

CHAPTER 20

*Divided Shakespeare: configuring
acts and scenes**Alan C. Dessen*

Although taken for granted by most readers, the division of Shakespeare's plays into acts and scenes has a tangled history. In his massive study T. W. Baldwin has charted the history of five-act structure from Roman times to the Elizabethans and has argued for the presence of such organizational thinking in the Shakespeare canon. However, act divisions are not to be found in any of the eighteen quartos published during Shakespeare's lifetime (the only exception before the 1623 First Folio is the 1622 Quarto of *Othello* that signals formal breaks for Acts 2, 4, and 5). Such pauses in the onstage action were standard practice in private theaters like the Blackfriars and, according to Gary Taylor, this procedure migrated to public theaters after 1610, but, if printed texts are to be the evidence, plays at the Globe and comparable outdoor venues before that date were designed to be played from start to finish with no such breaks. By 1623, the fashion had changed so that readers may have expected five-act division in printed play texts and would have encountered twenty-eight of the thirty-six Folio plays divided into five acts and two others partly divided.

Editors since 1623, following the precedent of Renaissance editions of Roman comedy, have therefore supplied act divisions for many plays not composed with such breaks in mind (exceptions include editions of non-Shakespeare plays such as *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, *The Shoemakers' Holiday*, and *A Woman Killed with Kindness*). The poster child for the pitfalls of arbitrary act division is *Pericles*, where such breaks first appeared in the Third Folio (1664) and were codified a century later by Edmund Malone, who (following the example of Folio *Henry V*) argued that 'the poet seems to have intended that each act should begin with a chorus' (1790: 92). However, as pointed out by Suzanne Gossett: 'The act divisions are not an editorial improvement' (2004: 82), for Gower's eight appearances actually divide the script into seven, not five, sections. Although such

editorial intervention may elsewhere be less visible, James Hirsh has argued that the Folio act divisions 'were not based on the actual dramatic structure of each play' and therefore 'have profoundly misled readers' and that subsequent editorial divisions have furthered such confusion by suggesting 'that the end of an act marks the culmination of a large-scale and particularly significant dramatic movement or development' or 'that the scenes grouped together within an act form a distinct, unified, and particularly meaningful structural unit' (1981: 255–6).

Dividing a play into scenes can be even more problematic, for, although scholars agree that a clearing of the stage initiates a new scene, such divisions can generate problems and anomalies. The most rigorous analysis of scenic division is provided by James Hirsh, who argues: 'The continuity of a play is not broken, and hence a scene division does not occur, unless the stage is cleared of all living characters'; similarly, 'even if the stage is technically cleared for a moment', a new scene does not occur 'if either the exiting or the entering characters express awareness of the presence of the other group'; however, 'a break between scenes occurs even if the location of the second of two consecutive episodes is the same as the first and no discernible fictive time has elapsed between the episodes'. Moreover, in his formulation: 'If two sets of characters occupy the stage at the same time they belong to the same *dramatic scene* even if they are unaware of one another's presence and, furthermore, even if they are in separate fictive locations' (211). By these yardsticks, Prologues and Epilogues constitute individual scenes, as do groups that pass over the stage without any accompanying dialogue, and the battle sequence in what is traditionally *Cymbeline* 5.2 becomes five scenes, with the opening stage direction (in which the two armies appear and *exeunt*, then Iachimo and Posthumus enter and fight) counting as two.

Elsewhere, scholars such as Mark Rose and Emrys Jones have dealt tellingly with what has been termed *scenic design*, while in their 'unit analysis' Charles and Elaine Hallett argue that 'the designated scenes are not *always* units of action' and therefore invoke the term *sequence* which 'is always an action, propelled in a discernible direction by the desires, goals, and objectives of its characters' (1991: 3, 5). In this formulation, a complex scene (e.g., the famous tavern scene in *Henry IV, Part 1*) may consist of several sequences, whereas a sequence (e.g., the build to the death of Macbeth) may consist of several scenes.

As with act division, few plays linked to the public theaters and published during Shakespeare's life provide signals for scene division other than an *exit-exeunt* that clears the stage, though Jonson, who prefers to

signal a new scene at the entrance of a new character, is a notable exception. The term *scene* can have a range of meanings and need not be linked to a clearing of the stage, whereas the few extant 'plots', backstage documents for use during a performance, divide the play into boxes rather than scenes. As Tiffany Stern notes, 'a box is not so much a dramatic unit as a unit of stage occupancy' that defines 'when the stage is empty and when it is full'. Information within the box signals only 'what is happening onstage, not off it', though 'the line along the bottom of the box' can represent 'any moment, scenic or not, at which everyone leaves the stage' (2009a: 211).

