

Macbeth in Performance

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At first sight, there is no apparent connection between Alan Ayckbourn, one of Britain's most popular contemporary dramatists, and Shakespeare. However, the bond of popularity may help account for the fact that Ayckbourn's work experience illuminates Shakespeare's practice. Here is Ayckbourn writing about the composition of his trilogy, *The Norman Conquests*:

I was aware that it would be optimistic to expect an audience . . . to give up three nights of their precious holiday to come to our one theatre . . . The plays would therefore have to be able to stand independently . . . Second . . . it should be possible to see them in any order. Third, since we could only afford six actors, they should have that number of characters. Fourth, ideally they should have only two stage entrances since that's the way our temporary Library Theatre set-up is arranged (but then this is common to all my plays). There were other minor pre-conditions peculiar to this venture. The actor I had in mind to play Norman couldn't join us for the first few days of the season—which necessitated him making a late first entrance in one of the plays (*Table Manners*) to facilitate rehearsals. If this all makes me sound like a writer who performs to order, I suppose it's true. I thrive when working under a series of pre-conditions, preferably when they are pre-conditions over which I have total control.¹

Ayckbourn manages the small theatre-in-the-round in the resort town of Scarborough where he premieres his work, and consequently has his potential audience and financial stringencies in mind as he creates. Presumably, Shakespeare, as a "sharer" in the profits of the King's Men, had a similar businessman's interest in economic and practical considerations. We know that Shakespeare usually wrote with a set number of actors in mind, and we suspect he also worked with only two entrances. Further, it has been frequently assumed that he wrote certain parts for particular actors. Indeed, it has become the conventional wisdom that Burbage's talents made possible the creation of the great tragic roles. It may be objected that such connections are merely casual and only suggest that the problems encountered by the working dramatist have changed little in three hundred years, but this is precisely the point. Ayckbourn's comments are a reminder that the exacting theatrical medium in which playwrights work often shapes their creation. The picture of Shakespeare as a dramatist who could work to order and who probably worked best when he had total control of the pre-conditions is an attractive one, and suggests an approach to the plays that considers the effect of those pre-conditions on the text. Such an approach is hardly original. M. C. Bradbrook was advocating it in the 1930s, and earlier, at the turn of the century, it was helping shape the work of William Poel.² However, while the merits of the approach may be granted, there is still argument about the nature of the pre-conditions. The following speculations about the working and possible effects of two scenes in *Macbeth* rest on three assumptions, based on the available evidence.

- 1 Preface to *The Norman Conquests* (London 1975: Penguin edn 1977) pp. 10–11.
- 2 M. C. Bradbrook, *Elizabethan Stage Conditions: A Study of their Place in the Interpretation of Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge 1932). For a discussion of this approach to the plays see "The New Shakespeare: Text and Performance", *Sydney Studies in English V* (1979–80) pp. 111–15.

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The first is that, in the "public" theatres, plays were performed on a large thrust stage in the open air. The second assumption is rather more contentious: that this stage had only two rear entrances.³ The third is that, unlike other known forms of theatrical set-up in which seats rake upwards and backwards from the front, the sitting audiences were housed in three balconies that rose *vertically*⁴ from the ground surrounding the stage.

We still have judgement here

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well,
It were done quickly: if th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease, success: that but this blow
Might be the be all, and the end all. Here,
But here, upon this bank and school of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases,
We still have judgement here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which being taught, return
To plague th' inventor, this even-handed justice
Commends th' ingreience of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips. He's here in double trust;
First, as I am his kinsman, and his subject,
Strong both against the deed: then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek; hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like Angels, trumpet-tongu'd against
The deep damnation of his taking off:
And pity, like a naked new-born-babe,
Striding the blast, or Heaven's Cherubin, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which ore-leaps itself,
And falls on the other. (475-502)⁵

Act One, scene seven begins with this, Macbeth's longest speech so far. It is the first time he has taken the stage alone and the first time the audience has heard him respond to the idea of Duncan's murder. Before this point, an actor might have conveyed a great deal. At Laurence Olivier's first silent sighting of the witches (in I.iii) Kenneth Tynan thought he gave the impression of "having already killed Duncan time and time again in his mind".⁶ Later, in the same scene, Macbeth's response to the witches'

3 For a complete and very readable review of all the evidence about the nature of the stage, see Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* (Cambridge 1970) pp. 82-111.

