

Hamlet – act 1 scene 4

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This is a scene full of irony and foreshadowing and marks a defining moment in the play's plot. As Macbeth's inevitable future begins to take shape we see his transition from the hero, into the tragic hero. The scene opens with King Duncan asking about the execution of the former Thane of Cawdor, as he speaks to his son, Malcolm, he says, " 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 essentially saying that he should not have put his full trust in him based on the way that he appeared and acted.

Duncan's statement is an example of dramatic irony, because as the audience we know that Duncan's trust in Macbeth ultimately leads to his demise. Duncan continues by commending Macbeth on the battle won, and tells him that he owes Macbeth more than he can ever repay him. Little does Duncan know, in giving Macbeth the title of thane of Cawdor he is also giving Macbeth his throne and his life.

The irony continues as Macbeth humbles himself by saying, "... our duties are to your throne and state children and servants, which do but what they should... In other words, Macbeth is saying that just as a servant or child does as they should, so does he do all that he is capable of in the name of King Duncan. Duncan continues to commend both Macbeth and Banquo on their valiant effort in battle, but oddly enough Banquo is as deserving as Macbeth yet receives nothing. Even Duncan recognizes this, "... Noble Banquo, that hast no less deserved, nor must be known no less to have done so... " Meaning Banquo deserves no less than Macbeth, and everyone should know it.

This event poses many provocative questions: If everyone should know it, then why does Banquo acquire nothing but a pat on the back? Could it be that Macbeth was destined to receive his title by the witches, or is it a simple case of luck? If Banquo had been given the title would he have gone to such lengths to protect his title and attain the throne? The simple answer is no, this is due to the fact that Banquo is the voice of right and wrong and acts as the conscience throughout the play.

After announcing his son shall be the prince of Cumberland King Duncan declares that, "... onor must not unaccompanied invest him only, but signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine on all deservers. " This generates a vivid image of a righteous and noble person receiving the gratitude and respect that is rightfully theirs. In reality this statement functions just the opposite; it is used as another case of dramatic irony to emphasize how undeserving Macbeth is of the title of Thane of Cawdor and how deserving Banquo is of recognition. Duncan then invites himself to Macbeth's home so he can be further " obliged" by his hospitality.

This is a form of almost humorous tragic irony because as the play progresses we learn that Macbeth has no intentions of being hospitable at all, but rather wants to kill King Duncan. In Macbeth's aside he is disgusted by the announcement that Malcolm is the prince of Cumberland. He says to himself, "... That is a step on which I must fall down, or else o'erleap, for in my way it lies. " What Macbeth means by this is that Malcolm is now in his path to the throne, so either he will have to step over him or give up.

His next line is a famous quote which marks a defining moment in the play and acts to foreshadow the outcome of the play, " Stars, hide your fires; let not light see my black and deep desires. " At this point it is evident that Macbeth is beginning to covet the throne so much that he might commit an immoral act. The audience can see that Macbeth has begun his transformation from the honorable protagonist to the tragic hero for which we sympathize with but cannot again see in the same light.

Duncan adds to the suspense by making a final ironic statement, " Let's after him, whose care is gone before to bid us welcome: it is a peerless kinsman. " This translates to: let's follow in his example for there is no man his equal. This statement is the cherry on the cake in terms of setting Macbeth up for tragedy. This act in the play not only marks the transformation of Macbeth but also signals a shift in tone. No longer is the play written in an optimistic, up-beat tone but rather a gloomy tone with many references to darkness and evil.