Also to be factored in is the practice found in pre-1580s plays, an alternative to the classical five acts or even the clearing of the stage to denote a distinct scene break. Here the key often was not scenic logic but theatrical exigency linked to performances by troupes of four to eight actors. Some of these plays do follow the familiar pattern. The best known of these items, Thomas Preston's *Cambyses* (1561), is scripted for eight actors so that, with no severe limits on personnel, the playwright clears the stage seven times to generate eight scenes.¹ Another play with recognizable scenes is Thomas Lupton's *All for Money* (1577), perhaps performed by only four actors, where the playgoer encounters not the typical through-line narrative dominated by a Vice but five discrete units, each of which demonstrates the primacy of money in contemporary society. For example, in a lengthy trial sequence in which corrupt petitioners get what they want from *All for Money*, he and Sin the Vice remain onstage while single litigants repeatedly exit and enter, thereby enabling two quick-changing actors to play many parts.

However, most of the play texts in this category display a more pragmatic approach to divisions to the extent that the *scene* category is no longer useful. In Ulpian Fulwell's *Like Will to Like* (1568), scripted for five actors, the roughly 1,275 lines contain three clearings of the stage to produce four scenes, but two of those scenes, dominated by the Vice Nichol Newfangle, add up to almost 1,100 lines. Of the roughly 1,450 lines in William Wager's *Enough is as Good as a Feast* (1560), scripted for seven actors, two key scenes with much coming and going contain 1,130 lines. In George Wapull's *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* (1576), scripted for four actors, Courage the Vice starts the play solus and stays there for roughly 750 of the play's 1,800 lines. Here a rationale linked to exigency is particularly clear when Wapull calls for onstage violence 'to prolong the time' (1214) while an actor offstage is

¹ I am omitting the Prologues (some of them of considerable length) from these calculations.

making a difficult costume change. In such plays, with their small casts and an abundance of *dramatis personae*, a clearing of the stage has little to do with dramatic structure. Rather, practical theatrical demands trump rigid scenic logic.

The widely used scenic breakdowns found in most of today's editions do not rigorously follow the cleared-stage yardstick. Most obvious are several moments in *Romeo and Juliet*: the Capulet ball, regularly denoted as 1.5, is a continuation of 1.4 in that Romeo and his fellow masquers have not left the stage; and the Balcony Scene in most editions remains 2.2 but Romeo is on stage during 2.1 and stays there to begin the next scene (and his first line forms a couplet with Benvolio's final line in 2.1).² A less familiar example is found in *Henry VI, Part 1*, 4.3–4.4 as presented in most modern editions. With York 'and many Soldiers' on stage (4.3.0), a figure later identified as Sir William Lucy enters to urge the rescue of Talbot beleaguered at Bordeaux. After York rejects the plea and exits, Lucy stays on stage to deliver a seven-line speech on 'the vulture of sedition' (47–53), at which point most editors indicate a new scene at the entrance of 'Somerset with his Army' (4.4.0 in the Riverside). Somerset also quickly rejects the pleas on behalf of Talbot by a Captain and Lucy. The point behind the rejections of the parallel pleas is evident, for clearly Talbot is undone (unhistorically) by the internal divisions within the English forces, not by the prowess of the French. To establish this point emphatically, the playwright plays fast and loose with a neoclassic sense of place or scene division by having one figure (Lucy) provide two parallel pleas and a soliloquy in between without leaving the stage, while York-army and Somerset-army are moved on and off. Concern for what I term *geographical realism* has been superseded not just by dramatic economy but also by a kind of symmetry of action, a parallel construction that makes the central point unmistakable. The thesis ('the vulture of sedition') trumps both verisimilitude and traditional scenic logic.³

² Also of interest (but perhaps the result of omitted mid-scene exits and entrances), is the situation in the First Quarto of *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), where there is no signal for Romeo to exit at the end of the balcony scene, so that in this text (described on its title page as 'often (with great applause) plaid publicly') he stays on stage from the beginning of Act 2 to the end of his scene with the Friar (2.3).

