

Exam Task - *Macbeth*

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 4 and then answer the question that follows. Duncan has announced that his son - the Prince of Cumberland - will become King. He has also said that he intends to travel to Macbeth's castle.

Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents deception in the play.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents deception in this extract
- how Shakespeare presents deception in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]
AO4 [4 marks]

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.

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

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.

In 'Macbeth' Shakespeare shows that many characters deceive: their intentions and true characters are different to the public face they present. Deception in the play takes several forms: Macbeth appears loyal yet murders the King; Lady Macbeth plays the 'honoured hostess' yet plots regicide; Macbeth himself is deceived by the words of the witches. The play serves as a warning about the way in which the manipulation of others, and the duplicitous nature of humanity. Macbeth's tragedy occurs in part because of his willingness to be deceived and misread prophecies in order to fulfill his ambitions.

Shakespeare structures the play so we see how a previously 'loyal kinsman' turns into a deceiver. In the second scene we learn of Macbeth's loyalty to the King and his desire to defend Duncan's kingdom. Unlike the treacherous Thane of Cawdor, 'brave Macbeth' fulfils his duty to his superior and defeats the rebels. The contrasting thoughts that we see in the extract show precisely how the words of the witches have poisoned his morals. In short, by the end of Act 1, we see the image of a man who is prepared to deceive in order to gain power.

In the extract, Macbeth presents himself as a man who 'humbly takes my leave' of Duncan, offering his labour and efforts in service to the King. The audience is allowed to see through aside Macbeth's true intentions. The Prince of Cumberland represents an obstacle between Macbeth and his desires and is described in metaphorical terms as a 'step/On which I must fall down'. Here the venom of his words often comes out in performance, suggesting that deception is in fact a skill akin to acting, but also one which cause emotional turmoil and requires the unappealing ability to lie. There is perhaps an element of shame attached to the process of deception, as if Macbeth realizes the immorality of his feelings: his request 'Let not light see my black and deep desires' is an acknowledgement that deception is 'black', i.e. evil in intent and is something that needs to remain hidden.

Deception has an impact upon the deceiver - Macbeth is an unhappy man who admits 'Full of scorpions is my mind' later in the play - suggesting that the impact of deceiving others is a negative one. His admission that his 'life has fallen into the sere' and the hopes of old age - friendship - are not his to enjoy. These effects can also be seen in Lady Macbeth, whose power, like Macbeth's, dwindles by the end of the play. Her instruction to her husband to 'look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't' gives an emblem of deception - the ability to present a superficially welcoming whilst concealing the evil 'serpent'.

In the extract, it is clear that deception works. Duncan's belief in Macbeth's deceptive front is maintained. Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony allows us to see what Duncan can't: the web of deceit Macbeth spins around him. In doing so, pity for the King is increased and of course we view Macbeth as corrupt and untrustworthy. Shakespeare's narrative shows not only how the desire for power is at the root of deception, but deception also leads to a loss of power in the end. Lady Macbeth's demands for her husband to 'sleek o'er your rugged looks' takes on an ironic edge when in the final act we see a much changed wife whose mind has been tainted by guilt.

Macbeth himself is never satisfied by his acquisition of power and ultimately loses his life. His tragic downfall is in part due to the manner in which he deceived by the riddling words of the witches. The 'juggling fiends' give him a sense of the truth but he allows himself to be deceived thinking he is safe until 'Birnam Wood does come to high Dunsinane hill'. In the end, his Kingship ends in defeat and in a moment of tragic realization, he grasps that life is a 'tale told by an idiot'. Shakespeare's play seems to suggest that no good can come from deception: the desire to manipulate others leads to personal disaster and for Macbeth, leads not to fame but 'dusty death'.