King Lear

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the period in which King Lear was written—from 1604 to 1607—King James VI, King of Scotland and England, was trying to persuade English Parliament to approve the union of the two countries into one nation. (It was James who first used the term "Great Britain" to describe the unity of the Celtic and Saxon lands: England, Scotland, and Wales.) Such a combination of nations is called "accession." In his speeches to Parliament, he regularly referred to the misfortunes that had been brought about by the disunion of England under King Leir, the historical source of Shakespeare's play. The historical context of Shakespeare's King Lear is thus twofold. Reading it you should keep in mind both the history of King Leir and the discussions on union/disunion of Great Britain in Shakespeare's own time.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Shakespeare drew the main plot of King Lear—that is, the story of a ruler who divides his kingdom among his children and is consequently ruined—from several sources describing the legendary British king of that name. Scholars believe that the most important source was the second edition of Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland (1587); Holinshed himself had taken the story of Lear from the History of the British Kingdom by Geoffrey of Monmouth, written in the twelfth century. (Critics have also pointed out that Lear's rejection of Cordelia resembles numerous classical British fairy tales, where a father rejects a daughter on the grounds that he does not believe she loves him enough.) Shakespeare drew further subplots from Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queen (1590), which also features a character named Cordelia, who dies by hanging; and from Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia (1580-90), which contains an outline of the Gloucester subplot.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Tragedy of King Lear
- **When Written:** c. 1605
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1608; 1623
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance
- **Genre:** Tragedy
- **Setting:** England, in pre-Christian times
- **Climax:** Lear raging in the thunderstorm
- **Antagonist:** Regan, Goneril, Edmund

EXTRA CREDIT

Poor Tom. The character of Poor Tom or the Bedlam Beggar, as which Edgar disguises himself, is based on vagabonds or madmen considered dangerous in England at the time. "Bedlam" was a slang word for "Bethlehem," which was the name of a mental institution in London.

Two Versions. There are actually two different versions of *King Lear*—*The History of King Lear* published in quarto form in 1608 and *The Tragedy of King Lear*, which was published in the First Folio (1623) and is very substantially revised from the play published in 1608. Before the 1990s, editors usually "blended" the two texts, taking what they believed were the best versions of each scene. In recent times, some editors have started focusing on the "original" 1608 edition.

Poor Fool. In Shakespeare's day, the roles of Cordelia and the Fool were often "doubled"—played by the same actor—since the two characters are never on stage at the same time. Shakespeare alludes to this fact at several points in the play. The first time that Lear summons the Fool, in 1.4, both he and his Knight observe that the Fool has been melancholy ever since Cordelia was sent to France. More famously, in 5.3, upon learning of Cordelia's death, Lear remarks "And my poor fool is hanged" (5.3.369). Sometimes directors staging the play invent a scene in which the Fool himself is hanged, to explain this line, but the tradition of doubling the characters is the better explanation.

PLOT SUMMARY

King Lear intends to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, so that he can enjoy old age without the burdens of power. He has planned a ceremony in which each daughter will state how much she loves him, before an audience of nobles

including Lear's long-trusted advisor, Kent, the Earl of Gloucester, and two suitors for his youngest daughter's hand, Burgundy and France. During the ceremony, his elder daughters, Goneril and Regan each profess to love Lear more than anything in the world. However, his youngest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to play along; when her turn comes, she says that she loves Lear "no more, no less" than she should as a daughter. Enraged, Lear strips her of her dowry, and banishes Kent when the latter attempts to intercede on Cordelia's behalf. France says he will marry Cordelia even without a dowry. Lear then tells the gathered nobles that he will keep one hundred knights and alternate months living with Goneril and her husband, Albany, and Regan and her husband, Cornwall.

Back at Gloucester's palace, Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son, plans to displace his legitimate brother, Edgar, as Gloucester's heir by turning Gloucester against Edgar. Edmund tricks Gloucester into thinking that Edgar is conspiring to kill him. Meanwhile, Goneril, with whom Lear has gone to live first, becomes angry with her father and his knights for causing chaos in her household. She orders her steward Oswald to treat Lear coldly. Meanwhile, the banished Kent returns to Lear in disguise, offers his services, and is accepted as part of Lear's company. Goneril criticizes Lear for his knights' rowdiness and demands that he dismiss half of them. Deeply insulted and angered, Lear curses Goneril and prepares to leave to go and stay with Regan along with his Fool and his other followers.

Back at Gloucester's castle, Edmund's conspiracy moves along. After Edmund tricks Edgar into fleeing, Gloucester, convinced of Edgar's evil intentions, condemns him to death, declaring Edmund his legitimate heir. Cornwall and Regan arrive at Gloucester's castle and welcome Edmund into their service. Outside, Kent and Oswald arrive with letters for Regan from Lear and Goneril. Kent insults Oswald and challenges him to fight. Roused by the disturbance, Cornwall puts Kent into the stocks—even though such an action is disrespectful to Lear. Elsewhere in the countryside, Edgar disguises himself as a mad beggar "Poor Tom" in order to escape the death sentence declared by his father. Lear himself arrives at Gloucester's castle. Upset to find his man Kent (still in disguise) in the stocks, he grows increasingly angry when Cornwall and Regan refuse to see him. Shortly after Regan finally comes out, Goneril arrives. Lear quarrels bitterly with both, as Regan joins Goneril in claiming that Lear does not need to maintain any attendants of his own. When each says that he may stay with them only if he dismisses all of his knights, Lear rushes, mad with rage, into a brewing storm. Cornwall, Regan, and Goneril lock up Gloucester's castle to keep Lear out.

Searching for Lear, Kent, who has been released from the stocks, meets a Gentleman who tells him that Lear and the Fool are alone in the storm. Kent tells the Gentleman that French forces are on their way to England. He gives the Gentleman his purse along with an identifying ring to bring to Cordelia, and asks the Gentleman to tell her about the injustice that Lear has suffered. Meanwhile, Lear has gone mad and is raging against the storm, while the Fool begs him to seek shelter. When Kent finds them, he leads them toward a hovel. Back inside the castle, Gloucester confides in Edmund that he has decided to try to help Lear; he also reports that he has received a letter about the French invasion. After Gloucester leaves to find Lear, Edmund tells the audience that he will betray his father to Cornwall.

Out on the heath, having reached the hovel, Lear, Kent, and the Fool find Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, inside. Gloucester finds them soon after, and leads them to the shelter of a house. Inside Gloucester's castle, Edmund tells Cornwall about Gloucester's decision to help Lear and hands over the incriminating letter from France. In return, Cornwall makes Edmund Earl of Gloucester. Back in the house, hiding from the storm, Lear hallucinates that Goneril and Regan are on trial before himself, Edgar, and the Fool. Gloucester returns, tells Kent that Goneril, Regan, and their husbands are plotting Lear's death, and asks Kent to rush Lear to Cordelia, who has landed with France at Dover. Back inside the palace, Cornwall sends men to capture Gloucester and sends Edmund and Goneril to tell Albany that the French have landed. When Cornwall's forces bring in the captured Gloucester, Cornwall and Regan pull out Gloucester's eyes as punishment for his treachery. However, Cornwall's Servant attempts to stop him; they end up dueling. Although Regan stabs the servant in the back, Cornwall receives a wound that will eventually kill him. Regan throws the now blinded Gloucester out of his own castle. Two servants take pity on Gloucester, and decide to try to help him find Poor Tom, who they know is Edgar in disguise.

Outside Gloucester's palace, Edgar, still disguised as Poor Tom, meets his blinded father. Deeply moved, he agrees to show him the way to Dover. Meanwhile, Goneril and Edmund have traveled back to her palace to fetch Albany. However, Oswald meets them and reports that Albany has changed. Goneril quickly sends Edmund away. When Albany emerges, he berates her for her brutality to her father. In response, she criticizes him for becoming cowardly. A messenger arrives, interrupting their argument with news of both the death of Cornwall from the wound his servant gave him as well as the blinding of Gloucester.

In the French camp, Kent and a Gentleman discuss Cordelia's love of Lear, which has brought her back to Britain at the head of an invading French army. Kent reports that Lear himself is in Dover and, although he has spells of sanity, he is too ashamed to see Cordelia. In the camp, Cordelia herself sends a search party after her father. Back at Gloucester's palace, Regan questions Oswald about Goneril and Edmund. She states her feeling that, now that she is a widow, she should marry Edmund and asks Oswald to convince Goneril of the logic of this. As Oswald hurries off with a letter for Edmund from Goneril,

Regan adds that she will show favor to anyone who kills the blinded Gloucester. Meanwhile, hoping to cure Gloucester of his despair, Edgar pretends to lead him to the cliffs of Dover (they are actually on flat ground). When Gloucester jumps, to commit suicide (in fact just fainting and falling), Edgar then hurries over to him while pretending to be someone who saw Gloucester jump, and telling Gloucester that the fact that he survived is a miracle. Lear shows up, raving mad; he jabbers at Gloucester about lechery, the abuse of power, and other human faults. When some of Cordelia's search party turn up, Lear runs off. Just the, Oswald happens upon Edgar and Gloucester. He attempts to kill Gloucester but Edgar kills him. In Oswald's purse, Edgar finds letters from Goneril to Edmund plotting Albany's death so that they can marry. In the French camp, Lear is awakened by the doctor treating him and is reunited with Cordelia.

At her camp, at the start of the battle, Goneril argues with Albany; she tells herself that she would rather lose the war against the French than let Regan marry Edmund. Edgar, still disguised as a peasant, brings Goneril's letter to Edmund, describing her plot against Albany, to Albany then quickly leaves, with instructions that Albany must summon him with three blows of a trumpet after the battle with the French, if the British have won. While Edgar places Gloucester beneath a tree to rest, the battle takes place off stage. In the battle, Britain defeats France and Lear and Cordelia are captured by Edmund. Edmund sends them to jail, then sends a Captain after them with secret instructions to kill them both. Summoned by Albany's Herald, Edgar arrives in disguise and fights and wounds Edmund, who, dying, admits to all his treacheries. Edgar identifies himself and explains that, right before coming, he revealed himself to Gloucester; Gloucester died in that moment of a mix of grief and joy. Goneril has poisoned Regan beforehand, in the hopes of securing Edmund for herself; however, when he dies, she also stabs herself. Before he dies, Edmund admits that he sent his Captain to hang Cordelia and kill Lear. Albany sends soldiers running off to try to save them. However, it is too late: Lear emerges from the prison with Cordelia's body in his arms, mad with grief. He explains that he killed the Captain who hung her but was too late to save her life. Lear dies of his sorrow on the spot. Only Albany and Edgar remain to pick up the pieces, as Kent concludes that he soon must follow his master (i.e., kill himself, too).

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

King Lear – The aging king of Britain and tragic hero of the play. Lear, who is used to complete obedience from everyone around him, makes two related major errors: giving up of political responsibility by transferring power to his daughters; and trusting the flattering Goneril and Regan over the plainspoken, but true, Cordelia. Despite his flaws he is able to maintain the loyalty of certain subjects, particularly Kent and Gloucester. However, these will not be enough to save him from madness and death.

Cordelia – Lear's youngest daughter, whom he disowns when she refuses to flatter him, as her sisters do, during the ceremony in which he hands over power. Cordelia remains loyal to Lear despite his unjust harshness to her at the beginning of the play and even seems prepared to forgive her treacherous sisters at the end. Other characters who do not betray Lear—particularly Kent—admire Cordelia for her virtue and mildness.

Goneril – Lear's vicious older daughter, who is the first to flatter him in the power-transfer ceremony and the first to insult him afterwards, throwing him and his knights out of her house. Goneril's ruthless temperament contrasts with that of her husband, the Duke of Albany. In the end, she plots against Albany, and even against her former ally, her sister Regan, out of lust for Edmund.

Edmund – Gloucester's younger, illegitimate son. Edmund resents the fact that the accident of his birth has deprived him of legal status (and, therefore, an inheritance). He schemes to turn Gloucester against his legitimate son, Edgar, and eventually usurp his title. Eloquent and seductively wicked, Edmund almost succeeds in carrying out his malign plots to fruition.

Edgar – Gloucester's elder, legitimate son. Although at first Edgar comes across as a bit naïve, easily duped by Edmund, he later disguises himself successfully as a madman beggar and manages not only to save himself from the death sentence his misled father has pronounced on him, but also to help Gloucester and Lear and to avenge the wrongs committed by his traitorous half-brother.

Kent – A nobleman of the same rank as Gloucester, banished by Lear in the first scene when he attempts to intercede with the king on Cordelia's behalf. Kent spends most of the play disguised as Caius, a disguise he takes on so that he can continue to serve Lear even after being thrown out of his kingdom.

Fool – Lear's jester, who accompanies him through much of the play. Although his statements come out as riddles, the Fool offers insight into Lear's mistakes and their consequences. Insofar as he stays with Lear, despite all his mockery and criticisms (and at his peril, during the violent storm in Act 3), the Fool, like Kent, Gloucester, and Cordelia, proves himself loyal.

Albany – The husband of Lear's older daughter, Goneril, and a Duke. Albany is kind and generous, in contrast to his malicious wife, and criticizes her for her treacherous behavior toward her father. However, he realizes the viciousness of the other

characters he is aligned with (namely, Edmund and Regan) too late in the play to prevent the evil that they cause.

France – The husband of Cordelia. France is a benevolent character, who takes Cordelia as his wife without a dowry, when she has been rejected by her father, and even sends her back to England with the French army to rectify the wrongs carried out by Goneril and Regan against Lear. However, France only appears in the first scene.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Regan – Lear's middle daughter, who shares the vicious traits of Goneril, also flattering him in the power-transfer scene and abusing him thereafter. Regan shows her particularly brutal nature when she aids her husband, the Duke of Cornwall, in blinding Gloucester.

Gloucester – An earl, or nobleman, who is loyal to Lear and similar to him in many ways. Like Lear, Gloucester misjudges his children, trusting his scheming illegitimate son, Edmund, over his honest and good child from his legal marriage, Edgar.

Cornwall – Cornwall is the husband of Lear's middle daughter, Regan, and just as vicious as she is. He disrespects Lear by putting his man Kent in the stocks and, later, violently blinds Gloucester.