³ In his Arden 2 edition Andrew Cairncross provides a scene break but argues in his note to 4.4.0 that 'Lucy does not leave the stage and return' but rather 'remains on stage, aside' (96). The Arden 3 editor Edward Burns breaks with editorial tradition by treating the sequence as a single scene (4.3) though retaining '[4.4]' in the right margin at Somerset's entrance. In his note to line 53 (239) he observes that by sidestepping 'the customary two, I may violate geographical probability, but this would be unlikely to trouble the original audience of the play, and it does produce a more cogent and emblematically telling shape to the scene, an option taken in the 1977 RSC production'.

A good test case is provided by Act 4 of *Henry IV, Part 2*. A survey of ten editions published between 1965 and 2007 reveals that editors have divided this act in two, three, or five scenes (the latter choice is the traditional one, an approach that does not observe the cleared-stage criterion).⁴ Clearly, at the end of what is regularly designated 4.1, the rebel forces do not leave the stage but are joined by Prince John so that there is no reason, other than tradition, for a scenic break on the page to indicate a new scene, 4.2. At London's Bankside Globe in 2010, director Dominic Dromgoole chose not to clear the stage; rather, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.4–1.5, the rebel group marched around a stage post while Prince John and his troops entered on the other side. Of my ten editions, two (New Cambridge, RSC Shakespeare) present the traditional 4.3 (Falstaff's encounter with Coleville) as part of an extended 4.1 so as to have only two scenes in Act 4; three (Folger, Oxford Wells–Taylor, Oxford World's Classics) treat Falstaff–Coleville as a separate scene and have three scenes in the act; the remaining five editions have the traditional five scenes.

Especially problematic is the final appearance of the dying Henry IV, a sequence traditionally divided into two scenes, 4.4 and 4.5, but presented without a break in both quarto and Folio. First, the ailing king enters to get reports (about Prince Hal and victories over the rebel forces) and then swoons. When he recovers, Henry instructs: 'I pray you take me up, and bear me hence / Into some other chamber' (4.4.131–2), at which point most editors, in keeping with long-standing practice, have indicated a new scene (4.5) and insert a stage direction to indicate some movement of the ailing figure. What follows is the placing of the crown upon the pillow; Prince Hal's taking of that crown; the king's chastising of his son; and the reconciliation and final advice. At the end of the sequence, the king asks Warwick: 'Doth any name particular belong / Unto the lodging where I first did swound?' and gets the reply: "'Tis called Jerusalem, my noble lord.' Henry IV's final words then close the scene:

Laud be to God! Even there my life must end.
It hath been prophesied to me many years,
I should not die but in Jerusalem,
Which vainly I suppos'd the Holy Land.
But bear me to that chamber, there I'll lie.
In that Jerusalem shall Harry die. (4.5.232–40)

⁴ My list includes the Signet (1965); Arden 2 (1966); Oxford *Complete Works* (1986); New Cambridge (1989); revised Riverside (1997); Oxford World's Classics (1997); Folger (1999); revised Pelican (2002); Bevington (2004); and RSC Shakespeare (2007).

The group of figures then *exeunt* and Shallow, Falstaff, and others enter to begin 5.1.

Of interest here are (1) how editors treat the putative 4.4–4.5 break on the page; (2) what stage directions they insert; and (3) what if any adjustments are made to the final *exeunt*. Five of my editions indicate a new scene; of these, two do not supply a note or gloss (Riverside, revised Pelican), whereas three (Bevington, Signet, Arden 2) do provide some explanation. For example, in an appendix, the Arden 2 editor notes that the action is unbroken in both 4.4–4.5 as in 4.1–4.2 ‘even though it envisages a change of place from the Jerusalem chamber (where the King swoons), to some other, and back again. To convey the King out and in again, interrupting his speech, is wrong’ (Arden 2: 240).

Three of the five editions that have no scenic break provide notes: ‘Many editions begin a new scene at this point’ (Folger: 186–7); ‘Q and F clearly envisage the action to be continuous. There are no stage directions in QF to signal exits, and no new scene is signalled, but the King is clearly intended to be in a notionally different location when he speaks at l. 137’ (Oxford World’s Classics: 238); ‘most editors since 1864 introduce exit and entrance directions and begin here a new scene, though the continuity is obvious in spite of the change of locale’ (New Cambridge: 157).

