Scene 27 (V v)

A little later, inside Dunsinane castle.

(V v 2-3) Enter ... Folio adds "with drum and colours", but that is obviously wrong. Macbeth is not on the march. On the contrary, he has had to withdraw into his castle; and there he intends to sit tight and let himself be besieged. That is what Seyward told us in the previous scene (V iv 15-17); and Macbeth now tells us the same thing. He is not at all happy about it -- but the defection of all the Scottish lords has left him no other choice.

(V v 12) It is the cry of women, ... Evidently Macbeth should make some gesture sending Seyton to investigate; and he reappears a few lines later to report what he has found out. The first critical edition which inserted the necessary directions -- "Exit" after line 12, "Re-enter Seyton" in the middle of line 19 -- was Dyce's (1857:444); but, as Dyce acknowledged, the directions had long been present in acting editions of the play (as far back as Lee's (1753:80)), and had already been inserted by Collier in his one-volume edition (1853:714-15).

(V v 20) The queen, my lord, ... After breaking the news, Seyton should exit, waved away by Macbeth. At least from line 23 onwards, the following speech is a soliloquy.

(V v 32) Enter ... Not a "messenger", as Folio calls him. This is one of Macbeth's soldiers. He has, as he tells us, been standing watch on a nearby hill, looking out for the English army: now he comes to report what he has seen. He hurries onto the stage -- but then he hesitates, seeming to be lost for words.

(V v 40) The wood began to move. That is, he has seen what the audience saw at the end of the previous scene.

(V v 41) Liar and slave! Rowe (1709:2360) thought that Macbeth should get violent at this point -- not just shout at the man but strike him. (Rowe's direction was retained by subsequent editors (even by Capell (1768:77)) till Boswell (1821:264), but was usually dropped after that.) The actors get to decide.

(V v 47) If thy speech be sooth, ... Macbeth is talking to himself again. (The soldier should be waved away before this.) He finally grasps the fact that he cannot rely on the third apparition's promise -- the promise (on one

condition) of invincibility (IV i 110-12).

(V v 52) ... and now a wood ... I would be inclined to read "the wood", rather than "a wood". For a wood to uproot itself and start marching across the landscape is surprising, to be sure, but not necessarily alarming. Any number of woods may do that if they must. The Apparition's promise was specific: there is only one wood that Macbeth needs to worry about. Only one wood is a threat to him. "And now the wood" -- that wood, the wood of Birnam -- "comes toward Dunsinane."

(V v 53) Arm, arm and out! And so, all of a sudden, Macbeth changes his mind and decides to make a fight of it. In a word, he goes berserk. Instead of sitting tight inside his castle, he will sally out and attack. He has to be aware that the odds are all against him. But he has not lost his courage. If he takes the enemy by surprise, he may be able to inflict so much damage that they are forced to retreat. Perhaps. (And perhaps he remembers that glorious day when he fought two battles, one after the other, and won them both. The odds were against him then too.)

(V v 54-7) If this ... Two rhyming couplets which (in my opinion) should certainly be deleted.

In subsequent scenes, Macbeth is roaming around the battlefield. The swordfights that are going to happen will be happening out in the open, not inside the castle.

C.F. Dec 2025, revised May 2026