

Scene 7 (I vii)

Some time later, in the castle

This scene takes place after sunset (hence "Torches"), in a corridor outside the room where the king is having his supper. We do not see him. We see the servants bringing dishes from the kitchen, and we hear the music ("Hoboyes") being played for his entertainment. Whether the music should continue throughout the scene is difficult to say. Should there be other noises -- clapping and cheering, bursts of laughter -- coming from the next room? The audience needs to be aware of the dissonance between the merriment there and the talk of treason on the stage. But they also need to be able to listen carefully to what Macbeth and his wife are saying.

(I vii 4) Then enter Macbeth. ... Macbeth enters from the side of the stage to which the food is being delivered. He is having second thoughts. He can think of many reasons for not committing the murder, only one for committing it. (Of course it does not occur to him that by murdering Duncan he will be making Malcolm king.)

(I vii 10) ... this bank and shoal of time ... Folio's "Schoole" was deciphered as "shoal" by Theobald (1733:405). Most editions concur.

(I vii 14-15) ... the inventor ... This is one of the places where F2 managed to lose a whole line, jumping ahead from "the inventor" to "the ingredience". The damage was made good by Pope (1723:533).

(I vii 14-16) This even-handed justice ... The first expression of the thought which will turn him into a tyrant. If he makes himself king by murdering Duncan, will he not be setting an example which may come back and bite him?

(I vii 36) Know you not he has? ... His wife comes looking for him. She knows that he has got cold feet (just as she feared he would). He knows that she knows. She is waiting for him to say his piece before she goes onto the attack.

(I vii 48-50) Wouldst thou have that ... I do not see how this can make sense as it stands: a line or two got lost, I think, between the bottom of one column (135a) and the top of the next (135b). But there is nothing to be done about it. The lady will have to bluff her way through, as generations of actors have done before her.

(I vii 55) Who dares do more ... Folio's "Who dares no more" makes some sort of sense, but not the sense that is required. The change from "no" to "do" was made by Rowe (1709:2314): it is one of the very few emendations that have hardly ever been questioned.

(I vii 58) When you durst do it, ... This is where we discover exactly what that letter said -- the letter which we saw her reading at the start of scene 5. (I think she might take it out of her pocket and wave it under his nose.) Macbeth told her that he had made up his mind to kill the king as soon as he could contrive an opportunity -- and the opportunity has now presented itself, without needing to be contrived. As far as the lady is concerned (no doubt she is stretching the point), that letter was a promise, and he is not to be allowed to break it.

(I vii 63) I have given suck, ... The lady's language is powerful, but her logic is defective. She seems to mean: "If I had promised to do something as solemnly as you did, I would keep my promise, even if it meant that I had to kill my own baby."

She speaks of this baby as if were hers and not his; she speaks of it as if it is no longer alive. Apparently we are meant to infer that she had been married before. (Some chroniclers say that she had been, though Holinshed does not.) Her first husband is dead; so is the child that she had with him.* It is possible, I think (if the actors want to play it like this), that she and Macbeth only got married quite recently. They have no children together yet, but there is every reason for them to expect that some children will turn up. (But they never do.)

* The baby's sex is indeterminate: "it" in line 65, "his" in line 66, and "his" at the time could mean either "his" or "its". If the actor prefers to say "its", no one is going to complain.

(I vii 70-1) We fail? ... Sarah Siddons made a meal of this line, but the lady's meaning is really not in doubt. "How can you even think that we might fail? Just keep your nerve, and we cannot possibly fail."

(I vii 71) But screw your courage ... An incomprehensible metaphor. In a case like this, the actor needs to put a little more emphasis than normal on the words which the audience can be expected to understand, a little less than normal on the words which it cannot.

(I vii 74) ... his two chamberlains ... The lady has a plan. There is no point in their murdering the king unless the blame can be put on someone else, and she has two someones in mind -- the attendants whose duty it is to keep watch while the king is asleep (and who, for that reason, have been brought along).

(I vii 77) Shall be a fume ... More metaphors which the audience cannot be expected to understand. (They seem to be derived from alchemy.) But "swinish sleep" is plain enough.

(I vii 93-6) I am settled, ... The last four lines of this scene seem doubtfully authentic to me: I suspect that the original ending has been lost. But Macbeth has to have something to say to get himself off the stage.

They return to the dining-room. Music and merriment continue for a while. Then silence descends.

C.F. Dec 2025