Oswald – Goneril's steward, or chief servant. Oswald's blind obedience to the evil Goneril earns him contempt from the "good" characters Kent and Edgar, and eventually costs him his life.

Curran – Gloucester's servant.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FATHERS, CHILDREN, AND SIBLINGS

The personal drama of *King Lear* revolves around the destruction of family relationships. Tragedy emerges from bonds broken between parents and children—and, at a secondary level, from the loss of ties among siblings. Lear, misreading Cordelia's understated, but true, devotion to him renounces his "parental care" (1.1.127) of her. This rejection is twofold. Lear withdraws his "father's heart" (1.1.142); he also strips Cordelia of the financial and political support that formerly made her attractive to her suitors. Driven by greed and ambition, Goneril and Regan fail to show any solidarity with their sister in 1.1. And later, despite their strong professions of love for Lear, they both betray him in order to consolidate their political authority. In addition, although the two "tigers, not daughters" (4.2.49) initially ally with each other, their lustful desire for Edmund ultimately drive Goneril to murder Regan, before committing suicide when Edmund himself is killed, thus ensuring the complete annihilation of the Lear line.

Edmund's conspiracy to mislead Gloucester into disinheriting his legitimate son Edgar provides a foil to the Lear family situation throughout the play. Edmund—who is Gloucester's illegitimate or "natural" son from an affair outside marriage, rather than a legitimate or "legal" one—further highlights the question of where parent-child loyalty stems from: biology or socially acknowledged status. And, indeed, the private or familial sphere is inseparable from the public and political realm in King Lear. Fatherhood, in the play, serves as a model and metaphor for kingly leadership, while the narrative regarding the disintegration of families parallels the disintegration of the British state.

AUTHORITY AND ORDER

At the beginning of the play, Lear is an authority figure, embodying order in his own person and commanding it from his family and followers. (This is how he is able to compel his elder two daughters to participate in the dramatic ceremony dividing the kingdom by professing their absolute love on cue, precisely when he demands it; this is why Gloucester, Kent, and others respectfully watch the ceremony unfold, despite thinking that Lear's plan to give up power is a bad idea.) Just as the father-child bonds discussed above encompass both a private and a public dimension, authority and order in this play exist at both the level of the family and the level of the nation.

Throughout the tragedy, Lear and other characters also repeatedly invoke the ideas of natural and divine order. Lear appeals to the idea of divine justice when his children treat him unjustly (e.g. after his final quarrel with Goneril and Regan: "O heavens,/ If you do love old men [...] Send down and take my part" [2.4.218-221]). Gloucester similarly calls out to the gods after he has been betrayed and blinded in 3.7. Meanwhile, nature in the play seems to mirror the political chaos of the play, particularly in the form of the brutal storm that rages even as Lear himself, the former embodiment of order in the kingdom, rages in his own madness.

DISINTEGRATION, CHAOS, NOTHINGNESS

Although Lear begins as a figure of authority and order, when he gives up his power and Goneril and Regan turn against him, he falls apart, going mad. Moreover, his personal decline parallels a farther-reaching dissolution of order and justice in the British state. Lear's error, based on

blindness and misjudgment, doesn't just ruin him personally. It leads to a political situation in which there is no order to guarantee justice, despite his (and Gloucester's) repeated appeals to the gods.

Cordelia's first answer to Lear's command that she pronounce her love for him, the answer that first enrages him against her, is (in 1.1) is "nothing." After that first appearance, the word "nothing" recurs constantly throughout the play in the mouths of multiple characters. The repetition of this word highlights the theme of nothingness, and of the complete lack of meaning that results from nothingness – after all, when everything is destroyed, it is not possible to compare anything to anything else, and in such a void, without any ability to compare, nothing can have any meaning. And, ultimately, it is hard to argue that the ending of the play offers any justice at all: while the "bad guys" of Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall are all killed, so are the heroes of Lear, Gloucester, and Cordelia. Nearly the entire social order, good and bad, is annihilated and turned to nothing. As Lear himself cries out in the moments before he dies, while holding the dead Cordelia in his arms, with his kingdom destroyed: "Never, never, never, never, never" (5.3.372).

OLD AGE

Originally, Lear wishes to free himself of the burdens of ruling his kingdom because he is aware of his old age and wishes to "crawl unburdened toward death" (1.1.42). As his choice of the verb "crawl" suggests, Lear has a sense that old age forces the individual to remember his or her animal aspect—that is, the fact that human beings, like animals, are subjected to the forces of physical nature and have physical needs.

Age as Goneril and Regan unkindly observe at various points, brings a kind of weakness with it. Regan mocks Lear: "O, sir, you are old [...] You should be ruled and led/ By some discretion that discerns your state/ Better than you yourself" [2.4.165-9]. Yet, together with the father-child bond, the play also suggests at various points that age should command respect. The fact that Lear's daughters abuse him for being old makes their cruelty seem all the worse and also indicates that all they care about is power, without any thought for wisdom. Cornwall and Regan's brutality to Gloucester is similarly heightened by our awareness of his age—for instance, when Regan plucks Gloucester's white beard in 3.7.

FOOLING AND MADNESS

From early on in the play, the Fool is probably the character with the greatest insight into what the consequences of Lear's misjudgments of his daughers will be. (The Fool's only competition in this respect comes from Kent in 1.1; in 1.2 Gloucester seems only to have a vague intuition that Lear's decision was a mistake.) Calling Lear himself a Fool and admonishing him that he has reduced himself to "nothing" by dividing and handing off his kingdom, the Fool recognizes that by giving up his authority Lear is essentially ensuring his own destruction and the destruction of his kingdom.

Just as the Fool's apparently nonsensical comments contain some of the most sensible advice that Lear receives on his behavior, Lear himself gains increasing insight into his situation as he moves from sanity to madness. His raving—for instance, in the storm or on Dover Beach—often resembles the riddling, but incisive, barbs of the Fool. It is possible to argue that in a world that itself does not seem to make sense—a world of death, of raging storms, of children who turn against their parents—it makes sense that madness might be the most sane reaction.

Deliberately adopting the mad manner of a bedlam beggar, Edgar provides a counterpoint to Lear's uncontrollable madness, particularly in the storm scene (3.2).

BLINDNESS AND INSIGHT

The tragic errors that King Lear and Gloucester make in misjudging their children constitute a form of figurative blindness—a lack of insight into the true characters of those around them. Reminding the audience of this fact, the language of the play resounds with references to eyes and seeing from the very beginning. Cornwall and Regan make these images and metaphors of (failed) vision brutally literal when they blind Gloucester in 3.7. For the remainder of the play, Gloucester serves as a kind of walking reminder of the tragic errors of blindness that he and Lear have committed. Yet, Gloucester's greater insight into the character of his two sons after he is blinded reflects an irony: literal blindness ironically produces insight. Only when Gloucester is blind can he see things for what they are.

Throughout the play, characters allude to, and call upon, the gods and the heavens watching over them. As noted above, the gods and heavens suggest order and eventual justice. However, as watchers of the action of the play, the gods also become a kind of audience, and like the audience they both see the story of what is happening more completely than the individual characters on stage and can't seem to do anything to stop it.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE STARS, HEAVENS, AND THE GODS

In Shakespeare's time there was a particularly strong belief that order on earth depended on order in the heavens—or, as Kent puts it, that "the stars above us govern our conditions" (4.3.39). Celestial bodies are thus both a metaphor of order and a potential source of disorder, when they go awry. Multiple characters in King Lear make references to eclipses that have taken place; in Act 1 Scene 2 in particular, Gloucester attributes the chaos in Lear's court—the banishment of Kent and abrupt departure of Cordelia and France—to "these late eclipses of the sun and moon" (1.2.109). Edmund then mockingly takes up the theme of "what should follow these eclipses" (1.2.148). Later in the play, Lear and Gloucester both appeal to the stars and gods together as benevolent spectators of their sad plights, and as forces for justice. (E.g., Lear cries out in 2.4: "You heavens, give me that patience [...] You see me here, you gods, a poor old man" (313-4).

ANIMALS

From start to finish, King Lear is full of references to animals, usually incorporated into insults and curses or used to describe states of maximum human degradation. (The Fool also frequently tells jokes or sings songs involving non-human creatures.) Lear himself observes, in his rage at Goneril and Regan: "Allow not nature more than nature needs,/ Man's life is cheap as beast's" (2.4.307-8). Throughout the play, animals present a vision of brutal nature to which men can descend, and yet the animals are also held up as less corrupt than men. After all the beasts are just beasts, and are naturally brutal, while the finely dressed Goneril and Regan, along with the other disloyal members of Lear's court, can spout beautiful language about love and honor, and then stab their father in the back.

CLOTHING AND COSTUMES

Complementing the many references to animals throughout the play are mentions of clothing and instances of disguise. Kent, banished by Lear, disguises himself as the commoner Caius. Edgar, fleeing Gloucester's mistaken wrath, transforms himself the mad beggar, Poor Tom. As the honorable characters of the play must take off their fine clothes and put on disguises to remain loyal, and Lear associates Goneril and Regan's fine clothing with their duplicity, clothing becomes a symbol of the desire for power and status that corrupts characters like Goneril, Regan, Edmund, and Cornwall. On Dover beach Lear remarks to Gloucester: "Through tattered clothes small vices do appear./ Robes and furred gowns hide all" [4.6.181-2].

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *King Lear* published in 2004.

"Nothing will come of nothing."

Related Characters: King Lear (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.99

Explanation and Analysis

Lear asks each of his daughters to profess their love to him in order to receive their portion of his kingdom. When Cordelia has nothing to say in response, Lear makes this pithy statement denying her any property.

Plot-wise, Lear's comment refers to the fact that Cordelia will receive no land if she does not express her adoration properly. Thus "nothing"—in terms of inheritance—will come of the linguistic "nothing" she offers him. We see Lear here make an incorrect association between language and property: He does not take into consideration his daughter's actual affection or care, but considers a single sentence she speaks as reason to deny her all dowry access.

Thematically, Shakespeare establishes a pattern of superficial treatment between characters: they will often base their actions on appearances and speech instead of according to honest principles or sentiments. The very word "nothing" itself appears again and again in the play, consistently reminding the reader of the desolation caused by Cordelia's simple inability to speak. Even Lear's own speech mirrors this motif: he opts for a clever, epigrammatic sentence instead of selecting more careful positions that would ultimately better himself and his daughter.

"I want that glib and oily art
To speak and purpose not."

Related Characters: Cordelia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.258-259

Explanation and Analysis

Lear announces to France and Burgundy that Cordelia has lost her dowry. Pleading, she observes that she is unskilled at the flattery practiced by her sisters.

Though contemporary readers might interpret "I want" here to mean that Cordelia desires the art of speech, in Shakespearean English it means something closer to "I lack." This distinction is relevant to making sense of Cordelia's character: she does not wish to abandon her principles, but rather affirms that she cannot deviate from them. Describing speech as "glib" highlights how it is superficial and insincere, while "oily" connotes a slimy or over-flattering type of language. Though she does not directly criticize her sisters, Cordelia implies that their language is "glib and oily" in a way that hers cannot be. Intriguingly, Cordelia's words are themselves quite eloquent here. They may not be obsequious, but they are concise and effective—thus showing that she possesses linguistic skill, but simply not the art of flattery.

More broadly, Cordelia differentiates between speech and intention when she juxtaposes "to speak" with "purpose not." Unlike Lear, who assumes that the "nothing" of her speech implies a "nothing" of emotional attachment, Cordelia is able to recognize the difference between words and things. This insight, however, does not necessarily aid her in the play—for while it may grant her an effective moral compass, it also denies her inheritance and leaves her open to others' manipulative behaviors.

"Yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself."

Related Characters: Regan (speaker), King Lear

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.339-340

Explanation and Analysis

As Scene One draws to a close, Regan and Goneril discuss their father's dwindling mental capacities. Here, Regan comments that this is no new development, for Lear has historically lacked personal insight.

This conversation predicts the way Regan and Goneril will deny their father's authority and install themselves with increasing power over him. To do so, however, they must justify their actions not only to others but also to themselves. One of their main strategies to do so is to take aim at Lear's old age—and to argue that he is unfit to rule or even make personal decisions. Here, Regan takes an even more aggressive tactic, to note that Lear's mental decline is in fact characteristic of his more general sensibility. That he has "but slenderly known himself" at any point in his life would imply that his commands cannot be trusted to conform to his actual wishes and desires.

More than a manipulative tactic, however, this sentence introduces the theme of introspection and self-knowledge. This question predominates *King Lear*, as many of the characters battle to harness their emotions and to make rational decisions that correlate with their actual needs. Regan's point here is to take the example of aging and extrapolate it to a broader phenomenon: how many lack the thoughtfulness necessary to identify their wishes and inner nature.

Act 1, scene 2 Quotes

"Thou, Nature, art my goddess."

Related Characters: Edmund (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.2.1

Explanation and Analysis

Edmund bemoans how his status as a bastard prevents him from having a claim to his father's title. As a result, he renounces the value of human laws and instead chooses to exalt the wonder of "Nature."

Here we see Edmund turn away for the first time from the systems that organize human life. He reveals a wish to violate social norms and seize power for himself. Since "Nature" exists beyond the royal system that delineates between legitimate and illegitimate children, it offers a world in which Edmund could receive a proper inheritance. That Edmund selects nature to be his "goddess" also marks a subtle turn away from Christianity and toward paganism. Though religion is not a blatant theme in *King Lear*, it bubbles under the tragedy's surface. Edmund's embrace of Nature could be seen as somewhat heretical, which foreshadows the way he will sin both spiritually and politically in order to further his own ascent to power.

His soliloquy also initiates a pattern in King Lear of characters seeking solace or support in the natural environment. The tragedy often juxtaposes the banality and social cruelty of the human realm with a more egalitarian and open natural world. Shakespeare positions nature as an

open psychological and physical space on which characters can project their ideal worlds, beyond the constraints of normative human society.

"These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us."

Related Characters: Gloucester (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.2.109-110

Explanation and Analysis

Edmund has just falsely informed Gloucester that Edgar is plotting against his father. Gloucester notes, as he wonders how to proceed, that the movements in the heavenly bodies foreshadow negative events to come.