4 Elizabethan building techniques meant that each gallery actually overhung the one below by about ten inches. Although the idea of reconstructing the Globe has been discussed almost continuously since it was first proposed by Ludwig Tieck in the 1830s, it remains an idea only. Several reconstructions of the stage have been built in America, but all are faced by conventional seating. The only reconstruction, of which we know, that retains the vertical galleries is the New Fortune on the campus of the University of Western Australia in Perth. Interestingly, the Barbican Theatre, the new London home of the Royal Shakespeare Company, uses an exaggerated version of overhanging galleries to ensure that no spectator is more than sixty feet from the stage.

5 The line numbering is that of Charlton Hinman from *The Norton Facsimile: The First Folio of Shakespeare* (London 1968). All other references are to the New Arden edition, ed. Kenneth Muir (London 1951; repr. 1967).

6 Tynan was reviewing the Royal Shakespeare Company production (Stratford 1955). Quoted by Dennis Bartholomeusz in *Macbeth and The Players* (Cambridge 1969), p. 255.

prophecy may reveal much, as may his visual and then verbal response to the naming of Malcolm as Duncan's heir (in I.iv). Even more important is the actor's response in the first scene with Lady Macbeth (I.v). Macbeth's answer, "Tomorrow, as he purposes", to her question about Duncan's departure was used by Edmund Kean and Donald Wolfitt to suggest a man who already had murder in mind. More often, the line may be used to imply the opposite, but, as Bradley noted,⁷ when Lady Macbeth suggests the murder her husband's reply is not outright rejection, but postponement: "We will speak further". The audience awaits this further speech as Macbeth enters alone.

As Marvin Rosenberg points out, the mere action of coming on to the stage may reveal much:

. . . sometimes we see him [Macbeth] backing away from the place he is leaving, perhaps bowing, perhaps bearing on his face a courtly smile wiped off as he turns, sometimes entering deep in thought, sometimes in a rush as if fleeing thought.⁸

And then he speaks.

The lines present several difficulties and those arising from the "bank and school" and "naked babe" metaphors are well known. For the actor, the difficulty begins with the opening line. The above quotation retains the punctuation of the First Folio which is the only original source for the play. However, most editors regularize the punctuation throughout the speech and, in the process, dispose of the awkward comma at the end of line one. Without it, Macbeth may appear to say: "If the murder is to be done, when I do it I had better do it quickly", but in a speech much concerned with time the emphasis falls on the multiple meanings of "done". Rosenberg's gloss is simple and precise: "If it were done (ended) when 'tis done (performed) then 'twere well it were done (got over with) quickly".⁹ This still avoids the intrusive comma after "well" which has been read by at least three great actors, Kemble, Macready and Irving, as if it had the force of a full stop. The Arden Editor calls this "ingenuity misplaced",¹⁰ but the resulting regularization, which then drops the colon after "quickly", makes a good deal of sense:

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well.
It were done quickly if th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence . . .

This may seem no more than a quibble over punctuation, but it is of fundamental importance to the actor playing Macbeth. The speech and the scene that follows are obviously crucial, to the characterization of Macbeth, the nature of the relationship between the Macbeths and the meaning and effect of the play as a whole. The speech is capable of a wide variety of interpretations. Kemble was "a cool logician" while Olivier appeared "petulant".¹¹ When Bradley suggested "This bold ambitious man of action, has, within certain limits, the imagination of a poet . . . And through it, especially, come to him the intimations of conscience and honour . . . His

7 *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London 1904; repr. 1969), p. 299.

8 *The Masks of Macbeth* (Berkeley 1978), p. 252.

9 Rosenberg, p. 253.

10 Note to I.vii.1-2, p. 37.

11 An eye witness used the description of Kemble, quoted by Bartholomeusz, p. 127. Richard David saw Olivier thus in "The Tragic Curve", *Shakespeare Survey* 9 (Cambridge 1956), p. 128.

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imagination is thus the best of him . . . and if he had obeyed it he would have been safe",¹² he clearly had this speech in mind. On the other hand, D. J. Enright's parody concept of the "absolutely monstrous, henpecked weakling"¹³ has its genesis here as well. What might have happened in Shakespeare's theatre?