As to stage directions, nine of the editors (the exception is the RSC Shakespeare) provide their version of the wording in the Riverside at line 132: ‘*The king is carried to one side of the stage and placed on a bed*’ (the presence of a bed is keyed to the king’s ‘Come hither, Harry, sit thou by my bed’ at 4.5.181). The staging of this 4.4–4.5 sequence has varied in recent productions. At the Swan in 2000, Royal Shakespeare Company director Michael Attenborough took the Gordian knot approach and cut ‘I pray you take me up, and bear me hence / Into some other chamber’, so that all the action took place around the same bed (the later reference to the Jerusalem chamber remained). At the London Globe in 2010, director Dominic Dromgoole cleared the stage for 4.4–4.5 so that the king was taken off, a huge bed was thrust on, and Henry re-entered from the center in a coughing fit. At the 2011 Oregon Shakespeare Festival, director Lisa Peterson kept her actors on stage but had a bed emerge from a trapdoor; similarly, in the 2007 Royal Shakespeare Company production at the Courtyard, director Michael Boyd started 4.4 with Henry IV in a wheelchair, then signaled a change of room by having a bed brought in with the wheelchair placed next to it. At the National Theatre in 2005 director Nicholas Hytner initially placed Henry IV in a wheelchair, but then with

difficulty he was moved to a bed that was brought in, with some movement about the stage to establish a sense of a second room.

What is at stake here is a potential collision between the fluid staging of the original performances and the rigor of subsequent assumptions about scene division, clearing of the stage, and changes in locale. In an appendix (241), the Arden 2 editor notes: 'How the scene was arranged originally is not clear. The essential movements are (a) entrance (or disclosure) of the King at IV.iv.1; (b) transport without break of action at IV.iv.132 (from one part of the stage to another); and (c) re-transport at IV.v.239–40 to the spot where the King swooned' (none of the other editors posits a 're-transport'). My question is: what happens if (1) Henry IV, if not already seated, around line 110 would collapse into a sick-chair (a portable property regularly found in the Shakespeare canon);⁵ (2) at his command ('take me up, and bear me hence / Into some other chamber') he is helped from that chair across the large platform stage to a bed that is thrust on so that in this 'other chamber' as defined by this physical displacement he would have his interview with Prince Hal; (3) the chair stays in its original position (later identified as the Jerusalem Chamber); and (4) the king's eventual exit is not towards the chair but in another direction.

Given such a staging, consider the added effect for a playgoer in the 1590s of the scene's closing lines devoted to Jerusalem. The king's query about 'the lodging where I first did swoon' makes good literal sense to the reader but can have a greater impact upon a playgoer, especially if a gesture from either the king or Warwick ('Tis called Jerusalem') to that part of the stage (perhaps defined by a visible sick-chair) vacated when Henry was carried to 'some other chamber' reminds that playgoer of the close proximity of 'Jerusalem'. In my reconstruction, however, the spectator would see a king who orders 'bear me to that chamber' so as to die 'in Jerusalem' but is then carried not to the place where he 'first did swoon' but rather to an adjacent stage door and off the stage. The playgoer is not shown or told whether or not Henry IV achieves his 'Jerusalem' before his death. Rather, the king is seen taken off in a direction away from the area now, *ex post facto*, defined as 'Jerusalem'; as a result, we recognize that, moments earlier, he had been where he most wanted to be but did not know it. My suggested ironic staging may be conjectural, but the question remains: to what extent do post-Elizabethan notions of scene division and 'place' blur or eliminate potentially meaningful images available to the original playgoers?

⁵ See my 'Sick Chairs and Sick Thrones', in *Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Vocabulary* (Dessen 1995: ch. 6).

This suggested juxtaposition of bed and sick-chair corresponds to two other sequences in the Shakespeare canon that cause problems for editors and directors. In Act 2 of *As You Like It* the banquet prepared for Duke Senior in 2.5 and eaten in 2.7 stays on stage during 2.6 (Orlando and Adam's arrival in Arden); and in Act 2 of *King Lear* Kent asleep in the stocks, presumably in the courtyard of Gloucester's castle, and found there by Lear in 2.4, is juxtaposed with Edgar in flight who, in what is traditionally designated as 2.3, speaks of having hid in the hollow of a tree. In both instances a significant property (a banquet table, the stocks) stays in view when the action switches to another place. To configure either sequence in terms of the traditional divisions is to enforce a sense of change of locale at the expense of meaningful juxtapositions. Whether to enhance the narrative pace or to italicize some point (as with the links between the plights of Kent and Edgar), Shakespeare and his colleagues were capable of dispensing with a form of verisimilitude prized highly today. The 'placing' of scenes is not irrelevant to Elizabethan theatrical practice, at least in their terms, but upon occasion something else – a concern for imagery or patterning or economy – could supersede what some readers today consider of primary importance.⁶

