Scene 2 (I ii)

This scene, as we find it in Folio, has been horribly mutilated. It bears only a distant resemblance to the scene written by Shakespeare. The actors chopped it into bits, threw some of the bits away, and rearranged the bits that they kept.

I do not blame them for shortening the scene. In its original form, it was, quite possibly, too long, stuffed with more facts than the audience could be expected to digest. They were not there for a lecture on some episode in Scottish history: they were there to see the witches. If the actors could see that the audience kept getting restless, they were within their rights to try shortening the scene. I repeat that I do not blame them for doing that. I blame them for making a botch of it. Ever since then, the play has begun (not counting the prologue) with a scene which simply does not make sense.

The damage is severe, and mostly irreversible; but I think we can go a little way towards undoing it. We have to start by distinguishing the separate bits and making sure that they are in the right order. That is what I have tried to do in the file I call script-2. Then we have to try to imagine what was supposed to happen during those bits of the scene which got cut out and thrown away. That is what I aim to do here. I shall be skipping over numerous minor points, so as not to get distracted from the main issue.

Not to make a mystery of it, I think that the lines should be read in this order:

..... 5-18, ... 40-63, ... 19-39, ... 66-82,

with a large gap at the beginning and smaller gaps later on. (Lines 64-5 are spurious and best forgotten.)

It is clear, for a start, that a large chunk of text has been cut from the beginning of this scene. Much of the exposition has been lost. There are two things that ought to be explained to us. First, we need to know that a rebellion has broken out in some distant part of the country. In the hope of ending it peacefully, the king has sent an emissary to negotiate with the rebels. In case he fails, the army is standing by. Second, the king has had to deal with a crisis closer to home. One of his most trusted advisers has been detected in some treasonous activity. He has been arrested, and is being kept in prison in some

castle not far away, while the king decides what to do with him.

In the course of this scene, four characters are going to enter. That emissary is the first of them. Accompanied by one soldier carrying a flag of truce, he went to speak with the rebels, but they refused to listen. Worse, they tried to take him prisoner, and he only escaped with the help of the soldier who was with him. After that, the soldier rejoined the army, which was already preparing to attack the rebels, and the emissary returned to make his report to the king.

Next to arrive is that soldier, who has been badly wounded -- so badly that he has had to drop out of the battle, but not so badly that he cannot carry a message to the king.

In Folio this is where the scene begins -- at the moment when the king first sees this wounded man.

(I ii 2) Alarum within. Wrong. This scene is taking place at the king's palace, a long way from the battlefield. The call required is "Flourish".

(I ii 2-3) Enter ... Malcolm, Donalbain ... Wrong. The king's sons should not appear in this scene. Malcolm is only there because Folio has given him the lines which properly belong to Macduff (see below). Donalbain is only there because Malcolm is there.

(I ii 4) ... a bleeding captain. Wrong. The man is an ordinary soldier. Folio promotes him for a reason which will shortly be explained.

If we want to make some sense of it, the scene should start like this: "Flourish. Enter King, Macduff, lords and attendants, meeting a bleeding sergeant." (The king's name is Duncan -- but, as things stand, we are not told that till scene 5.) The actors will not find it easy to fetch all of these people onto the stage in a suitably dignified way. It will help, I think, if the sergeant is restrained by the guards as he tries to approach the king, and only released once Macduff has vouched for him.

(I ii 5) What bloody man ... As soon as this soldier appears, before he has a chance to say a word, the king assumes that the battle was still undecided at the moment when this man left the battlefield. "He can report, / As seemeth by his plight, of the revolt / The newest state."

(I ii 8) This is the sergeant ... Macduff recognizes the man at once, as the soldier who helped him to escape from the rebels. "This is the sergeant / Who like a good and hardy soldier fought / 'Gainst my captivity." Like the king, he expects only an interim report. "Say to the king the knowledge of the broil / As thou didst leave it."

(I ii 13) Doubtful it stood, ... The soldier's first words go to prove that the king and Macduff were both right: the battle was still in the balance when he left.

(I ii 18) ... from the western isles ... As Folio has it, this line is followed immediately by "Of kerns and gallowglasses is supplied". Something has gone seriously wrong here. Kerns and gallowglasses did not come from the western isles: they came from Ireland. Everybody knew that. (Did Shakespeare know it? Yes, he did (2 Henry VI V ix 24-7).) By itself the word "kerns" could sometimes be used more loosely, for any irregular light infantry, but "kerns and gallowglasses" in combination are definitely Irish.

As Holinshed tells the story, the rebel commander had assembled a strong army, "a mightie power of men":

> for out of the westerne Iles there came vnto him a great multitude of people, offering themselues to assist him in that rebellious quarell, and out of Ireland in hope of the spoile came no small number of Kernes and Galloglasses, offering gladlie to serue vnder him, whither it should please him to lead them. (Holinshed 1587:169a)

That is, the rebel army had two components: peasants from the western isles plus a stiffening of mercenaries from Ireland.

At the very least, I think it would have to be supposed that a line or two has been lost after line 18. But it seems to me that the disjunction is more radical than that. Up until now, we have been hearing about a battle which is still undecided; from here onwards, we are being told about a battle which has been won. A new bit of the scene begins with line 19 -- and that bit does not belong here (see below).

(I ii 40) Dismayed not this ... A few lines have gone missing before this. The sergeant has been speaking of some incident which seemed to turn the battle in the rebels' favour; and the king is responding to that.

(I ii 40-1) ... our captains, Macbeth and Banquo? The joint commanders of the army. (These are the characters to whom the word "captain" applies; Folio misapplies it.)

(I ii 44) If I say sooth, ... A meaningless and worse than meaningless line. The sense is better without it.

