, instead of driving Macduff wild with anger, he aims to drive him wild with despair. He accuses himself of one vice after another -- until finally Macduff is persuaded that Malcolm would be an even worse king than Macbeth. Again he heads for the exit -- again Malcolm holds him back. He tells Macduff that he was making it all up -- and Macduff believes him.

This is all really very silly. After telling these fibs about himself, how can Malcolm expect Macduff to believe him? I was lying when I said I was a liar. I was deceiving you when I said that I enjoyed deceiving people. Until just now, I had never in my life told a fib. (Really? How can someone who never told a lie before be such an accomplished liar?) It is not just silly: it also leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Neither character comes out of it with any credit. (I would rather not have Malcolm tell me that he is "unknown to woman" (IV iii 143). That is no business of mine.) I strongly recommend that the whole of it should be cut. The question is rather why it was ever included (see below).

(IV iii 2) Enter ... Two characters enter. We recognize one of them, Macduff. In scene 20 we were told that he had fled to England: so we infer that he has now arrived. The other character is not someone we know, but we are expected to be able to work out that he must be one of Malcolm's sons -- the elder one, the one who told us in scene 11 that he was going to flee to England. (In scene 19 we were reminded that his name is Malcolm.) When we saw him last, he and his brother were frightened teenagers, barely able to open their mouths -- barely able to do anything except get dressed and run away. Since then, Malcolm has been brought up in the English court. Now he is a man -- played, therefore, by a different actor. He is, what he was not before, a potential king.

There should perhaps be a guard or two standing in the background; and Macduff should certainly have been relieved of his sword and dagger before he was allowed to get this

close to Malcolm. (Yet Malcolm does not seem to fear assassination. He fears being lured back to Scotland and handed over to Macbeth.)

(IV iii 16) This tyrant ... The word "tyrant" occurs six times in this scene: twice from Malcolm, three times from Macduff, once from Ross. (It is notable that even Malcolm thinks of Macbeth as a "tyrant" -- not as a "usurper".)

(IV iii 33) wife and child ... F2 changed "child" to "children", and that change does seem to be required: it appears from the sequel that Macduff has several children, not just one -- and presumably Malcolm knows that (or takes it for granted).

(IV iii 39-42) Bleed, bleed, ... I think both sense and metre are better if the lines are rearranged like this:

> Bleed, bleed, poor country!
> Wear thou thy wrongs -- the title is afeard.
> Great tyranny, lay thou thy basis sure,
> For goodness dare not check thee. -- Fare thee well, lord!

Let the actors decide. (Possibly "afeard" should be changed to "affeared", a lawyer's word for "confirmed" -- that was Pope's idea (1723:576) -- but the audience will not be aware of any difference.)

(IV iii 46) Be not offended ... This is where Malcolm starts boasting of his various vices. It is all so unnecessary. It makes the scene much too long. Just when we think that things are starting to move forwards, Malcolm takes us back to square one. The actors have to decide -- but if they take my advice they will drop this whole passage, from "Be not offended" as far as "banished me from Scotland" (IV iii 129). It is, I am sure, all perfectly authentic; but it is also (I agree with Gentleman) "painfully tedious".

Shakespeare got the story from Holinshed (1587:175); Holinshed had got it from Boece (1527 fo 262r-v). But anyone who had read anything about Scottish history would have come across some version of it.* I suspect that Shakespeare was acting under duress. It had been hinted to him that the king expected this story to be included -- "His Majesty enjoyed your play, Mr Shakespeare, on the whole, but he wondered why you did not mention ..." -- and he had no choice but to comply with criticism coming from that quarter. In other words, I think that this is one of the places where the king's stultifying influence on the play can be seen at work.

* A fifteenth-century verse chronicle has a concise version of the story which culminates with the lines: "I am so fals that na man may / Trow na word that euer I say" (Wyntoun ed Amours 1903-14 4:294).