In an attempt to frame an answer, a group of Sydney teachers¹⁴ spent a weekend working on this scene and produced, without recourse to theatre history, a number of possible interpretations. Among them was an enormously introspective Macbeth, musing like Hamlet on the possibility of action, and attempting to reason himself out of the murder. Another, much influenced by the "method" school of acting, played the speech for the intensity of emotion. This Macbeth was engaged in an active struggle between his ambitious desires and his sense of righteousness (he "wouldst not play false, / And yet wouldst wrongly win"). The speech involved radical shifts of emotion culminating in a scream of unbearable pain on "drown the wind" as this Macbeth covered his own eyes and head with his arms to ward off the imagined "horrid deed". The early stages of this workshop exercise were concerned with translating close textual analysis into playable form, then, in an attempt to approximate the "pre-conditions" of which we spoke earlier, the group moved outside into a large courtyard surrounded on three sides by three vertical galleries. The remainder of the group went up to the first gallery level and the introspective Macbeth played the speech. Nothing happened. The actor's voice was carried away by the wind. Gestures which had appeared pointed enough in the intimacy of the classroom couldn't be seen and, most important of all, the audience found they were looking down on the actor's head and couldn't catch the movements of his face. Obviously, much of this could be put down to problems of technique: the group were teachers not actors. The "method" version followed and even with its intensity of emotion appeared scaled-down in this outdoor setting. Yet both of these versions would have been endorsed by the only writers who have undertaken book-length studies of the play in performance. According to Marvin Rosenberg, in this speech Macbeth's "primary activity is inward . . . isolated from the social world" he is "free to plunge into introspection".¹⁵ And in a chapter stressing "the intimate contact between actors and audience" at the Globe, Dennis Bartholomeusz says: "Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are not so much heard as overheard".¹⁶ Both have been so conditioned by modern traditions of delivery that they have neglected, as had the teachers, the possibility that in the speech Macbeth talks not to himself, but to *his audience*.

Of Macbeth's lines: "We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases, / We still have judgement here . . ." Rosenberg says:

. . . perhaps a hint of the royal *we*, as he has leaped ahead of his fantasy to the deed accomplished. The *we* may include Lady Macbeth: *we* is one way of escaping, for a while, the clamorous *I*. *We* also manifests the philosophic

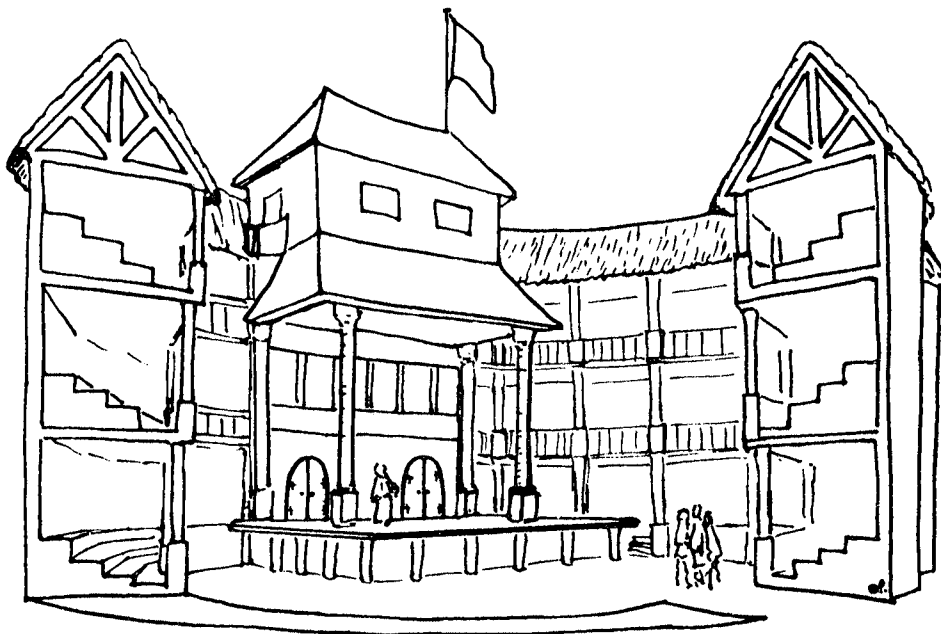
12 *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 295.

13 *Shakespeare and the Students* (London 1970), p. 122.

14 The group included both High School and tertiary teachers of literature and drama. The workshop was organized and conducted by the writers together with Roslyn Arnold and Paul Richardson both of whom lecture in Education at the University of Sydney. All who took part in the workshop contributed to whatever insights are embodied in this article.

