

**insight** SHAKESPEARE PLAYS



# King Lear

William Shakespeare



**Aidan Coleman & Stephen McInerney**

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First edition published in 2011

This second edition published in 2017, reprinted in 2024

Insight Publications Pty Ltd

3/350 Charman Road

Cheltenham Victoria 3192

Australia.

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBNs:

9781925485509 (bundle: print + digital)

9781925485493 (digital)

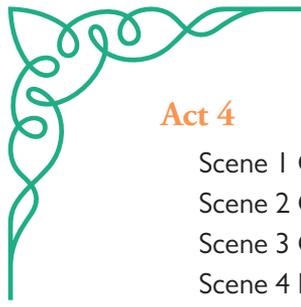
Cover and internal design: Gisela Beer

Printed by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd



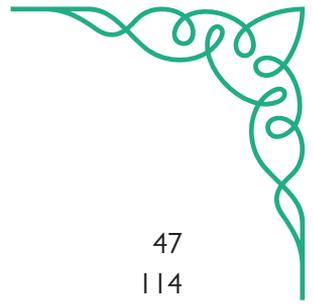
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## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the following people:

Associate Professor Dr Tom Burton (University of Adelaide), Tess Coleman, Abbie Thomas, James McCann and Leana Coleman for their valuable feedback on various aspects of the book.

The South Australian English Teachers' Association, for their ongoing support.

The staff at Insight Publications for their sound advice and willingness to listen to our ideas.

Our families, for their infinite patience, understanding, excitement and support.

# Introduction

## Who was Shakespeare?



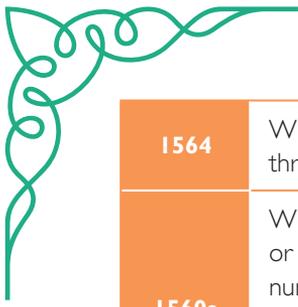
*The Chandos Portrait of William Shakespeare*

Shakespeare was neither a king nor a lord, and this is the reason we know little about him. While historians and writers made an effort to record the details of the lives of those born into noble families (kings, queens, ladies and lords), they were not generally interested in the important details of other people's lives. In his time Shakespeare was a famous playwright, but perhaps no more famous than some other London playwrights, such as Ben Jonson or Christopher Marlowe. Little effort was made to record the details of his life until some 50 years after his death.

## Did Shakespeare write Shakespeare?

Nearly all scholars agree that we have enough evidence to confirm that William Shakespeare, the man born in Stratford-upon-Avon, was the author of the plays and poems attributed to him. However, a few other theories exist as to who wrote the plays. Some authors that have been suggested include Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford; Christopher Marlowe (a talented playwright who died in 1593 but who conspiracy theorists claim may have faked his own death); Francis Bacon (a philosopher and scientist); and even Queen Elizabeth I.

There are a number of problems with all of these theories and very little evidence to support them. No-one doubted Shakespeare was the author of the plays and poems until 200 years after his death and these theories are usually based on the argument that Shakespeare was not university-educated.



1564	William Shakespeare was baptised on 26 April 1564; it is likely that he was born three days before this on 23 April (St George's Day).
1560s	<p>William's parents, John and Anne, were possibly both illiterate (they couldn't read or write). His father, John Shakespeare, was a glove maker and was involved in a number of other business activities. He became a member of the town council when Shakespeare was very young.</p> <p>William was John and Anne's third child. He had seven brothers and sisters but only five of them survived to adulthood.</p>
1571	It is believed that Shakespeare entered the King's New Grammar School in Stratford around the age of seven. School days would have begun at six in the morning in summer and seven in winter and they would have finished at five in the evening (Monday to Saturday). The school would have been very strict and students could have expected to be beaten for misbehaving or showing any signs of laziness.
1578	Shakespeare probably left school at 14 or 15. His father owed quite a few people money by this time, and, for this reason, William was unable to attend university.
1582	At age 18, he married 26-year-old Anne Hathaway. They had three children – Susanna, and twins, Judith and Hamnet (Hamnet died when he was only 11).
1590s	<p>We are unsure what Shakespeare did in his early twenties. There are stories of his being employed by a rich landowner in the north of England. It is possible that he joined a travelling company of actors. We do know that by the early 1590s he was a popular playwright in London; in 1594 he invested in the acting company of which he was a member (the Lord Chamberlain's Men), becoming a part-owner.</p> <p>Through the 1590s Shakespeare wrote a number of poems and many of his most popular plays, including <i>Richard III</i>, <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> and <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>. He acted in some of his own plays and those of other playwrights.</p> <p>In 1596 Shakespeare obtained a coat of arms for his father, which meant that he would be officially regarded as a gentleman. In the following year, Shakespeare bought New Place, the second-largest house in Stratford-upon-Avon.</p>
1600s	<p>The first decade of the 1600s was his most productive period, when he wrote most of his greatest plays, including <i>Hamlet</i>, <i>Othello</i>, <i>Macbeth</i> and <i>King Lear</i>.</p> <p>In 1603 Shakespeare's company became the King's Men and regularly performed at court before King James from this time. During this decade he bought more properties around London and the Stratford area and became very wealthy.</p>
1613	In 1613 Shakespeare returned to Stratford-upon-Avon but still travelled to London occasionally to look after his business interests.
1616	He died on his 52nd birthday (23 April 1616) and was buried at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford.

# Jacobean England

Upon her death, Queen Elizabeth I was childless and it was widely accepted that her second cousin, James, already the King of Scotland (as James VI), was the best candidate to replace her. James I of England came to the throne in 1603, and ruled both England and Scotland until his death in 1625. Historians refer to this period (1603–1625) as 'Jacobean'.

Most English people were pleased to finally have a man on the throne because they believed it would lead to greater stability. King James was intelligent and knowledgeable, but with no real practical sense, and this earned him the reputation of being 'the wisest fool in Christendom'. He was very opinionated, and wrote books and pamphlets on such diverse topics as politics, tobacco and witchcraft.

James was not as diplomatic as Elizabeth in dealing with the English Parliament and he promoted the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, which argued that kings received their power from God and could not, therefore, be challenged. James was instinctively conservative and, despite replacing many of the English courtiers with Scottish favourites, made few changes to the government of the realm. Early in his reign, James secured a lasting peace treaty with Spain, and tried to introduce a union between England and Scotland. Although the union was not achieved in James' lifetime, the flag he introduced still flies today as the British Union Jack.

