Scene 15 (III ii)

(III ii 2) Enter ... If Lady Macbeth was excluded from scene 14, this is the first that we have seen of her since the coronation. Like her husband, she needs to be visibly older, visibly changed in both appearance and manner -- unhappy, nervous, and (when we see them together) more than a little frightened of the person that her husband has become. If the audience gasp when they see her, that is not a bad thing.

The menopause is not something that we would expect to find mentioned in a seventeenth-century tragedy. Nevertheless, it is a fact of life, and Shakespeare's audience would all be aware of it. If the lady has not had any children by now, there is not much chance of her having any children in the future. Childlessness is the unspoken theme which permeates part 2. Macbeth is struggling with suppressed rage, not just because Banquo has a son and he does not, but because his hopes of having one have come to nothing. And his wife is struggling with the consciousness of having failed to give him that son.

But none of this is going to make sense unless the audience is conscious of a gap in time between part 1 and part 2. If the intermission is suppressed, as it is in the Folio script, the relationship between Macbeth and his wife will seem to have fallen apart within a week or two, for no discernible reason. How can that have happened? How can it have happened so suddenly? The actors have nothing to work with: it is not their fault if the audience feels perplexed.

(III ii 3) Is Banquo ... A question which goes to show that she was not present during the conversation between Macbeth and Banquo in the previous scene.

(III ii 5) Say to the king ... A line which tells us at once that a gulf has opened up between her and her husband. They are living separate lives. When she wishes to speak to him, she has to make an appointment. When Macbeth appears, we see how their relationship has changed. The intimacy has gone. The trust which existed before exists no longer.

(III ii 8-11) Nought's had, ... In the previous scene we heard Macbeth say "To be thus is nothing" (III i 59); in these few lines his wife expresses the same sort of disenchantment.

(III ii 12) Enter ... Macbeth has had time to change into

something more comfortable. At least he has taken off his crown.

(III ii 18) We have scorched the snake, ... Theobald (1726:185) changed F1's "scorch'd" to "scotch'd", and was highly pleased with himself for doing so. The emendation was accepted by Pope (1728:225) and others, but more recent editors -- from Adams (1931:56) onwards -- have turned against it, and rightly so, I think. The word "to scotch" does (or did) exist, but it does not mean what Theobald wanted it to mean. It means (or meant) to cut notches into something, not to chop it into bits.

(III ii 21-3) But let the frame ... Something has gone badly wrong with these lines, which neither scan nor make sense. But there is nothing to be done about it, as far as I can see. The actor will have to bluff his way through, as generations of actors have done before him.

(III ii 23) Ere we will ... If this is to mean anything, it has to be taken to mean "Rather than that we should have to". The dreams are already happening every night: Macbeth is wishing for them to stop, not for them not to start. But the audience can be trusted to get the point: Macbeth is tormented by suspicions while he is awake and by bad dreams when he is asleep. Just as he warned himself in scene 7 (I vii 11-16), he is in constant fear of being done by as he did.

(III ii 25) Better be with the dead ... The first clear hint that Macbeth's reign has become a bloodbath. Many people have been put to death -- yet Macbeth still has nightmares every night. More nightmares mean more deaths; more deaths mean more nightmares. (In the botched version of the play that we find in F1, Macbeth has not had time to kill anyone except Duncan. Possibly that is the reason why F2 made a change in this line: "Whom we to gain our place, ...".)

(III ii 55) Be innocent ... This is cruel, and "dearest chuck" just makes it crueller. He dangles the bait in front of her, and then he whisks it away. Since we met them first, they have drifted a long way apart. He does not consult with her or ask her advice; he does not even tell her what he is planning to do. When she asks to be taken into his confidence, he refuses. Worse, he has been deceiving her, as much as everyone else. He has asked her to make a display of her affection for Banquo (III ii 38-9) when he knows that (if all goes to plan) she will not have the chance to do so. (The deception works. That is why she

fails to understand what "deed of dreadful note" (III ii 53) is being planned.)

(III ii 61) ... the rooky wood ... Steevens (1773:468) started the idea (perhaps as one of his jokes) that "the rooky wood" might possibly mean "the wood that abounds with rooks". Mitford (1844:129) took up the suggestion; Dyce (1857 5:459) concurred; and the gloss "filled with rooks" has often been quoted approvingly since then. (For example, Muir (1951:89) has "black and filled with rooks", where "black" is his own contribution. Rooks are black, are they not?) This seems surprising to me. No one would suppose that a pond with a lot of ducks on it could be called a "ducky" pond (no one, that is, upwards of three years old); so how could anyone suppose that a wood with a lot of rooks in it could be called a "rooky" wood? There was a country word "rooky", meaning "foggy, misty", which certainly had some currency.* Admittedly there is no proof that it was part of Shakespeare's vocabulary; but, if it was, the picture that he had in mind was of a solitary crow flying homeward in the twilight to roost in a fog-shrouded wood. Is that not apt enough?

* It is listed as a North Country word by Ray (1691:59), as an East Anglian word by Forby (1830 2:280).

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