15 Rosenberg, p. 253.

16 Bartholomeusz, p. 12.



A reconstruction of an Elizabethan public playhouse (based on a sketch by C. Walter Hodges in *The Globe Restored* (London 1968), p. 150) showing the vertical galleries and the large thrust stage with its two entrances.

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strain in the Macbeth design: his frequent extension of his thoughts from his personal involvement to a world view.¹⁷

In its comprehensiveness, this manages to miss the primary dramatic point: that *we* includes the audience in, what Rosenberg terms, "the Macbeth design". In a scene which offers a definition of "man" in terms of what he "dares", the lines assert a common bond (later in the play deliberately broken) between Macbeth and his auditors, and thus with all humanity. When one of the teachers attempted to play directly to the audience the effect, on these lines particularly, was remarkable. They created an uneasy sense of inclusion. Macbeth's dilemma was no longer distant and singular (and how well the architecture of conventional proscenium arch theatres lends itself to the enhancing of such distance and singularity), but one *shared by and with* the audience. Easy judgment of this man became out of the question and yet precisely what an audience addressed in this way is called upon to do is judge. The basis of the speech in dramatic and linguistic terms is the law. "Surcease" is a legal term for a stay of proceedings; "bank" has been taken to suggest the judicial bench and "cases" coming before "have judgement" clearly takes on a legal tinge. Central to the speech is "even-handed justice" which in a hideous parody of communion offers retribution and "Commends th' ingredience of our poisoned chalice / To our own lips". The connection between the justice of this world and that of the "world to come" is picked up again when Duncan's virtues "Will *plead* like angels, trumpet-tongued, against / The deep damnation of his taking-off" which to one editor even "suggests the Last Judgement".¹⁸

It is not just the language which suggests a law court; in direct delivery the entire speech takes on legal associations. Macbeth appears as a man presenting a case: acting as both judge and advocate.¹⁹ This helps to explain the rhetorical nature of the speech, the careful weighing of the evidence, and the creation of that distance between the speaker and himself as his own subject as Macbeth characterizes himself, "his kinsman", "his subject", "his host" and glances at a role he should avoid, "his murderer". The presentation of the King, "this Duncan", and his attributes is equally distanced. It is only with the metaphors surrounding the "naked . . . babe" that the poise of the advocate begins to break down under the realization that no argument can withstand the Divine intervention that "Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye" (in direct delivery, the line demanded a gesture, it is "every eye" of the judging audience). The final lines of the speech, from "I have no spur" involve a radical change of tone as, for the first time in this monologue, Macbeth reveals himself directly.

The custom of playing such monologues as introspective self-communing, "overheard" by an audience, is relatively modern and comes from the early nineteenth century. Until then, such speeches were delivered directly to the spectators and, making this point, J. L. Styan quotes the advice Mr

17 Rosenberg, p. 258.

18 The Editor was Dover Wilson. The comment is quoted by Muir in his comprehensive footnotes to the speech which explore the other legal references mentioned above, pp. 37-41.

19 Robert B. Heilman is surely mistaken when he suggests "We see the world judging Macbeth, but not Macbeth judging himself" in "The Criminal as Tragic Hero" in *Aspects of Macbeth*, ed. Muir and Edwards (Cambridge 1977), p. 36.

Puff, the critic-playwright of Sheridan's *The Critic*, gives to an actor: "Now, sir, your soliloquy—but speak more to the pit, if you please—the soliloquy to the pit—that's a rule".²⁰ Sheridan wrote this over 150 years after Shakespeare's death, but theatre history suggests that many traditions of business and delivery were handed down from those who had it from "Mr Shakespeare himself".²¹ The tradition was, however, not unbroken. The theatres of Shakespeare's time were either pulled down or vanished through natural causes during the years (1642–1660) when the Puritans banned performance of plays. With the Restoration, new theatres were built and they created their own "rules" to fit the new architectural and social context. In Shakespeare's time, the "groundlings", those who stood around (and thus slightly below) the stage, paid less than those who occupied the galleries above. In Sheridan's time the position was reversed. The upper gallery had become the cheapest area of the theatre and "the pit", the area we would today call "the stalls", was the place where the young dandies would disport themselves. An eighteenth-century actor might well have looked down to address his comments to those who paid well, but an Elizabethan actor is much more likely to have looked up, allowing his eyes to play over the three levels of gallery. This distinction between looking up and looking down affects a very great deal.