The kingdom James inherited was thriving with confidence and patriotic feeling. This was the high point of the period often described as the English Renaissance. The modern scientific method was being developed, based on observation and experiment, and new discoveries were being made, particularly in the areas of anatomy, mathematics and astronomy. It was also a time of great achievement in the arts. At the centre were the English theatres, attracting audiences of around 20 000 per week.



*Portrait of James I by an unknown artist*



Illustration from 1579 of the Great Chain of Being

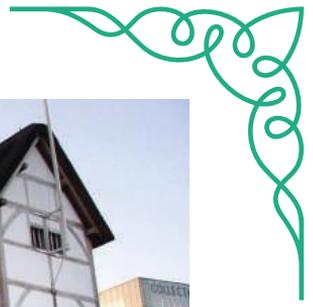
When James came to power, Shakespeare had already written many of his most famous plays, including *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. James was quick to name Shakespeare's company of actors the King's Men. This new title allowed Shakespeare's company to march in processions and to play before the King, which they did on many occasions. In the next few years Shakespeare wrote some of his most profound plays, including *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*.

Unlike today, when the people of England vote for a government, England was ruled by a monarch, James I, and his advisors. Jacobean society was divided into two broad groups: the 'gentle', the two to five per cent of the population who governed the country (including earls, lords, ladies and gentlemen), and the 'base' or 'knaves', who made up most of the population. People were born into a certain class and marriages

between people of different classes were reasonably rare. While the 'gentle' were generally wealthy, some businessmen of lower rank were also beginning to make their fortunes during this time. The practice of knighting or even ennobling a person of lesser rank became more common under James; people usually paid for this privilege and James saw this as another source of income.

In the early 1600s, virtually everyone believed in a God who created and controlled the universe. Jacobeans believed in a divine order called the Great Chain of Being. In this way of seeing the world, God ruled the universe and below Him were a number of angels. The King was the highest earthly rank in the Chain of Being; beneath him were nobles and lesser lords, and below them the majority of the population. This chain extended further to the animal and then the plant kingdom. Such an idea was used to reinforce the class system: everything had its place in the chain and people believed that upsetting this order in any way would cause chaos. A person's social class was even made clear through the clothing they wore, which was governed by strict laws.

Jacobean society was quite superstitious. Many of them believed in fairies and witches, whom they blamed for unexplained mishaps, although many educated people were becoming sceptical. Jacobeans would worry if a black cat crossed their path, and would avoid walking beneath ladders because this was considered bad luck. The Earth was generally believed to be the centre of the universe, and it was thought that, in their motion around the Earth, the planets produced



*The New Globe Theatre*

musical notes that together formed a perfect harmony. Jacobean also believed that the constellations and other heavenly bodies, including the moon, influenced human events and held clues for the future.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, England, like most other European countries, was Roman Catholic. Under Henry VIII, the country broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and formed the Protestant Church of England. Although England briefly became Catholic again under Queen Mary, the country remained Protestant throughout the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. This meant James I was the head of the Church of England. Catholicism was illegal when James came to the throne and English Catholics hoped that their new king would change this. The King's wife, Anne of Denmark, was a Catholic and James had made some remarks as King of Scotland that suggested he might introduce a limited tolerance towards Catholics. The early years of James' reign were a disappointment for some, and in 1605 a group of radical Catholics attempted to assassinate James and the ruling elite by blowing up the Houses of Parliament. The scheme, known as the Gunpowder Plot, failed and everyone involved was executed.

Many Protestants, known sometimes as Puritans, appealed to James to reform the Church of England and make it more distinct from the Catholic Church. James ignored their appeals on most points, except their request for a new translation of the Bible. The King James Bible was produced early in James' reign (1611) by a committee of Greek and Hebrew scholars. Many consider it the most poetic translation of the Bible into English. Like Shakespeare's plays, the King James Bible has had a profound effect on the development of the English language.

# A day at the theatre, London 1607

Imagine you could go back to London on a Saturday afternoon in September 1607. It is a warm sunny day with a slight breeze blowing in from the country. You decide to avoid the crowds flowing over London Bridge, choosing instead to be rowed across the River Thames (pronounced *Temz*) in one of the many water taxis. There are dozens of similar boats making their way across the river from the main city to Southwark (pronounced *Suth-uk*).

Southwark is a poor, overcrowded suburb filled with hastily built houses and flats. This is where immigrants from other parts of England or overseas come to live when they first arrive in London because it's cheap and no-one asks questions. It is full of workshops and young apprentices and you notice an overly high number of beggars. It is also the location of five of London's prisons, including that most notorious prison: the Clink.



*A panorama of London by Claes Van Visscher, 1616*

More importantly, Southwark is London's entertainment district. This is largely because it is outside the control of the city officials and their strict laws. The streets are packed with bowling alleys, brothels and taverns, where you can drink, or gamble illegally on dice, backgammon or cards. Here you can see all sorts of professional entertainers, from acrobats and clowns to musicians and puppeteers. You can also see some sickeningly violent entertainment. In the bear-baiting rings you are likely to see a bear or bull being attacked by vicious dogs. But you haven't crossed the river to see any of these things. You are here to see a play.

As you near the theatre, it is the smells you notice: roasting meats and pies mingle with the ever-present stench of horse dung, human sweat and sewage. Then you turn a corner, and there it is, standing 30 metres high: the Globe Theatre. The building is almost round in shape and white, crisscrossed with timbers. Above the brown thatched roof a white flag ripples in the breeze.

Today's play is *King Lear*. It costs just a penny to enter. This is about a tenth of the average worker's daily wage, which makes it cheaper than a movie today. As you pass beneath the entrance you read the words *Totus mundus agit histrionem*: the whole world is a playhouse.

Inside, three tiers of gallery seating wrap around the stage. If you pay another penny, you can buy yourself a seat in one of the lower tiers, or for

sixpence you can purchase one of the best seats in the upper galleries. This is where the upper classes sit: the gentlemen, lords and ladies.

The stage is raised about 1.5 metres above the ground. Like the seats in the galleries, the performance area is covered. The ceiling, which they call the heavens, is painted with stars. You notice there are very few props of any sort and no backdrops or scenery: just a curtain at the back of the stage and, above this, three balcony areas that face the audience. These are the most expensive seats in the house, where people sit to be seen.

The Globe is now almost full with 3000 noisy people. You find a place off to the side of the stage. You'll have to stand for two or three hours but you've done that before at plenty of concerts. There are no toilets, and you will need to keep a careful eye on your bag.

