



Macbeth

by [William Shakespeare](#)

There's No Art To Find The Mind's Construction In The Face

Explain this line from *Macbeth*: "There's no art / to find the mind's construction in the face."

This line is spoken by King Duncan in act 1, scene 4 of *Macbeth* after he has been told that the Thane of Cawdor has been executed for his crimes of treason. This statement can be interpreted to mean that one cannot read someone else's mind by merely looking at their face. There is no way to predict betrayal. By saying this, King Duncan is admitting that he was shocked by this betrayal and did not see it coming.

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Expert Answers

These lines are spoken by King [Duncan](#) in act 1, scene 4 and refer to the duplicity of the former Thane of Cawdor, who has just been executed for treason. [Malcolm](#) praises the Thane of Cawdor, saying that the man who did not live well was at least capable of dying well, since he showed both genuine repentance and courage when facing death. Duncan reproves and contradicts his son here, saying that appearances are deceptive. There is no way to know what a man is really thinking and feeling simply by looking at his face.

The [irony](#) is that the new Thane of Cawdor, who is about to enter, is to prove even more deceptive and deadly. Later in the same scene, [Macbeth](#) is already thinking about the need to conceal his true nature:

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.

When, in the following scene, Lady [Macbeth](#) is encouraging her husband to kill the king, she makes the opposite point to the one that occurs to Duncan here. In her opinion, it is all too easy to see what Macbeth is planning from looking at his face:

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't.

There is an ironic contrast here between the old king, who should be battle-hardened and cynical but remains innocent, and the lady, who is supposed by conventional standards to be innocent, and is clearly able to look so, but whose appearance is deceptive. She may be able to read Macbeth's face like a book, but Duncan has already declared himself incapable of doing so.

When King Duncan speaks this line from act 1, scene 4 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, he has just been informed that the Thane of Cawdor has been executed. Malcolm tells the king that the men in charge of the execution have not returned from the task yet, but that he (Malcolm) talked to someone who saw Cawdor's execution. This messenger said that Cawdor admitted his crimes, deeply repented, and asked King Duncan's forgiveness. Then the messenger reported to Duncan that Cawdor died very well. At the end of Malcolm's speech, King Duncan responds:

There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face. He was a
gentlemen on whom I built an absolute trust.

An art in this context means a creative skill. We use this word in several contexts. For example, there is an art and a science to teaching and practicing medicine. This word art also refers to magic arts, like mind reading or fortune-telling. What King Duncan means by this is that one cannot read another's mind by looking at his face. King Duncan had placed absolute trust in the Thane of Cawdor, therefore his betrayal took him completely by surprise.

The description of the Thane of Cawdor's betrayal comes in act 1, scene 2 when [Ross](#) tells the king that the Norwegian flag is flying in Fife, and he saw the Norwegian king leading an immense army and being assisted by the Thane of Cawdor.

The irony of King Duncan's statement about not being able to read someone's mind based on their face is that he will be betrayed to an even greater degree by Macbeth, whom he is also unable to read and in whom he placed absolute trust.

To understand the meaning of this line, it is important to consider its context. This line comes from [Act I](#), Scene IV, and is spoken by King Duncan. Here, Duncan is speaking with his noblemen, including Macbeth, about the Thane of Cawdor and his treason. Specifically, Duncan is saying that he had no idea that Cawdor would turn out to be a

traitor. After all, it is impossible ("there's no art") to know what a person is thinking ("the mind's construction") simply by looking at the face, because a person can hide his true intentions and feelings.

Looking deeper, this line is just as applicable to Macbeth as it is to Cawdor. In the previous scene, for example, Macbeth listened intently to [the witches](#), who prophesied that he would become the next king of Scotland. This prompted Macbeth to suddenly start thinking about murdering King Duncan. But, just like Cawdor, Macbeth hides these murderous thoughts. In this scene, Macbeth acts completely loyal and trustworthy to Duncan.

So, for the second time, Duncan is unable to read the "construction" of a person's mind. This time, it is Macbeth's mind, and Duncan is completely clueless about the impending murder.

This is a line that is spoken in Act I, Scene 4 by King Duncan. He is talking to Malcolm after Malcolm has reported to him that the Thane of Cawdor has been executed. What Duncan means by this is that there is no way to tell what a man is like -- what his character is -- by looking at his face.

When Duncan says "there is no art" he means "there is no way." When he refers to a "man's construction" he means the man's character.

What he is saying is that Cawdor basically fooled him -- he thought Cawdor was loyal but he turned out to be a traitor.