

Scene 33 (V vii 85-136)

A heading for a new scene was -- rightly -- inserted at this point by Pope (1723:597), deleted by Capell (1768:81), reinstated by Wilson (1947:84).

A little later, inside the castle.

(V vii 85) *Retreat and flourish.* Two new trumpet-calls, which the audience is expected to understand. From one side a call which means: "Disengage and flee!" Then, from the other side, a call which means: "We've won!"

(V vii 85) *Enter ...* Folio's "drum and colours" are out of place: nobody is on the march.

(V vii 86) *... Ross, ...* For completeness, four more names should be added after this -- Lennox, Angus, Caithness, Menteith (Malone 1790:434). But none of them gets to speak.

(V vii 91) *Your son, my lord, ...* Malcolm and the others have to talk for a while before Macduff can enter; so they have to be given something to discuss. That is the only reason why we are told about Seyward's son: we are not required to pay attention.

(V vii 94) *In the unshrinking station ...* If Young Seyward was allowed to appear in scene 29, this line had better be omitted.

(V vii 111) *Enter ...* Macduff arrives, "with Macbeth's head". Despite the disapproval of some squeamish critics, there is no doubt what Shakespeare intended here. He had Holinshed's word for it that Macduff hunted Macbeth down and killed him, and that "then cutting his head from his shoulders, he set it vpon a pole, and brought it vnto Malcolme" (1587:176). It is a question, however, what Macduff is supposed to do with the head, after bringing it on.

(V vii 114) *The usurper's cursed head.* This is the only place where the word "usurper" occurs, and I have my suspicions about it. If I were going to allow myself one gratuitous change, this would be it: I would change "usurper's" to "tyrant's" -- which scans just as well, and is, I think, more consonant with what Macduff says next.

(V vii 122-4) *My thanes and kinsmen, ...* A strangely incongruous sentence, which I would be strongly inclined to regard as an interpolation. ("His Majesty was surprised, Mr

Shakespeare, that you did not mention the fact ...".) Holinshed does indeed have some comments to this effect: "Manie of them that before were thanes, were at this time made earles, as Fife, Menteth, Atholl, Leuenox, Murrey, Cathnes, Rosse, and Angus. These were the first earles that haue beene heard of amongst the Scottishmen (as their histories doo make mention)" (1587:176). But of course it was not being suggested that Malcolm distributed earldoms indiscriminately -- in the immediate aftermath of the battle, to everyone within earshot, before he had even been crowned.

(V vii 136) Flourish. Exeunt omnes. And so the play comes to an end.

This final scene was fated to undergo some rough treatment in performance. In Davenant's version (Chetwin 1674:65-6) -- where Macduff enters with Macbeth's sword, not with Macbeth's chopped-off head -- only a few lines survive unchanged; but the scene, even so, is similar in size and shape to Shakespeare's scene. In Garrick's version (Bell 1773:69-71), apart from the omission of a few of Shakespeare's lines and the interpolation of some of Davenant's ("yet I present you with his sword"), the scene did largely regain its original form.

Kemble dealt with it differently. In his version (1794:64), scenes 32 and 33 are merged. Macbeth utters the dying speech written for him by Garrick; Macduff says nothing. But then, instead of exiting, he remains on the stage, with Macbeth's dead body at his feet, waiting for Malcolm and the others to arrive. (If they had arrived a minute earlier -- why did they not? -- they would have seen Macbeth get killed.) Macduff hails Malcolm as king; the others cheer; Malcolm delivers a shortened version of the final speech; and that is the end. Roughly speaking, Kemble retained one third of scene 33, tacking it on to the end of scene 32.

Charles Kean went further -- much further -- in the same direction. In his version (1853:89), the play is brought abruptly to an end like this:

Yet I will try the last: lay on, Macduff;
And damn'd be he that first cries, "Hold, enough."
[Alarms -- Shouts -- Fight -- Macbeth is Slain.

Enter Malcolm, Old Siward, Rosse, Lenox, Angus,
Cathness, Menteth, and Soldiers, R. Malcolm is
raised on a shield in C. Shouts. Flourish.

And Irving (1888:72) was equally brutal.

The problem is that scene 33 does not provide an appropriate ending for the play. It is the ending for a history, not for a tragedy. A wicked king is overthrown and killed; a new king is installed in his place. There is nothing tragic about that. Malcolm, so to speak, believes that the play is a history, and that he is the hero of it. But of course he is mistaken. We know better. The play is a tragedy, Macbeth is the hero, and Malcolm is just one of the instruments made use of by the powers of darkness to bring about the destruction of their victim.

And then there is the question of the witches. Ought they not to reappear? As far as we know, Macbeth's decapitated body is still somewhere to be found; so is the detached head. If the thumb of a drowned pilot is worth having (I iii 31), the witches can surely find use for bits and pieces of a king -- an anointed monarch, horribly done to death. At the least, I think, they should be given a chance to gloat. I have suggested that scene 1 might be repeated here, in a shortened form -- ending with "There to meet with ----" -- and at that point the play would end with evil cackling from the witches, accompanied by diabolical noises from their various familiars. Might that not be worth trying?

C.F. Nov 2025