

Scene 5 (I v)

Later that day, in Macbeth's castle at Inverness

As this scene begins, a procession of people are on their way to the castle: first, a messenger sent on ahead by Macbeth to let his wife know that the king is coming; second, Macbeth himself; and third, the king and his entourage, who are riding fast, with the jolly idea of overtaking Macbeth and surprising him when he arrives. (In the real world, the distance from Forres to Inverness is about 25 miles.)

(I v 2) Enter Macbeth's wife alone ... Macbeth spoke of his wife in the previous scene (I iv 56-7); now we get to meet her. She is holding an open letter -- the letter written by Macbeth the night before, after his encounter with the witches.

(I v 3-14) "They met me ... She is reading the letter aloud as she comes on to the stage. Why is she doing that? There is no reason for her to read it aloud unless the letter is going to tell us something that we need to know and do not know already. But the letter that she is reading does not do that. On the contrary, it begins by telling us something which cannot possibly be true -- that he has made inquiries about the witches. He has definitely not done that. There was, we know, a tacit agreement between Macbeth and Banquo that the encounter with the witches was to be kept a secret between them: they would not tell anyone anything about it. Besides, even if he wanted to ask someone, even if he could think of someone who might know something, he would not have had the time to do it.

The letter that Folio makes her read is spurious: this cannot be the letter that Macbeth wrote to her. The whole tone of it is wrong. "A funny thing happened to me on the way to Forres, and I thought you might like to know about it straight away." He tells her of the witches' prediction that he will be king one day; he says nothing of taking any action to make sure that the prediction comes true. In fact we know -- because the lady spells it out for us later (I vii 58-63) -- what the real letter said. It told her that he had made up his mind to murder Duncan and was only waiting for the right opportunity. The lady thinks that would be a very good idea.

(I v 15) Glamis thou art, ... This is where the scene should start. The lady enters with the letter in her hand (so that

we know how she knows about the encounter with the witches), says nothing until she reaches the centre of the stage, and then launches into this speech.

(I v 24-5) **Thus thou must do ...** There is probably some corruption here, but the gist is clear enough. The actor will have to bluff her way through, as generations of actors have done before.

(I v 31) **Enter ...** A servant enters in great excitement, to announce that the king is on his way. The servant sent ahead by Macbeth has just arrived with the news, but is too exhausted to deliver it himself.

(I v 43) **The raven himself is hoarse ...** Instantly the lady sees that this is the chance that Macbeth is waiting for. Just as quickly as he did, she realizes that the king has created the opportunity for his own murder. Almost as quickly, she realizes that her husband is liable to change his mind. She knows him. She is sure that he is ambitious; she is not sure that he is sufficiently ruthless. It will be her wifely duty (and her pleasure) to keep him up to the mark.

(I v 57) **That my keen knife ...** Evidently she is willing to participate in the murder -- but in the event she does not go as far as that.

(I v 59) **Enter ...** Macbeth arrives in a hurry, almost as out of breath as the servant who preceded him. How they greet one another ... is for the actors to decide.

(I v 62-4) **Thy letters have ...** Just to be clear, "letters" could mean a single letter (as it does in Othello IV i 286), and that is what it means here. (If you think that the audience might be confused, you are probably allowed to change this to "Thy letter has".)

At this point she still has the letter in her hand. She folds it up and puts it in her pocket. Perhaps she intends to destroy it -- that might be the safest thing to do. But I suspect that she means to keep it, in case her husband starts losing his nerve. As far as she is concerned, this letter is a promise, and she is not going to let him break it. The letter reappears, I think, in scene 7.

(I v 69) **Oh, never ...** And with these few words they come to an agreement: they are going to kill the king that very night.

(I v 71) Your face, my thane, ... Possibly some sound is heard -- a hunting horn perhaps -- which signifies the king's approach. That produces a grimace on Macbeth's face. And that produces this warning from his wife.

(I v 72) ... strange matters. To beguile ... Folio's punctuation is wrong; Theobald (1733:403) put it right.

(I v 74) ... look like the innocent flower, ... Folio prints "th'innocent", as if it expects the stress to be on the "o". Elsewhere, however, the scansion requires "inn'cent" (II ii 47, III i 94, III ii 55, IV iii 20), as one would expect, and I assume that the same applies here.

(I v 77) This night's great business ... The lady takes it upon herself to make the necessary arrangements.

For pity's sake, let her not be made to mouth the next two lines. I think the scene should end like this:

... and you shall put
This night's great business into my dispatch.
Macbeth. We will speak further.
Lady. Only look up clear:
Leave all the rest to me. *Exeunt.*

They go off in different directions -- he to get himself cleaned up after his long ride, she to meet the king, who is about to arrive.

C.F. Dec 2025