The audience around you are poorer Londoners, the groundlings. You'll find they're a lot like a crowd at the football, but rougher. They will eat, drink and talk throughout the performance and will shout out or boo if they don't like what's happening.

When the actors come on you'll find they speak very quickly, but you'll be able to hear them clearly where you are. If you look very closely you may even notice something strange about the female characters. All of the parts are played by males, and female characters, including Cordelia, Regan and Gonerill, are played by boys whose voices have not yet broken. Theatre companies are considered too dangerous for women, and they won't be permitted onstage for another 60 years.

Anyway, it's almost 2 o'clock and the performance is about to begin ...



*Interior of the New Globe Theatre*

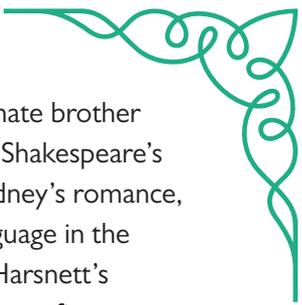


## Dates, sources and setting

The first performance of Shakespeare's *King Lear* that we know of took place in the court of King James in 1606, though it was quite likely performed to less illustrious audiences before this time, possibly as early as 1603. Since the play is associated so strongly with Shakespeare, it surprises many modern readers to learn that the story is an ancient one, believed to date from around 800 BC, and that Shakespeare was not the first person to base a play on it. Around the time Shakespeare's version was first performed in the court of King James, an earlier, anonymous version, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella*, was published, having first been performed in 1594. This tells us something about Shakespeare's daring and self-confidence, for it was inevitable that his version would be compared with that of the anonymous playwright from which it draws some inspiration.

It's likely that Shakespeare drew upon earlier versions of the story too, including the first known written version in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, from the twelfth century, and the versions found in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England* (1577) and William Warner's *Albion's England* (1586). The story was first given poetic treatment in an episode in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590); an epic poem Shakespeare undoubtedly would have known. In all these versions, however, unlike in Shakespeare's, the ending is not tragic. While Lear is treacherously dethroned by two of his daughters and their husbands, he is returned to power with the help of the King of France and upon his death is succeeded by his faithful daughter Cordelia (known by various similar names, such as Cordella). Departing from its predecessors, Shakespeare's ending – in which both Cordelia and Lear die – would have shocked the play's first audiences.

For the play's main plot, Shakespeare was also probably inspired by contemporary events. In an infamous lawsuit in 1603, the two eldest daughters of Sir Brian Annesley tried to have their father declared medically insane in order to take over his fortune. His youngest daughter, Cordell, defended her father against the claim of insanity. The incredible parallels between these events and the well-known story of King Lear would have been reasonably fresh in the minds of Shakespeare's audience during the play's early performances. Also well known to this audience was the intriguing fact that Cornwall and Albany, who in the play are the husbands of Regan and Gonerill respectively, were the real-life titles of King James' two sons.



The story of Gloucester and his two sons, Edgar and his illegitimate brother Edmund, would also have been familiar to the literate members of Shakespeare's audience. Shakespeare adapted the tale from a story in Sir Philip Sidney's romance, *Arcadia*, which appeared in 1590. At the same time, for Edgar's language in the part of Tom o' Bedlam, Shakespeare drew extensively on Samuel Harsnett's anti-Catholic polemical work *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, first published in 1603, which attacked the Catholic practice of exorcism.

Thus, in *King Lear* Shakespeare weaves together ancient, medieval and contemporary sources, as he re-tells a mythical tale. Set in Britain's distant pre-Christian past, *King Lear* brings together pagan and Christian philosophies. The play is populated by the names and presence of ancient gods, including Apollo and Hecate, yet it is also full of biblical allusions and, on one occasion, a direct reference to the Christian God. The playwright's motives for combining these various sources in this way, and for adapting a tale from (and setting it in) the mythical past, have been much debated by critics. All agree, though, that the play is enormously powerful and utterly compelling. It is regarded by many as Shakespeare's greatest tragedy.

## Shakespeare's language

Shakespeare wrote with an astonishing command of the English language. His lines are packed with puns, metaphors and ironies. Sometimes his words and phrases strike the modern reader as difficult and strange, and some of these words (such as 'naughty' and 'doubt') have shifted in meaning since Shakespeare's time, thus adding to the difficulty. He frequently uses a different word order (syntax) from conventional speech patterns, and his characters often speak in poetry (verse). Shakespeare's language can be challenging, but the reward is in the challenge.

On the following pages are some tips on how to read the text and some of the main features to look out for. At this stage in your schooling, you may be relatively confident with terms such as **iambic pentameter** and **rhyming couplet** or they may be unfamiliar. In either case, it is important to practise reading the text aloud to appreciate the sound of the language and to understand the relationship between the sound and the sense (the relationship between *how* something is said and *what* it means).



## Tips for reading

It is vital that you don't pause at the end of a line if a thought or an idea continues on to the next line. Try reading the following example by stopping at the end of the first line and then try reading it again without pausing at the end of the line.

*[Context: In his opening speech of the play, Lear explains his plans for dividing up the kingdom and his reasons for relinquishing the throne.]*

Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.  
Give me the map there. Know that we have divided  
In three our kingdom; and 'tis our fast intent  
To shake all cares and business from our age,  
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we  
Unburdened crawl toward death. (Act 1 Scene 1)

The most natural place in these lines to pause is where you see a punctuation mark such as a full stop (.), comma (,) or semicolon (;). In this case, it is natural to pause at the full stops after 'purpose' and 'there', at the semicolon after 'kingdom', and at the commas after 'age' and 'strengths'. Where a full stop (.) or semicolon (;) appears around the middle of a line, this pause is known as a **caesura**. Shakespeare uses this device often.

Read the lines again, this time pausing at punctuation marks rather than at the end of each line, paying particular attention to the caesuras. You will notice that the lines flow much more smoothly now and that the meaning of the lines is clearer. Pause for a little longer after 'purpose', 'there' and 'kingdom' than after 'age' and 'strengths', as a comma does not require as long a breath as a full stop or semicolon. The key point to remember is to pause in your reading only at punctuation marks, the same way you would when reading a novel.

## The dash

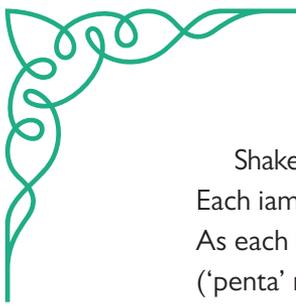
In this version of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the dash (–) is a specific punctuation mark. It is used to indicate interruptions to the flow of conversation in several ways.