This passage speaks to the important role of omens for the characters of *King Lear*. Various characters refer to the way the heavens ordain human events, and thus examining their movements offers a way to guess at the future. Gloucester believes, here, that he can interpret "late eclipses"—moments when light is blocked from the sun or moon—as signs of "no good" to come. (Symbolically, we could say that the light of royalty and stability will be eclipsed by deceit and eventually murder.) Shakespeare thus presents Gloucester as adhering to the value of fate—believing the the heavens determine his life more than individual human action.

It is intriguing that Gloucester brings up the idea of heavenly bodies just after Edmund has sworn allegiance to nature. Though they both seem to be appealing to the same force, their ways of doing so are vastly different. If Edmund sees in nature a space beyond the moral and social constraints of humanity, Gloucester instead sees a divine power that rules over and intersects human affairs. The first sees it as a space apart; the second as deeply integrated. In this way, Shakespeare treats nature and the heavens as a complex symbolic system—a site that various characters interpret differently based on their own beliefs and ends.

"As if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion."

Related Characters: Edmund (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.2.128-129

Explanation and Analysis

After Gloucester departs, Edmund mocks his father's comments on the heavens. He believes that the motion of the planets do nothing to ordain human action.

With these characters, Shakespeare establishes two poles on the question of human agency in the context of heavenly predestination. Whereas Gloucester believes that eclipses in the sky predict negative events in the human world, Edmund finds this perspective ridiculous. This debate speaks to a philosophical question on free will, but it also expresses a generational difference. Just as Lear values ceremonial behavior and adherence to tradition, Gloucester finds deference the heavens to be important. Friction arises with both sets of children because the younger generations seek increased personal control.

To substantiate his claim on the heavens, Edmund gives two examples of where human identities should not reasonably conform to fate: "villains" and "fools." Shakespeare has not arbitrarily selected these terms. Being himself a villain (as he has just decided), Edmund is implicitly claiming that he acts according to his own will as opposed to the effect of any celestial body. Yet we could take his exploits as proof that Gloucester was correct that eclipses foretold negative events. "Fools" will play an important role later in the tragedy, when both actual and artificial fools render unclear whether the heavens or human action lead to madness. Thus even as Edmund disparages his father's belief in destiny, Shakespeare subtly designs the structure of the tragedy to reiterate the ever-present role of fate.

Act 1, scene 3 Quotes

"Old fools are babes again."

Related Characters: Goneril (speaker), King Lear

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.20

Explanation and Analysis

During Lear's visit, Goneril becomes increasingly frustrated with her father. She complains about how elderly people regress to a stage of seeming infancy.

This passage corroborates the selfish qualities of Goneril's character. As with her earlier observations on Lear's aging, these comments are highly uncharitable considering Lear's generosity—and they explicitly conflict with the kind words Goneril offered at the onset of the tragedy. Shakespeare presents her character as deeply opportunistic, motivated only by self-advancement as opposed to genuine love.

Her comment also clarifies the tragedy's presentation of old age. Claiming that age makes men "babes again" defines a cyclical model of time, in which people revert back to their infancy—as opposed to, say, becoming wiser and more esteemed. This model helps justify Goneril's command over her father. Furthermore, the phrase "old fools" implies that age brings a particular brand of madness that deviates from rational control and which thus mimics the behavior of children. The question of the fool will become increasingly important as Lear slowly looses his mind, and Goneril's comment here prefaces the way age can intersect with and mimic insanity.

Act 1, scene 4 Quotes

"Thou hast pared thy wit o' both sides and left nothing in the middle."

Related Characters: Fool (speaker), King Lear

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.4.191-192

Explanation and Analysis

As Lear prepares to depart from Goneril's palace, he is chastised by his Fool (the jester who attends to him, offering entertainment and often wisdom) for his irrational actions. The Fool claims that Lear has lost his mind.

The Fool's point is not direct, here, but rather conveyed through an odd image. That Lear has "pared thy wit o' both sides" means that he has sliced or cut off his intelligence—so the Fool imagines "wit" as a physical object that can be cut. Symbolically, the "both sides" could represent Goneril and Regan, to whom Lear has apportioned each half of his estate. For in doing so, he has indeed "left nothing in the middle": he maintains no power or land of his own, and thus his action could be seen as the result of no "wit."

This passage also plays with the idea of madness and role-playing in the tragedy. Though the Fool is supposed to be a jesting figure, he speaks here with remarkable insight. (That his words are lighthearted but his content weighty is an another example of how Shakespeare explores the difference between language and meaning.) Indeed, one would never expect him to be able to criticize a king in this way—so Shakespeare seems to have turned the Fool into a ruler at the very moment the King becomes a Fool. Thus even amidst the strict social roles that predominate the text, interactions like this speak to a fluidity in the identities of all the play's characters.

Act 2, scene 1 Quotes

"My old heart is cracked; it's cracked."

Related Characters: Gloucester (speaker), Edgar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.106

Explanation and Analysis

Edgar has now fled Gloucester's castle, causing his father to become convinced that Edgar is indeed guilty. Gloucester bemoans the events and their effect on his emotions.

That Gloucester draws attention to his "old heart" returns the text to the ever-present question of aging. He implies that the emotional pain is particularly damaging due to his age, for he has been abandoned by his son after having invested so deeply in their relationship. Having lost his heart, Gloucester begins to follow actions reminiscent of Lear's: irrationally aiding his deceitful child and lashing out against the honest one. "Cracked" thus speaks not only to sadness but also to the misdirected emotion that causes him to condemn Edmund to death.

One should note that the image of being "cracked" appears often in this text. Characters use it to refer to emotional stress and to betrayal as Gloucester does here, but the term is also employed to signify insanity. By bringing these two meanings together in one word, Shakespeare shows how pain and betrayal function alongside insanity: the first can induce the second or visa versa, and the line between the two is never particularly clear.

Act 2, scene 3 Quotes

"I will preserve myself, and am bethought
To take the basest and most poorest shape
That ever penury in contempt of man
Brought near to beast."

Related Characters: Edgar (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.3.6-9

Explanation and Analysis

Having fled his father's castle, Edgar finds himself alone in the wilderness. He decides to take on the disguise of a fool called "Poor Tom" in order protect himself from being recognized and killed.

Edgar begins, first, by declaring this intention to "preserve" himself, marking basic survival as his primary intention. Saying, "bethought to take the basest and most poorest shape" declares that the best way to protect himself will be to take on an alternative identity and costume of lowliness. That his "penury" or poverty will be "in contempt of men" implies that his false identity will inherently criticize the morally-empty pomp and circumstance of those from which he hides. Thus he will take on the role of the "beast" primarily for self-protection, but also with an inherent skepticism of others, particularly the morally-bankrupt "nobility."

This passage takes the theme of man's relationship to the wilderness in an intriguing direction: in order to best protect himself from the human world of deceit, Edgar must approximate the wilderness as much as possible—becoming "the basest and most poorest shape" that he can. In an odd way, this recourse to nature follows in Edmund's footsteps: not only is he locating in wilderness something that was lacking in the human world, but he even invokes the tropes of baseness associated with Edmund illegitimacy. Yet whereas Edmund sought a reprieve from legal and moral justice, Edgar is seeking protection only from a misapplication of that justice. Thus Shakespeare presents nature as a repository of both productive and counter-productive divergences from human society.

Act 2, scene 4 Quotes

"O sir, you are old.
Nature I you stands on the very verge
Of his confine."

Related Characters: Regan (speaker), King Lear

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.4.164-166

Explanation and Analysis

Regan and Goneril argue with Lear about his behavior in their households. During the fight, Regan comments on his age and the way he approaches his mental and physical demise.

Her accusation returns to the question of how insanity and elderliness interplay: Regan firmly contends that the decline of Lear's mental capacities is responsible for his erratic behaviors. Here, she offers a somewhat new take on the issue when she brings in the ever-present image of "Nature." Here, "Nature" signifies a wild realm beyond a human, rational range of understanding. That this force is "on the very verge of his confine" means that the specter of madness approaches Lear. His "confine" would thus stand for the metaphorical borders of his sanity—which, if breached by Nature, would shatter his mind. In this way, Regan defines a very fragile conception of human intelligence and control, in which emotional instability or old age could potentially weaken one's "confine." For her, "Nature" is a set of wild forces waiting to burst in and take advantage of human weakness the moment social or mental stability fails.

"O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's."

Related Characters: King Lear (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.4.304-307

Explanation and Analysis

Lear becomes increasingly deranged during his conversation with Goneril and Regan. He begins raving, here, about the meaninglessness of life and how all men are essentially equivalent to beggars.

As with many of Shakespeare's supposedly mad characters, Lear chooses images that seem nonsensical at first but actually contain real philosophical significance. When he says that beggars "are in the poorest things superfluous," he plays with the question of ownership and inheritance. Indeed, beggars have a great deal of "the poorest

things"—the "nothing" so oft referenced in the play. In this way, they are weirdly superior to the rich. Lear continues to affirm the value of poverty when he continues, "allow not nature more than nature needs," pointing to the way nature requires no human accessories or niceties to exist.

At this point, Lear could have still defined nature to be a separate space from human society, but when he adds, "Man's life is cheap as beast's" he brings the two together. That is to say, in this new worldview, men should not consider themselves superior to animals; their reason and things bring them no special existential merits. The choice of the economic term "cheap" stresses the foolishness inherent in how humans assess their lives in terms of money. Thus beneath Lear's apparent madness, one can actually trace a complex critique of human society, one which has come from Lear's experiences with his daughters greed and deceit. Indeed, saying "reason not the need" Lear seems to be aware of the value in his insanity. If he indeed finds "reason" empty or unnecessary, he is explicitly saying so. This passage thus brings into question the full extent of Lear's insanity: has he actually lost his mind, or has he gained greater clarity into human folly?

"Here's a night pities neither wise men nor fools."

Related Characters: Fool (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.14-15

Explanation and Analysis

Lear and his Fool stand amidst the overpowering storm. The first shouts at the natural forces, while the second offers these more reasoned statements.

The Fool is here describing the way Nature does not affect humans differently based on their social status. This night "pities" none more than others, because it affects all equally. Physically, this would be taking place on the stage as we would see King Lear and the Fool equally affected by the "night." This statement quite cleverly plays with the opposition between "wise men" and "fools." Note how the Fool and Lear continue to switch roles: whereas the supposedly wise king is screaming insanely into the environment, the supposedly jesting Fool is offering poignant commentary. Yet that Fool's wise comment is to once more equate wise men and fools! After all, it is in his madness rather than his earlier rationality that Lear seems more introspective and intelligent. Thus the effect is not particularly to invert their roles but rather to, amidst a physical and metaphorical storm, show how fluidly intelligence and insanity bleed together.

"The art of our necessities is strange
And can make vile things precious."

Related Characters: King Lear (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.76-77

Explanation and Analysis

Still amidst the storm, Lear reflects on the insignificance of physical possessions. He observes how little humans require in certain circumstances.

Once again, Shakespeare places philosophically significant statements in the mouth of a madman. That Lear considers "our necessities" to be an "art" is a subtle paradox, for arts are generally taken to be a supplement to human existence rather than a strict requirement. Being a "strange" art further muddles the definition of "necessities," which we would expect to be clear-cut and self-evident rather than uncertain. When Lear adds that this art "can make vile things precious" he points to the power human psychology has in reshaping its relationship to external objects. Things that should seen disgusting can be made "precious" with sufficient art—indeed they may even come to be seen as necessities.

Lear's confrontation with the primal nature of the storm thus seems to have radically altered his sense of what is essential versus superfluous. Shakespeare shows how his earlier conceptions have been opened up by this poignant confrontation with environmental and internal madness—ironically giving him greater insight than he had while supposedly sane.

Act 3, scene 4 Quotes

"Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness defend you
From seasons such as these? O I have taken
Too little care of this."

Related Characters: King Lear (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.4.32-37

Explanation and Analysis

Lear has finally escaped from the overwhelming storm. Shaken by the experience, he reflects on how little attention he devoted as King to his impoverished subjects.

This passage shows that Lear's experience has granted him a new level of empathy to others. He imagines that common people "bide the pelting of this pitiless storm" just as he has—and that they must therefore be in need of resources and aid just as Lear was. Nature, here, serves as an equalizer between king and subject, allowing Lear to understand how desperately others would need aid "from seasons such as these." He is able, then, to imagine the significance of not having a castle and only owning "looped and windowed raggedness": the paltry huts that would be owned by peasants. Having redefined his idea of a necessity, he comes to see even mere shacks as precious.

Shakespeare develops, then, the argument that supposed madness can actually bring one great clarity and insight. Lear is seen by the other characters to be insane, but his ravings in the wilderness have actually brought him greater empathy for his subjects—the exact quality that would be necessary for any accomplished ruler. That he renounces his previous actions places Lear in a traditional moral arc of recognition and repentance, but Shakespeare plays on this formula by making insanity the route to that realization.

"Child Rowland to the dark tower came
His word was still 'Fie, foh, and fum,
I smell the blood of a British man."

Related Characters: Edgar (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.4.195-197

Explanation and Analysis

Edgar arrives disguised as the beggar "Poor Tom." Here, he seems to speak a meaningless rhyme, but the tune actually carries a frightening threat.

What Edgar says is a play on a famous quatrain that is best known today for its appearance in Jack and the Beanstalk. However the rhyme was established before the Jack story, as well as before *King Lear*. The other part of the quote references the old fairy tale of "Childe Rowland." Edgar's comment seems, at first, to just be a strange version of this tale—the sort of comment that is made by a madman who intermingles bits of story without much attention to what they mean.

Yet beneath that apparent insanity, the careful reader can note some darker meanings: for instance, Edgar is speaking of "Child Rowland," thus pointing to the way children throughout the tragedy have threatened their parents. Similarly, the "dark tower" references the royal castles that the children are constantly seeking to own—and their way of gaining control would indeed be by "the blood a British man." Revising the original term "Englishman" to "British man" might also speak cleverly to the political divides being played out in *King Lear*: for British refers more generally to the broader empire, whereas English refers only to English-citizens proper. Thus beneath Edgar's simple play on a nursery rhyme, we can see a parable about the way children in the play are seeking to violently overtake power from their British fathers. Once more, Shakespeare has housed poignant social commentary in the words of a seeming madman.