In the confines of our courtyard, immediately the actor looked up to address the gallery his voice opened out and the largeness of the speech's metaphors and syntactical constructions became "natural" in this public form of delivery. In fact, it is not overstating to suggest that many of the problems of understanding posed by the speech resolve themselves when it is played as public, rather than private, speech. The actor's gestures opened out correspondingly. Unprompted, he spread his arms wide, weighing the balance with his hands, on "even-handed justice". In an indoor setting, the gesture would have appeared gross and stilted, but outside it was precisely right. The group had discussed Professor Riemer's reading of "bank" and "school" as gambling terms relating to "jump" in the sense of hazard or gamble,²² and the actor had found this line of interpretation much easier to play than the traditional reading. Now, in direct delivery, he discovered another spontaneous gesture to accompany "We'd jump the life to come" which involved the whole right arm flicking dice into play. Incidentally, the gesture picked up the physical nature of "jump" which has so puzzled editors and readers.

This process of opening out and enlarging affected more than voice and gesture, it influenced the entire characterization of Macbeth within the scene. R. A. Foakes has suggested that "the best criticism . . . ought to find a way of reconciling the opposing views of Macbeth as both weak and heroic, and of restoring the play's richness".²³ Writing of performance, Dennis Bartholomeusz talks about "the mighty opposites in Mac-

20 *Shakespeare's Stagecraft* (Cambridge 1967; repr. 1975), p. 72.

21 The comment was made of a Restoration performance of *Henry VIII*. The part of Henry was "rightly and justly done by Mr Betterton, he being instructed in it by Sir William, who had it from Mr Lowen, that had his instructions from Mr Shakespeare himself". Quoted in Bartholomeusz, p. 1.

22 A. P. Riemer and Ann Parker, "Macbeth—Two Notes", *Sydney Studies in English*, V (1979–80), 96–101.

23 "Macbeth" in *Shakespeare: Select Bibliographical Guides*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford 1973), p. 193.

beth's character—the fear and the courage, the sensitiveness and the reserves of violence”.²⁴ Perhaps the most important effect of direct delivery is in exactly this area. The Macbeth who spoke to his listeners had grown immensely in stature. The weakness, that desire to “wrongly win”, remained, but this was a strong man, potentially a great man, and his strength arose precisely from his ability to see into the deed and to present himself as a man who, in Enright's words, is “pre-eminently a self-conscious being”.²⁵ This strength-in-weakness became more important as the scene proceeded. The Lady Macbeth who had played with him when the speech was delivered introspectively and internally found she needed to work much harder to persuade this man. This scene is probably the most difficult for any actress playing the part. George Bernard Shaw saw his ideal Macbeth “cowering . . . and crying piteously ‘I prithee peace. I dare . . .’” but realizing most actors would refuse such a response, advised in a letter to Flora Robson: “if he will not play down you must play up and let yourself go for all you are worth; for you must get on top at all costs.”²⁶ In the courtyard version, the actress playing Lady Macbeth discovered she was contending with the audience Macbeth had addressed as well as with her husband. She concentrated her efforts on him, prowling around his stationary figure²⁷ as she goaded him like “a beast”, but towards the end of the scene she found she could subdue the audience as well. When Macbeth asked

Will it not be received,
When we have marked with blood those sleepy two
Of his own chamber, and used their very daggers,
That they have don't?

she turned from him and her eyes slowly raked the galleries as she answered: “Who dares receive it other . . . ?” After her earlier questions about the limits of daring, the effect was shocking rather than melodramatic. Some years ago, J. L. Styan speculated “It is possible that Shakespeare saw his actors as playing to their audience most of the time”,²⁸ and the effect of this one line suggests we still have much to learn about the possibilities of direct delivery.

In stark contrast to the ending of the scene just discussed, the next opens with Banquo and Fleance's casual talk of “husbandry in Heaven”, but it ends on a different note from Macbeth:

Hear it not Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to Heaven, or to Hell.
(II.i.63–4)

Duncan does not wake, but in the following scene (II.ii) Macbeth appears to have his own moment of awakening (“What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes”) to the full realization that this nightmare is real. The lines about Duncan are prompted by the ringing of a bell—presumably a signal from Lady Macbeth that the guards are asleep—and they form a stark contrast, clear in performance, with the lines with which Macbeth

24 Bartholomeusz, p. 235.

25 *Shakespeare and the Students*, p. 132.