### a. Alternating between speaking to one character and another

*[Context: Hurling abuse at Gonerill, Lear interrupts his tirade by issuing a command to his servant.]*

LEAR                      Darkness and devils! –  
                                 Saddle my horses! Call my train together –  
                                 Degenerate bastard! I'll not trouble thee. (Act 1 Scene 4)





te-DUM, te-DUM, te-DUM, te-DUM, te-DUM ...

Shakespeare generally uses ten beats per line, divided into what are called **iamb**s. Each iamb contains one unstressed beat followed by one stressed beat (te-DUM). As each line has five iambs, this forms the rhythm called **iambic pentameter** ('penta' relates to a group of five, as in pentagon, which is a five-sided shape).

This pattern is made clearer below, where the CAPITALISED letters are a stressed or a strong beat. They should be emphasised a little more than the weaker beats:

GLOUCESTER I HAVE no WAY, and THERE-fore WANT no EYES; (Act 4 Scene 1)

Shakespeare uses iambic pentameter (five te-DUMs per line) not only *across words* ('no EYES', as written above), but also *across speakers*:

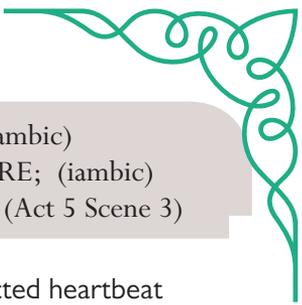
EDGAR Now fare you well, good sir.  
GLOUCESTER With all my heart. (Act 4 Scene 5)

In the lines above, Edgar's six-beat line (with three iambs) combines with Gloucester's four-beat line (with two iambs) to form a complete line in iambic pentameter. This makes these lines particularly poignant, emphasising the close connection between Edgar (as Tom o' Bedlam) and Gloucester at the precise moment Gloucester believes he is departing the world. The poignancy is heightened by the stress on key emotive words ('fare', 'well', 'sir', 'all' and 'heart') which are respectively evocative of beauty ('fare'), health ('well'), nobility ('sir'), wholeness ('all') and love ('heart'), all the things Gloucester believes he has lost. The person reading the part of Gloucester will speak immediately after Edgar to complete the rhythm of the iambic pentameter. In this way, the heart of the play does not stop beating.

You will not necessarily pick up the rhythm of a line straight away, but the more you read Shakespeare, the more you will develop a feel for blank verse, and especially for the all-important iambic pentameter.

## b. The trochee

It is important to recognise that Shakespeare sometimes departs from strict iambic pentameter, usually to include the metric foot known as a **trochee** (normally in combination with iambs). The opposite of an iamb, a trochee has the first syllable stressed and the second syllable unstressed (TEE-dum). A famous example in *King Lear* comes in the heartbreaking speech Lear makes following the death of Cordelia (Act 5 Scene 3). The speech includes a line of **trochaic pentameter** (the capitalised letters indicate the stressed beats in the following passage):



Why SHOULD a DOG, a HORSE, a RAT, have LIFE, (iambic)  
And THOU no BREATH at ALL? Thou'lt COME no MORE; (iambic)  
NEVer, NEVer, NEVer, NEVer, NEVer. (trochaic) (Act 5 Scene 3)

Notice how the rhythm in the final quoted line is not the expected heartbeat rhythm of the iambic pentameter that characterises the first two lines. Instead, the stress in each foot comes on the first beat in 'never', which is how the word is normally spoken. The jarring transition to the rare trochaic pentameter focuses our attention on Lear's terrible realisation of what has taken place. The falling rhythm perfectly carries the sense of his desperation, sorrow and loss, and the general feeling of decline.

### c. Rhyme

Although blank verse predominates in *King Lear*, some lines are actually written in **rhyming verse**. There are two main kinds of rhyming verse used throughout the play.

#### i. Rhyming couplets (in iambic pentameter)

KENT                      My point and period will be thoroughly wrought,  
   Or well or ill, as this day's battle's fought.                      (Act 4 Scene 6)

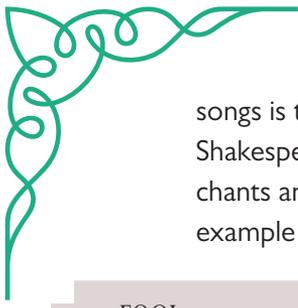
Shakespeare often employs a rhyming couplet (two consecutive lines that rhyme) to close a scene, as in the above example. This would have indicated to the audience that they could fidget a little. It might also have been a cue to the actors that they were soon due on stage for the next scene. More importantly, a rhyming couplet makes a point memorable, setting it apart from the rest of the dialogue, often conveying a sense of purpose and firm resolve on the part of the speaker. Note, too, that the rhyming couplet is still in iambic pentameter.

At other times, Shakespeare uses rhyming couplets to express a moral point or lesson for the benefit of both the characters and the audience. In the following example from the series of rhyming couplets that concludes the play, Edgar distils into a single utterance the 'weight' of the play's tragedy and the lesson to be learned from it:

EDGAR                      The weight of this sad time we must obey;  
   Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.                      (Act 5 Scene 3)

#### ii. Chants and songs

One of the characteristics of Lear's Fool is that he frequently communicates through chant and song. The first thing we notice about the Fool's chants and



songs is the variety of poetic forms in which they are cast. As we have seen, Shakespeare typically uses a ten-syllable regularly stressed line, but the Fool's chants and songs are usually composed of six-syllable lines. The following example uses a series of six rhymes:

FOOL            Have more than thou showest,  
                    Speak less than thou knowest,  
                    Lend less than thou owest,  
                    Ride more than thou goest,  
                    Learn more than thou trowest,  
                    Set less than thou throwest ...

(Act 1 Scene 4)

The Fool's dialogue also contains more complex rhyme schemes. In the following example, the rhyme scheme is *ababcc*. The name of this six-line form is a **sestet** (meaning six).

FOOL            Fathers that wear rags  
                    Do make their children blind;  
                    But fathers that bear bags  
                    Shall see their children kind.  
                    Fortune, that arrant whore,  
                    Ne'er turns the key to the poor.

