

Scene 16 (III iii)

A short time later, just after sunset, at the far end of an avenue leading to the palace. Just out of sight, there is a lodge: if we feel like stretching our legs, we dismount there. The lodgekeeper will look after our horses. If it is getting dark, as it is now, he will provide us with a torch.

(III iii 2) Enter ... Three suspicious-looking characters appear. Two of them are the ruffians we saw Macbeth making love to in scene 14. The third is one of Macbeth's hired thugs -- possibly the same character who appears in scenes 25 and 27, where his name is revealed to be Seyton. His arrival is a surprise, to the ruffians no less than to the audience. Despite all the time that he has taken talking them into it, it turns out that Macbeth does not trust the ruffians to get the job done: he thinks that they may need some professional help. Third Murderer leads the way: he is the man who knows where the ambush is to be set. The ruffians follow. First Murderer is suspicious -- and rightly so, we may suspect.

When did it begin to seem obvious that the two ruffians are the designated scapegoats -- doomed to the same fate as the two unfortunate chamberlains in scene 10? When did playgoers start to think like gangsters? A modern audience, given the slightest sign, will understand immediately what the plan is. Once Banquo and Fleance have been killed, Third Murderer will kill the two ruffians -- and then he will arrange the bodies to make it look as if the four of them all killed one another.

Is that what Shakespeare intended? I cannot say that I catch any hint of it in the text. (On the contrary, if this theory is right, it will have to be "Third Murderer", not Folio's "First Murderer", who appears in the following scene.) But he had examples in front of him, in the account of the murder of King Duff. It was not just the two chamberlains who were killed: the labourers who were hired to help in burying the king's body were also disposed of once the job was done (Holinshed 1587:150). Let the actors decide. If they want to play it this way (with the necessary adjustment in scene 17), I think they are allowed to do so.

(III iii 13-17) Hark! ... Folio's speech prefixes need to be adjusted here. Lines 15-17 belong to Third Murderer: he is the one who would know that the other people on the guest

list have all arrived. So line 13 should be given to Second Murderer. (And Banquo's line might be thought to come better after Third Murderer's speech, rather than before it.)

(III iii 19-21) *Almost a mile ...* Third Murderer answers a question which has not been asked: "How far is it from here to the palace?" Possibly a line has gone missing. But his meaning is clear enough. "No, Banquo is not going away -- he is doing what everyone does -- leaving his horse at the lodge and walking the rest of the way."

(III iii 22) *Enter ...* Folio makes Banquo and Fleance appear too soon (see below).

(III iii 26) *It will be rain ...* This is the moment for Banquo and Fleance to enter.* Banquo is talking about the weather as they come into view.

* As in scene 8, Capell (1768:41) considered it unseemly for a torch to be carried by a nobleman's son. He thought that three characters should enter here -- Banquo, Fleance, servant with torch -- and that the latter two should escape together when Banquo is attacked. I think we may assume that Shakespeare let Banquo let Fleance do the carrying.

(III iii 27-30) *Let it come down!* The trap is sprung. Third Murderer seems to hang back, waiting to see if the ruffians can get the job done without his help. First Murderer goes for Fleance -- but accomplishes nothing beyond striking out the light. (He admits to that in line 32.) Second Murderer attacks Banquo, but does not succeed in killing him at once. Though taken by surprise, Banquo puts up some resistance -- but his lines and his life are soon cut short, probably by Third Murderer. Fleance, meanwhile, has escaped into the darkness.

(III iii 31-36) *Who ...* Third Murderer conducts the post mortem. Fleance got away (that was First Murderer's fault) but Banquo is thoroughly dead.

(III iii 37) *Exeunt.* It will be helpful if they carry the body with them, as if intending to throw it into some nearby ditch.

We never hear much about the aftermath. From scene 19 we learn that Banquo's body has been discovered, and that Fleance, by running away, has laid himself open to the same suspicion as Malcolm and Donalbain did. But that, as we know, was not Macbeth's intention. In letting it be

supposed that Fleance might have instigated the murder, he is merely making the best of a bad job.

As for Fleance, he is not seen again. (D'Avenant, disliking loose ends, let both him and Donalbain return to participate in the denouement; Shakespeare just forgot about him.) According to Holinshed (1587:172-3), Fleance fled to Wales, and found refuge with the prince of that country. Some time later, having seduced the prince's daughter and made her pregnant, he was found out and put to death. But the prince's daughter, in due course, gave birth to a son ... and this posthumous bastard meant that Banquo's lineage could survive.

C.F. Aug 2025