Scene 10 (II iii 1-166)

A moment later, in the castle courtyard

The knocking continues, and now we are back in the castle courtyard, just inside the gate.

(II iii 2) Enter a Porter. The tension ratcheted up in the previous scene is released all at once, with a descent from tragedy to farce. The company's chief comic actor (the same, no doubt, who played First Witch in other scenes) comes stumbling onto the stage. He is the porter -- the man in charge of the gate. (This is the only scene in which he has anything to do, but perhaps we caught a glimpse of him in scene 6.) He has just got out of bed, and is wrestling with some articles of clothing which keep getting tangled or turned back to front or inside out. Or perhaps he has a large bunch of keys and cannot find the right one. That is for the actor to work out. Shakespeare provides him with some patter: he echoes the knocking at the gate, and in between he imagines himself to be the porter of the gate to hell. The physical comedy is what counts here. It does not matter much what the porter gets to say; so it does not matter much that most of what he says will not be understood by a modern audience. It would do not harm to drop some of the incomprehensible passages -- provided that Macbeth still has the time he needs to prepare for his next entrance. Timing is all-important. The actor has to judge how long to go on with this performance before the audience is properly unwound -- and ready for the tension to start ratcheting up again as they wait for Duncan's body to be discovered.

(II iii 8) Come in time, ... Most editors think that something has gone wrong here, and I agree. What do napkins have to do with farmers? But as long as the porter is hopping around on one leg, with his britches in a twist, we need not worry whether what he says makes sense.

(II iii 22) Anon, anon, ... Finally he gets his clothes in order, opens the door in the gate, and has the nerve to ask for a tip.

(II iii 24-5) Was it so late, friend, ... Now we find out who it is that has been knocking at the gate -- Macduff and another lord, a younger man. Folio's notation calls him Lennox, and I do the same; but there is no necessity for this to be the same young lord who was called Lennox in scenes 2-4. (He is never named in the text.)

As the text stands in Folio, Macduff has not spoken a word in any previous scene; we are not even told his name till two scenes later (II iv 28). In Kemble's version, things are managed differently. He thought, I suppose, that the play was thrown out of balance if Macduff was not introduced much sooner than this. So he gave him all the speeches in scenes 2 and 3 which in Folio are given to Ross (Kemble 1794:7, 11). At least as late as the 1820s, acting editions were still following Kemble's lead (Cumberland 1827:12-13, 16-17). Though I agree that there is a problem -- the play is out of balance, Macduff does need to appear in scene 2 -- I prefer a different solution.

Folio prints these two lines of Macduff's as verse, but I doubt whether that was the intention. The porter speaks prose, and Macduff, out of politeness, adapts himself to the porter's way of speaking.

(II iii 27-43) And drink, sir, ... This whole chunk of text should be deleted, without the slightest doubt. It has nothing to do with anything; it is not even funny. The less said about it the better. Macduff is under instructions to help the king get out of bed; he is afraid that he may be late; he is not going to want to listen to the porter talking drivel.

This is how I think the script should go:

... Anon, anon. I pray you, remember the porter.
Enter Macduff and Lennox.
Macduff. Was it so late friend, ere you went to bed, that you do lie so late?
Porter. Faith, sir, we were ---
Macduff. Is thy master stirring?
Lennox. Our knocking has awaked him. Here he comes.
Enter Macbeth.
Good morrow, noble sir.
Macbeth. Good morrow, both.
Macduff. Is the king stirring, worthy thane?
Macbeth. Not yet.

With Lennox's speech (I have put the prefix one line sooner than Folio) the dialogue shifts into verse. (The porter has nothing more to do. He should head for the exit now, mumbling the rest of his line to himself, "carousing till the second cock". Nobody wants to know that.)

While the porter was soliloquizing, Macbeth has had time to clean himself up, take off his clothes, put on his night-gown, and regain control of himself. When he enters, he is

suitably dishevelled and (in theory) naked under his night-gown. We can see that his legs are bare, and do not need to see any more than that. (He has slippers on his feet, I should think: castles have stone floors, and stone floors are cold. Does he have anything on his head? A character in Othello mentions in passing that he wears a night-cap in bed (II i 316).)