(Act 2 Scene 4)

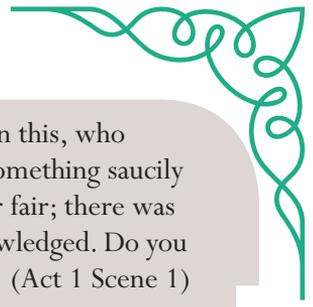
This is a good example of how rhyme contributes to meaning, for the words of each of the rhyming pairs – 'rags' / 'bags'; 'blind' / 'kind'; 'whore' / 'poor' – undercut one another. In the case of 'rags' (indicating poverty) and 'bags' (indicating wealth), the similarity of the sound works against the clear difference of the meaning, creating a powerful sense of irony. This is reinforced in the song's concluding rhyming couplet. Since 'whore' is a synonym for 'Fortune' in the Fool's song, it likewise plays against Fortune's opposite, 'poor'.

The intricacy of such forms, and the cleverness of the rhymes, serves to heighten the authority of the Fool. At the same time, the occasional awkwardness of the Fool's poetic metres gives a certain rough edge and directness to the otherwise elusive advice he offers.

As the madman Tom o' Bedlam, Edgar also reverts to songs and chants from time to time, though less frequently than the Fool. The songs sung by both the Fool and Tom o' Bedlam draw, at least in part, on popular medieval songs.

#### d. Prose

While most of Shakespeare's plays are written in verse, he sometimes chooses to have his characters speak in prose. This is the sort of writing found in novels; it is how we naturally speak, and it does not necessarily have a consistent rhythm.



GLOUCESTER But I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account. Though this knave came something saucily into the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair; there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund? (Act 1 Scene 1)

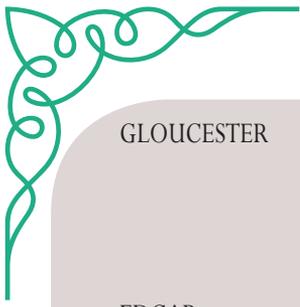
In many of Shakespeare's plays, prose indicates that a character is of a lower class or is engaging in 'low' or casual behaviour. However, prose in *King Lear* usually has more to do with the context and nature of what the characters are saying. In fact, most characters in the play are able to shift with relative ease from verse to prose. Edmund, for example, moves from a soliloquy written mostly in iambic pentameter, in which he reveals his philosophy of life and his immoral intentions, to lengthy exchanges with Gloucester and Edgar in conversational prose (Act 1 Scene 2). This highlights Edmund's duplicitous character.

It is worth noting, too, how a change from prose to poetry, or poetry to prose, can alter the tone of the drama. This is apparent in the opening of the play, when the prose dialogue between Gloucester and Kent about Edmund's origins is followed by Lear's dramatic opening speech in verse. Another example, also from Act 1 Scene 1, is the shift to prose after the love-test has ended and Cordelia has departed. The last words in verse, spoken by the noble France – 'Come, my fair Cordelia' – are followed by an exchange between Gonerill and Regan in which they start their scheming. Having spoken in eloquent verse when addressing the King, they now talk in functional, businesslike prose. The contrast between France and Cordelia, on the one hand, and Gonerill and Regan, on the other, is thus clearly established, as is the contrast between the way the two evil sisters present themselves to the King and the way they present themselves to one another.

### e. Dramatic pauses

As we have seen in our discussion of trochees, Shakespeare does not always adhere strictly to iambic pentameter. At times he leaves a line of blank verse incomplete, thereby breaking the rhythm of the text. In this example, the relevant lines are highlighted in bold.

EDGAR Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again.  
GLOUCESTER **But have I fallen, or no?**  
EDGAR From the dread summit of this chalky bourn.  
Look up a-height. The shrill-gorged lark so far  
Cannot be seen or heard. Do but look up.



GLOUCESTER

**Alack, I have no eyes.**

Is wretchedness deprived that benefit  
To end itself by death? 'Twas yet some comfort  
When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage  
And frustrate his proud will.

EDGAR

Give me your arm.

(Act 4 Scene 5)

The two short lines spoken by Gloucester are constructed deliberately to heighten dramatic tension. Leaving the line with fewer than the usual ten beats allows time for the characters to pause, or perhaps to do something during the moment of silence. In the first of the two examples above ('But have I fallen, or no?'), the incomplete line allows Gloucester to contemplate whether or not he has fallen; his confusion seems to fill the space. In the second example ('Alack, I have no eyes'), the incomplete line helps to convey Gloucester's lack of vision; the break in the iambic pentameter reinforces the sense of visual emptiness.

These two incomplete lines make Edgar's command 'Give me your arm', which *does* complete the iambic pentameter, all the more powerful. Just as the line is completed, so Gloucester is metaphorically completed by Edgar; his lack of understanding and blindness is made up for by Edgar's watchful compassion.

## f. Contractions and accents

Shakespeare frequently uses contractions in order to preserve the rhythm of iambic pentameter. Contractions are shortened words. You use contractions such as don't (do not) and haven't (have not) in everyday speech. In each of these examples, an apostrophe indicates that something is missing, that the word has been shortened.

'tis (it is)   do't (do it)   cold'st (coldest)   i' (in)   'gainst (against)

At other times, Shakespeare adds a syllable or a beat to a word to make it fit the iambic pentameter. This is indicated in the text by an accent mark to create an extra syllable:

curlèd [CURL-ed] (two beats instead of one)  
preparèd [pre-PAR-ed] (three beats instead of two)

Be on the lookout for a variety of language forms throughout the play: blank verse, rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter (with the occasional trochee), prose and songs. And remember, the rich variety of language is used by Shakespeare to show the range of characters, and the shifting relationships and often ambiguous emotions that make up the world of *King Lear*.

