Scene 8 (II i)

Some time later, in the castle courtyard

The entertainments are over and everyone is retiring for the night. Bedrooms in the castle have been provided for the king, for his two sons, and for Banquo. The king's other companions (including Macduff and Lennox) have had to find lodgings in the town. They have all gone by now. The castle gate has been closed and made secure. Everything is quiet.

(II i 2) Enter ... Two characters enter, a man and a boy. The boy is carrying a torch (to let us know that this is the middle of the night). By the light of the torch we recognize the man as Banquo; the boy is nobody we know. Folio's notation calls him Fleance — and we are going to discover later that Banquo has a son named Fleance.* But this is not Banquo's son. I cannot think of any reason why Shakespeare would want to introduce us to Banquo's son in the middle of the night, in the middle of Macbeth's castle. Even if he had some reason which I have failed to think of, there would be no point is his doing it unless he made it clear what he was doing; and there is nothing in the text which serves to identify the character. (Macbeth, when he enters, ignores him.) The conversation between them is as of master and servant, not as of father and son. Plainly this boy is just a servant, assigned to see to it that Banquo gets safely to bed.† (It is possible, of course, that in some production this character was played by the same actor who played Fleance in scene 16. Perfectly possible, but perfectly irrelevant. The same remark applies to "Lennox" in scene 20.)

* Capell, thinking it unseemly for a nobleman's son to carry a torch, introduced a servant for the purpose: "Enter Banquo, and Fleance; Servant with a Torch before them" (1768:21). But that misses the point entirely.

† "It has been suggested to me by my friend Mr. Strutt, that the appearance of Fleance was either a mistake, or some slovenly expedient of the players; he has no other employment than that of a mere attendant; and, indeed, the decorum of the scene seems to require two servants, one attending on Banquo, and the other in the ordinary service of his master" (Seymour 1805:192-3). (The friend in question is Benjamin Strutt (1754—1827), author of a history of Colchester (1803).)

(II i 5-6) The moon is down. ... These two half-lines should be transposed, as they were by Davenant (Chetwin 1674:17). Both sense and scansion are better with the lines arranged

like this:

Banquo. How goes the night, boy?
Servant. I have not heard the clock.
The moon is down.
Banquo. And she goes down at twelve.
Servant. I take it, 'tis later, sir.

The same thought occurred (independently, it seems) to Seymour (1805:193). I am surprised that the suggestion has not been generally adopted: perhaps the fact that it was made by Seymour has prejudiced people against it.

(II i 9) Hold, take my sword. ... Banquo is beginning to get ready to go to bed. He takes off his sword and gives it the servant. One line later he takes off something else (his dagger, perhaps) and gives that to the servant too. Since the servant is already carrying a torch, the actors will need to work out between themselves how to handle this business.

(II i 17) Give me my sword. ... Banquo hears somebody approaching. He tells the servant to give him his sword back: I am not sure whether he should go so far as to draw it. His reaction proves what a jumpy state he is in. He is, after all, inside a locked castle, his friend's home: he has not the slightest reason for apprehending any danger.

I assume that Macbeth makes a joke of it. Perhaps he holds up his hands, as if to say, "I surrender!" Perhaps Banquo laughs, sheepishly. He puts his sword away and gives it to the servant again.

(II i 38) So I lose none ... They are still joking. There is no edge to this exchange, as far as I can tell. They are thinking (or pretending to think) of some indefinitely distant future. They bow to one another, with exaggerated courtesy, as they part.

(II i 46) Is this a dagger ... The transition is very abrupt. Perhaps the dagger has been flickering into view for some time before this. The servant, of course, would not be able to see the dagger, any more than the guests at the banquet can see Banquo's ghost. This incident with the dagger is indeed meant to prepare us for the ghost: we learn from it that Macbeth, in moments of extreme stress, is liable to start hallucinating.

(II i 54) As this which now I draw. ... He draws his own dagger at this point. Shakespeare takes it for granted that

the noblemen in this play will all be wearing swords and daggers in their belts.

(II i 70) ... which way they walk, ... Folio's "which they may walke" cannot be right. Rowe changed it to "which way they walk", and no one has disagreed with that, as far as I know. I would rather read "whither they may walk". That emendation is less of a wrench, and I prefer it for that reason. But I do not feel strongly about it. Either way, the sense is much the same.

(II i 75) A bell rings. ... This is the bell which Macbeth is expecting his wife to ring, when (as he tells the servant) his drink is ready. It is just a little bell, nothing like the alarum bell which is rung in scene 10 and elsewhere.

C.F. Dec 2025