

ACT V SCENE IV. Country near Birnam wood.

Drum and colours. Enter MALCOLM, SIWARD and YOUNG SIWARD, MACDUFF, MENTEITH, CAITHNESS, ANGUS, LENNOX, ROSS, and Soldiers, marching

Sound and visuals are used to signify the enormity and significance of the army that is against Macbeth. The contrast to the previous scene is striking – we now see the noblemen and the army stood together in juxtaposition to Macbeth who we have previously seen either alone or with one attendant. This is used to demonstrate the lack of support that Macbeth has.

Malcolm reveals his plan to the others – he plans to literally bring the wood to Dunsinane by using as camouflage. It is significant that nature (symbolised by the wood) which has been disrupted by Macbeth is now physically fighting back, a metaphor for Malcolm’s own fight to restore the natural order.

Macbeth believes that his defeat is impossible. As it stands, he will endure the siege upon his castle atop Dunsinane Hill by Malcolm’s forces.

The forward movement of time is referenced at many significant moments throughout the play signifying the passing of time and foreshadowing the ultimate demise of Macbeth. The final line stands in stark contrast to the others due to the lack of rhyme. In this way, Shakespeare enhances the dramatic quality of the play as the line conveys a sense of finality about the fate of Macbeth.

MALCOLM  
Cousins, I hope the days are near at hand  
That chambers will be safe.

MENTEITH  
We doubt it nothing.

SIWARD  
What wood is this before us?

MENTEITH  
The wood of Birnam.

MALCOLM  
Let every soldier hew him down a bough  
And bear't before him: thereby shall we shadow  
The numbers of our host and make discovery  
Err in report of us.

Soldiers  
It shall be done.

SIWARD  
We learn no other but the confident tyrant  
Keeps still in Dunsinane, and will endure  
Our setting down before 't.

MALCOLM  
'Tis his main hope:  
For where there is advantage to be given,  
Both more and less have given him the revolt,  
And none serve with him but constrained things  
Whose hearts are absent too.

MACDUFF  
Let our just censures  
Attend the true event, and put we on  
Industrious soldiership.

SIWARD  
The time approaches  
That will with due decision make us know  
What we shall say we have and what we owe.  
Thoughts speculative their unsure hopes relate,  
But certain issue strokes must arbitrate:  
Towards which advance the war.

Exeunt, marching

Malcolm addresses the others amicably as “cousins” – they are united together in the desire to defeat Macbeth (a character who has become symbolic of evil – link to theme of good v evil). The reference to “chambers” is a direct link to King Duncan’s murder and is a metaphor for his hope that his battle will root out all disloyalty in Scotland.

It is important to note that the Jacobean audience has been left in suspense about the significance of Birnam wood and how this will come about. Shakespeare has cleverly delayed this moment of clarity in order to increase the atmosphere of anticipation and speculation.

It is clear that Malcolm has the respect from his servants and army, unlike Macbeth who controls through fear and intimidation. Also, unlike Macbeth his orders are obeyed without question.

It seems that Macbeth’s fears of his own people being disloyal expressed in the previous scene are grounded. This links to the theme of appearances v reality and is deeply ironic as in A1S7 Macbeth states that “False face must hide what the false heart doth know.” Now it seems that he is now surrounded by those who, like him, have false “hearts”.