(II iii 61) He does -- he did appoint so. A perfectly reasonable thing for Macbeth to say. It is not for him to decide when the king should leave. The king has said that he is only staying for one night -- but perhaps he may change his mind and stay for longer.

(II iii 62) The night has been unruly. Since Macbeth, understandably, is not much inclined to talk, it is Lennox who fills up the time before Macduff discovers the body.

In the previous scene we were given the impression that the night was very quiet -- so quiet that the slightest noise seemed loud. Now we are told that we have just survived a howling gale, and possibly an earthquake too. Shakespeare is taking a liberty here, so that he can give Lennox something to say; one just has to hope that the audience will allow it.

(II iii 90) Banquo and Donalbain, Malcolm, ... So in Folio -- but I think the first and third names should be transposed, "Malcolm and Donalbain, Banquo". (The scansion is the same either way.) This is the first time that we have heard them named together: Macduff is upset, but I do not see why he should be allowed to confuse us.

(II iii 97) What's the business ... Lady Macbeth is the first person to appear. She has washed her hands (and probably loosened her hair). I suppose that she is wearing some sort of smock -- like the white smock that Desdemona is seen wearing in the last act of Othello (V ii 273) -- with her night-gown on top of that.

(In Garrick's version of Macbeth this scene is greatly altered. The porter's part is reduced to one line.* There are no bare legs to be seen. (Garrick, we are told, "would not risk the appearance of half, or even disordered, dress, though extremely proper, and what the incident of the fable and situation of the characters seemed to require" (Davies 1783 2:157).) Lady Macbeth, who appeared in Davenant's play as well as Shakespeare's, does not appear in Garrick's. "The players have long since removed Lady Macbeth from this

scene. ... Many years since, I have been informed, an experiment was hazarded, whether the spectators would bear Lady Macbeth's surprize and fainting; but ... persons of a certain class were so merry upon the occasion, that it was not thought proper to venture the Lady's appearance any more. Mr. Garrick thought, that even so favourite an actress as Mrs. Pritchard would not, in that situation, escape derision from the gentlemen in the upper regions" (Davies 1783 2:152-3).)

* "The part of the porter is properly omitted; and [some of Lennox's] lines, by transposition, judiciously introduced to give Macbeth time for change of appearance, of which, even now, he is allowed too little" (Gentleman in Bell 1773:25).

(II iii 100) Oh, gentle lady, ... Another odd thing. Macduff refuses to tell the lady the news -- but a moment later, with the lady standing next to him, he blurts it out to Banquo.

(II iii 104) Enter ... Not just Banquo: as many people as possible should be brought onto the stage at this point. (And there ought to be some women among them.) Presumably the porter should show his face again: he is the only one who is fully dressed. The whole company needs to be assembled before Macbeth and Lady Macbeth start their performance.

(II iii 107) What, in our house? This is, I think, precisely the sort of silly thing that an innocent person, taken by surprise, would say.

(II iii 111) Enter ... If Ross is the character who appears with the old man in scene 12, he cannot appear in this scene. Capell (1768:30) deleted him; Clark and Wright reinstated him, without saying why (1865:455), but then deleted him again (1869:25). Why his name was ever added here is a mystery -- but not a very interesting one.

(II iii 118) Enter ... Duncan's two sons arrive last of all, in the same half-naked state as everyone else. When we saw them before, in scene 6, they did not open their mouths; now they are allowed to utter three words each. Folio seems hardly to know which son is which -- and indeed at this point in the play it hardly matters. I take it that the older son ought to speak first: that is what the audience will be expecting.

(II iii 119) What is amiss? This sounds to me like Malcolm.

(II iii 123) Your royal father's murdered. The boys look blank: Macduff spells it out for them.

(II iii 124) Oh, by whom? And this sounds to me like Donalbain.

(II iii 125) Those of his chamber, ... Lennox begins by answering Donalbain's question; but then he turns away and starts speaking to the crowd that has assembled.

