

Scene 19 (III vi)

The morning after the banquet, in a corridor of the palace.

Once the Hecate scene has been omitted, for whatever reason (because it is spurious, because it is pointless, because it requires too much machinery), scene 19 will follow directly on scene 17. And so it should. That was the party; this is the morning after.

Banquo's murder is already a known fact. At first light (so we may suppose), search parties were sent out to look for Banquo and Fleance. Banquo's body was discovered, thrown into a ditch; Fleance was nowhere to be found. Banquo's horse was still in the stables; Fleance's horse was missing. Those facts are enough to make Fleance the prime suspect. But people have not forgotten that something similar happened once before. Back in scene 12, Malcolm and Donalbain were suspected of contriving their father's murder; yet there was never any evidence against them, beyond the bare fact of their having run away. That gives people pause. Instead of wondering whether Fleance is guilty, perhaps they ought to be wondering whether Malcolm and Donalbain were innocent. And where is that line of thought going to lead them?

For Macbeth, this is just so much bad luck. It was not some cunning plan of his for Duncan's sons to bring suspicion on themselves by running off. He did not care what they did. It was not some cunning plan of his for Fleance to bring suspicion on himself by running off. On the contrary, he wanted Fleance dead. Nevertheless, it is the similarity between those two cases which has got people thinking. After Macbeth's behaviour at the banquet last night, they are ready to believe the worst of him. What was unthinkable before has become thinkable now.

(III vi 2) Enter ... Two of the lords who were present at the banquet appear. Folio calls them "Lenox" and "Another lord", but (as usual) it makes no difference which characters they are. Their conversation is just one example of the many conversations which are taking place, as the lords revise their ideas. These two are visibly nervous: they look over their shoulders now and then, as if fearful of being overheard.

(III vi 17) Was not that nobly done? Spoken loudly, for the benefit of anyone who may be listening.

(III vi 17) *Ay, and wisely too, ...* Spoken softly.

It seems to be Lenox's theory that Macbeth bribed the chamberlains to murder Duncan and then killed them to stop their mouths. As far as I can see, no one ever suspects that Macbeth might have committed the murder himself. We know for a fact that he did, because we saw him with Duncan's blood on his hands; inside the play, only his wife saw that.

(III vi 20) *He has borne all things well* Spoken loudly.

(III vi 22) *As and it please heaven ...* Spoken softly.

(III vi 25) *... the tyrant's feast, ...* The first indication that something is going wrong with this scene. I doubt whether Lenox is ready to start calling Macbeth "the tyrant" -- still less so while he is inside the tyrant's palace.

(III vi 28-43) *The son of Duncan, ...* And now we descend into nonsense. This whole speech is wrong. The other lord knows things that he cannot possibly know. Even if it were possible for him to know them (which, I insist, it is not), he ought not to share his knowledge with us. The news that Macduff has fled to England should come as a surprise to us, just as it does to Macbeth, at the end of scene 20. The news that an English army is about to invade Scotland should come as a surprise to us, just as it does to Macduff, halfway through scene 22. The other lord's speech spoils those surprises for us. For that reason it should certainly be regarded as an interpolation.*

* One small clue occurs at the end of this speech. In line 42 "their king" refers to Edward; so does "he" in the same line. Two lines later, however, "he" has turned into Macbeth. (Hanmer's emendation, "the" for "their" (1744:521), only adds to the confusion.)

For proof of that, one has only to look ahead to the last few lines of this scene, where it is clear that the news contained in this speech is (quite rightly) unknown to Lenox and the other lord. The character who hopes that Macduff will keep his distance is unaware of his having fled the country. The character who hopes that "some holy angel" will carry a message to England is unaware of Macduff's having done just that. Those surprises which Shakespeare has in store for us will be surprises for them too.

But why was the interpolation made? There must have been some reason for it.

My guess would be that the significance of the other lord's speech lies not in what he says but in the time that it takes him to say it. The stage-hands had a fair amount of work to do, clearing away the furniture used in the banquet scene and setting up the machinery needed for the cauldron scene -- and I am guessing that scene 19, in its original form, did not last long enough for them to get the work done. And therefore Shakespeare threw in these extra lines, instructing the actor to speak them at a measured pace, not expecting that anyone would ever pay them close attention. In a word, this speech is just padding.

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