

Scene 14 (III i 15-170)

The scene should begin:

Flourish. Enter Macbeth, Lords and Attendants, meeting Banquo.

Two or three lords should be present -- it does not matter who. They do not have anything to do or say. They are only there because Macbeth wants them to witness his display of friendliness for Banquo. (As usual, he overdoes it.)

Banquo has also aged since we saw him last. By now he has a son, whose name is Fleance -- a future king, perhaps, if the witches' prophecies come true. (They do indeed come true, but only three hundred years into the future.) Fleance seems to be a teenager (around the same age as Malcolm and Donalbain in scenes 6-11) -- not old enough to speak up for himself, but old enough to go on a long ride with his father. (He is too young to be invited to the banquet.) It does not appear that Banquo has a living wife: he seems rather to be a widower. But it does seem certain that Fleance is his only son.

Possibly Fleance should be with his father here. Kemble (1794:32-3) thought so, and I can understand why. Unless the audience can see him, they can hardly be expected to understand Macbeth's question, "Goes Fleance with you?" (III i 44). Besides, even though he does not get to speak, it seems right for Fleance to appear more than once, not just for a very brief moment in scene 16.

(III i 16) If he had been forgotten, ... The botcher has a problem -- a problem created by his own botch. It is necessary for Lady Macbeth to appear in scene 13; it is NOT necessary for her to appear in scene 14. And yet, with the scenes botched together, here she is. The botcher did not think it allowable to let her stand there with nothing to say -- so he gave her three lines which properly belong to Macbeth. It does not appear from Folio when he wanted her to exit (see below).

In D'Avenant's adaptation (Chetwin 1674:28-9), Lady Macbeth was removed from this scene, and Macbeth was allowed to complete his own train of thought:

Here's our chief Guest, if he had been forgotten,
It had been want of musick to our Feast.

Acting editions of Shakespeare's play consistently omitted Lady Macbeth from this scene -- till Irving (1888:40) made the mistake of bringing her back. Kemble (1794:32) has this:

Here's our chief guest; if he had been forgotten,
It had been as a gap in our great feast,
And all things unbecoming.

That captures the rhythm of the lines correctly; Folio gets it wrong.

(III i 24) ... For ever knit. If the scene is being performed (unwisely) as it stands in Folio, this is the moment for the lady to make her exit. No one speaks, but at least she can be bowed off the stage with proper courtesy. No exit is marked for her in Folio. From Rowe (1709:2327) onwards, editors have made her exit with the lords (III i 53). But that is obviously wrong. For scene 15 to make sense, she cannot be present (but silent) during the conversation between Macbeth and Banquo (III i 25-48). She cannot be waved off the stage without a word when Macbeth tells the lords that he wants to be left alone (III i 49-53): he would never dream of humiliating his wife like that.

(III i 36) My lord, I will not. A crucial moment, and the actors need to make sure that the audience take proper note of it. The promise which Macbeth exacts from Banquo will be kept by Banquo's ghost.

(III i 37-42) We hear ... If the transposition that I have suggested is made (scene 13), the remaining passage here will look (and scan) like this:

For a dark hour or twain.
Macbeth. Fail not our feast.
Banquo. My lord, I will not.
Macbeth. Hie you to horse. Adieu,
Till you return at night. Goes Fleance with you?
Banquo. Ay, my good lord. Our time does call upon us.

(III i 50) To make ... Folio's punctuation is misleading. Theobald saw that a new sentence started here: "... at night; to make ... welcome, ..." (1733:421).

(III i 53) Exeunt Lords. The lords have seen what Macbeth wanted them to see: he has no further use for them. On the stage, they exit at this point. In a movie, they stay where they are and Macbeth retires to his private quarters.

(III i 59) To be thus ... This means, I suppose, that he is wearing his crown.

(III i 68) ... Mark Antony's was by Caesar. The allusion is to a passage in Plutarch's Lives (transl North 1579:985), cited also in Antony and Cleopatra (II iii 19-21). An Egyptian soothsayer tells Antony that the odds are always going to be against him because in a parallel universe his daemon is afraid of Caesar's daemon. A few editors -- most notably Dyce (1866:33) -- have suggested that "Caesar" should be changed to "Caesar's" accordingly. But two lines above we have "under him", not "under his" -- "under Banquo", not "under Banquo's".

(III i 75) No son of mine ... The son is hypothetical: Macbeth has no children. Back in scene 7, he was assuming that his wife would bear him sons (I vii 84-6). With the passage of time since then, there is no longer any hope of that. That is why Macbeth has become embittered; that is why he and his wife have drifted apart.

(III i 85-170) ... and two Murderers. This dialogue between Macbeth and the murderers is really rather odd. It seems absurdly disproportionate. One would have thought that the matter could be dealt with very quickly:

Macbeth. Will you kill Banquo for me?
First Murderer. Yes.
Macbeth. And Fleance too?
Second Murderer. Yes.

And the details could be settled later. Yet here we have more than 80 lines of dialogue -- and this, we are told (III i 88), is the continuation of a conversation begun the day before.

These murderers, though Folio calls them that, are not professional assassins. They have no thought of killing anyone until they are talked into it. It is clear that Macbeth is enjoying himself. It amuses him to exercise his power in making people do what he wants them to do, even making them think what he wants them to think. It is doubtful, however, whether the audience is going to enjoy it as much as he does. Watching a cat play with two helpless mice may be amusing for a while, but it is not going to stay amusing for very long.

Acting editions generally shorten this dialogue, more or less brutally. Kemble's script, for example (1794:34-6), omits 38 lines out of 86 (lines 86, 92-105, 112-29, 145-9).

Those cuts do not seem excessive to me. But that is for the actors to decide. How much of this dialogue will the audience accept before it begins to lose interest?

(III i 89) *It was, ...* Folio gives this line to "Murth.", as if the two speak together. Steevens (1793:455) gave it to First Murderer, and most editors have gone along with that. The actors should decide between themselves how to share out their few lines. Masefield (1943:50) thought that the murderers should be differently motivated, one by outraged vanity and the other by sheer desperation. But these are very minor characters, and the actors should not overdo it.

(III i 162) *Fleance, his son, ...* Fleance's name was mentioned earlier (III i 44); now we are told, what we only assumed before, that he is Banquo's son. If Fleance is indeed the ONLY child, he would seem to be more of a threat than Banquo himself. (Does he have a sister? An illegitimate half-brother? We are given no hint of that.) Let Fleance be killed immediately, let Banquo be prevented from fathering any more children, and the witches' prophecy cannot possibly come true.

C.F. Aug 2025