Act 3, scene 6 Quotes

"All the power of his wits have given way to his impatience."

Related Characters: Kent (speaker), King Lear

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.6.4-5

Explanation and Analysis

Kent reports to Gloucester on Lear's continual descent into insanity. He unexpectedly blames that decline on Lear's restlessness.

This comment may catch the reader by surprise, considering that Lear's behavior has been generally pegged to old age, anger, or illness. Kent, instead offers "his impatience" as the reason for Lear's insanity, which seems to imply that Lear wishes to hasten some end. Perhaps Kent means an impatience for Lear's daughters to serve him, which caused Lear to become increasingly frustrated to the point of insanity. Or perhaps "impatience" operates on a more metaphorical level—meaning an impatience for mental clarity or philosophical insight. Since Shakespeare has repeatedly likened that insight to madness, one could see that impatience in that domain would cause one's "wits" to give way. In any case, Kent offers a model of "wits" that must maintain themselves with a consistent "power" against the

threat of insanity, but which due a factor like impatience may fail and leave one privy to madness.

"Out, vile jelly!"

Related Characters: Cornwall (speaker), Gloucester

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.7.101

Explanation and Analysis

After Gloucester helps Lear escape, Goneril demands that his eyes be removed. Cornwall makes this odd pronouncement as he follows her order.

This command speaks to the evil inherent in Cornwall and Goneril's characters. Despite Gloucester's genuine intentions, Cornwall and Goneril not only torture and punish him but also verbally ridicule him as they do so. "Jelly" refers, here, to the physical substance of Gloucester's eye, so Cornwall has claimed it is "vile" because of Gloucester's misdeeds. In a sense to call his eyesight vile is correct, for Gloucester has repeatedly been blind to the behaviors of Edgar and Edmund—first metaphorically for believing that Edgar was plotting against him, and then literally for not being able to recognize Edgar as Poor Tom. Yet calling Gloucester "vile" is also highly ironic on Cornwall's part, considering that his very action in the moment is even more despicable. Shakespeare thus presents a cycle of violence and retribution, in which metaphorical blindness becomes increasingly literal—but in which the agents of poetic justice are themselves even more hateful than those they're punishing.

Act 4, scene 1 Quotes

"The worst is not
So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'"

Related Characters: Edgar (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.30-31

Explanation and Analysis

Edgar is reflecting on his lowly position when he sees the blind Gloucester led by an Old Man. He revises his earlier beliefs, pointing out that many are far worse off than himself and that, indeed, the ability to observe how bad things are must mean they are not at the absolute bottom.

That Edgar's observations are induced by seeing the Old Man and Gloucester reiterates how the tragic action offers perspective on one's own misfortune. Edgar may have pitied himself, but once he sees others in even more dire straights, he realizes that he was being ridiculous all along. His very ability to reflect on his state of affairs is juxtaposed with their lack of composure.

This passage also returns to the question of how language can often deviate from reality. One would assume that saying "This is the worst" would imply that things are indeed at their most terrible, but Edgar points out that it is just the opposite. The very ability to speak those words implies a level of composure and reflection—indeed an ability to speak!—that must mean the state of affairs could be even worse. Thus not only can language misrepresent reality, in this case, the statement itself must misrepresent reality.

Act 4, scene 2 Quotes

"The nature which contemns its origin
Cannot be bordered certain in itself."

Related Characters: Albany (speaker), Goneril

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.2.41-42

Explanation and Analysis

Albany has realized the deceitful way Regan and Goneril treated Lear. He condemns them, here, for turning against their own father.

Shakespeare plays once more with the complex term "nature," here used to refer to both Goneril's disposition and to her blood-linked relationship to her father. In the first sense, Goneril's "nature" means her cruel personality that has acted independently of any filial compassion and thus lashed out brutally against her father. But by selecting the possessive pronoun "its" for "its origin," Albany implies that nature is inherently linked to the "origin" of one's parents. Goneril's actions against her father have thus both been characteristic of her nature but also have betrayed that nature because she "contemns"—sees with contempt—her father.

Albany brings these two meanings of nature together in the second line. That something cannot "be bordered certain in itself" means that it cannot have a secure sense of its identity or disposition. That is to say, it is a nature that

cannot be sure of its borders and thus can never know just how it will react. Albany implies that turning against one's heritage is a kind of self-abnegation—a violation of one's own nature. Thus Shakespeare plays with the dual meaning of nature as identity and origin to differentiate between those who value heritage and those who belittle it.

Act 4, scene 6 Quotes

"How fearful
And dizzy tis to cast one's eyes so low!
[...]
I'll look no more
Lest my brain turn and the deficient sight
Topple down headlong."

Related Characters: Edgar (speaker), Gloucester

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.6.16-29

Explanation and Analysis

Edgar wonders how to help his father in his current decrepit state. He pretends, here, to be overlooking an enormous cliff, hoping that Gloucester will ask to be hurled off it.

The full effect of this passage is difficult to imagine without the image of the flat stage, but it comes off as somewhat farcical in an actual performance. Choosing words like "fearful" and "dizzy" to describe a flat stage would seem humorous and would allow the audience to comprehend better the metaphorical and literal blindness that is essential to this tragedy. And Edgar's repeated references to vision—"cast one's eyes so low" and "deficient sight"—make the irony of the scene entirely evident to the audience. The passage is, however, more than a humorous aside. It also transforms blindness into an odd asset for Gloucester. Edgar is able to set up a fake cliff for Gloucester, where he believes he has attempted to commit suicide and been saved by a miracle. Edgar thus harnesses the very quality in Gloucester that caused him to be treated so terribly—his blindness—and instead turns it into an opportunity for redemption.

"Gloucester: Oh let me kiss that hand!
Lear: Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality."

Related Characters: King Lear, Gloucester (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.6.147-148

Explanation and Analysis

After Gloucester has survived his fake-suicide, Lear enters the scene. Gloucester asks to greet him royally, but the mad Lear rejects the offer due to an irrational comment on his impending death.

Shakespeare places in conversation here two figures who are crippled from proper communication: Gloucester and Lear have both been driven to different forms of disability, with the first being blind and the second being insane. Yet he cleverly inverts their roles in this moment of mis-recognition: this inversion comes through in the way that Gloucester is blind, yet he is able to recognize Lear and thus asks to kiss his hand. Lear, meanwhile, is the blind one in that he does not recognize Gloucester. Indeed, his senses are nonfunctional in that he "smells" his hand incorrectly.

The passage also reiterates the way madness is equivalent to philosophical insight. Lear is indeed correct to point out that his hand "smells of mortality," for all human hands do in a sense. His insanity comes from that exact existential insight, for he applies it indiscriminately to every situation. Thus by staging an interaction between two forms of disability, Shakespeare burlesques the very nature of human interaction—for even when one man overcomes his disability and the other offers a poignant observation, they entirely fail to communicate.

Act 5, scene 3 Quotes

"No, no, no, no. Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds in the cage."

Related Characters: King Lear (speaker), Cordelia

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.3.9-10

Explanation and Analysis

When Lear and Cordelia are sentenced to prison, Cordelia wonders if they could find a way out of their fate. Lear instead chooses to idealize their time in prison.

To do so, he uses the provocative image of "birds in the cage." Lear romanticizes the experience of prison not as one

that restricts freedom but as a way for him and Cordelia to be safe from external harm. They would be birds singing--performing enjoyable melodies instead of unhappily bemoaning their fate. Lear's earlier insistence that humans are no more special than wild beasts clarifies that he would see no particular issue in being treated as a bird. Indeed, that role would finally fulfill his hope at the play's onset to offload responsibilities to his daughters and live with little concern in his old age.

This is a somewhat unconventional tactic in Shakespearian tragedy: we have a character who accepts his tragic fate instead of rebelling against it. Lear's acceptance comes from a combination of existential rumination and insanity, which allow him to reach that conclusion. Lunacy thus offers a weird psychological route to beautify and escape his fate.

"Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever."

Related Characters: King Lear (speaker), Cordelia

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.3.308-310

Explanation and Analysis

Just as Edmund sends a messenger to halt his plans to kill Cordelia and Lear, Lear enters with his daughter's body. He exclaims these lines of intense remorse.

Though Lear's language has become increasingly difficult to parse, it continues to hold meaning if examined carefully. Lear's invocation—"Howl, Howl, Howl"—recalls his earlier expressions during the storm. Here, he mimics the environmental sounds, becoming himself an expression of natural catastrophe rather than of rational human logic. Calling others "men of stones" implies that he finds them emotionless and cold in the face of the catastrophe he has witnessed. As a result, Lear finds their verbal responses lacking.

In particular, he wishes he possessed their "tongues and eyes" because he could speak and see with greater vigor the horror of his daughter's death. That Lear demands the senses of others is particularly evocative considering the role that blindness and insanity have played in the work: even as he descends into a lack of proper sensation, he demands the sensory capacities of others. His goal would be "that heaven's vault should crack," which develops the previous imagery of celestial bodies. Here Lear implies that something could "crack" or change course in the pre-destined role of the heavens were he given sufficient power—a point that notably deviates from his earlier adherence to fate and the heavens. Thus in Lear's more remorseful moments, he both imitates and seeks to overcome the power of nature, all while demanding that the other unmoved humans grant him their sensations.

"No, no, no life?
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never."

Related Characters: King Lear (speaker), Cordelia

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.3.369-372

Explanation and Analysis

As Lear's life draws to a close, he speaks these final lines. He ends with abject denial of himself and of human nature.

His tone in this passage is actually quite soft and surprised. The repetition of "No, no, no" combined with the phrasing as a question, cast Lear as quite hesitant, even infantile. His next line comparing the lives of animals to that of dead Cordelia is similarly innocent: Lear seems to not be able to make sense of basic human injustices, believing naively that his daughter simply deserves to be alive because other things are. In this way, he completes the narrative spelled out by Regan and Goneril earlier in which old age reverts him to an infantile state.

The obsessive repetition of negation words recalls his original rejection of Cordelia's "nothing." Here, then, we see how far that denial has carried the both of them—from one faulty sentence to a complete denial of life with three "no"s and five "never"s. Shakespeare ends this tragedy, then, not exactly with overwhelming bloodshed, but rather with a exploration of how one small bit of misplaced language multiplied into a broad and permanent nihilistic denial.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Kent and Gloucester are in King Lear's court, discussing Lear's plan to give up his power and divide it among his daughters. Gloucester introduces Kent to his illegitimate son, Edmund, who is standing nearby. Gloucester says that, although Edmund is a "knave" (1.1.21) born out of wedlock, Gloucester loves him no less than the other "son" he has "by order of law" (1.1.19) (i.e., Edgar).

Gloucester's words to Kent show that he values his bond with his illegitimate son, despite the fact that a "natural" (i.e. biological) rather than a social or legal order connects them. This conversation looks ahead to the dismembering of the British kingdom by Lear.

Lear enters with Albany, Cornwall, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and their attendants. Having sent Gloucester to fetch Cordelia's suitors, the lords of France and Burgundy, Lear announces that he has divided his kingdom into three parts. He intends to "shake all cares and business from his age,/ Conferring them on younger strengths" so that he can "unburdened crawl toward death" (1.1.41-2).

Ironically, Lear's authority as king, as the head of a political order, enables him to make the decision that will produce grave disorder. By using the word "crawl" to describe his progress toward death, Lear describes the aging human without his former authority as an animal.

Next, Lear calls upon each of his daughters to state how much she loves him. First, Goneril insists that she loves her father "dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty" (1.1.61); Lear awards her one third of his kingdom, accordingly. Then, Regan claims that she loves her father even more than Goneril does; she is an "enemy to all other joys" but his "dear Highness' love" (1.1.80-4). Lear grants her a third, in turn.

The ceremony Lear has devised to make himself feel good also reinforces the plays theme of the connections between the "public" authority of Lear as a king and his "private" authority over his daughters as a father.

While her sisters speak, Cordelia grows nervous, knowing that she would prefer to "love, and be silent" (1.1.68) than to make such a public declaration of her love for her father. And, indeed, when her turn comes to speak, Cordelia can answer only "Nothing, my lord" (1.1.96). Lear presses her to give another answer, but she insists that she loves him "according to [her] bond, no more, no less" (1.1.102).

Refusing to go along with Lear's political theater, Cordelia stresses the importance of her inward bond. Her answer, "nothing," will echo throughout the play. Here it anticipates the way in which the dismembering of the kingdom will lead to ruin, chaos, and annihilation.

Enraged by this refusal to play along, and vowing by "all the operation of the orbs" (1.1.124), Lear renounces his "paternal care" of Cordelia forever (1.1.127). When Kent attempts to intercede on Cordelia's behalf, Lear reiterates: "here I give/ her father's heart from her" (1.1.141-2). He states that he will from now on alternate months living with his two other daughters, keeping only 100 knights on reserve to be his followers. When Kent continues to counsel him against such a rash decision, Lear banishes him on pain of death: "out of my sight!" (1.1.179). Having consoled Cordelia, and exhorted Goneril and Regan to live up to their declarations of love, Kent departs.

Lear invokes the heavens as a symbol of order and justice for the first of many times throughout the play. Kent, meanwhile, shows a personal devotion to Lear that is so strong that he is willing to step outside of the usual political order (i.e., the rules of the court) in order to try to protext his king. More insightful than Lear, Kent knows that dividing the kingdom is a bad idea; he also sees Goneril and Regan for the opportunists they are.

Gloucester returns with France and Burgundy. Lear addresses Burgundy first, telling him that Cordelia has been disowned. Cordelia interrupts, begging her father to explain that she has not done anything wrong: her only sin is to lack a "still-soliciting eye and such a tongue" (1.1.266) as her sisters. Burgundy asks, won't Lear give the dowry he proposed? Lear replies that he will give "nothing" (1.1.283). Then, Burgundy apologizes, he cannot marry Cordelia. France, however, says that the neglect of the gods has only increased his love: he pronounces Cordelia his wife and queen. Lear accepts and exits with his attendants.

Burgundy's reaction to Lear's declaration reflects that authority and order, political and economic calculations, also govern marriage.France, however, like Cordelia herself, seems to have private, purer motivations.

