

SCENE IV. Forres. The palace.

Flourish. Enter DUNCAN, MALCOLM, DONALBAIN, LENNOX, and Attendants

DUNCAN

Is execution done on Cawdor? Are not
Those in commission yet return'd?

MALCOLM

My liege,
They are not yet come back. But I have spoke
With one that saw him die: who did report
That very frankly he confess'd his treasons,
Implored your highness' pardon and set forth
A deep repentance: nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it; he died
As one that had been studied in his death
To throw away the dearest thing he owed,
As 'twere a careless trifle.

Refers to the execution of the previous thane of Cawdor, who betrayed Duncan and led a rebel uprising against him. (Duncan ordered his execution in Act 1 Scene 2.)

In the medieval era (11th century) in which the play is set, any treasonous act was punished by execution.

The previous thane of Cawdor, when about to be killed, confessed to everything he was accused of and begged for forgiveness. Malcolm says that, in the thane's entire life, he never did anything quite as well as he died.

"My liege" means my lord, referring to Duncan.

Malcolm is telling Duncan the people in charge of carrying out the execution of the thane of Cawdor have not yet returned but he has spoken to someone who saw the thane be executed.

DUNCAN

There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face:
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust.

Duncan is saying that there is no way of telling what's in a man's mind just by looking in his face. This links to the theme of duplicity that runs throughout the play and foreshadows Macbeth's own deceit.

Duncan clearly misjudged the previous thane of Cawdor who betrayed him so deeply. This is an example of foreshadowing as it is later revealed that Duncan also misjudges Macbeth. Perhaps this is one of Duncan's flaws – that he is too easily trusting?

Enter MACBETH, BANQUO, ROSS, and ANGUS

O worthiest cousin!

The sin of my ingratitude even now
Was heavy on me: thou art so far before
That swiftest wing of recompense is slow

Duncan praises Macbeth highly, showing his humility and compassion. He states that he feels that he has not rewarded Macbeth enough for his actions in battle and that this is a "sin". Duncan is clearly presented as a generous King and concerned with Christian morality.

To overtake thee. Would thou hadst less deserved,
That the proportion both of thanks and payment
Might have been mine! only I have left to say,
More is thy due than more than all can pay.

MACBETH

The service and the loyalty I owe,
In doing it, pays itself. Your highness' part
Is to receive our duties; and our duties
Are to your throne and state children and servants,

Which do but what they should, by doing everything

Safe toward your love and honour.

DUNCAN

Welcome hither:

Duncan uses this metaphor to express to Macbeth that he intends to make him rise in both status and power, a metaphor which is continued by Banquo who replies by saying that if he accomplishes anything then it will be due to Duncan's kindness.

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour
To make thee full of growing. Noble Banquo,
That hast no less deserved, nor must be known
No less to have done so, let me enfold thee
And hold thee to my heart.

BANQUO

There if I grow,
The harvest is your own.

DUNCAN

My plenteous joys,

Wanton in fulness, seek to hide themselves
In drops of sorrow. Sons, kinsmen, thanes,

Duncan confirms that his eldest Son Malcolm will inherit the throne. The audience would be aware of the significance of this decision as Macbeth (at least in part) wishes to become King himself.

And you whose places are the nearest, know

We will establish our estate upon
Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter
The Prince of Cumberland; which honour must

Not unaccompanied invest him only,
But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine
On all deservers. From hence to Inverness,
And bind us further to you.

This simile ties in with the symbolism of light/ dark throughout the play. Duncan's comparison between Malcolm and the stars that "shine" suggests that he believes his son to be virtuous, worthy and moral. In addition, Duncan's comparison of nobleness with the image of "stars" contrasts with Macbeth's plea for darkness: "Stars, hide your fires/ Let not light see my black and deep desires."

MACBETH

The rest is labour, which is not used for you:
I'll be myself the harbinger and make joyful
The hearing of my wife with your approach;
So humbly take my leave.

Throughout the play, dark and light are juxtaposed. Darkness is symbolic of evil, violence and moral corruption, with the Witches, the 'dark arts' and with the Devil. Macbeth here inhabits the darkness. Light is symbolic of morality, reason, purity, and with truth. Macbeth uses this metaphor to show that he wishes the "stars" to no longer burn, so that God cannot see the true nature of his "black [...] desires". This implies that Macbeth's ambitions are not pure and hints at his malevolent intentions.

DUNCAN

My worthy Cawdor!

MACBETH

[Aside] The Prince of Cumberland! that is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires:

Macbeth is now aware that Malcom (as well as Duncan) now stand between him and the throne. This means that Malcom is now a threat to Macbeth's ambitions.

These words, spoken by Macbeth, contain two instances of alliteration in the repeating sounds of "let light" and "deep desires," which emphasise Macbeth's passion behind his words.

The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

Exit

Macbeth is evidently aware that his thoughts are treasonous as he wishes to not "see" what he intends to do, implying his conflicted feelings of guilt and desire.

DUNCAN

True, worthy Banquo; he is full so valiant,
And in his commendations I am fed;
It is a banquet to me. Let's after him,

Whose care is gone before to bid us welcome:

It is a peerless kinsman.

Flourish. Exeunt

This is an example of dramatic irony as Duncan is now praising Macbeth directly after his (Macbeth's) aside proclaiming his malicious intentions.