Scene 12 (II iv)

(II iv 2) Enter ... It is hard to say where or when this scene is supposed to be happening. As to the where of it, we seem to be at some road junction in the middle of nowhere, a spot where people travelling towards different places can accidentally meet. Forres is in one direction, Scone in a second, Fife in a third.

As to the when, there is an obvious answer: if "this sore night" (II iv 5) means the night of the murder AND the night just gone, we are still in the same day now as in scenes 10-11. Hence Adams gives the time of this scene as: "Later the same morning" (1931:46).

But the obvious answer seems to me to be wrong, because, as the scene proceeds, we are told of things happening which would, at the least, take several days to happen. First, the old man knows of a prodigious event which happened "on Tuesday last" (II iv 15); and enough time must have passed, not just for this event to occur, but also for the old man to get to hear about it. Second, Macduff knows that Duncan's body has been carried to Colmkill (II iv 46-8). What distance there was between Inverness and Colmkill in Shakespeare's idea of Scotland, who can say? On the face of it, however, that journey would take some days -- and the news that the journey had been completed would take another day or two to reach Macduff. Third, there must have been enough time for the lords to get together and elect Macbeth as king, because Macduff knows that he is already on his way to Scone (II iv 43-4). The meeting itself would probably not take long, because Macbeth was the obvious choice; but the lords would have to be notified and given time to assemble from the furthest parts of the country. (Ross, for some reason, missed that meeting, but the meeting was quorate without him; he does not seem to resent not being waited for.)

For these reasons, I do not see how "this night" can mean what it might seem to mean at first sight. Apparently "this night" should be taken to mean, not "the night just gone", but "the night that we have been talking about".

(II iv 8-13) Thou seest the heavens, ... Shakespeare is remembering what he read in Holinshed's account of the murder of king Duff. In the aftermath of that, we are told, "there appeered no sunne by day, nor moone by night in anie part of the realme, but still was the skie couered with continuall clouds" (Holinshed 1587:151). That lasted "for

the space of six moneths togither": the sun remained hidden till after the murderers had been put to death. (In the present case, the sun seems to have come out again fairly soon, without waiting for justice to be done.)

(II iv 15-23) On Tuesday last, ... As Holinshed tells it, the prodigies spoken of here occurred during that interval of six months. "Monstrous sights also that were seene within the Scotish kingdome that yeere were these: horsses in Louthian, being of singular beautie and swiftnesse, did eate their owne flesh, and would in no wise taste anie other meate. ... There was a sparhawke also strangled by an owle. Neither was it anie lesse woonder that the sunne, as before is said, was continuallie couered with clouds for six moneths space. But all men vnderstood that the abhominable murther of king Duffe was the cause heereof" (Holinshed 1587:152).

(II iv 18-23) And Duncan's horses, ... The speech-prefixes go wrong here. These lines belong to the old man. He is in a position to know about Duncan's horses; Ross is not. (It was Shakespeare who decided that the flesh-eating horses were Duncan's horses, not some horses somewhere.)

(II iv 24) 'Tis said ... This is Ross speaking.

(II iv 25-6) They did so, ... This is the old man.

(II iv 28) Here comes ... This is Ross.

As soon as Macduff appears, Ross loses interest in the old man; Macduff takes no notice of him at all. It is probably best for him to exit at this point -- as he did in Garrick's version (Bell 1773:31) -- when he sees that he is going to be ignored. (If he stays, he has to have something to do -- eat his sandwiches, perhaps, at the back of the stage. I remember a performance where he stood between Ross and Macduff, looking from one to the other, nodding from time to time. But that is obviously wrong. It makes him look foolish; it makes them look positively rude.) Folio only keeps him on the stage so that he can deliver two lines at the end of the scene. But those two lines are meaningless (see below) and can certainly be dispensed with.

(II iv 31) Is't known ... Now we come to the business of the scene, which is to let us know what has been happening since the murder of Duncan. Ross is strangely ignorant -- but of course it is necessary for him to be ignorant so that we can be told the news.

First we are told the result of the inquiry which was proposed at the end of scene 10. It was decided that the murder had been committed by the king's two attendants. That was what Lenox supposed; Macbeth supposed so too; the attendants were not capable of denying it. Furthermore, the king's sons, by absconding as they did, had made themselves look guilty; so it was decided that they had instigated their father's murder. That is the official story, and that is the story which Macduff relates to Ross. We can feel fairly sure that he does not believe it -- but he is not disposed to share his suspicions with anyone.

(II iv 41) Then 'tis most like ... Ross seems to think that one of Duncan's sons might have been chosen to succeed him, had they not both run away. But that thought did not occur to anybody who was present in scene 10. (If it had, Duncan's sons would not have been given the chance to steal away and flee.) Perhaps Ross is assuming that the old king's sons would be put on the short list as a matter of form, only to be eliminated at once -- as being, both of them, far too young for the job.

(II iv 43) ... already named ... The implication is that some form of election has taken place (at Forres perhaps), with the choice falling on Macbeth -- by a unanimous vote if Macduff (like Banquo) kept his suspicions to himself, nem con if Macduff abstained.

(II iv 43) ... and gone to Scone ... Most actors feel obliged to say "skoon", because they have been told that that this is the approved pronunciation in Scotland. But it is not to be assumed that Shakespeare was aware of that. As with Glamis and Dunsinane, I suspect that he would have pronounced the name as he saw it spelt.

(II iv 46) Carried to Colmkill ... An antiquarian detail,* possibly interpolated. But I think it is well enough embedded in the script.

* "The bodie of Duncane was first conueied vnto Elgine, & there buried in kinglie wise; but afterwards it was remoued and conueied vnto Colmekill, and there laid in a sepulture amongst his predecessors" (Holinshed 1587:171). It is not clear what "afterwards" should be taken to mean, nor whose idea it was (Macbeth's? Malcolm's?) for the body to be relocated.

(II iv 53) Lest our old robes ... An awkward line, turned back to front for the sake of the rhyme at the end. The meaning is: "Let's hope that our new robes do not sit less

easily than our old ones." (D'Avenant turns the line the right way round, making it rhyme with "it": "New robes ne'er as the old so easy fit" (Chetwin 1674:25).)

Macduff exits after that; Ross should exit too, in the opposite direction, unless the old man is still present.

(II iv 55-6) God's benison do with you, ... If the old man has been allowed to remain till now, this is the moment for him to deliver his vacuous couplet. There is nothing apposite about it; it could be said at the end of almost any scene in almost any tragedy. I would have no hesitation in deleting it.

(II iv 57) Exeunt omnes. The word "omnes" occurs just twice -- here and (as usual) at the end of the play. I see this as a small hint that it was Shakespeare's idea, not just mine, that the play should consist of two halves.

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