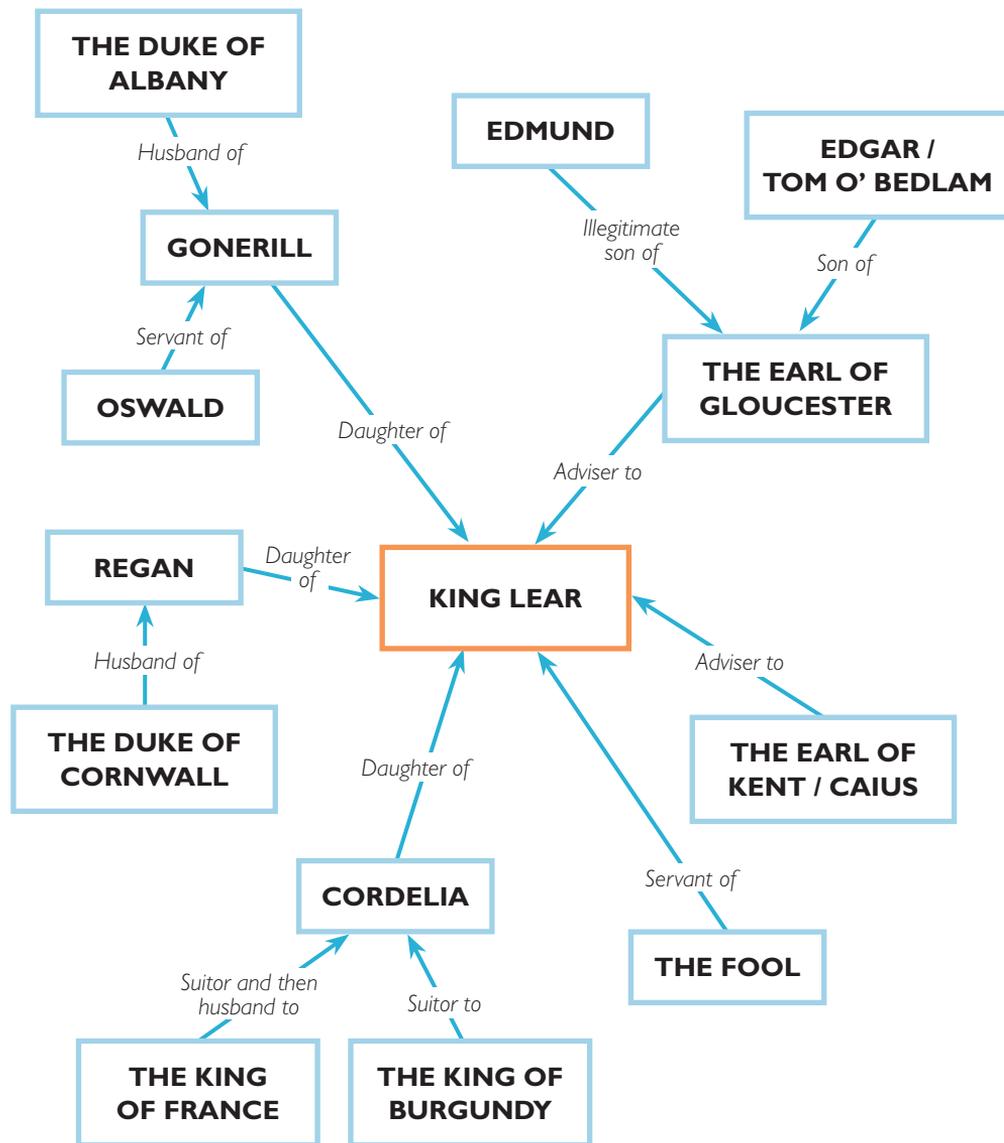
## Essential vocabulary

Shakespeare's works include an incredible vocabulary; some scholars have estimated that his plays and poems make use of up to 15 000 different words. You can enjoy Shakespeare without understanding every word, but it is still a good idea to learn the words that are used regularly throughout the play. Some words, such as 'treason' and 'wit', are still used today, but others, such as 'prithee' and 'wherefore', are not used often.

Here are some words that occur frequently throughout *King Lear*. You might like to begin a vocabulary list of your own.

<b>Aught:</b> Anything
<b>Beseech:</b> Beg; forcefully request (entreat)
<b>Chide / chid:</b> Criticise or tell someone off
<b>Disposition:</b> State of mind or mood
<b>Dower / Dowry:</b> Property or wealth given away by a father with a daughter when she marries
<b>Ere:</b> Before
<b>Fie:</b> An exclamation of annoyance, disapproval or disgust
<b>Knave:</b> Troublemaker or trickster
<b>Prithee:</b> A polite term when asking for something (equivalent to 'please')
<b>Sirrah:</b> Equivalent to 'sir' but used to address someone of a lower rank
<b>Thou:</b> You
<b>Thy:</b> Your
<b>Treason:</b> Betrayal or extreme disloyalty (particularly to the sovereign or the state)
<b>Wherefore:</b> Why
<b>Wit:</b> Intelligence, wisdom or reasoning

# The characters



**Also appearing:** Curan (a courtier), Old Man (Gloucester's tenant), Captain, Herald, various Gentlemen, Servants, Attendants, Knights and Soldiers

# Act summaries



## Act 1

Because King Lear is growing old, he decides to retire and divide the kingdom among his three daughters. To gain a third of his kingdom, each must tell the King how much she loves him. Gonerill and Regan exaggerate their love and, with their husbands, gain their third of the kingdom. Cordelia, who is to marry either the King of France or the Duke of Burgundy, states that she only loves her father as a daughter should, and no more. In fury, King Lear divides Cordelia's portion of the kingdom between Gonerill and Regan and banishes his servant Kent for protesting on Cordelia's behalf. Although Cordelia now lacks property, the King of France is impressed by her honesty and marries her anyway.

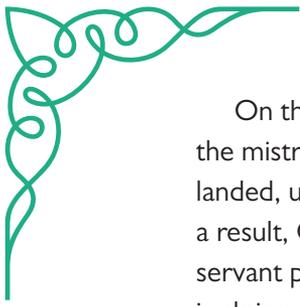
Edmund, the illegitimate son of Gloucester, plans to disinherit his legitimate brother Edgar by fabricating a story that Edgar has sought his help to murder their father. Meanwhile, Gonerill insists that she cannot house all of Lear's followers and presses him to reduce their number. Furious, Lear curses her and leaves to stay with Regan. Kent, whom the King previously banished, re-enters the King's service disguised as Caius. Lear quickly warms to him and gives him an important letter to deliver.

## Act 2

Edmund convinces his brother Edgar to flee Gloucester's castle for his own safety. Persuaded of his son's disloyalty, Gloucester asks for Regan and Cornwall's assistance in hunting Edgar down. When Gonerill's servant Oswald arrives at the castle, Lear's messenger (Kent in disguise) attacks him and is punished by being left in the stocks overnight. When Lear enters, Regan defends her sister's actions and when Gonerill turns up the two sisters combine against their father, each asserting their unwillingness to house Lear's followers. An enraged Lear refuses to stay any longer and rushes out into the storm. In the meantime Edgar is forced to discard his expensive clothes and take on the persona of a mad beggar to protect his identity.

