The show of kings (IV i 100-24)

The show of kings is an unwanted interpolation. It is not there for any good reason, only to titillate the king's vanity. It does not fit with the rest of the play. The witches are never going to let Macbeth browbeat them as he does here. They refuse to answer his question ("Seek to know no more"). If he persists ("I will be satisfied"), they will simply vanish, just as they did in scene 3 ("Stay, you imperfect speakers -- tell me more.") And they are certainly never going to let him see this particular vision, because, by doing so, they are frustrating their own purpose. They know beforehand that the vision will demoralize him ("grieve his heart") -- and that is the opposite of the effect which they are seeking to achieve. They aim to induce in him a blind recklessness, a feeling that he is free to act on impulse, without regard for the consequences. (By the end of the scene, Macbeth has reverted to this frame of mind, as if the show of kings had never happened; but that just helps to prove that the show of kings is an interpolation.) Without question, this whole passage should be cancelled -- and, as a bonus, the money which would have to have been spent on costumes for the kings can be put to some better use.

If the show of kings were ever to be performed, the script which I attach below is roughly what would be required. The cauldron has been standing on a trapdoor in the middle of the stage; now it is lowered and got out of the way. The orchestra starts playing some music, presumably a slow march, *adagio maestoso*. And Banquo's descendants, in gorgeous robes, with crowns on their heads and sceptres in their hands, enter one by one, the last of them carrying a mirror in his spare hand.

Incomprehensibly, the Folio text says that there are eight kings in the procession. In fact there should only be seven -- two Roberts and five Jameses. The eighth Stuart king, the sixth James, is among the kings seen only in the mirror -- the kings who carry twofold balls and treble sceptres. (I cannot believe that any seventeenth-century actor would have dared to impersonate a living monarch, least of all a living monarch who was sitting in the audience.)

The seventh king is followed by Banquo's ghost, who presumably must look the same here as he did in the banquet scene.

I am not sure how the show should be brought to an end. Possibly the kings pass in a line across the back of the stage, exiting as they entered, one by one. That appears to be what D'Avenant intended; that is what Rowe and his illustrator had in their minds' eyes. But since Banquo "points at them for his",

it seems rather to be implied that the kings are all simultaneously visible. If it can be contrived, I think it would be best for them to assemble themselves into a group at the centre of the stage and then all vanish at once.

Here is the script that I suggest.

> ..... Yet my heart
> Throbs to know one thing. Tell me, if your art
> Can tell so much -- shall Banquo's issue ever
> Reign in this kingdom?
> *All.* Seek to know no more.
> *Macbeth.* I will be satisfied. Deny me this
> And an eternal curse fall on you. Let me know.
>
> *The cauldron descends.*
>
> Why sinks that cauldron?
>
> *Music starts playing.*
>
> And what noise is this?
> *1 Witch.* Show.
> *2 Witch.* Show.
> *3 Witch.* Show.
> *All.* Show his eyes and grieve his heart.
> Come like shadows, so depart.
>
> ***A show of <u>seven</u> kings, and Banquo last.***
>
> *Enter First King.*
>
> Macbeth. Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo. Down!
> Thy crown does sear mine eyeballs.
>
> *Enter Second King.*
>
> And thy hair,
> Thou other gold-bound brow, is like the first.
>
> *Enter Third King.*
>
> A third is like the former. Filthy hags,
> Why do you show me this?
>
> *Enter Fourth King.*
>
> A fourth? Start, eyes!
> What, will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?

Enter Fifth King.

Another yet?

Enter Sixth King.

A sixth? I'll see no more.

Enter Seventh King, with a glass in his hand.

And yet the seventh appears, who bears a glass
Which shows me many more -- and some I see
That twofold balls and treble sceptres carry.
Horrible sight!

Enter Banquo's Ghost.

Now I see 'tis true,
For the blood-boltered Banquo smiles upon me
And points at them for his.

Apparitions vanish.

Music stops.

What, is this so?
Where are they? -- Gone? ......