

## Scene 26 (V iv)

Later that day, in the open country near Birnam wood.

Another mutilated scene. This ought to be an especially thrilling moment. An English army is invading Scotland, as we know from scene 22. A Scottish army is aiming to cross paths with them, as we know from scene 24. In normal circumstances, when an English army and a Scottish army came face to face, they would instantly start fighting. On this occasion, instead of trying to kill one another, they fraternize.

In its un mutilated form, I suppose, the scene would begin like this. The Scottish lords whom we met in scene 24 would enter with their army from one side. Malcolm, Macduff and Ross, with Siward and the English army, would enter from the other side. Malcolm would place himself between the two armies and make a speech. The commander of the Scottish army would reply; the commander of the English army would add a few suitable remarks; and then they would all come together and embrace.

It was Shakespeare's idea, I suppose again, that this display of brotherly affection between the English and the Scots would be gratifying to the king. But apparently it was not. For one reason or another, his majesty took offence -- perhaps because the scene was thought more likely to revive memories of ancient enmity, perhaps because it seemed to imply that the Scots were not capable of governing themselves without intervention from England. When Shakespeare (or the actors) was (were) given a hint of the king's disapproval, he (they) cancelled the obnoxious lines -- and left the scene in the sorry state in which we find it.

Nevertheless, the audience must be given a chance to understand what is happening. The actors are going to have to stage the encounter between the two armies in something like the manner that I have described, even though they will have to do it in dumb show. They have flags which can be waved; perhaps the Scottish trumpets and the English trumpets might engage in conversation; loud inarticulate cheering should be heard from all around.

(V iv 2) *Drum and colours. Enter ...* The two armies join up and fill the stage with all the noise and colour that can be contrived. The English soldiers are regulars: they have some sort of uniform. The Scottish soldiers are irregulars,

and look it.

(V iv 2-3) ... Seyward, ... Seyward's son, ... From the English side, two characters appear whom we have not met before. One is the English commander -- an elderly bellicose man whom we are expected to recognize as Malcolm's uncle Seyward. The other is a much younger man. He neither speaks nor gets spoken to, but -- from his expensive armour, and from the way he stays close to Seyward -- we infer that this is the son who was mentioned in scene 24 (V ii 13).

(V iv 5-6) Cousins, I hope ... In its mutilated state, the scene begins with this strange remark of Malcolm's. Why is he talking about bedrooms? Strange it may be -- but he has to have something to say as he comes to the centre of the stage. If the background noise makes him inaudible, that would not be a bad thing.

But it occurs to me that some of the lines which need to be deleted from scene 19 might be inserted here. As the Scottish commander enters, he might be saying "To wake Northumberland ..." and so on, till "... pine for now" (III vi 35-41). If the actors wanted to try this, I think it could be made to work.

(V iv 7) We doubt it nothing. This line should certainly be audible. Perhaps it should be given to Caithness, who seemed to be the man in command of the rebel army in scene 24 (V ii 33).

(V iv 8) What wood is this ... With this question of Seyward's the scene gets down to business.

(V iv 9) The wood of Birnam. Perhaps this line should be given to Angus, the man who knew his way around the local landscape in scene 24 (V ii 9).

(V iv 10-13) Let every soldier ... Malcolm has a cunning plan. From a military point of view, the plan is pointless, because it is already known in Dunsinane, even to the servants, that the English army is ten thousand strong (V iii 16). (But possibly Malcolm does not know that it is known.) From a dramatic point of view, the plan hits the spot.

(V iv 14) It shall be done. The common soldiery, English and Scottish, go off in various directions. The staff officers remain on stage, to discuss the progress of the campaign.

(V iv 19) For where there is advantage ... There seems to be some corruption here. As I understand him, Malcolm is saying that Macbeth has lost the initiative. Wherever he might have thought of attacking the invaders, he cannot trust the local population not to turn against him. So staying in Dunsinane is his only option.

(V iv 31) Towards which ... The soldiers have all reappeared by this time, dragging their branches behind them. They reassemble themselves at the back of the stage. At the word of command, all of them (representing ten thousand English and several thousand Scottish soldiers) hoist their branches into the air. It will take some rehearsal to get this right, but the actors should aim to make the sight as spectacular as possible. And then the two armies march off together, all in the same direction -- towards Dunsinane.

C.F. Sep 2025