Cordelia then takes leave of Goneril and Regan, saying she knows their faults, but hopes that they will live up to the love they have declared. Cordelia and France leave. Left alone, Goneril observes that Lear's old age is "full of changes" (334) and that he showed "poor judgment" (337) casting off Cordelia. Regan agrees the "infirmity of his age" (339) is to blame for his error. Goneril says that in these "infirm and choleric years" (345) they cannot permit their father to exercise any real authority.

Cruelly criticizing their father's senility, the sisters show their true colors for the first time, foreshadowing all the abuses that they will soon wreak on him due to his age. Like Kent, they also describe what Lear has done as an error. But they, unlike Kent, plan to take advantage of it, and show more interest in power than in the love they owe their father simply because he is their father.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Edmund stands alone on stage, criticizing the injustice of the laws and customs that deprive him of all legal rights just because he was born out of wedlock. Therefore, Edmund says, rather than law he worships "Nature" (1.2.1). Then, holding up a letter he has forged, Edmund explains to the audience that he is plotting to steal the land of his half-brother, "legitimate Edgar" (1.2.17), by winning all his father, Gloucester's, affection.

Edmund, criticizing official legal order as unjust, decides to follow a more brutal "win or lose" natural order instead. At this point, a modern reader might be sympathetic to Edmund: it's not his fault he was born out of wedlock. The Edmund/Edgar sibling rivalry for paternal favor mirrors that between Lear's daughters.

As Gloucester returns from Lear's court, baffled by the events there, Edmund conspicuously hides the letter in his pocket. When Gloucester asks what it is, Edmund replies "no news [...] nothing" (1.2.31-3). Gloucester cheerfully demands to see it: "the quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself [...] if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles" (1.2.35-7).

The word, "nothing," repeated by Cordelia and Lear throughout 1.1, continues its echo here. Quickly falling for Edmund's tricks to turn him against his legitimate son, Gloucester displays a shortsightedness that matches Lear's own misjudgment of his daughter's.

Feigning hesitation, Edmund hands over the letter, explaining that Edgar sent it to him. Gloucester reads it aloud. The letter argues against the "aged tyranny" (1.2.53) that keeps sons enslaved to fathers past their prime. It goes on to hint that if Edmund will help Edgar dispose of Gloucester, Edgar will grant the bastard half of his legitimate wealth. Edmund adds that Edgar has often said that, with "sons at perfect age and fathers declined" (76-7), sons should take care of fathers as their wards.

In his forged letter, Edmund uses the kinds of criticisms of age that Goneril and Regan cited at the end of 1.1—and which, indeed, motivated Lear to give up his own power—to play on Gloucester's own anxieties and turn him against his other son.

As Gloucester grows enraged, Edmund pretends that he would like to urge moderation: he offers to approach Edgar about the matter, while Gloucester, in hiding, can watch. Gloucester agrees, saying that he would give up everything he has to know whether or not Edgar is actually so untrue to the "father that so tenderly and entirely loves him" (101-2). He adds that he has recently observed disorder in the skies that predicts all the chaos that has happened with Lear, Cordelia, Kent, and now him: "these late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us [...] we have seen the best of our time" (109-19).

Like Lear, Gloucester sees the heavens as both symbolizing and causing order or disorder in human affairs. He is incredulous that Edgar could violate the bonds of family. He thinks of these bonds not in Edmund's legal or economic terms of inheritance (because such issues don't affect him; he was a legitimate son of his father). Instead, he sees the bonds almost as a kind of rule of nature, embodying "tender" and complete emotional love.

After Gloucester has exited, Edmund mocks his father's belief in astrology: it is "excellent foppery," he says that when people suffer ill fortune, usually because of their own dumb behavior, they then blame "the sun, the moon, and stars" (125-8). Seeing Edgar, who has just then wandered in, Edmund briefly takes up the subject with him. Edgar is surprised at his brother's sudden interest in astronomy.

Edmund and Edgar both dismiss their father's faith in the heavens as being foolish and outdated (obliquely reflecting their age difference with their father, once again).

Then Edmund cuts to the chase, asking Edgar if he knows how he has offended Gloucester, who, Edmund reports, is enraged at his legitimate son. Edgar reacts with disbelief: "some villain hath done me wrong" (1.2.172). Replying that that's precisely what he fears, Edmund tells Edgar to go hide in Edmund's rooms, and advises Edgar that if he leaves his hiding place to make sure to carry a weapon to protect himself. Edmund promises to bring Edgar more news soon. Edgar rushes off.

Edmund, however, does continue to create just the kind of familial discord that Gloucester was troubled to observe in Lear's court and which, Gloucester predicted, were the result of the recent eclipses.

Once Edmund is left alone, he observes to himself that his father is trusting and Edgar is such a good person that he would never suspect someone else of being anything other than good. Dealing with such "foolish honesty" (1.2.189), Edmund says, will make it easy for him to take, through cunning, the lands that he did not inherit by birth.

Edmund explains that he will exploit the blind faith that a parent has in his child and the assumed trust between siblings in order to outwit the typical legal order (whereby the legitimate child inherits everything).

ACT 1, SCENE 3

At Goneril's palace, where Lear has been spending his first month after giving up power, Goneril complains to her steward, Oswald, about how badly her father, his Fool, and his knights have been behaving in her house. She instructs Oswald to tell Lear that she is sick and will not see him. She also instructs Oswald and the servants to serve him only with "weary negligence" (1.3.13), so that she has an opportunity to broach the subject with Lear.

Goneril shows her lack of personal regard for her father: she will use her new political power to flaunt the usual order of authority in a parent-child relationship. Strikingly, Lear has already become an agent of disorder, rather than the careful, controlling stage-manager who planned the divestment ceremony in 1.1.

Goneril adds that if Lear does not like what she says, he can go to Regan. She knows that she and her sister are of the same mind on this subject and will not be overruled by an "idle old man" (1.3.17). "Old fools are babes again and must be used/ With checks as flatteries" (20-1), she concludes, resolving to write to her sister.

Goneril speaks about the old, and how they should be subservient to the young, in the same terms that Edmund cited in his forged letter. For the time being, she show solidarity with her sister.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

Kent returns in the disguise of Caius, a commoner, to offer his services to Lear. Lear accepts. He sends Kent to fetch his Fool.

As in 1.1, Kent demonstrates his deep loyalty to Lear's authority, which empowers him to go outside of the usual order of political business. Lear's failure to recognize Kent in his disguise provides a dramatic metaphor for his failure to see his daughters' true colors.

Seeing Oswald, Lear attempts to summon him, but Oswald ignores him. Irritated, Lear sends a Knight to call Oswald back. The Knight returns with the message that Goneril is not well and that Oswald refuses to obey Lear—the Knight thinks that Lear has been "wronged" (66). Lear sends the Knight to fetch his Fool. Both Knight and Lear observe that since Cordelia's departure for France the Fool has been melancholy and sad. Oswald enters again. Lear summons him and demands to know who he is. When Oswald replies, "my lady's father" (1.4.79), Lear grows enraged, calling him a "dog," "slave" and "cur" (81), and hitting him. Kent joins in tripping Oswald.

Lear's demand to have Oswald acknowledge who he is—that is, the king (or former king)—draws attention to the fact that sight and recognition are part of authority and order, insofar as the leader and the subject must see and acknowledge each other for what they are if the system is to function. Lear's treatment in Goneril's house violates both the private respect she as a child owes her parent and the traditional order of official hospitality.

The Fool enters. He tells Lear to wear his (the Fool's) coxcomb (or fool's hat). He continues to tease Lear, who finally asks whether the Fool is calling him a Fool. The Fool replies that indeed he is: "all thy other titles thou has given away. That thou wast born with" (152-4). The Fool continues to mock Lear, saying that Lear is worth even less than he is: "I had rather be any kind of thing than a Fool. And yet I would not be thee [...] I am a Fool. Thou art nothing" (189-99).

Traditionally, the Fool had the unique privilege of stepping outside of, and even inverting, the order of the court by criticizing the King. Speaking in mad, riddling language, the Fool makes insightful comments about Lear's diminished condition. The Fool's use of the word "nothing," echoing Lear, Cordelia, and Gloucester, stresses that Lear has destroyed himself in the process of dividing his kingdom.

At this point, Goneril storms on stage, irritated. She blows up at Lear, criticizing the Fool and all of Lear's knights for disturbing the peace in her house. Goneril scolds Lear, telling him he must return to his usual self. Lear, incredulous, jokingly demands whether anyone present recognizes him (i.e., as their former king). "Who is it that can tell me who I am" (1.4.236) But Goneril cuts him off, demanding that he reduce the number of knights with him from 100 to 50. Lear flies into a rage cursing her as a detested kite" (or bird of prey; 1.4.274) and pleading the gods either make her infertile or to send her a "child of spleen" (296) so that she herself can know "how sharper than the serpent's tooth it is/ to have a thankless child" (302-3). Lear and his knights exit, preparing to depart for Regan's house. As they go, Lear tries, in vain, to stop crying at the loss of his daughter: "Old fond eyes,/ Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck you out" (317-8). Lear shouts that when Regan hears of Goneril's unkindness she'll "flay" Goneril's "wolvish visage" (325). He rushes out.

Lear seems to think that he was king by virtue of being himself, rather than by virtue of his power, and that therefore he could give up power but still demand respect. Now he is discovering that in giving up power he has given up his former identity. Lear curses Goneril using animal terms ("kite," "serpent's tooth," "wolvish visage"). The implication in Lear's use of these insults is that Goneril is an animal because, like an animal, she lacks the tender familial bonds of love that make humans unique. The fact that his curse focuses specifically on the idea that Goneril be without children—or, like him, have only thankless children—stresses how hurt and angered he is by his daughters' ingratitude.

As Lear departs, Albany enters, tentatively criticizing the lack of hospitality that Goneril has shown to her father. Goneril cuts him off. She summons Oswald, double-checks that he has written a letter to Regan, as she instructed, and orders him to bring it to Regan quickly. Then she turns back to her husband, telling him that he is foolish to be so gentle. Albany remains dubious: "How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell./ Striving to better, oft we mar what's well" (368-9)

Although Albany is bound to Goneril through the laws and customs of marriage, and his political power depends on her, Albany's clear vision of her cruelty to her father starts to drive him away from her. Their opposing viewpoints on the treatment of Lear, among other things, will break their marriage by play's end.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

Lear explains what happened with Goneril to Kent (who is still disguised as Cauis), and then sends Kent to deliver a letter to Regan. Assuring Lear that he will not sleep until he has delivered the message, Kent speeds off.

Kent continues to show exemplary loyalty to Lear (though he has to maintain the disguise of Caius in order to do so).

As he prepares to head for Regan's castle himself, Lear is teased by his Fool, who predicts that Regan will be as like Goneril as "a crab [...] to a crab" (1.5.18). Meanwhile, Lear begins to rave, fearing that he will go mad at the "monster ingratitude" (1.5.39) that Goneril has shown him. As the Fool persists telling Lear "thou wouldst make a good Fool" (1.5.38), Lear begs: "Sweet heaven!/ Keep me in temper. I would not be mad!" (1.5.46).

The Fool also continues with the kinds of animal metaphors that Lear introduced in his curse of Goneril. Lear, meanwhile, having realizing that in giving up power he has lost his identity as king, calls out to the even higher power of heaven to help him, as he fears that in losing his identity he may fall into the chaos of madness.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

At Gloucester's court, Curran mentions to Edmund that there are rumors of imminent war between Cornwall and Albany. Curran also mentions that Cornwall and Regan will be arriving to stay at Gloucester's castle that very night. After Curan has exited, Edmund reflects that this development – both the coming war and the arrival of Cornwall – will help him in his schemes if he acts boldly and is just a bit lucky. He calls to Edgar to come out of his hiding spot.

Paralleling the exchange between Gloucester and Kent at the beginning of 1.1, Curan's rumors of war indicate the coming dissolution of the kingdom and the breakdown of order. But for Edmund, who was born outside the law and now seeks to create disorder everywhere, these developments are good news.

Edgar enters. Edmund pretends to be frightened for Edgar's safety. He tells Edgar that Gloucester has discovered his hiding spot, and that the Duke of Cornwall is also rushing to the castle out of anger with Edgar. He asks if Edgar has said anything publicly against Cornwall? Edgar denies doing any such thing, but just then they hear Gloucester approaching. Edmund apologizes, but says that to keep up good relations with Gloucester he must pretend to be fighting Edgar off. He tells Edgar to pretend to fight him as well. While shouting as if he and Edgar are fighting, he whispers to edgar that he should flee. Edgar does, and exits. Once Edgar is gone, Edmund wounds himself in the arm in order to make the fight seem more real and himself seem more heroic.

Edmund dupes Edgar as easily as he has mislead Gloucester. Through his trickery he makes Edgar look guilty and himself look like a hero, and turns on its head the usual emotional bond between father and son as well as the usual legal bond between father and legitimate son.

Gloucester enters. Seeing that Edgar has "escaped," he sends servants after him, then questions Edmund, who confirms that Edgar attempted to persuade him to murder their father and, then, when Edmund opposed "his unnatural purpose" (2.1.59), attacked Edmund. Enraged, Gloucester declares that, by the authority of Cornwall, who is supposed to arrive that night, he will put a price on Edgar's head. Gloucester further declares that Edgar is no longer his son ("I never got him" [2.1.90]), and that he will make the "loyal and natural" (2.1.98) Edmund heir to all his property.

Staging the entire encounter for the purpose of misleading Gloucester, Edmund has provided yet another instance of manipulating vision in order to produce blindness. Entirely misreading his two sons, Gloucester falls for it and uses his authority to reverse the usual legal order, preferring the illegitimate to the legitimate.

Just after Gloucester makes this declaration, Cornwall and Regan arrive. They have already heard rumors of Edgar's attempted murder of his father. Gloucester confirms to them that his "old heart is cracked" (1.2.106). Cornwall praises Edmund for having "shown [his] father/ a childlike office" (122-3) and takes him into his service; Edmund gratefully accepts.

Yet, despite his definitive declaration, Gloucester, like Lear in 1.1 and 1.4, is clearly deeply emotionally affected by losing his emotional bond to his legal son—particularly given his old age. Cornwall, meanwhile, praises just the sort of parental respect that neither he nor Regan are going to show to Lear.