What then are the implications of divided Shakespeare for today's editors and users of editions? Here, like many readers of this chapter, I wear several hats. As a long-time teacher of the plays I welcome the convenience found in the standard scene breakdowns for quick reference in the classroom (and, I confess, in my head the Balcony Scene remains 2.2, even though I know better). Moreover, scholarly tools such as the Spivack concordance are keyed to the traditional divisions found in the Riverside edition, while any teacher who has even a single student using atypical scene breaks (as in the Oxford Wells–Taylor edition) will encounter problems in class discussions. The Arden 3 editor of *Romeo and Juliet* (René Weis) notes in his gloss on the 1.4–1.5 sequence: 'The action in Q2 is continuous here (as at 2.2 below), but most editors mark a new scene;

⁶ In addition to changes of locale without clearing the stage in *Henry IV, Part 2* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the lengthy 2.3 of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* starts in a public slave market and, as clearly indicated in the dialogue, moves to Barabas' house. In John Day's *Law Tricks* the long final scene starts with a figure revealed in his study, continues as an inside-the-house scene, but ends with the sudden revelation of a supposedly dead figure in her tomb, the site of a previous scene clearly set in a graveyard. Perhaps closest to the situation in *Romeo and Juliet* 1.4–1.5 is Marlowe's *The Masacre at Paris* where the king announces hypocritically 'I will go visit the Admiral' who has been wounded and is 'sick in his bed'. Rather than using an *exit* and *re-enter* to move the king to the Admiral's chambers, Marlowe instead keeps the royal group on stage and has 'Enter the Admiral in his bed' (4.48, 43, 49.s.d.).

this edition follows that pattern for convenience of reference' (166). To call for a total break with long-standing on-the-page divisions strikes me as impractical.

On another front, as a theater historian who devotes much time to wrestling with various problems and anomalies, the how-to-divide choices in today's editions make little difference for my work where I regularly ignore what today's editors present in terms of act-scene divisions, stage directions, or place-locale signals in favor of the evidence found in the early printed texts or the occasional manuscript play. What I find most troubling about the practices of editors (whose texts form the basis for interpretations in the study, in the classroom, and on the stage) is not that they are wrong-headed, unlearned, or imprecise (some of my best friends are editors) but that at times they can (often unwittingly) close down options that might seem negligible to them but could be of considerable interest to another interpreter, whether in the theater or on the page.

The question about divided Shakespeare remains: what approach is best for editions targeted at students or other first-time readers? Anomalies, as in *Henry IV, Part 2* can be acknowledged in a gloss, textual note, or appendix, but many readers ignore such material or, in the case of textual notes, find them baffling. Some editors have experimented with various on-the-page solutions. For example, in her Arden 3 *Pericles* Suzanne Gossett keeps the standard divisions but places them in the left margin in square brackets and bold type. For the Act 2 sequence in *King Lear*, the Arden 3 editor, R. A. Foakes, presents 2.2–2.3–2.4 as one scene (2.2) but includes in the right margin in square brackets the traditional divisions for 2.3 and 2.4 along with line numbers for those scenes; similarly, in the New Cambridge edition of *Henry IV, Part 2* Giorgio Melchiori presents only two scenes in Act 4 but signals the traditional scenes and line numbers in the right margin. Such multiple numbering systems provide a solution to the historical versus traditional problem but at the risk of cluttering the page and perhaps adding to the obfuscation rather than providing clarity. How to navigate among (1) convenience in the classroom; (2) fidelity to the original theatrical practice; and (3) clarity for a first-time reader remains a puzzle for which I have no easy answer. As with other ahistorical features that remain part of the editorial landscape (e.g., place-locale indicators – '*Another part of the forest*'), the application of neoclassical act division and scenic precision to plays that may be operating by an alternative strategy can be misleading in various ways, but such may be the price tag for convenience of reference in our texts – at least in the short term.

In the future, when both students and general readers will be viewing a play on their Kindle or other digital format, this and related problems may be resolved. To set up an on-the-page text today with multiple approaches to scene divisions and line numbers may be daunting, but perhaps, not long from now, even a first-time reader of *Henry IV, Part 2* will be able to compare three different versions of Act 4 with the swipe of a finger or click of a mouse. An editor will then not have to make divisions that have the potential to screen out meaningful alternatives, and a savvy teacher will be able to ask students: what difference does a division into acts and scenes make to our understanding of this play? Perhaps the time is not far off when clarity, convenience of reference, and theater history will no longer be quarrelsome companions.