26 Bartholomeusz, p. 242.

27 The importance of movement and its symbolic possibilities became obvious to the audience looking down on the actors.

28 *Shakespeare's Stagecraft*, p. 75. See also Daniel Seltzer, “The Actors and Staging” in *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. Muir and Schoenbaum (Cambridge 1971), pp. 35–66.

closes the scene after the murder. Again, he responds to a noise:

Wake Duncan with thy knocking: I would thou couldst!

(II.ii.73)

Again, Duncan will not wake, but the knocking continues across the scene division to arouse a Porter who speaks as if he were the "Porter of Hell Gate".

This description labours the connections, although in the theatre they are writ equally large. In one sense, a reader has such connections over-emphasized by the printed scene divisions, but the same reader may still forget that their original dramatic importance stemmed from the fact that on an open Elizabethan stage with its two entrances, the action was continuous. As one scene ended, the next began: after Macbeth exits by one door intent on Duncan's murder, his wife enters from the other. These simple exits and entrances form another important connection between the scenes, and may help account for a part of the play that has puzzled many, the scene with the Porter.

Dead drunk at the door of Hell

Two doors and a bare day-lit stage were "pre-conditions" which the nineteenth century with its scenic extravaganzas found crude in the extreme, but they allowed Shakespeare a fluid and speedy movement between scenes impossible when scenery is employed. He could establish night with "a torch" and a whole locale with a few choice words:

This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.

(I.vi.1-3)

The doors themselves often provide an appropriate division between the inside and the outside world. As Duncan speaks the lines above, the stage becomes an area outside Macbeth's castle, and when Lady Macbeth comes out to meet him the door she uses becomes its entrance. When she and Duncan exit through this same door, the audience accept they are going inside. Immediately, a group of servants who cross the stage from one door to the other carrying food and plates for a banquet, transform it into an area within the castle, adjacent to the main hall. Later, the Porter will open one of the doors in response to the knocking and the audience accepts without difficulty that it now leads to the world outside the castle. The sure and subtle way in which such transformations are accomplished doubtless stems from the fact that Shakespeare was in familiar control of the "pre-conditions". They allowed him great scope and flexibility, but the two doors also imposed limitations.²⁹ *Macbeth* Act Two, scenes two and three suggests Shakespeare delighted in overcoming them.

When Macbeth exits after his dagger soliloquy, the door he uses (call it door one, for convenience) becomes the door to Duncan's chambers and so it remains, with growing dramatic impact, for the next two scenes. Lady Macbeth enters by the other door, but soon, by her words and presumably by her look, directs the audience's attention to door one: "He is about it. / The doors are open; and the surfeited grooms / Do mock their charge with snores". The audience awaits the reappearance of her husband and when

29 For a reading that assumes the two doors were supplemented by two other entrances from an inner stage, "the study", see R. Watkins and J. Lemmon, *Macbeth: In Shakespeare's Playhouse* (Melbourne 1974), pp. 73-84.

he comes he is transformed. No longer do we see the firm and resolute murderer, but a man bemused who almost sleepwalks his way around the stage. Lady Macbeth tries in vain to break in upon the reverie, but she does not succeed until the moment that she sees the daggers. In performance, some Macbeths respond automatically to her order "go carry them, and smear / The sleepy grooms with blood" and begin to retrace their steps. It is only as they approach the fateful door that they recoil on "I'll go no more". The movement may be no more than a turn towards the door and then an abrupt turn away, but the door remains a powerful focus. Lady Macbeth may have to repress a shudder at the first touch of blood when she takes the daggers and she may need to force herself on through the door leading to Duncan. Or, it may be when she re-emerges from the chamber that the audience glimpses the beginning of the process of disintegration that will culminate in her sleepwalking. Her steps may falter, she may pause for a moment, sometimes seeking physical support, as she steels herself for the lines that follow: "My hands are of your colour . . ." ³⁰ Macbeth's final line: "Wake Duncan with thy knocking; I would thou couldst!" suggests that he looks once again at Duncan's door, and if the audience registers the connection, discussed earlier, between this exit and his last, it is partly because his look directs their attention.