Regan then explains to Gloucester why she and Cornwall have come. They have been informed, via letters from both her father and sister, of differences between them. They hoped to seek Gloucester's counsel as their "good old friend" [1.2.146] and thought, in any case, that it was best to handle the matter while not at home. Gloucester welcomes them and says he will be happy to advise.

Despite how badly shaken and heartbroken he is by the loss of Edgar, Gloucester smoothly fulfills his duty, performing his role as host. Although Goneril and Regan have criticized Lear for his senility (1.1), here Regan at least suggests that she respects Gloucester's potential wisdom.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Outside Gloucester's castle, Kent and Oswald run into each other, waiting for responses to the letters that they brought Regan (from Lear and Goneril, respectively). Kent picks a fight with Oswald, calling him a "son and heir of a mongrel bitch" (2.2.22) and reminding him who he is: two days ago, Kent says, he tripped Oswald at Goneril's castle.

Continuing to demonstrate his loyalty to Lear, insulting Oswald as an animal, Kent further shows how the discord brewing at the highest level of government carries down to the level of bickering servants.

Hearing the ruckus, Edmund, Cornwall, Regan, Gloucester, and his servants, enter, and demand to know what is going on. Oswald explains that Kent, an "ancient ruffian" (2.2.63), started the quarrel and that he has spared him only because of "his gray beard" (64). Continuing to abuse Oswald, Kent further insults Regan, Cornwall, and Gloucester by adding that he has "seen better faces in [his] time than [those] before [him] at this instant" (97-9).

Echoing the abuse that Goneril and Regan used against Lear, and which Edmund cited to upset Gloucester, Oswald shows that old age can be a liability for commoners or servants as well as royals and aristocrats. Kent stresses that he is able to see through Cornwall and Regan to the corruption in their hearts.

Cornwall orders that Kent be put in the stocks until noon, in order to learn some manners. Kent replies that he is "too old to learn" (2.2.138). Regan lengthens his sentence from noon until the following morning. Kent is shocked: he says, if he were Lear's dog, Regan would be wrong to abuse him in this way. However, Cornwall and Regan are firm. Gloucester, too, is perturbed and seeks to console Kent; but both know that Cornwall will not reverse his command.

As Gloucester knows, Cornwall and Regan are breaking the rules of hospitality as well as the respect they should show to Lear as a father and former kin by punishing his messenger in this way.

Left alone on stage, Kent takes out a letter, which, he explains to the audience, is from Cordelia. "Nothing almost sees miracles but misery" (180-1). The letter says that Cordelia has been informed of the steps Kent has taken, disguising himself, and will in time return to remedy the trouble in Lear's England.

Cordelia's letter to Kent provides the first sign that there are forces working to restore justice and order in England—and particularly that not all family-feeling between children and parents is lost.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

In a soliloquy, Edgar explains that he escaped the "hunt" (2.3.3) sent after him by hiding in the hollow of a tree. Now that nowhere is safe for him he intends to disguise himself in the "basest and most poorest shape/ that ever penury in contempt of man/ brought near to beast" (7-9)—that is, as a "Bedlam beggar," or madman escaped from an asylum—and give up his own identity: "Edgar I nothing am" (21).

Transforming his outward appearance into that of a nearly animal, naked madman, Edgar seeks to escape the unjust (or blind and misled) workings of the law. Like Lear (whom the Fool calls "nothing" in 1.4), Edgar annihilates his own identity. However, Edgar does so knowingly and purposefully, and in doing so is able to pretend madness without actually going mad, while Lear did so in error, and is therefore slipping into actual madness.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Lear, his Fool, a Gentleman, and his other followers arrive at Gloucester's castle. Confused not to have found Regan at home, and not to have been informed of her departure, Lear grows infuriated when he sees Kent in the stocks, demanding to know who put him there. Kent explains that Regan and Cornwall themselves are responsible. Lear storms off into the palace to find them. While he is away, Kent asks why Lear has so few attendants with him. The Fool mocks Kent for asking such a stupid question.

Lear comes closer to the brink of madness upon seeing his messenger abused by his own other daughter—particularly as, in the order of the court, such an act is a direct insult to Lear himself.

Lear returns with Gloucester, in disbelief, as Gloucester has explained to him that Cornwall and Regan have been informed of Lear's arrival but decline to see him. Lear exclaims: "My breath and blood!" (116-7). As he attempts to calm himself, Gloucester returns inside. Finally, Gloucester persuades Cornwall and Regan to come out with him.

Regan's initial refusal to see Lear parallels Goneril's coldness to him in 1.4. Lear is shocked that his child, bound to him not only by her legal inheritance but in her (animal) body of "breath and blood" would insult him in this way.

Having freed Kent from the stocks, Cornwall and Regan receive Lear. Lear explains his grievances against Goneril. However, Regan takes her sister's side: "O sir, you are old." (165). Insisting that he should be ruled by someone who "discerns [his] state" (168) better than he can, Regan encourages Lear to return to Goneril's house and ask for her forgiveness. Lear is incredulous: what should he do, apologize for his age? As Cornwall joins in reproaching Lear, Lear curses Goneril—insisting, however, that he will never curse Regan in this manner because she knows better what the "offices of nature, bond of childhood" (202) are.

When Regan reveals herself as having just as little regard for both her father's age and the responsibilities following from the "bond of childhood" as Goneril exhibited in 1.4, the extent of Lear's misjudgment (and blindness) in 1.1 becomes increasingly clear.

Oswald appears, announcing Goneril's arrival. Continuing to rave with displeasure at Kent's having been put in the stocks, Lear asks the gods to take his side and to help preserve his sanity. When Goneril herself shows up, she defends her behavior; Regan tells Lear to accept Goneril's terms, dismissing half of his hundred men and return to Goneril. Lear says that he would rather "abjure all roofs, and choose [...] to be a comrade with the wolf and owl" (241-3). Goneril says coldly that the decision is up to him.

Lear's invoking of the heavens to preserve his sanity explicitly opposes the order of the stars and the gods to the disorder taking place on earth. When Lear further states that he would rather revert to the state of an animal without shelter ("comrade with the wolf and owl") he suggests that perhaps nature has more intrinsic justice than family bonds of law or affection.

Lear begs Goneril not to drive him mad. She can wait; he will be patient and stay with Regan, with his hundred knights. Regan, however, interjects that he should not make this assumption. Indeed, she thinks it is unsafe for him to keep as many as fifty followers in her household; she will allow him twenty-five. Responding that "wicked creatures yet do look well-favored/ when others are more wicked" (294-5), Lear throws himself back on Goneril: now, however, she says she does not understand why he needs twenty-five, ten, or five in a household where she has so many servants that she will tell to serve him. In fact, Regan questions why he even needs one.

As they bring down the numbers of knights that Lear is allowed to keep, without concern for their own ingratitude or injustice to their father, Regan and Goneril systematically reduce him to "nothing" (as the Fool called him in 1.4), stripping him of his remaining power and authority with shocking speed.

Lear responds with outrage, saying that what he needs is not the point: "Allow not nature more than nature needs,/ Man's life is cheap as beasts" (307-8). Begging for divine justice and for the gods to bear witness to how he has been wronged, he says he will have revenge on these "unnatural hags" (320): "I will do such things--/ What they are yet I know not, but they shall be/ The terrors of the earth!) (323-5). Once again, he insists that he will not weep, and fears that he will go mad. He exits with Kent and his Fool. Gloucester follows them.

While his speech descends into self-interruption and incoherence ("I will do such things") Lear makes the strong point that a life defined only by needs is no more than animal life. Calling his daughters "unnatural hags" he finally sees them as neither human nor animal: they have violated the laws of love, duty, and of nature itself.

A storm is beginning, Cornwall encourages the group to come inside, but Regan points out that there is no space for all of Lear's followers in Gloucester's house. Regan and Goneril agree that they will receive Lear himself, but not one follower. Gloucester, returns, reporting that Lear is in a high rage, raving around outdoors. Goneril says that they will not beg him to stay, but Gloucester is worried about the storm—there is no shelter for miles. Pitiless, Regan says that Lear has earned whatever suffering he comes by and Cornwall urges Gloucestre to shut the doors of his castle.

By effectively throwing Lear out of the house into extreme, dangerous natural conditions, Goneril and Regan reduce him to the animal state that he describes above (i.e., the state of need). Doing this in Gloucester's palace, they effectively use their authority to violate the usual order of hospitality. In response, Lear begins to go fully mad.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

Kent, out looking for Lear, runs into a Gentleman. The Gentleman describes seeing Lear out in the storm, from which even fierce animals ("the cub drawn bear" [14] and "belly-pinched wolf" [15]) are hiding, with only the Fool to keep him company.

The Gentleman's language reminds us that the mad Lear's daughters have driven him to the animal state of being subject to nature's forces.

Seeing that the Gentleman is on his side, Kent confides in him that there is division between Albany and Cornwall, which is still a secret. And he asks the Gentleman to go to Dover and report of the "unnatural and bemadding sorrow" (3.1.42) to which the King has been subjected. Although he does not reveal his real identity, he gives the Gentleman his purse, containing a ring, which he should show Cordelia who will be at Dover. Kent says she will recognize it.

Kent is wise to the division and disorder already mounting among the British. He hopes that the invading French force can take advantage of this division in order to restore a more legitimate authority in the British kingdom. He also alludes to the superior insight and recognition that exists between Cordelia and himself with the ring in his purse.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Lear rages out in the storm, calling upon it to "crack nature's molds" and destroy everything "that makes ingrateful man" (3.1.10-11), while the Fool urges him, in vain, to find shelter. "Here I stand your slave/ A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man" (21-2), Lear raves. When Kent arrives on the scene, directing Lear to a hovel that he has found, Lear finally relents, remarking that "the art of our necessities is strange/ and can make vile things precious" (76-7). As they enter, the Fool predicts that they are at the beginning of an era in which the "realm of Albion" (i.e. England) will "come to great confusion" (98-9).

No longer appealing to the divine or natural powers of the heavens to guarantee order, Lear calls upon the storm to produce maximum disorder, stripping the world of unjust human authority and pretenses and laying things bare as they are. He reveals himself in something like the animal terms of "unburdened crawl toward death" (1.1): "a poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man."

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Back inside, Gloucester confides in Edmund that he does not like the "unnatural dealing" (3.3.2) that Goneril and Regan have shown to their father. Edmund agrees. Gloucester then tells Edmund that there is division between Albany and Cornwall and that he has received a letter with further information, too dangerous to be spoken, which will eventually bring Lear revenge. Gloucester asks Edmund to distract Cornwall while he sneaks off to aid Lear.

Blind to the potential risk (and Edmund's machinations), Gloucester trusts completely in the wrong son, highlighting the parallels between his and Lear's situations. Gloucester anticipates that Cordelia and her French army will destroy Goneril and Regan and return justice and order.

Once Gloucester has exited, Edmund informs the audience that he will immediately report everything that his father has told him to Cornwall, in the hopes that he himself will gain what his father loses: "the younger rises when the old doth fall" (3.3.25).

But Edmund reveals that his father's trust in him is totally misguided, and in doing so suggests that the justice and order that Gloucester thinks Corelia is going to bring back may not really exist at all.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Lear, Kent and the Fool arrive at the hovel. Lear still insists that the "tempest in his mind" has taken "all feeling" from his senses beyond his anger and sadness at his daughter's ingratitude. As the Fool goes inside the hovel, Lear pauses to reflect that he has spent too little time thinking about his poor subjects who were regularly exposed to such hardships. If powerful people spent more time thinking about such matters, he decides, they would be more generous with what they have, making the heavens more just.

As his daughters' violation of their duties to him, and the physically punishing experience of natural chaos in the form of the storm, drive Lear to madness, his reduced (nearly animal) state gives him a moment of insight into the lives of those less privileged—which he implies he lacked when he was king.

The Fool darts back out, reporting that someone is in the hovel: a spirit named Poor Tom. Edgar emerges raving as if possessed by the "fiend," or devil, in his Bedlam beggar disguise. Lear comments over and over that Edgar could only have been brought to this lowly state by "unkind" or "pelican daughters" (3.4.77; 81). Then he goes on to observe that Edgar would be better off dead than exposing his "uncovered body" (109) to the storm and that he has reduced himself to the state of an animal (as Edgar said was his plan in 2.3): "unaccommodated man is no more than such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (113-5).

In Lear's eyes, Edgar, a madnman wearing just the barest rags for clothes, offers a stark contrast to his unjust daughters, dressed in their furs and robes. This semi-animal, semi-human figure emerges from the natural chaos of the storm, and exists outside the usual social/legal order (remember, Edgar is fleeing justice: the price his own father has put upon his head).

Gloucester approaches with a torch. Failing to recognize the disguised and raving Edgar as his son, he leads Lear, Kent, Edgar, and the Fool to a house.

Gloucester's failure to recognize his own child, echoing Lear's failure to recognize his long-faithful servant Kent, provides a literal emphasis to Lear's metaphorical "blindness" to the true qualities of his daughters.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

Cornwall enters with Edmund, carrying the letter reporting news of the invasion from France (which Gloucester mentioned to Edmund in 3.3). Edmund waffles, feigning remorse at having betrayed his father.

Edmund's handing over Gloucester as a traitor is an ultimate violation of the father-child bond.

Granting Edmund the title of Earl of Gloucester, Cornwall then sends him to find his father and arrest him. Edmund assents, although he continues to lament a 'sore conflict' (3.5.23) between his duty and his blood. Cornwall reassures Edmund that he, Cornwall, will be Edmund's "dearer father" (26) from here on.

Cornwall suggests that just as he can take on the traditional legal role of a father in granting a political title that would usually come from inheritance, he can also replace a biological father of flesh and blood. Incidentally, as he falls for Edmund's performance of hesitation about turning in Gloucester, he misjudges Edmund just as Gloucester and Edgar have before.

ACT 3, SCENE 6

Inside the house to which he has shown them, Kent thanks Gloucester, and then reports that Lear has gone entirely mad. Gloucester exits as Lear, the Fool, and Edgar enter, raving together. Lear has Edgar and the Fool sit down, announcing that they are the jury for an imaginary trial of the "she-foxes" (24) Goneril and Regan, which he persists carrying out as Kent entreats him to rest and Edgar remarks that he is finding it difficult to restrain his tears.