(I ii 53) Enter Ross and Angus. Wrong. Ross enters alone. He is the third person to arrive; Angus is the fourth, and he arrives later (see below).

(I ii 55) The worthy thane of Ross. Of all the minor characters, Ross is the only one who is ever named in the text -- and he is only named this once. Even so, he has no individuality. There is no particular reason why this should be the same character who is called Ross in scene 12, or in any scene after that.

Kemble (1794:7) changed this line to "The worthy thane of Fife" (and let it be spoken by Ross, who, in this version, has been present since the start of the scene). The lines which Folio assigns to Ross were given by Kemble to Macduff. He did not say why -- but I think that I can guess. He thought, I suppose, that the play is thrown out of balance if Macduff does not appear much sooner than he does in Folio (where he does not open his mouth until scene 10). I agree -- but I do not agree that Macduff should be given Ross's lines. It is, I think, the lines which Folio assigns to Malcolm which should be given to Macduff instead. I hope to explain my reasons some time soon.

(I ii 59) Whence camest thou, ... Ross's arrival is unexpected. (Like the sergeant, I think he should be restrained for a while -- is he an accomplice of Cawdor's? -- before the king has him brought forward.) It is known that he was not with the army -- so why is he in such a hurry? "What a haste looks through his eyes!"

(I ii 60) From Fife, great king, ... The answer is that Ross is bringing news of yet another crisis. A Norwegian army, commanded by the king of Norway himself, has come ashore in Fife. (It is not explained why the thane of Ross was in that part of the country -- but he was -- and therefore he is first with the news.)

(I ii 64-5) Assisted by ... These lines are spurious. For the scene to make sense they have to be deleted.

Some genuine lines have been lost. Ross needs to finish

what he is saying. The king needs to respond. The situation is undeniably alarming. With a Norwegian army on the offensive, with the Scottish army already engaged in a hard fight with the rebels, it is hard to imagine how things can turn out well ...

And this is the moment for Angus to arrive. The character whom Folio calls Angus is a young lord who has been given the honour of reporting the army's successes to the king. Folio is wrong to call him a captain. He is not properly that -- but we can see from his armour that he is an officer, not a mere sergeant. Unlike the sergeant, therefore, he is a suitable person to carry the news of a victory.* This is his big opportunity: he does not want to waste it. Along the way, between the battlefield and the palace, he has thought up some clever turns of phrase.

* "We may add that Shakespeare's good sense would hardly have tolerated the absurdity of sending a severely wounded soldier to carry the news of a victory" (Clark and Wright 1869:x). We have seen that Duncan and Macduff think just the same: they both assume that the lines which Shakespeare has written for the sergeant will relate to an unfinished battle.

(I ii 19) Of kerns and gallowglasses ... This is where we hear about the Irish mercenaries -- from Angus, not from the sergeant. Echoing Holinshed (see above), we might think of reading "... [with no small number] / Of kerns and gallowglasses is supplied" -- or something to that effect.

(I ii 22) For brave Macbeth ... And now we are told that the battle is over. The rebels and their Irish allies have been defeated, and the rebel commander has been killed and butchered by Macbeth. The king is delighted to hear it. "Oh, valiant cousin, worthy gentleman!"

(I ii 28) ... from the nave ... The word "nave" means "hub of a wheel"; but here it has to mean "navel". Editors seem to have assumed that this was an idiosyncrasy of Shakespeare's; compilers of dictionaries, more or less willingly, have gone along with that. But perhaps it was merely a misprint. Pronounced as one syllable, "na(v)el" would scan just as well.

(I ii 28) ... upon our battlements. The battlements are a surprise: we had rather supposed that the battle was taking place out in the open. But perhaps the king's army had made itself at home in some nearby castle while waiting to be ordered into action.

(I ii 35) No sooner justice had, ... Angus has more news to report. As the first battle ended, the Scottish army were attacked by the Norwegians.

This is where the bits of this scene have most obviously been disarranged. As Folio has it, we are told about the attack by the Norwegians (lines 31-9) before we have even been told about their arrival in Scotland (lines 60-3).

Some lines are missing at this point. We ought to be told how the Scottish army, despite being taken by surprise, rallied and fought back ... and how the king of Norway still thought that he was sure to win ...

(I ii 66) Till that Bellona's bridgroom, ... And this is where we reconnect with Angus's (not Ross's) speech. Once again, it was Macbeth's courageous conduct which turned the tide of the battle. The Norwegians called a truce. They paid a large sum of money to be allowed to give their dead a decent burial, and then they retired to their ships and sailed away. Once again, the king is delighted. "Great happiness!"

(I ii 77-8) No more that thane of Cawdor ... With the rebellion crushed, with the invasion thwarted, only one crisis remains to be resolved. The king has made up his mind what to do. The thane of Cawdor is to be executed -- and the forfeited title is to be conferred upon Macbeth, as a reward for his bravery.

(I ii 78) Go, pronounce his present death ... Though Folio fails to make it clear, the audience need to understand that the king is issuing two separate orders. This first order is addressed to two or three of the attendants. ("Those in commission" (I iv 5). There is, perhaps, a death warrant to be signed and given to them. They bow; they do not speak.) They exit in the direction of the castle where Cawdor is being detained.

(I ii 79) And with his former title ... And this second order is addressed to Ross. Ross responds -- "I'll see it done" -- and then he and Angus depart together, in the direction of the returning army. (Angus can estimate where the army is likely to be met with; Ross has no way of knowing that.)

(I ii 81) What he hath lost, ... One line from the king brings this scene to a hurried end. It should conclude as it began, with a "Flourish".

C.F. Jan 2026, revised May 2026