(IV iii 78) ... such a one ... Folio's "an" is a misprint,* carried forward by inertia into every edition till Johnson's (1765:460), first put right in Capell's (1768:62).

* Compare "If such a one ..." in this same scene (IV iii 117), "Such a one ..." in scene 29 (V vii 5).

(IV iii 101) ... summer-seeming lust ... Much quibbled over, but it is clear enough what Macduff is getting at. Lust is a young man's vice and will fade away with time. Avarice is an old man's vice and will just get worse and worse.

A case in point would be Duncan's grandfather, who came to a sticky end because he had succumbed to "that reprochfull vice of vile auarice. For as it oftentimes happeneth, couetousnesse and age laid hold on him both at once. He then began to repent in that he had beene so liberall in giuing away his lands to his barons; & to recouer the same againe, he surmized feigned matter by vntrue suggestions against diuerse of the chiefest nobles, putting some to death, & banishing other, that he might by this meanes inioy their lands and goods as confiscate to the crowne for their supposed offenses" (Holinshed 1587:168a).

(IV iii 135) By many of these trains ... A clear proof that Malcolm has been in exile in England for some considerable length of time, not just days or weeks.

(IV iii 138) For even now ... If the passage above was omitted (IV iii 46), this has to be omitted too, as far as "... upon myself" (IV iii 148). The lines that get broken join up: "... / Deal between thee and me. What I am truly / ...".

(IV iii 148) What I am truly ... This is the moment, I think, when Macduff gets his sword given back to him -- a visible token that Malcolm does indeed now trust him.

(IV iii 157) Enter a Doctor. The Doctor's entrance is the cue for a discussion of the disease called the King's Evil. The passage is an obvious interpolation, designed to flatter the king (who, whether he believed it or not, did not object to being told that he was capable of working miracles). It serves no useful purpose, and will not mean anything to a modern audience; it should certainly be dropped. Here

again, the lines that get broken join up: "... / 'Tis hard to reconcile. See who comes here! / ..."

(IV iii 169) Which often since ... Another proof that Malcolm has been in England for quite a while.

(IV iii 172) All swollen ... Another instance of inertia, more striking still than "an" (IV iii 78). The word is spelt "swolne" in F1, "swoln" in F4, and that spelling was retained, for no good reason, in every edition that I can think of, till Wilson's (1947:68) and Muir's (1951:135). (One might equally well prefer "stoln" to "stolen" (II iv 37) or "faln" to "fallen" (V iii 28).)

(IV iii 181) Enter Ross. Ross's arrival sets things moving in a new direction. Like Macduff, he was presumably disarmed before being allowed to come within range of Malcolm: I think he should be escorted onto the stage by a guard or two. Once Macduff has vouched for him, Malcolm takes the sword from the guard and gives it back to Ross.

(IV iii 183) My countryman, ... As Shakespeare visualized this scene, there was going to be something about Ross's appearance which, even from a distance, would mark him out as a Scot. But I cannot say that I understand what Shakespeare had in mind.

Steevens has a note drawing attention to this point. "Malcolm discovers Rosse to be his countryman, while he is yet at some distance from him, by his dress." He goes on to complain: "This circumstance loses its propriety on our stage, as all the characters are uniformly represented in English habits" (Steevens 1773 4:508).*

* This note was repeated in subsequent editions till 1803 (Steevens 1778 4:581, 1785 4:611-12, Malone 1790 4:409, Steevens 1793 7:537, Reed 1803 10:244) but omitted after that (Harris 1813 10:244). Boswell (who was working with the 1803 edition) retained this note but added a note of his own to contradict it: "This has long been reformed on the stage, which, in point of costume, as in every other respect, is under the highest obligations to the taste and knowledge of Mr. Kemble" (Boswell 1821 10:230). But Kemble, it seems, was following Macklin's lead (see below).