## Act 3

While Lear commands the storm to rage, the Fool and Kent plead with him to take shelter. The King is led to a hovel where the group meets Tom o' Bedlam – Edgar in disguise. While the storm rages, Edgar rants insanely. When the group takes shelter in a farmhouse, Lear, who is now delusional, conducts a fictitious trial of Gonerill and Regan before falling asleep.



On the same night, Gloucester expresses to Edmund his concerns over the mistreatment of the King and shares information that the French army has landed, under the command of Cordelia. Edmund betrays his father and, as a result, Gloucester is blinded by Regan and Cornwall. During the blinding, a servant protests against the torture and, although Cornwall kills this servant, in doing so he receives a mortal wound.

## Act 4

A loyal servant guides the blinded Gloucester to his son Edgar, who is still in disguise. Gloucester asks to be led to the cliffs of Dover where he intends to suicide. During the journey, Edgar keeps his identity a secret and tricks Gloucester into believing that he is jumping from a high cliff when he is simply falling on flat ground. Edgar declares his father's survival a miracle and urges him to bear his suffering patiently. In the meantime, Albany begins to have doubts about his wife's actions and his attitude leads the two of them to argue. Regan, who is now a widow, and Gonerill, who is still married, begin to compete for Edmund's affection. Cordelia, encamped with her army, sends out for Lear to be found and father and daughter are soon reunited.

## Act 5

The French forces, under Cordelia's command, lose the battle and Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoner. Edmund gives the command for an officer to kill them. When Regan declares her intention to marry Edmund, Albany reveals what he knows about Edmund's deception and challenges him to a duel. During this, Regan, who has been poisoned by Gonerill, exits to die. Albany, who had earlier received instructions from Edgar, commands the trumpet to sound. The call is answered by Edgar clad in armour, who, while keeping his identity secret, declares his intention to fight Edmund. In the ensuing combat, Edmund is mortally wounded. Gonerill flees from the stage to commit suicide and the brothers exchange forgiveness. Edgar recounts that his father Gloucester died of simultaneous joy and grief at being reunited with his son. Before dying, Edmund gives hasty instructions for Lear and Cordelia to be saved but, almost immediately, Lear enters carrying Cordelia's body. Lear expresses his bitter grief before dying.

# Quick questions!



QUESTIONS

Spend a few minutes answering these questions in pairs or as a class.

- 1 Which two daughters inherit half of King Lear's kingdom each?
- 2 Which daughter loses her third of the kingdom?
- 3 Who does the King banish for questioning his judgement?
- 4 Who marries Cordelia despite her owning no property?
- 5 Who is Gloucester's illegitimate son?
- 6 Summarise Edmund's plan.
- 7 With which daughter does King Lear initially stay? Why does he leave her house?
- 8 What does the banished Kent decide to do?
- 9 Who becomes a mad beggar to conceal his identity?
- 10 Why does he have to do this?
- 11 Why is Kent placed in the stocks overnight?
- 12 What issue do Lear and his daughters argue over?
- 13 How does Lear respond to the storm?
- 14 Who is out in the storm with Lear?
- 15 What information does Gloucester convey to Edmund?
- 16 Who blinds Gloucester?
- 17 What are the consequences of the servant's disagreement with his master, Cornwall?
- 18 Why does Gloucester want to be led to a cliff in Dover?
- 19 How does Edgar deceive his father?
- 20 Which characters make their attraction to Edmund clear in Acts 4 and 5?
- 21 Which two sets of characters are briefly reunited towards the end of the play?
- 22 Who loses the battle between French and English forces?
- 23 Which character declares her intention to marry Edmund in Act 5?
- 24 Why does Regan die?
- 25 Which character answers the trumpet's call?
- 26 Who receives a mortal wound in the duel?
- 27 What happens to Gonerill in Act 5?
- 28 What caused Gloucester's death?
- 29 Which character's lifeless body is carried onto the stage by Lear?
- 30 What happens to Lear at the end of the play?



# Freeze-frames

The recommended time allocation for this task (preparation and performance) is approximately 50–60 minutes in total.

Present the play in five freeze-frames (one for each act) in groups of five to seven students.

## Instructions

- Read carefully through the act summaries.
- Work out how you will present the action of each act in a single ‘frozen’ pose.
- You may choose to represent a character, an event or even an idea. You may strike a pose in which you are doing two things at once.
- When instructed, present Act 1. Your teacher will then ask you to CHANGE and then FREEZE for your representation of Act 2. This will continue until you have represented all five acts.
- You shouldn’t take longer than 15 seconds between acts, so make sure you practise your changeovers before you present your freeze-frames to the class.
- Make sure you can explain what you represent, who you are or what you are doing when you present your freeze-frames.

## Optional

- Use a digital camera to photograph your five freeze-frames. Print the photographs and write a caption below each photograph explaining the act being presented. These can be displayed in your classroom.
- Alternatively, print your photographs but do not label them. Display them in your classroom and ask students from other groups to organise your photographs into what they think is the correct order of the five-act play.

# Act 1

## Act 1 Scene 1

### CHARACTERS

Lear  
Kent  
Cordelia  
Gonerill  
Regan  
Gloucester  
France  
Burgundy  
Albany, Cornwall  
(a half line spoken together)  
Edmund

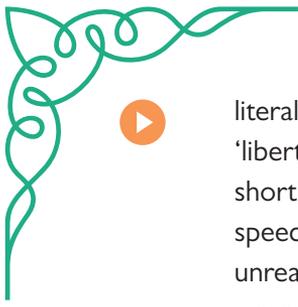
### IN A NUTSHELL

*After the Earl of Kent and the Earl of Gloucester discuss the division of the Kingdom of Britain, Gloucester introduces Kent to his illegitimate son Edmund. King Lear announces his plan to divide the kingdom among his three daughters while retaining for himself the title of King. To gain a third of his kingdom each daughter must state how much she loves him. Gonerill and Regan do this successfully and each, with their husbands, gains a third of the kingdom. Cordelia, though, states that she only loves her father as a daughter should and nothing beyond this. In a fury, King Lear shares Cordelia's portion of the kingdom between Gonerill and Regan and banishes Kent for protesting on Cordelia's behalf. The King of France, impressed by Cordelia's integrity, states his intention to marry her despite her changed circumstances. When Cordelia says goodbye to her sisters, she states that she knows their true nature but, nevertheless, asks them to treat their father kindly. When left alone, Regan and Gonerill discuss Lear's recent behaviour and their need to bring him under control.*

### Before you read

- The love-test gives the audience insight into King Lear's character. It is clear that he has already decided how he will divide his kingdom but insists on his daughters making speeches professing how much they love him. As you read this scene, decide whether you think Lear devises the love-test because of his insecurity, his vanity or for some other reason.
- **Hyperbole** (*hy-PER-bo-lee*) involves the use of a deliberately exaggerated statement to emphasise a point. It is a figure of speech and is not to be taken





literally. In this scene Gonerill claims to love her father more than ‘eyesight’, ‘liberty’ and ‘space’ and her sister, Regan, declares that Gonerill ‘comes too short’ and claims to be ‘an enemy to all other pleasures’ but Lear’s love. Their speeches sound rehearsed and formal, and the hyperbole adds a certain unreal quality to their words. By the end of this scene they are already plotting ways to further limit their father’s power.