Carrying out the imaginary trial—which is almost like a mad parody of the ceremonial love-test Lear put his daughters to in the first scene of the play—Lear shows how far he has descended into madness. Ironically, in this hallucinated parallel trial he has better insight into the nature of the "she-foxes" (and what he now knows as their animal heartlessness) than he did in 1.1.

In the middle of the trial of Regan, Gloucester returns. Told once again by Kent that Lear's "wits are gone" (92), Gloucester tells Kent that he has overheard a plot against Lear's life. Gloucester then says he has arranged for Lear to be secretly transported to Dover in a litter. He asks Kent to help him get Lear on the litter. All exit except Edgar, who remains on stage. Briefly stepping out of the character of Poor Tom, Edgar expresses his deep pity for Lear, saying that he feels so badly for Lear that he can hardly feel his own pain. Yet he also remarks on the similarity between the two of them: "he childed as I fathered" (120). Then he exits as well.

Like Kent, Gloucester shows himself willing to risk himself personally out of loyalty to Lear and what he perceives as right political order (Lear in power, allowed to maintain control) and familial order (Lear not subject to cruelty by his daughters). Although his father continues to misrecognize him, Edgar's moment of pain explicitly draws out the similarities between the Lear/Cordelia and Gloucester/Edgar situations.

ACT 3, SCENE 7

Cornwall enters with Regan, Goneril, Edmund and servants. Handing Goneril the letter with news that the army of France has landed, and telling her to send it to her husband Albany, he sends servants to find Gloucester. Then Cornwall tells Edmund to leave, as the revenge he plans to take on the traitorous Gloucester is far too brutal for a son to behold. Oswald arrives to report that, thanks to Gloucester, Lear has been carried away to Dover.

Cornwall and Regan's decision to turn on Gloucester, who is their host, highlights the destruction of custom and order in Britain. Cornwall's comment about how brutal his violence against Gloucester is a further expression of lawlessness and chaos.

Just then, Gloucester enters. Immediately Cornwall and Regan accuse him as a traitor. Regan even plucks a hair from his "white beard." Gloucester reproaches them, saying that they are breaking the laws of hospitality by turning on their host. As they keep haranguing him, he gives up, noting that he, like a bear in a bear-baiting show, is "tied to th' stake" and "must stand the course" (67). Gloucester tells Regan that he helped Lear escape because he could not bear to see how she and Goneril treated him.

Once caught, and as helpless as a show animal, Gloucester acknowledges that he has acted out of an inward sense of justice—of how both familial relations and political order should work. He could not bear to watch what was taking place. Plucking his white beard, Regan disrespects his age (whereas in 2.1 she had asked him for wise counsel).

Cornwall interjects, saying that Gloucester never will see such a thing. Cornwall ties Gloucester down and pulls out one of Gloucester's eyes. He is preparing to pull out the second eye when one of his servants interjects. The servant pleads that Cornwall to stop this course of action. Cornwall, angered that the servant would dare to interrupt him, draws his sword. The two fight. Cornwall is seriously wounded. However, Regan takes a sword from a second servant and stabs the first in the back, killing him. Cornwall forces out Gloucester's other eye, crying "out, vile jelly!" (101).

Turning the language of vision and blindness that has been metaphorical up until this point brutally literal, Cornwall will transform Gloucester, who failed to see his son's true character, into a walking symbol of blindness. Cornwall's servant, however, still viscerally responds to an inward sense of order and balks at this injustice.

Blinded, Gloucester calls out to Edmund for help: "enkindle all sparks of nature/ to quit this horrid act" (105-6). Regan informs Gloucester that Edmund hates him, that it was Edmund himself who betrayed his father. Devastated, Gloucester realizes that he was misled regarding Edgar. He calls upon the gods to forgive him and to help Edgar prosper.

Ironically, only when he is literally blinded is Gloucester able to see the truth about his sons. His call to the gods to let Edgar prosper reflects his residual belief that the heavens are capable of guarding order and justice.

Wounded Cornwall and Regan leave Gloucester with the second and third servants, instructing them to throw him out of his house. The servants discuss among themselves how horrible they find Cornwall and Regan's actions. Resolving to find "the Bedlam" (125), i.e. the disguised Edgar, to lead Gloucester to safety, they first fetch flax and egg whites to help stop the bleeding from Gloucester's face.

Throwing Gloucester out of his own house, Cornwall and Regan not only violate the laws of hospitality but continue the process of using their authority to disarrange the usual order of the kingdom. Yet the servants still understand what is right and just, and help their former lord.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, stands in the wind, reflecting that it is best to be lowly, because for the "lowest and most dejected thing of fortune" (4.1.3) things can only get better. Then, he sees an Old Man leading the blinded Gloucester, who keeps asking him to leave him to die: "I have no way and therefore want no eyes./ I stumbled when I saw" (19-20). Gloucester laments his misjudgment of Edgar and says how much he wants to meet his son once more: "Might I but live to see thee in my touch/ I'd say I had eyes again" (24-5). As the Old Man catches sight of Edgar, Edgar notes his foolishness for thinking of himself as 'the lowest' before: "O gods, who is't who can say 'I am at the worst'?/ I am worse than e'er I was" (27-8).

Edgar's realization, upon seeing his blinded father, that it is impossible to know when you are at the worst, because things can always get even worse, suggest that there is no limit to the potential of unjust power to produce destruction and suffering. Gloucester, meanwhile, in the face of his own errors and the awful brutality of the world, has given up on living except for a desire to meet his true son once more.

The Old Man tells Gloucester that they had found Poor Tom. Gloucester notes that the previous night he saw such a mad beggar who "made [him] think man a worm" (37). He has learned, he says, about human lowliness: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;/ They kill us for their sport" (41-2). He still does not recognize that the "naked fellow" (46) is his son. Sending the Old Man who was leading him back to fetch some clothing for "Poor Tom" (who is naked), Gloucester offers Poor Tom all the money in his purse to take him to the cliffs at Dover (where he intends to commit suicide).

Gloucester, when he first saw Poor Tom, thought him to be as low as a worm. But now Gloucester realizes that all men are like worms in the eyes of the gods – mere playthings, to be killed for fun. In the face of the terrible things he has done and seen, Gloucester despairs and wants only to cease to exist.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

Having traveled from Gloucester's—now Edmund's—castle, Goneril and Edmund arrive at Goneril's palace. Oswald emerges, reporting that Albany is "changed" (2.1.4) and that everything that should upset him pleases him. Goneril, irritated, tells Edmund that he should not meet Albany at this time. She gives Edmund a sign of her favor and kisses him. Edmund exits, swearing that he will remain faithful to her until death. After he has gone, she laments that her "fool" (i.e. her husband) "usurps [her] body" (35).

Goneril, who has spurned the ties of duty between parent and child (and, indeed, sibling and sibling, allowing Cordelia to be taken away) now proceeds to disrespect and violate the bonds of love and duty connecting husband and wife.

Albany enters and denounces Goneril (and Regan) in scathing terms for their mistreatment of their father: "Tigers, not daughters, what have you performed?" (49). Although Goneril tries to shut him up by calling him a coward, he persists, calling her a devil, and says that if Goneril were not a woman he would tear her to pieces.

As Lear was forced to come to terms with his daughters' cruelty, now Albany fully recognizes that of his wife. Like Lear (and Kent to Oswald), he describes her and Regan's misdeeds in animal terms.

However, a servant interrupts them, bursting in with news of Gloucester's blinding and that Cornwall has died of the wound he received from his servant. Albany, who had not known of Gloucester's blinding, cries out that Cornwall's death is proof that the gods exist: "this shows you are above,/ you justicers" (95-6). Goneril, however, is worried that the widowed Regan will now seduce Edmund from her. She hurries off to answer the messenger's letter.

Albany, like Lear, still obviously sets some stock in divine justice and natural order. Goneril, however, is absorbed only with her own selfish and lustful concerns: her sexual desire for Edmund.

Left alone with the Messenger, Albany asks whether Edmund is with Gloucester. The Messenger explains that it was Edmund who informed against him. Albany vows that he will thank Gloucester for his love toward Lear and will revenge his lost eyes. He summons the Messenger to give him more information.

Like Kent and Gloucester before him, Albany is now willing to risk himself, making his purpose vengeance and the restoration of a just political authority and order.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

In the French war camp, Kent asks a Gentleman about Cordelia's reaction to the letter that he sent in 3.1. The Gentleman reports that she was moved to deep pity for her father and rage against her sisters. Kent states that "the stars above us govern our conditions" (39), because there could be no other explanation for how siblings could be so different from each other.

Kent, like Albany in 4.2, still has faith in the power of the heavens. However, he uses it to explain the (otherwise inexplicable) differences between Cordelia and her siblings, not to guarantee order.

Kent then explains that Lear is in the camp and is occasionally sane. However, he adds, Lear refuses to see Cordelia out of shame at "his own unkindness" (51) and at having given her "dear rights to his dog-hearted daughters" (55). Kent asks the Gentleman to come with him to see Lear, explaining that he must remain in the strange disguise he has adopted for some time yet.

Like Gloucester in 4.1, Lear has been moved by the extremity of his situation to see his children for what they are. For him, as for Gloucester, insight required a kind of blindness—here the metaphorical blindness of madness.

ACT 4, SCENE 4

Cordelia, attended by the Gentleman from 4.3 and a Doctor sends out a search party of one hundred soldiers for her father, who, she has heard, is raving "mad as the vexed sea" (4.4.2). She then promises the doctor that whoever cures Lear can have everything she owns. The doctor responds that, in order to be cured, the mad king needs rest.

Clearly concerned for her father, and prepared to give up anything to restore him, Cordelia proves that she places utmost importance on her duties as a child, setting them before wealth or political power.

A messenger enters with news that the British are marching on the French camp. Cordelia responds that she is aware, explaining that the whole purpose of France's war on England is to avenge her father: "No blown ambition doeth our arms incite,/ But love, dear love, and our aged father's right" (30-1).

As the British army approaches, the face-off between the self-interested children (Edmund, Goneril, and Regan) and the selfless Cordelia comes to a head.

ACT 4, SCENE 5

Back at Gloucester's former palace, widowed Regan questions Oswald about Goneril and Edmund. She pauses to explain that Edmund himself has gone to kill Gloucester—whose pitiful appearance, blinded and wandering, is turning the people against the British—and to also assess the power of the French army. Then, she resumes pestering Oswald, asking him to open the letter that he is carrying from Goneril to Edmund and let her read it. Oswald refuses, but Regan insists that he take the following news to Goneril: Cornwall is dead, Edmund and Regan have spoken and concluded that it is more convenient for him to marry Regan than her sister.

Presumably, Regan desires Edmund both as a sex-object and as a protector of her political power, now that she is a widow. Her persistent selfishness, which led her to abuse her father, will now erode her bond with her sister, with whom she has been united up to this point.

Regan concludes by saying that she will show favor to whoever kills "that blind traitor" (41), Gloucester.. Oswald responds that if he runs into him en route to Goneril, he will kill Gloucester. Then Oswald rushes off.

Regan's command to kill Gloucester reveals her real brutality. Oswald shows the blind willingness to obey in order to ingratiate himself with powerful people, exactly the trait for which Kent mocked him in 2.1.

ACT 4, SCENE 6

Edgar, now dressed as a peasant, pretends to lead Gloucester up a steep cliff, while in fact they are going over flat ground. At the "summit" Edgar gives a long speech on "how fearful and dizzy it is to cast one's eyes" (17) over the edge. Taking his bait, Gloucester asks to be led to the cliff and, giving Edgar a purse with a valuable jewel in it, asks him to go away. Edgar does so, and says to himself that he is only playing with Gloucester's despair in this way only in order to cure it.

Showing exemplary dutifulness to his father, Edgar encourages him to believe one further illusion, which, however, should cure him of his woes. On stage, Edgar's description of the huge hill where there is none sounds, however, almost as deluded as Lear's mad ravings.

Standing at the "edge" of the nonexistent cliff, Gloucester address the "mighty gods": he is renouncing the world "in [their] sights" and that if he could bear their "great opposeless wills" any longer, he would live out his life (44-8). However, since he cannot, he asks them to bless Edgar. Then he "leaps"—falling to the ground in a faint. Edgar now pretends to be a new person who saw Gloucester leapfrom the "cliff," and approaches Gloucester. Although Gloucester asks to be left alone, Edgar refuses: he keeps telling Gloucester that it is a miracle that he has survived his fall and persuades Gloucester that the creature that led him to the edge of the cliff was in fact the devil. "The clearest gods," Edgar tells his father, "have preserved thee" (90-1).

Even though he has suffered so much, Gloucester still believes that a divine order exists. Speaking of the world in the gods' "sights," he further describes them as spectators who have the ultimate insight into human affairs. When Edgar approaches him after the "fall," he, too, describes the gods as looking out for humans.

Lear enters, raving and mad. Edgar cannot help but exclaim in grief at his appearance: "O, thou side-piercing sight!" (104). Hearing Lear, Gloucester recognizes his voice and calls out to him, asking to kiss the king's hand. Lear, however, continues raving. Cordelia's gentleman and a group of attendants enter. Spotting Lear, they entreat him to come to Cordelia, but he flees. As Cordelia's men pursue Lear, Edgar asks one of the Gentleman for an update. He reports that the battle between the British forces of Edmund, Goneril, and Regan and the French force led by Cordelia is imminent.

Raving mad, Lear fulfills his own worries before the storm and the prophecy of the Fool in 1.4 that he would become like a Fool playing word games. Edgar sees Lear's madness as a symbol of the current dissolution of Britain. The imminent battle indicates that that dissolution, in one form or another, is about to come to a head.

Gloucester begs the "ever-gentle gods" (241) for forgiveness for his attempted suicide. Edgar approaches him. As he takes Gloucester's hand, however, Oswald appears. Rejoicing to have spotted the "eyeless head" (254) of Gloucester—who Regan bid him to kill in 4.5—he draws his sword. Edgar intercedes, still in the persona of a peasant. Puzzled that a peasant would risk himself for a traitor, Oswald orders Edgar to stand down. They fight; Edgar kills Oswald. As he dies, he asks Edgar to take the money in his purse and bury him, and take the letters therein and deliver them to Edmund, Earl of Gloucester.