Yet Steevens's note was out of date almost as soon as it was published. A short-lived production by Charles Macklin in November 1773 is credited with bringing about a permanent change in the staging of Macbeth. "Previous to this period, Macbeth used to be dressed in a suit of scarlet and gold, a tail wig, &c. in every respect like a modern military officer. ... Macklin, however, whose eye and mind were ever

intent on his profession, saw the absurdity of exhibiting a Scotch character, existing many years before the Norman Conquest, in this manner, and therefore very properly abandoned it for the old Caledonian habit. He shewed the same attention to the subordinate characters, as well as to the scenes, decorations, music,* and other incidental parts of the performance." That "useful reformation" was "acknowledged as such, and has ever since become general, not only on the London boards, but in all the provincial and country Theatres" (Cooke 1804:283-4).

* This means the incidental music -- overture, entr'actes, march for the Scottish army, and so on. It came to be generally assumed that this music ought to have a Scottish sound to it. I see no harm in that. At least as far back as the late seventeenth century, people were expected to recognize a "Scotch Tune" when they heard one.**

** For example, https://archive.org/details/imslp-banquet-playford-john/PMLP218008-apollosbanquet_5th_ed_3/page/n1/mode/2up

I add one cautionary comment of my own. The more Scottish they are made to look, the more the actors will be tempted to affect a Scottish accent. Perhaps that is allowable, but there is no warrant for it in the text. On the contrary, it was taken for granted at the time -- by Shakespeare, by the actors, by the audience -- that tragic characters were going to speak like Londoners, regardless of their nationality. An out-of-town accent was the mark of a comic character.* By that token, the actors playing the witches or the porter might be allowed to indulge their notions of Scottishness; but it is questionable whether the same licence should be allowed to the principal characters. The decision belongs to the actors, and I do not seek to dictate -- but I hope it will be remembered that Macbeth is a tragedy, not a history. It takes place in an imaginary Scotland, not the real one.

* There is a character in The Witch who is required to speak with a Scottish accent (ed Dyce 1840:278). But he only has two lines to say -- and besides he is only pretending to have come from "the northern parts".

(IV iii 196) Dying or e'er they sicken. The idiom "or ever", meaning "before", was still a living thing in Shakespeare's time; even after it went extinct, it survived in fossilized form, through its use in the English bible.* Folio misconstrues the expression as "or ere", and most editors, from Pope onwards, have gone along with that. The few who have made the correction (Rowe 1709::2351, Hanmer 1744:536, Dyce 1866:58) have not been taken notice of.

* On a quick count, the expression occurs more than 40 times in the

"Great Bible" of 1539 and the "Bishops' Bible" of 1568, six times only in the "authorized version" of 1611. For example, Psalms 90:2: "Before the mountaines were brought forth, or euer thou hadst formed the earth and the world: euen from euerlasting to euerlasting thou (art) God".

(IV iii 210) When I came hither ... Ross has come all this way with the sole purpose of telling Macduff that his family has been massacred. He has had plenty of time to decide how to break the news. (He has, indeed, thought up some little speeches: "But I have words ..." (IV iii 224), "Let not your ears ..." (IV iii 235).) And yet, when he is given the chance to speak -- first by Malcolm ("What's the newest grief?" (IV iii 200)) and then by Macduff ("How goes it?" (IV iii 209)) -- he resorts to evasive or ambiguous answers. It is not going to be easy for the actor to deliver Ross's lines if this prevarication is not to seem cowardly or cruel.

(IV iii 214) ... the tyrant's power afoot ... Here and later, "power" means "army", common usage at the time. Ross has heard news of a rebellion (though he is not himself involved in it); he has seen for himself that Macbeth has mobilized his troops.

(IV iii 254) He has no children. What Macduff means by this is not altogether clear. According to Chetwood (1749:32), Robert Wilks used to improve on the line by saying "He has no Children! Butcher! If he had, / The Thought of them would sure have stirr'd Remorse!" Those words come, slightly altered, from 3 Henry VI, V v 63-4.

(IV iii 275) This tune ... Folio has "time": "tune" is Rowe's emendation (1709:2353 as reprinted), almost universally approved.

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