The king's sons have been told the news, in no very sensitive manner; from here on they are ignored. Nobody thinks that they may need to be comforted. Nobody thinks that they may need to be protected. (And of course it occurs to nobody -- not to Macduff, not to Malcolm himself -- that Malcolm is now the king.) Having asked one question each, they get forgotten. They do not protest. They are children: thy are used to being ignored.

(In Kemble's script their subsequent speeches were cut: he made them exit at the end of Lennox's speech (1794:28). Irving thought that they should go and see their father's dead body for a moment, before abandoning him (1888:38). Perhaps they should -- but there is no hint of it in the text.)

(II iii 125) ... as it seemed, ... If Lennox wanted to overact, he could emphasize the word "seemed", could look sideways at Macbeth, could catch Macduff's eye. But he should not do any of these things. He is bewildered, not suspicious of Macbeth.

(II iii 130) Oh, yet I do repent me ... This announcement produces some general consternation, but Macduff is the one who asks the obvious question. He is instantly suspicious: he has reason to be so. When he saw the crime scene, the chamberlains were presumably still unconscious. It does not seem very likely that they would have cut the king's throat -- and then drunk themselves into a stupor while waiting for the crime to be discovered.

(II iii 141) Who could refrain, ... Except for Macduff, the lords appear to be satisfied with Macbeth's explanation. (The only person who saw what happened was Lennox, and he has nothing more to say.) Macbeth dares them to doubt him: "You would have done the same as me -- unless you had less love for the king, or less courage, than me." But in any case the lords are not given time to think about it, because Lady Macbeth chooses this moment to collapse. (Does she

actually fall to the ground? That is for the actor to say. The lady is pretending, of course.)

(II iii 146) Why do we hold our tongues, ... Taking advantage of the confusion caused by Lady Macbeth's fainting fit, Duncan's sons come to the front of the stage and have a whispered conversation. They were tongue-tied when talking to the grownups; they are fluent enough when talking to one another. (The actors are old enough to be trusted with lines of blank verse.)

I switch the prefixes again. This first speech sounds to me like the younger son: "Shouldn't we speak? Shouldn't you, being older, speak first?"

(II iii 148) What should be spoken here, ... And this is the older son: "What good would that do?" Even at this age, Malcolm is inclined to be cautious -- not to speak until he is ready.

(II iii 152) Nor our strong sorrow ... Folio marks a change of speaker here. I prefer to let Malcolm complete his own train of thought.

(II iii 153) ... upon the foot of motion. Though Folio fails to mark an exit for them, it was, I think, quite certainly Shakespeare's intention that Malcolm and Donalbain should disappear at this point. A character who says "Let's away" is -- like the murderer at the end of scene 16 -- planning to leave straight away: he does not intend to hang around on the stage waiting for everyone else to leave. (And, correspondingly, a character who says "Therefore to horse", as one of the two does later (II iii 178), is on his way to the stables. He is not still wearing his night-gown.) Nobody sees them go, or notices that they have gone. Nobody cares in the least what they do or do not do.

(II iii 154) Look to the lady ... By this time, I suppose, the servants have produced some piece of furniture on which the lady can be carried out.

(II iii 155) And when we have ... Or, more crudely, "Let's get dressed before our dicks freeze off."

(II iii 162) And so do I. Inertia strikes again. A misprint in Rowe's edition (1709:2324) gave this line to "Macb." instead of "Macd.", and that error persisted into every subsequent edition -- except Capell's (1768:31) -- as far as Boswell 1821.

(Kemble (1794:28) knew, or perhaps just felt, that there was something wrong here: he gave the line to Macduff.)

(II iii 166) Exeunt. This is right as it stands. Missing the point, Hanmer (1744:503) changed the direction to "Exeunt all but Mal. and Don." (Capell (1768:31) said the same thing in a different way.) Malone (1790:348) copied from Hanmer, and that became the normal reading. Nobody seems to have understood -- what I have to say looks obvious to me -- that Malcolm and Donalbain had exited already.

C.F. Dec 2025