Right after Gloucester has evoked the gods as spectators and protectors, Edgar is brave enough to stand up and defend his father, despite his father's former misjudgment and mistreatment of him. In his selflessness, Edgar's actions parallel Cordelia's. The self-interested and ambitious Oswald, failing to recognize Edgar, is puzzled by his gesture of selfless devotion.

Edgar opens Oswald's purse and reads the letter in it—which is from Goneril to Edmund, attempting to persuade him to murder Albany and marry her. Shocked, Edgar resolves to head off and find the "murderous lechers" (304) Edmund and Goneril, and eventually to reveal all to Albany. He approaches Gloucester, who has been privately grieving to himself, and, calling him "father," takes his hand and leads him away.

The coincidental confrontation with Oswald gives Edgar insight into all the machinations taking place between Lear's children, as their personal allegiances fall apart in the political chaos they have created. But, meanwhile, Edgar has now revealed himself to his father, restoring that family bond.

ACT 4, SCENE 7

Back in the French camp, Cordelia thanks Kent for all the service that he has shown her father and asks him to take off his peasant's clothing. However, Kent insists, he must remain in disguise for a short while longer. Cordelia then asks the Doctor how her father is doing. The Doctor replies that he is asleep. Cordelia prays: "O, you kind gods,/ Cure this great breach in his abused nature" (16-7). The Doctor says that they will wake him up. Two servants enter, carrying Lear on a chair. The Doctor cues for music to be played. Cordelia kisses her father while commenting on her astonishment at her sisters' cruelty in throwing Lear out into the storm: "Mine enemy's dog,/ Though he had bit me, should have stood that night/ Against my fire" (42-4).

Cordelia shows decency, and the faith in the gods, exhibited primarily by older characters in the play, such as Lear and Gloucester. Like Lear, too, she marvels at the unkindness of her sisters using an animal comparison (she would have been kinder to her enemy's dog than they were to their own father). That she would be kind to an enemy's dog reflects her innate and a-political sense of decency and justice.

At the doctor's urging and with music, Lear wakes up, at first unsure whether he is alive or dead. Cordelia asks him to look at her and give her his benediction. He fears he is "not in [his] perfect mind" (72) but believes that the woman in front of him is Cordelia. She assures him that she is and that he is in his own kingdom. Cordelia asks him to take a walk with her. Begging her to "forget and forgive," because he is "old and foolish" (99), he accepts. They exit.

Upon first waking up, unsure of his state, Lear is reluctant to trust the senses, which have so misled him—both when he misjudged his children and in his madness. The reunion between Lear and Cordelia joyfully restores the family bond trampled on everywhere else in the play up to this point.

Kent remains on stage with a Gentleman. They discuss the state of the battle: Edmund is leading the British force. The Gentleman states that there is a rumor that Kent himself is with Edgar in Germany. After he has departed, Kent remarks that the outcome of his ruse, disguising himself, will depend on how the day's battle is fought.

The Gentleman's failure to recognize Kent, however, reminds the audience that many of the misrecognitions and blindnesses of the play have yet to be resolved as the conflict comes to a head

ACT 5, SCENE 1

Edmund, leading the British forces with Regan, sends a messenger to Albany to confirm that Albany will send his forces to join theirs. Regan, meanwhile, pesters Edmund about whether or not he has ever slept with Goneril. Edmund tells Regan not to fear, just as Albany and Goneril approach. Goneril remarks to herself that she would rather lose the battle to the French than have Regan come between her and Edmand. Although Albany stresses that he is joining them against their common enemy of the French, not because he approves of their treatment of Lear and Gloucester, he and Goneril join Edmund and Regan. Edmund says he will join Albany shortly at his tent. Regan forces Goneril to walk off with her.

Goneril's obsessive jealousy of Edmund, and Regan's suspicion of Goneril, show the accelerating decay of their relationship and alliance. Albany, meanwhile, stresses that he is only temporarily suspending his principles voiced in 4.2 for the sake of maintaining the integrity of the British kingdoms. (He has not changed in his disapproval of the 'tiger daughters.')

As the others depart, Edgar, still in disguise as a beggar, approaches Albany. Edgar gives Albany the letter from Goneril to Edmund that he intercepted from Oswald, and tells Albany to read it before the battle. Then, Edgar says, if the British side wins, Albany must have a herald sound a trumpet and Edgar will appear again. Edgar exits. Just as Albany is starting to read, Edmund appears and hands him a report describing the strength of the French army. Albany takes it and exits, hurriedly.

By delivering the letter to Albany, Edgar will grant Albany full insight into his wife's character—and how her treachery will violate their marriage as well as her familial bonds. Edgar, meanwhile, is laying in place the plan to avenge himself on his brother.

Alone on stage, Edmund explains that he has sworn his love to both Goneril and Regan and muses about which it would be more convenient for him to marry. Resolving to leave that problem for the time being, he further reveals that, if the British are victorious, although Albany wishes to spare Lear and Cordelia, he never will.

Edmund's deceit of the two sisters reveals that they, too, are capable of misjudging. Edmund's malicious opportunism has an almost unlimited depth, even when compared to such treacherous people as Goneril and Regan.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Edgar leads Gloucester to the shade of a tree, so that he can rest there during the battle. Then Edgar leaves his father, assuring that if he ever returns again, he will bring him comfort. He exits. After the sound of an alarm signaling a retreat, Edgar appears onstage again. He reports that the French forces have lost and Lear and Cordelia have been taken prisoner. Gloucester says that he would like to die and rot on the spot, but Edgar insists on leading him along.

Edgar shows care and tenderness for his father to the last. Meanwhile, Shakespeare sets the main action of the battle offstage—solving a dramatic problem (how to show a whole army on stage) but also maintaining focus on what is most important in the play—not war, but rather familial relationships.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Edmund orders that the captured Lear and Cordelia be taken away to prison. Cordelia, speaking with Lear, wonders if they should ask to see Goneril and Regan. But Lear, delighted to be with Cordelia again, says no. He says that they will enjoy prison, where they can laugh and sing and tell old stories and mock the courtiers and their petty political gossip. He says that in prison they will live longer than "hordes" of rulers who will come and go on the whims of fortune. They exit. As they go, Edmund calls back a Captain, one of the soldiers accompanying them and hands him a letter, instructing him that if he kills Lear and Cordelia he will gain "noble fortunes" (35). The Captain says that he will do it.

Reunited with Cordelia, Lear seems to see prison as offering the same kind of opportunity that he thought he would get by giving up power: an escape from political responsibility that will let him stand outside the usual rules of the court and be amused by it. Yet Lear's idea is based on an assumption that, as tradition and custom dictates, Edmund will treat his prisoners well until they can stand trial. But Edmund cares only about power, not tradition, and he plays off the greed and ambition of others, such as the Captain, to corrupt them too.

Albany, Goneril, Regan and other soldiers enter to the sound of a flourish from a trumpet. Albany asks to have Lear and Cordelia brought to him so that they can be protected until they can be judged. Edmund explains that he has already sent them off. Albany reminds Edmund that he does not think of him as a brother, yet, but merely as an ally in the war. Regan interjects that she will give him herself and her property—all he requires to become Albany's brother. Goneril interjects that Regan should not get ahead of herself, and the two descend into squabbling, which Regan cuts off only because she feels sick to her stomach. In brief, she tells Edmund that he can take her soldiers, prisoners, and inheritance; she here makes him her "lord and master" (92).

Albany attempts to stand up and preserve the just order of law, which Edmund has just violated in his instructions to the Captain to kill Cordelia and Lear illegally. Meanwhile, personal conflict between Regan and Goneril pushes all onstage further toward disorder and destruction. Regan, boldly trying to seize Edmund from Goneril, completely abrogates their former sisterly bond.

Albany cuts all off when he announces that he is placing Edmund, as well as Regan, under arrest for capital treason. Albany calls for his men to let the trumpet sound and throws down his glove: if no one appears to fight with Edmund, in order to avenge his treasons, Albany vows that he himself will do so. As this is going on, off to one side, Regan grows increasingly sick. Goneril remarks to herself that Regan had better be sick—Goneril herself has poisoned her out of jealousy over Edmund. Denying that he is a traitor, Edmund accepts the challenge, throwing down his glove, as Regan is helped to exit.

While Albany is setting the stage for Edgar's revenge on Edmund, he is also living up to his vow in 4.2 that he would avenge Lear's suffering and Gloucester's lost eyes. His gesture, undertaken out of a sense of desire to guarantee just order by his authority, takes place just as the subplot between Goneril and Regan comes to a head, breaking their sisterly bond forever.

A herald reads a declaration calling for any man who would like to declare that Edmund is a traitor to come forth. He sounds the trumpet three times. On the third sounding, Edgar enters, armed (with his face covered). He refuses to identify himself: he has lost his name, he says, because of treason. Yet, he says, he is noble and will fight to prove Edmund a traitor. Edmund accepts. They fight. Edmund is wounded. When Edmund falls, Goneril becomes hysterical, cursing Edmund because he was not obligated by the laws of war to accept a challenge from an unknown assailant. Albany cuts her off, brandishing the letter that she wrote to Edmund, plotting against his life. Goneril shuts him up, reminding him that political power is hers, not his. She exits. Noting that she seems hysterical, Albany sends a soldier after her.

Edgar initially obscures his identity because he feels le lost it, when he was disinherited by his father and forced to take on the vagrant character of Poor Tom. With Edgar's rightful revenge on Edmund, the tides start to turn from the lowpoint (where Cordelia and the French lost their battle) back toward a restoration of just order in England. It is ironic that Edmund is killed because he himself is deceived by a disguise, and does not recognize his brother Edgar as his challenger.

Encouraging the fallen Edmund to "exchange charity" (200) with him, Edgar then identifies himself, concluding that "the gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/ Make instruments to plague us" (204-5), observing that Gloucester was punished for his adultery with Edmund's mother by the loss of his eyes. Edmund agrees: "the wheel is come full circle" (209). Edgar then explains everything that happened. He finishes by describing how he revealed himself to his father only right before leaving to fight Edmund. Gloucester, unable to bear his mixture of joy and grief, died on the spot. Edgar adds that Kent came upon them, as Gloucester was dying, and revealed himself as having served Lear in disguise, all this time.

Edgar, after revealing himself and ending the deception of his disguise, invokes the gods to explain that all the suffering that has happened is part of a just order that has now restored him to his rightful place. Edgar's revelation of Kent's identity furthers the process of unveilings that need to take place before all characters gain insight into everything that the audience (or the gods as divine spectators) have seen.

As Edgar is wrapping up his story, a Gentleman runs in, crying for help, with a bloody knife. He exclaims that he has just taken it from the heart of Goneril—who, after confessing to having poisoned Regan, committed suicide. Edmund confesses that he had pledged to wed both, and that now all three will be united in death. Albany orders the Gentleman to bring in the bodies. As he speeds off to do so, Kent arrives asking to see Lear. Reminded, Albany asks Edmund where Lear and Cordelia can be found. Edmund, saying he would like to do some good before he dies, orders them to send someone quickly to the king and his daughter—for he has written instructions for his Captain to kill them (earlier in 5.3). Edmund gives the messenger-soldier his sword, as a sign of the authenticity of the message. He explains that he instructed his soldier to hang her, and make it look like suicide, as Albany orders that he be carried off.

However, before order can be restored, the destruction and annihilation that has been unfolding ever since Cordelia's first speaking "nothing" has more to wreck in its path. With Edmund's confession that he pledged himself to both Goneril and Regan, the audience and the other characters see what poisoned their allegiance as sisters. Edmund also reveals the danger that Lear and Cordelia have been in, all while Albany and others believed them to be under the protection of law, awaiting judgment…

At this moment, Lear enters with Cordelia's body in his arms, crying: "Howl, howl, howl [...] she's gone forever" (309-11). Although, he explains, half-mad, he killed the man who hanged her, he did so too late to save her. Then, seeing Kent, he asks, confused, who he is, noting that his "eyes are not o' th' best" (337). Kent identifies himself and explains that he has been serving Lear, in disguise as his servant Caius, all this time. Kent also reports to Lear that his two other daughters have committed suicide, but Lear does not seem to understand. Albany quiet Kent, pointing out that it is no use to attempt to explain such things to Lear now.

Lear is so devastated to be confronted with the loss of his one loyal child—a loss that ultimately resulted from his own misjudging her at the beginning of the play—that he can hardly process the fact that his entire family has now been annihilated. His confusion upon seeing Kent revealed, like his confusion upon waking up and being reunited with Cordelia in 4.7, reminds the audience that he is half-mad.

A messenger enters, reporting that Edmund is dead. Albany brushes off this "trifle" (359), then declares that, for the duration of Lear's life, they will return absolute power to him and all will be rewarded or revenged upon, according to their behavior. Lear, however, descends into raving with grief over Cordelia: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,/ And thou no breath at all?" he asks. "Thou'lt come no more,/ Never, never, never, never never" (370-2). He faints with grief; as he does, Kent prays that Lear's heart break, finally releasing him. Lear dies.

Albany proves that he is truly just and dutiful toward his father in law, insofar as he is willing to return power to him. However, the destruction has clearly gone too far for such a restoration of the order of pre-divided Britain. Lear's irrational raving about animals suggests a crazed sense of injustice; his full line of 'nevers' suggests that he cannot see meaning in anything anymore, and he seems to embrace death as an escape.

Albany orders that the corpses on stage be carried away, so that all can begin their general mourning. He then tells Kent and Edgar that they will rule over and rebuild Britain. Kent, however, says that he, too, must soon commit suicide in order to rejoin his master. Edgar announces that they all must learn the lessons of these sad times, "to speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." He concludes: "The oldest have borne most. We that are young shall never see so much nor live so long" (393-4).

Albany seeks to restore order to the kingdom by having Kent and Edgar, the only two characters remaining to have acted nobly through the play, take leadership of Britain. Kent's sense of duty remains so strong, however, that he cannot live without Lear, his master. Yet that does leave Edgar, who's inheritance was almost stolen from him by Edmund, to now rule over Britain. And Edgar, in taking power, pronounces an end to disguise or subterfuge in saying that all should speak what they feel and not what they think they should say, while also restoring a sense of order through his reverence for the older generation that was so abused by the younger, and which has now passed away.

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