

Scene 23 (V i)

Some time later, outside Lady Macbeth's bedroom in Dunsinane Castle

This may be the most famous scene that Shakespeare ever wrote. Praise it as much as you like, in any way you like, and I will not disagree with you. Nevertheless, I am going to say that this scene is not properly integrated with the rest of the action. It does not quite fit. For three convergent reasons, it seems to me to be an interpolation -- not part of the play as originally conceived.

First, this is the only scene in the play which is written in prose throughout (except for the last ten lines). Admittedly all three characters come out with lines of verse now and then. The doctor: "You may to me, and 'tis most meet you should." The gentlewoman: "She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of that." Lady Macbeth: "Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeard?" But that is all accidental. These are lines of prose which just happen to have the rhythm of lines of verse. No other scene has a smaller share of verse than this one.

Second, this scene is in contradiction with scene 25. In that latter scene, when Macbeth asks the doctor "How does your patient?" (V iii 45), he is told that his wife is "troubled with thick-coming fancies" which prevent her from getting to sleep; and if she cannot get to sleep, it is plain to see that she has no opportunity to walk in her sleep.

Third, the present scene, like scene 21, interrupts what ought to be a continuous flow of action. Scene 20 ("Macduff is fled to England") ought to be followed immediately by scene 22; and scene 22 ("Our power is ready") ought to be followed immediately by scene 24 ("The English power is near"). It is arguable that neither scene 21 (solo for Lady Macduff) nor scene 23 (solo for Lady Macbeth) should be allowed to obstruct that flow.*

* These two scenes have something else in common. The lines given to Lady Macbeth seem to be telling us that the murder of Macduff's wife and children is an unsolved crime, on a par with the murders of Duncan and Banquo; and we get the same impression from the ending of scene 21. But that is contradicted by what we are told in scenes 20 and 24.

I am hopeful that the actors may heed my advice and drop scene 21. I have no hope of them dropping scene 23. Lady Macbeth will mutiny if she is not allowed to do her

impersonation of Sarah Siddons. The audience will riot if they do not get to hear her say "Out, damned spot!" Besides, I accept that there is a good argument for retaining the scene. It does not seem right for a character who was so important in the first half of the play to be allowed to fade away after the banquet. She ought to be allowed some swansong. That, I suppose, is the reason why Shakespeare wrote the scene, and the reason also why it should be kept. But I do have a suggestion to make. It seems to me that the play would work better if the present scene were put before scene 22, not after it. With that arrangement, the momentum built up towards the end of scene 22 would be carried forward into scene 24, not dissipated by scene 23.

(V i 2-3) *Enter ...* Two characters enter. One is a doctor: we have not seen him before, but we can tell what he is from his costume. (He will appear again in scene 25.) The other is a gentlewoman attending on the queen: perhaps we have seen her before (at the banquet, for instance), but this is the only scene in which she gets to speak.

(V i 4) *I have two nights watched ...* Here and elsewhere, "to watch" means "to stay awake". Similarly below, "do the effects of watching" means to "act as if one is awake".

(V i 10) *... write upon it, ...* Presumably only in mime, not with a real pen and ink. What the lady might think she was writing, to or for whom she might be writing it, remains mysterious. She does not perform this routine on this occasion.

(V i 27) *Ay, but their senses are shut.* Folio has "sense". Dyce (following Walker) took this to be "senses" pronounced as one syllable, "sens's" (1857:438, cf Walker ed Lettsom 1854:248), in the same way that "horses" may be pronounced no differently from "horse" (II iv 18).

(V i 30) *It is an accustomed action ...* On this occasion, instead of writing an imaginary letter, the lady starts washing her hands with imaginary water. And this is another performance which the gentlewoman has witnessed several times.

If the lady is to rub her hands together, she must have put the lighted taper somewhere -- on a table, presumably, or some other piece of furniture. But she should not forget it. She needs to pick it up again (without actually seeing it) and take it with her when she exits.

(V i 34) I will set down ... The doctor starts making notes -- "taking out his Tables" was Capell's direction here (1768:70). I think this sentence is usually omitted in performance, but do not see why it should be. Without the doctor's notebook, we would have no record of Lady Macbeth's self-incrimination. (How else could we be sure that she and her husband were guilty of anything? Surely we are not just going to take Malcolm's word for it?)

(V i 36) One -- two -- ... She seems to be listening to a striking clock (of which there were, needless to say, none to be found in eleventh-century Scotland). But it was not the sound of a bell struck mechanically by a clock which gave the cue for the murder. It was a little bell rung by her (II i 45, 75-6).

(V i 43) The thane of Fife ... Is it right for her to say this? Is it not better if she is thinking about Duncan alone? It is Duncan's blood that she has on her hands, not Lady Macduff's (nor Banquo's, nor anyone else's).

(V i 48) You have known ... The doctor is speaking to Lady Macbeth, as is clear from the gentlewoman's echo of this remark. He means: "You have had experiences which you ought not to have had." He is not speaking to the gentlewoman ("You have heard things which you had better not have heard"), as the actors seem sometimes to think.

(V i 70) Will she ... The doctor needs to be careful with this line -- or else he will be laughed at. He is asking: "When she says "To bed", does she mean it?"

(V i 72) Foul whisperings ... Now the doctor switches to verse. Is there some reason for that?

(V i 79) My mind she has mated ... A dud line, definitely for the chop.

(V i 81) Good night, good doctor. The gentlewoman also seems to switch to verse, completing the doctor's last line.