Intermission

Between scenes 13 and 14 there needs to be an intermission, during which several years are supposed to elapse.* Macbeth was king for seventeen years, according to Holinshed.† He began his reign well, "gouerning the realme for the space of ten yeares in equall iustice". After that, however,

> he began to shew what he was, in stead of equitie practising crueltie. For the pricke of conscience (as it chanceth euer in tyrants, and such as atteine to anie estate by vnrighteous means) caused him euer to feare, least he should be serued of the same cup, as he had ministred to his predecessor. (1587:172)

And so it came about that "he defamed the [common-wealth] with most terrible crueltie" (1587:176) during the seven years that followed.

* No one should think that this is hard to believe. Something similar happens in *The winter's tale*, where the action suddenly jumps forward by sixteen years. For the purposes of the plot, Perdita needs to be a baby in act III, a teenager in act IV.

† In the first edition, Macbeth's reign in said to have begun in 1040 (1577:244) and lasted for 17 years, ending in 1057 (1577:252). Holinshed took those dates from John Major (1521), preferring them to the ones given by Hector Boece (1527), but taking note of Boece's dates in the margin. In the second edition, "1540" was miscorrected to "1046" (1587:171), to make it agree with the "H.B." date in the margin, and the numbers no longer add up (1587:176).

Shakespeare would not have cared about the exact number of years, and the audience need not care either. Nevertheless, it is important for them to understand that much time has passed -- so important that some exaggeration is allowable.* For a start, the colour scheme should be conspicuously different. Instead of the bright colours of the coronation scene, the characters should now be wearing sombre clothes, almost as if they are going to a funeral (as indeed they almost are). Macbeth should be visibly older -- not a different person (as Malcolm will be, when we meet him), but very visibly changed. (Perhaps his hair is going grey already: high office can age a man fast.) Outside the palace, a reign of terror prevails, though we do not start to hear about that until later (scene 19). Inside the palace, things appear to be normal. The lords still come to court (with the single exception of Macduff). They still laugh at the king's jokes. But it needs to be made clear that there is some tension beneath the surface. The lords would rather not stand too close to him. Their laughter is

a little hollow. The mood seems cordial -- but there is a brittleness about it which the audience ought to made to sense.

* The need for some contrast was noted by Masefield (1945:23-4), but he visualized it rather differently from me: he wanted things to start looking "less smart and more vulgar" once Macbeth was king.

Macbeth has moved into a new home -- a newly constructed castle at Dunsinane.* (As Holinshed (1587:174) tells the story, it was Macduff's refusal to take his turn supervising the construction of the castle which brought about the catastrophe.) In any production which uses scenery, some stress should be laid on this point. In part 1, Duncan was living in a large castle and Macbeth was living in a smaller castle, but both castles were showing their age. (It is hard to keep a castle clean.) In part 2, Macbeth is living in a grand castle which looks as if it was completed just yesterday.

* From Capell (1768:34) onwards, some editors have put this scene at Forres. But that is obviously wrong. The Third Apparition's words in scene 20 (IV i 110-12) are not going to resonate with Macbeth unless Dunsinane is already his usual residence, the place that he calls home. Why would he tempt fate by moving to Dunsinane (Capell 1768:69) AFTER scene 20?

Times have changed since part 1. That was the bronze age: this is the iron age.*

* Some other plays are divided quite distinctly into two parts along geographical lines. *Julius Caesar*, for example: part 1 in Rome, part 2 in Macedonia. Or *Othello*: part 1 in Venice, part 2 in Cyprus. In each case, the division is intrinsic to the design of the play -- which, by the way, the division into acts is not.

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