Scene 6 (I vi)

Moments later, outside the castle gate

The king has now arrived at the gate of Macbeth's castle. He is not alone: a king does not travel alone. He has brought a large entourage with him. They have been riding hard, in the hope of overtaking Macbeth. They have not managed that -- but they have probably managed to get puffed out in trying.

The only lord who speaks in this scene is Banquo. But Macduff is also required to be present, and so is the younger lord who is given the name Lennox. Among the attendants are the two gentlemen of the bedchamber whose fate it is to be killed by Macbeth in scene 10. The lords have all brought servants with them: there are so many people that they cannot all be accommodated inside the castle. Some of them, perhaps most of them, have to find lodgings in the town.

(I vi 2-4) Enter ... Folio begins the scene with the direction "Hoboyes and torches". It repeats this instruction at the beginning of the next scene -- and that is where it belongs: here it is quite certainly a mistake. (One does not play hoboyes outdoors; one does not light torches in the daytime.) As the actors knew without being told, the direction wanted here, at both the beginning and the end of the scene, is "Flourish" (Kemble 1794:17-18).

The king is accompanied by two teenage boys who -- as I understand it -- ought to appear for the first time in this scene. They are not introduced; they do not speak or get spoken to. (When Lady Macbeth comes out to greet the king, she takes no notice of them.) Somehow or other, it has to be made clear to the audience who they are. The clue has to come from their staying close to the king, and from the lords' deferring to them. They enter with the king; the lords are one step behind. When the king exits, they follow; the lords stand aside to let them pass. If this is done right, the audience will understand that these two boys are Duncan's sons. (Their names are Malcolm and Donalbain, as we discover later.)* They are both still children, but old enough to participate in a hard cross-country ride. Perhaps the older is about 16, the younger about 14.†

* Another thing we discover later is that they have an English uncle, earl Seyward (grandfather in Holinshed, uncle in Shakespeare); so their mother, evidently, must have been English too. She seems to have been dead for some time; we never hear anything about her, except

for two lines from Macduff in scene 22 (IV iii 125-7).

† Donalbain, like Fleance, was sometimes played by a young female actor -- for example by Miss C. Carr at Drury Lane in 1824, by Miss Wilmott at Drury Lane in 1827 (Cumberland 1827:10).

Folio makes Ross and Angus join the party, but that is probably wrong. Neither of them will be needed. Ross is certainly not present: when we meet him again in scene 12, he has to be informed of the events which are about to happen. (Mysteriously, Folio makes Ross pop up in one of the stage directions in scene 10 (II iii 111); but he was, rightly, cancelled by Capell (see later).) Angus has nothing to say or do: as far as Folio is concerned, he does not appear again till scene 24 (but no doubt he should be present at the banquet).

(I vi 9) The temple-haunting martlet ... Folio's "barlet" is meaningless; "martlet" is Rowe's emendation (1709:2312). Banquo is talking about swifts, *Apus apus*, also called black martins (Ray 1673:86), and also once called martlets (as in Merchant of Venice II ix 28).* The French word for "swift" is *martinet*: that is the word used by Darmesteter (1883:54) in speaking of this scene.

* The word "martlet" survives in the language of heraldry: it means a legless swift-like bird. (Swifts have very short legs, and were sometimes believed to have no legs at all.)

Swifts are summer visitors to Europe. In Gilbert White's part of England, they generally arrived in the last week of April and departed in the second week of August. "In general they haunt tall buildings, churches, and steeples, and breed only in such" (White 1789:180).

(I vi 9) By his loved masonry ... Folio has "loued Mansonry": both words are problematic. F1's "loued" became "loved" in F3 (which tended to modernize the spelling); Rowe (1709:2312) turned that into "lov'd" (because the word only counts as one syllable). In Pope's second edition (1728:203) "mansonry" was changed to "masonry"; Theobald (1733:404) preferred to add a letter rather than subtract one, and he changed the word to "mansionry". After that, the reading "lov'd mansionry" came to be generally accepted. It means, I suppose, that people like to see swifts nesting in their neighbourhood. That may well be true -- but is it what Shakespeare meant?

I have my doubts. I think that F3 may have got the wrong idea. If "loved" were the intended word, one would expect

F1 to have "lou'd" (as at IV iii 17), not "loued". I rather suspect that "loued" is a mistake for "loude", and that Banquo was thinking about the aerial displays -- screaming parties, they are called -- which are (or used to be) a familiar sound in English villages during the summer, as gangs of swifts fly around together at top speed, making as much noise as they can (Lack 1956:46-7).

But if "loued" means "loud", what can "Mansonry" mean? Apparently it has to be agreed that Shakespeare invented a new word, and that the printer (or somebody) failed to understand what it meant. So what might this new word have been? I am tempted to think that the "M" is the mistake, like the "B" in the line above, and that the word we are looking for is "Chansonry". That "Ch" might be mistaken for a clumsy "M" seems plausible to me. The word "chanson" was used once elsewhere by Shakespeare (Hamlet II ii 438), and "chansonry" is or would be a well-formed word: it could exist, if someone wanted it to exist. So I am inclined to read "loud chansonry".

As for "mansionry", that word had no recorded existence before Theobald dreamed it up; and even since then it has never had any existence (not counting an occasional nineteenth-century poem) outside editions of Shakespeare. The word "chansonry" has no recorded existence at all;* but I still think it has something to be said for it. With "chansonry", Banquo talks about two different things -- first about screaming parties, then about nests. With "mansionry", he talks about the same thing twice.

* As a made-up word, *chansonnerie* does have some existence in French. Like chansonry, it is, to say the least, a well-formed word.

(I vi 14) Where they most breed ... Another emendation of Rowe's (1709:2312): start a new sentence with "Where" and change "must" to "most". (Obviously right: questioned only by the most obtuse of editors.)

(I vi 17) The love that follows us ... It has occurred to the king, somewhere along the way, that perhaps he may be making a nuisance of himself by descending on Macbeth and his wife without adequate notice. This is his way of apologizing.

This is the last we see of Duncan. In scene 7 he is having his supper in the next room; in scene 8 he is in bed; in scene 10 he is found dead.

If the decision had been mine, I would have ended Act I here, rather than one scene later.

C.F. Dec 2025, revised May 2026