Scene 20 (IV i)

Later that day, in the witches' cave.

This scene has a complex history written on its face. On three different occasions, it was interpolated with some spectacular addition: a song (IV i 41-7), a dumb show (IV i 119-46), a dance (IV i 147-55). This is the order of their appearance; it is also the order in which they were added to the script. Hecate, who is responsible for the song, knew nothing about the dumb show when we met her in scene 18 and knows nothing about it now: so the song is earlier than the dumb show. The dance exists because Macbeth needs to be cheered up, and he did not need to be cheered up till after he had seen the dumb show: so the dance is later than the dumb show. None of these additions is necessary; none of them has anything to recommend it; the scene is a better scene without them.

(IV i 2) Enter ... The witches enter. They are waiting for a signal from one of their familiars before they begin their incantations.

(IV i 6-7) Round about ... Possibly spoken by all three witches in chorus. That was Charles Kean's thinking (1853:64); I am inclined to agree.

(IV i 28-31) Liver ... Third Witch does rather overdo it. Possibly these two couplets might be omitted. (There may be some Jewish people in the audience; there may be some Turks or Tartars; it is is not necessary for their feelings to be hurt.)

(IV i 41-7) Enter ... First interpolation: Hecate returns, as she told the witches she would (III v 18-19). (She seems to have forgotten the "vaporous drop" that she was so excited about before.) Again the only reason for her presence is to introduce a song. She is accompanied by "the other three witches" -- that is, the witches who sang their first song at the end of scene 18 and are about to sing their second song now. Then they were up in the air, calling for Hecate to join them; this time they are on the ground, adding some extra ingredients to the cauldron.

This second song, "Black spirits, etc.", like the first one, had lyrics by Thomas Middleton and music by Robert Johnson. Again, the manuscript used by the printers gave only the opening words, enough to tell the actors that they should step aside. As before, however, the same song (with new

music) was incorporated into Davenant's Macbeth, and the lyrics are given in full in the printed version of that play (Chetwin 1674:45).

Though Folio does not mark an exit for them, it is clear that Hecate and the singing witches are supposed to go off (perhaps flying) as soon as their song is finished (Muir 1951:111, cf Dyce 1857:423). They have done what they came for; they have nothing more to do.

(Davenant wanted Hecate to stay: in his play the apparitions are dispensed with, and it is Hecate who delivers their messages to Macbeth (Chetwin 1674:46). Clark and Wright (1865:484) were also inclined to think that Hecate should remain on the stage; but they were not entitled to make that suggestion unless they could explain why Macbeth does not see her, and they did not try to do that.)

(IV i 70) Say if th'hadst ... The witches know without being told what Macbeth is anxious about, and they are, on their own terms, willing to offer him some comfort. Unexpectedly, they give him a choice: he can get his answers from them, or, if he prefers, he can get his answers from some creatures they call their masters. Either way, presumably, the answers would be the same; but Macbeth, choosing (reasonably enough) to cut out the intermediaries, tells them to summon up their masters.

(IV i 77) Come, high or low, ... The witches' masters, as I understand it, are demons of some sort, possessing the ability to take on any form they choose; and on this occasion they take on the forms which they consider most suitable.* On Shakespeare's stage, I suppose, they were represented by life-size puppets thrust up through the cauldron from beneath the stage, amid as much noise and smoke as would make them seem properly portentous.

* "The armed head, represents symbolically Macbeth's head cut off and brought to Malcolm by Macduff. The bloody child, is Macduff untimely ripp'd from his mother's womb. The child with a crown on his head, and a bough in his hand, is the royal Malcolme; who ordered his soldiers to hew them down a bough, and bear it before them to Dunsinane" (Upton 1746:53). Perhaps that is what the demons have in mind. For a non-demon, however, that interpretation only becomes possible with the advantage of hindsight. Here and now, Macbeth has no way of knowing what the apparitions mean. Besides, this detached head is not the same head that turns up later in scene 33. That head is Macbeth's. If this were the same, Macbeth would be sure to recognize himself.

Like First Witch in scene 3, the first apparition says

something which is intended to establish their credibility. The second apparition seems to promise Macbeth invulnerability. The third seems to promise him invincibility. Both promises are conditional -- but Macbeth is far too excited to pay attention to the small print.

(IV i 93) Had I three ears, ... A difficult line for the actor: the audience must not be allowed to start laughing.

(IV i 111) Great Birnam wood ... Folio spells the name "Byrnam", but the "m" is probably a misprint: everywhere else the last consonant is an "n". Even then, the spelling is unstable: "Byrnane" four times, "Byrnan" twice, "Birnane" twice, "Birnan" once. In Holinshed the name is "Bernane" once (174b), "Birnane" three times (175b-6a). F4 is the earliest edition which spells the name consistently, and the spelling there is "Birnam". Editors have accepted that, with just one exception that I can think of: Hunter (1967) was happier with "Birnan".

