

• But who did bid thee join with us?' : The Problem of  
the Third Murderer in Macbeth

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English 700  
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Advisor: Dr. Jaarsma

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By

Albert M. Bender

Ben Jonson, in his infinite wisdom and jealousy,  
uttered perhaps the most famous assertion that Shakespeare  
was far from perfect:

I remember the players have often  
mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare  
that in his writing, whatsoever he penned,  
he never blotted out a line. My answer hath  
been: Would he had blotted a thousand.<sup>1</sup>

What Jonson also has done, however unwittingly since,  
similarly, he both admired and praised his friend and fellow  
dramatist, is to open the gates for a flood of rather careless  
Shakespeare teachers and students who are quick to attribute  
any textual inconsistency to being just another blunder by  
an only human master. Solutions to the "problems" arising  
throughout Shakespearean drama can, for the most part, be

found right in the plays themselves. We need only to respond naturally, as would the Elizabethan audience, to the thoughts and actions of the characters, and we must not let the obvious cloud our perception. It is, then, the purpose of this essay to illustrate an example of such a problem and its solution.

In Macbeth (III.iii.) the climactic murder of Banquo is preceded by the sudden appearance of a third murderer:

1 Murderer. But who did bid thee join with us?  
 3 Murderer. Macbeth  
 2 Murderer. He needs not our mistrust, since  
 He delivers our offices, and what  
 We have to do, to the direction  
 Just.  
 1 Murderer. Then stand with us.<sup>2</sup>

Since, in scene i., we have just seen Macbeth hire only two murderers, we may be perplexed not only because of the obvious number discrepancy, but also because of Shakespeare's apparent attempt to insert a new character without first furnishing a logical reason for the character's presence. Unfortunately, to satisfy our own sense of the mysterious, we have credited Shakespeare with providing "answers" which, in fact, cannot be substantiated in the text and, therefore, would not have been intended for the original audience.

Scholarly evidence indicates that the first theatergoers to see Macbeth assembled in possibly two different years "for there is no specific record of a production earlier than April of 1611, when a performance at the Globe was described by the astrologer Dr. Simon Forman. There is good

reason to believe, nevertheless, that Macbeth was among the many plays performed at court in July and August of 1606 for the entertainment of the king's brother-in-law, King Christian IV of Denmark ... Allusions in the play to equivocation and to the hanging of traitors have usually been taken to refer to the trial on March 28, 1606, and the hanging on May 3 of the Jesuit Henry Garnet for his complicity in the Gunpowder Plot..."<sup>3</sup>

What this dating of the play reveals is that Macbeth is a Jacobean drama, and thus we have a significant piece to our puzzle. Since "it is known that King James liked his plays short,"<sup>4</sup> Ronald Watkins and Jeremy Lemmon share A.C. Bradley's belief that Shakespeare himself abridged Macbeth. Bradley, theorizing where the omissions occur, suggests "Only in the first part, for the rest is full enough. And surely anyone who wanted to cut the play down would have operated, say, on Macbeth's talk with Banquo's murderers, or on III.vi. [the brief conversation Lennox has with a Lord], or on the very long dialogue of Malcolm and Macduff [IV.iii.], instead of reducing the most exciting part of the drama."<sup>5</sup>

Bradley's theory gains considerable credence if we examine the challenge that Murderer 1 poses to Murderer 3. Clearly, we are viewing a scene in medias res, or, at least, we can surmise that Murderer 3 has said something which warrants Murderer 1 to begin his question with the contrasting conjunction "But." Apparently we are to understand, as did Shakespeare's audience, that action has occurred offstage. Herein lies the logical solution to our problem, and, once again, we can, by



looking back into the text, determine not only what the third murderer says, but also his identity, which would have been no mystery to the Elizabethans. Thus, it is time to vindicate William Shakespeare.

Since, as we have seen, the two murderers question their newly arrived cohort, we can dismiss any notion that Shakespeare lost track of his characters. Who, then, donned the cloak of an assassin? Although there is absolutely no evidence in the play, "It has been argued that the Third Murderer was Macbeth himself (Notes and Queries, 1860). Irving thought he was the attendant or servant mentioned in III. i. (Nineteenth Century, 1877). Libby thought he was Rosse (New Notes on Macbeth). Another critic thought he was Destiny. These theories are all fantastic."<sup>6</sup> Let us take the Macbeth theory, the one most commonly espoused by Shakespeare teachers, and dismiss it. We observe that in the scene following Banquo's murder, the First Murderer returns to Macbeth and confesses:

Most royal sir, Fleance is scap'd. (III.iv. 20)

whereupon Macbeth, in an aside, responds:

Then comes my fit again. I had else been perfect;  
Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,  
As broad and general as the casing air.  
But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd, bound in  
To saucy doubts and fears. (III.iv. 21-25)

Obviously, as Kenneth Muir points out, "Macbeth's agitation

in III. iv. when he hears that Fleance has escaped is proof that he cannot have been present at the murder of Banquo."<sup>7</sup> Just as obvious, however, is the fact that Shakespeare, through the use of soliloquies and asides, makes clear the thoughts, motives, and plans of his characters. We can therefore assume that if Macbeth were to be the Third Murderer, Macbeth himself would have told us so.