In any performance, the door to Duncan's chamber assumes immense importance, but in the modern theatre its continuing significance may be lost at this point because of the multiple entrances that are available. Working with only two, Shakespeare needs to maintain one as the entrance to Duncan's chamber and he has just caused the Macbeths to exit through the other. He has set himself a staging problem and he solves it with a daring *coup de théâtre*. A figure stumbles on from Duncan's chamber. For a moment, an Elizabethan audience must have wondered if Macbeth's wish had been granted. Can this staggering figure be Duncan, or is it a groom, roused from his drugged torpor, about to sound the alarm?

As it turns out, of course, it is neither. The Porter has no knowledge of what has occurred behind the door from which he innocently emerges, and he soon has the audience laughing as he picks out various spectators whom he characterizes in a series of contemporary jokes. The laughter is far from the "comic relief" sometimes supposed; after the initial release of tension, it is distinctly uneasy. Near the end of his stand-up routine, the Porter plays his own trick (this is M. C. Bradbrook's brilliant reading³¹). Macbeth has seen daggers in the air, and heard a disembodied "voice". The Porter has been pretending to keep Hell-gate and inviting various members of the audience to join him. Suddenly, he stops, and gazes horrified at the blank air: "What are you?" Has he conjured up a real devil? Perhaps his next line is accompanied by a knowing leer at the audience, which secures a howl of relief: "But this place is too cold for Hell".

Coleridge thought the Porter an "interpolation of the actors"³² and not Shakespeare's work at all, but generations of critics have disagreed. One of the best discussions of the purpose of the role is provided by Kenneth

30 For detailed descriptions of the ways in which individual actors and actresses have interpreted the parts of the scene referred to in the text, see Rosenberg, pp. 339-47.

31 *Shakespeare the Craftsman* (London 1969), p. 6.

32 *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (London 1960), pp. 75-8.

Muir in his *New Arden Introduction*. Noting the connection with the use of Hell gate in the old miracle plays,³³ he makes a point that gains greatly in importance when we remember the unlocalized possibilities of Shakespeare's stage:

Shakespeare's . . . reason for recalling the miracle plays was that it enabled him to cut the cable that moored his tragedy to a particular spot in space and time, so that it could become universalized on the one hand, or become contemporary on the other.³⁴

Muir explores in detail the variety of elements that ensures this scene is an integral part of the play, and he begins with this eminently practical point:

The scene is theatrically necessary, because the actor who plays Macbeth has to change his costume and wash his hands, and (as Capell suggested) it was necessary "to give a rational space for the discharge of these actions".³⁵

This is a useful reminder that in theatre necessity is indeed the mother of invention, but there is another equally practical reason for the Porter's speech. Door one must remain the door to Duncan's chamber in order to secure the dramatic impact of the discovery of the murder later in the scene, and the Macbeths have just made their exit by the other door. If the Porter were immediately to cross and open this same door to admit figures from the outside world, the audience might justifiably see the awkwardness as comic. Capell's idea of the "rational space" is useful here (if, in a sense he didn't quite intend) because this is precisely what Shakespeare creates with the Porter's monologue. His twenty-odd lines provide a sufficient time for the redefinition of the door (from one leading to a bedchamber to one leading to the outside) to be acceptable to the audience. When he does open to Macduff, any possible awkwardness has vanished.

The foregoing discussion, which is again based on actual workshop experiments, may appear somewhat pedantic, but much more is involved than simply discovering who enters where.³⁶ It should have become clear that the enormous dramatic importance of the door to Duncan's chamber (an importance clear in all productions and recorded in several pictorial representations of the play)³⁷ was hard won. An approach that considers the "pre-conditions" mentioned at the start, reveals Shakespeare creating striking effects while solving practical difficulties as they arise. It suggests a dramatist transcending the limitations of his medium to create, in the scenes just discussed, one of the most powerful sequences in all the plays. To return to that initial comment of Alan Ayckbourn, it reveals Shakespeare the working playwright utilizing the possibilities of his stage and theatre and thriving because he had total control of the pre-conditions.

33 Glynne Wickham, "Hell-Gate and Its Door-Keeper" in *Aspects of Macbeth*, pp. 39-45, goes further than Muir and sees Macduff as the Christ-figure who will harrow Hell.

34 Introduction, p. xxvii.

35 Introduction, p. xxvi.

36 The fact that the scene will work, and work very well, with only two doors, of course supports the assumption that there were only two.

37 The most striking is a painting by Zoffany of Garrick and Mrs Pritchard in the Drury Lane production of the 1760s. While the rest of the stage is in deep shadow, they are illuminated in a shaft of light coming through the half-open door.