(IV i 111) ... to high Dunsinane hill ... To be scanned as ti tum tum ti ti tum. It is not necessary to pronounce "Dunsinane" with the stress on the second syllable.

(IV i 115-19) Sweet bodements -- ... Something has gone badly wrong here. Macbeth has been made to speak in clumsy rhymed couplets; worse, he has been made to refer to himself as if he was somebody else. (I take it that he ought to speak of "our high-placed Macduff", the name with which he has been preoccupied throughout this scene. But "Macduff" would not rhyme.) For purposes of performance, the simplest solution would be to omit these lines, jumping forward from "earth-bound root?" to "What, is this so?" (IV i 146), and from there to "Where are they?" (IV i 156). That is what I have done in my script 2.

(IV i 119-46) Yet my heart ... Second interpolation: this is the show of kings. I have written up my thoughts about that in a separate file.* Macbeth has forgotten all about it by the end of this scene. It is never alluded to again.

* http://durobrivis.net/macbeth/scripts/show-of-kings.pdf

(IV i 147-55) Ay, sir, ... Third interpolation: these lines are here to introduce a dance, just as Hecate's lines (IV i 41-7) were there to introduce a song. Like those, these lines are rhymed eight-syllable couplets of a very feeble kind. Quite possibly they were written by the same jobbing poet; but they belong to a distinctly later phase in the

history of the script.

This dance was carried forward into Davenant's play, with new music provided for it by Matthew Locke. To repeat (with some abbreviation) what I have said elsewhere,* "'A Jig called Macbeth' was included in a collection of pieces for the cithren published by Playford in 1666 (Wing P2491). The same tune was reprinted several times, for different instruments, and its name is given either as 'Mackbeth' (G1874-5, P2497) or as 'The Dance in the Play of Macbeth' (P2444-5). In one of these books -- first published while Locke was still alive -- the initials 'M.L.' are attached to the end of this piece (G1874-5). So it does seem tolerably certain, both that this dance-tune was composed by Locke, and that it was intended for a production of Macbeth."

* http://durobrivis.net/macbeth/music/music-for-macbeth.pdf

Later, it was carried forward again, into Garrick's version of Macbeth. At Drury Lane, from 1750 onwards (Stone 1762 1::220), this dance -- called "A dance of Furies" (Bell 1773:50) -- was frequently advertised as a special attraction. It was rejigged by Giuseppe Grimaldi for a performance on 13 Apr 1763 (Stone 1962 2:988).* The dance was still being performed in 1776-7 (Hogan 1968 1:39), but seems to have been dropped after that. (It is absent from Kemble's script (1794:49).)

* Harding (1971:78) cites a subsequent performance on 20 Dec 1765 (Stone 1962 2:1144), misprinting the year as "1756".

(IV i 155) ... and vanish. Having said what they wanted to say, the witches disappear, just as they did in scene 3. (Of course they cannot be bullied into saying anything more.)

(IV i 159) Enter ... The character who enters is called Lenox in Folio, but that cannot be right. It is unthinkable that Macbeth would let himself be accompanied by one of the lords. The character is just a servant. (A gentleman has to have a servant to hold his horse, and what is a king if not a gentleman?) It is possible, of course, that in some production this character was played by the same actor who played Lenox in other scenes. As was the case with the character called "Fleance" in scene 8, that is conceivable -- but quite irrelevant.

(IV i 165) Infected be the air ... Back in scene 3, for half a minute, Macbeth and Banquo started laughing about the

witches (I iii 93-6). And then some news arrived which made them stop laughing. Similarly here. For half a minute, Macbeth tries to tell himself that the witches cannot be trusted. But then some news arrives which makes him trust them absolutely. He sees the trap, knows that it is a trap, but cannot stop himself from diving into it regardless. If Macbeth were not known to us as a murderer, this is the moment when we might feel sorry for him.

At this moment, Macbeth becomes a changed man. When he was contriving Banquo's murder, we saw him take elaborate precautions to prevent suspicion from falling on himself. (He defeated his own purpose by overacting in scene 14 and freaking out in scene 17 -- but that does not alter his intention.) This time he takes no precautions at all. He drops the disguise. Deluded by the witches, he thinks he can commit the most outrageous atrocities without any fear of the consequences. He makes no attempt to hide his culpability. On the contrary, he wants everyone to know what he is capable of doing to them should they ever dare to oppose him.

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