The theory concerning the attendant or servant, although considered "fantastic" by Muir, is, in fact, close to the truth. In checking the initial hiring of the murderers (III.i.), we see Macbeth preparing the killers (and Shakespeare preparing the audience) for the appearance of a third member:

Your spirits shine through you. Within this  
hour at most  
I will advise you where to plant yourselves,  
Acquaint you with the perfect spy o' th' time,  
The moment on't: for't must be done to-night,  
And something from the palace; always thought  
That I require a clearness; and with him,  
To leave no rubs nor botches in the work,  
(III.i. 128-34)

As early as the eighteenth century, critics, most notably Dr. Samuel Johnson, understood that the "' perfect spy,' mentioned by Macbeth in the foregoing scene, has, before they (the two murderers) enter upon the stage, given them the directions which were promised at the time of their agreement; yet one of the murderers suborned suspects him of intending to betray them; the other observes, that, by his exact knowledge of 'what they were to do,' he appears to be employed by Macbeth, and needs not be mistrusted."<sup>8</sup> We can, as a result,



see Shakespeare, perhaps partly to assuage King James, editing out such action which was not necessary to the audience's understanding of the play.

Where this servant theory creates a problem, again one of interpretation, is in our attempt to identify the attendant in question. Glen Byam Shaw's famous 1955 production at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre (now the Royal Shakespeare Theatre) in Stratford-upon-Avon provides a classic example. Michael Mullins, editor of an annotated facsimile of Shaw's promptbook, notes that the mystery man is Seyton since "Shaw says he is 'the head manservant of the Macbeth household. He is trusted, absolutely, by his employer.' Besides giving Seyton the messengers' and the third murderer's lives, the director made him a frequent silent witness on stage."<sup>9</sup> Although Shakespeare obviously never intended Seyton for such stardom, Shaw solves that problem, as can be observed in the promptbook, by crossing out the original character and allowing Seyton to perform his tour de force. If Seyton, however, is not to be considered a possible answer to our puzzle, then there is nobody left - and now we have, at last, found the linchpin. In our attempt to name the Third Murderer, we make him more important than Macbeth. If, instead, we view the murderer as an indicator of Macbeth's beginning decline, we perceive that "Shakespeare, as Wilson [J. Dover] suggests, introduces the Third Murderer to show that Macbeth, 'tyrant-like, feels he must spy even upon his chosen instruments.'"<sup>10</sup>

By the beginning of Act IV Macbeth furnishes further proof of his tyranny. Having again been baited by the witches and learning, from Lennox, that Macduff had fled to England, Macbeth decides:

The Castle of Macduff I will surprise,  
Seize upon Fife, give to the edge o' th' sword  
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls  
That trace him in his line. No boasting like  
a fool!  
This deal I'll do before this purpose cool.  
(IV.i. 150-54)

Accordingly, he hires, again offstage, murderers (as nondescript as Banquo's third murderer) who provide him, once more, with a quick solution to his problems.

Problems, however, are not restricted to the characters or their author; they declare war on the minds of the scholars, critics, and teachers who must employ all of their knowledge, skill, and resourcefulness if they are to ascertain the truth. The "problem" of the Third Murderer, is, in the final analysis, one of our own creation. If the Elizabethan (and Jacobean) audience did not try to make mystery stories out of Shakespeare's plays, then neither should we. It is easier to forgive Ben Jonson, who studied Shakespeare's art and realized the man made mistakes, than it is to forgive the individual who uses those mistakes as a reason not to study Shakespeare's art. Ironically, we can look to a Shakespearean character to say it another way, and thus, we would be wise to listen to Dromio of Syracuse:



... For they say every why hath a  
wherefore. (II. ii. 43-44)

We would, after all, not want to turn all of Shakespeare  
into a comedy of errors.

COMPLETED INDEPENDENT STUDY

To the Dean:

A written study or report accompanies this notification of the completion of the Independent Study respectfully submitted herewith for your approval. Study undertaken from: Summer - June to: August, 1979  
(Semester)

signed Albert W. Bender Date 7/24/79

approved, signed Richard [Signature]  
(Faculty Supervisor)

approved, signed \_\_\_\_\_  
(Chairman, Sponsoring Department)

1. Course number under which this study was registered 0520 (Eng. 700)
2. Title under which this course was registered Independent Study
3. Number of credits for which the student had registered this study 3
4. Grade for this completed study A
5. Faculty Supervisor's evaluation of this completed study \_\_\_\_\_  
a fine workable job involving  
a good deal of difficult research.
6. Course, if any, in lieu of which study was undertaken NONE

Note: A copy of the completed written study or report has been retained by the sponsoring department. The copy herewith respectfully submitted to the Dean for his approval should, if approved, be sent to the College Library.

Approved, Signed \_\_\_\_\_  
(Dean, Graduate and Research Programs)



School of Humanities

August 15, 1979

Mr. Albert Bender  
95E Howard Drive  
Bergenfield, NJ 07621

Dear Mr. Bender:

I have received a copy of your completed independent study, "'But who did bid thee join with us?': The Problem of the Third Murderer in Macbeth," which has been approved by Professor Jaarsma and Professor McNamara.

I wish to congratulate you upon the excellence of this piece of work. I hereby approve the allocation of three (3) credits for this independent study. I am authorizing its inclusion in the files of my office.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Richard Atnally". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Richard Atnally  
Dean, School of Humanities

cc: Dr. Jaarsma  
Dr. McNamara  
Mr. Evangelista



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson, "On Shakespeare's Art," The Works of William Shakespeare, vol. X (Stratford-on-Avon: The Shakespeare Head Press, 1907), p. 308.

<sup>2</sup> George Lyman Kittredge and Irving Ribner, ed., The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Lexington, Mass.: Xerox College Publishing, 1971). All Shakespeare quotations are taken from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Kittredge, p. 1289.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Watkins and Jeremy Lemmon, ed., The Tragedy of Macbeth (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy (London: MacMillan and Co., 1960), p. 469.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Muir, ed., Macbeth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 90.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Sherbo, ed., The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, vol. VIII (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 779-80.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Mullins, ed., Macbeth Onstage (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1976), p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Muir, p. 90.



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