- A **pun** is a play on words. It may play on the fact that a word has a double meaning (*lie* as in lying down or *lie* as in not telling the truth) or it may play on the fact that two words sound similar (*cause* and *course*). In his conversation with Kent at the beginning of this scene, Gloucester puns on the word ‘conceive’. When Kent says ‘I cannot conceive you’ (line 8) he uses the word ‘conceive’ to mean understand. When Gloucester replies ‘this young fellow’s mother could’, he uses the same word to mean ‘become pregnant’.

V	<b>Moiety:</b>	Part or portion
	<b>Issue:</b>	Offspring
	<b>Saucily:</b>	Cheekily, presumptuously
	<b>Sue:</b>	Request
	<b>Dower / Dowry:</b>	Property or wealth given to the bridegroom by a father when his daughter marries
	<b>Felicitate:</b>	Made happy or joyful
	<b>Propinquity:</b>	Blood relationship
	<b>Vassal:</b>	Villain
	<b>Miscreant:</b>	Unbeliever
	<b>Benison:</b>	Blessing

## King Lear’s castle.

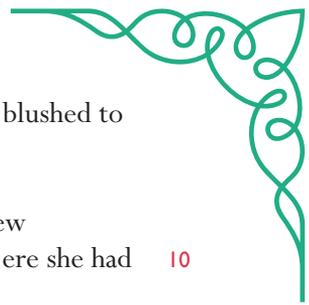
*[Enter KENT, GLOUCESTER and EDMUND]*

KENT                    I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.  
 GLOUCESTER        It did always seem so to us. But now, in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the Dukes he values most, for qualities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either’s moiety.  
 KENT                    Is not this your son, my Lord?

5



- 
- 1     **Had more affected:** Had liked more.
  - 2–3 **It appears not:** It is not clear.
  - 3–4 **Qualities are so weighed that curiosity ... moiety:** (1) The qualities of the parts (of the division of kingdom) are so evenly balanced that even careful inquiry (‘curiosity’) cannot tell which part (‘moiety’) is greater or more desirable; (2) the qualities of each man are so close, inquiry cannot tell which of them is greater.



GLOUCESTER His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him, that now I am brazed to it.

KENT I cannot conceive you.

GLOUCESTER Sir, this young fellow's mother could; whereupon she grew round-womb'd, and had indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed. Do you smell a fault? 10

KENT I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper.

GLOUCESTER But I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account. Though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair; there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund? 15

EDMUND No, my Lord.

GLOUCESTER My Lord of Kent. Remember him hereafter as my honourable friend.

EDMUND My services to your Lordship. 20

KENT I must love you and sue to know you better.

EDMUND Sir, I shall study deserving.

GLOUCESTER He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again. The King is coming.

*[Sennet. Enter one bearing a coronet, KING LEAR, CORNWALL, ALBANY, GONERILL, REGAN, CORDELIA and Attendants]*

KING LEAR Attend the Lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester.

GLOUCESTER I shall, my Liege. 25

*[Exit GLOUCESTER and EDMUND]*

KING LEAR Meantime we shall express our darker purpose. Give me the map there. Know that we have divided In three our kingdom; and 'tis our fast intent To shake all cares and business from our age, Conferring them on younger strengths, while we Unburdened crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall, 30



- 
- 6 **Breeding ... at my charge:** (1) I have been accused of or charged with ('at my charge') fathering him ('breeding' him); (2) I have been responsible for his upbringing ('breeding') at my own expense ('at my charge').
  - 7 **Brazed to it:** Brazen or boldly open about it; hardened to the fact.
  - 13 **By order of law:** Legitimate (child recognised by the law).
  - 16 **Whoreson:** Literally this means the son of a prostitute, but during the Renaissance it was used to describe any son born outside of marriage.
  - 22 **Study deserving:** Learn how to deserve (your kindness to me). This could be read as a hint of Edmund's calculating nature, revealed in the next scene.
  - 23 **Out:** Overseas.
  - 26 **We:** The 'royal' we (i.e. used by royalty to indicate 'I'); **Darker purpose:** More secret intention.
  - 28 **Fast intent:** Steadfast intention, unalterable decision.
  - 31 **Son:** Son-in-law, in this context.



And you, our no less loving son of Albany –  
 We have this hour a constant will to publish  
 Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife  
 May be prevented now. The Princes, France and Burgundy, 35  
 Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,  
 Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn,  
 And here are to be answered. Tell me, my daughters,  
 Since now we will divest us both of rule,  
 Interest of territory, cares of state, 40  
 Which of you shall we say doth love us most?  
 That we our largest bounty may extend  
 Where nature doth with merit challenge. Gonerill,  
 Our eldest born, speak first.

GONERILL 35  
 Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter; 45  
 Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty;  
 Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,  
 No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour,  
 As much as child e'er loved or father found;  
 A love that makes breath poor and speech unable; 50  
 Beyond all manner of 'so much' I love you.

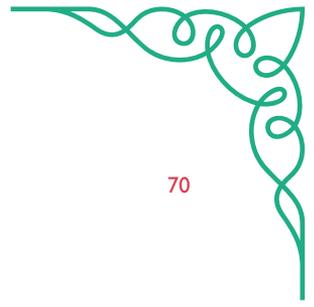
CORDELIA 45  
 [Aside] What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.  
 LEAR 50  
 Of all these bounds, even from this line to this,  
 With shadowy forests and with champains riched,  
 With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads, 55  
 We make thee lady. To thine and Albany's issues  
 Be this perpetual. – What says our second daughter,  
 Our dearest Regan, wife to Cornwall? Speak.

REGAN 55  
 I am made of that self mettle as my sister  
 And prize me at her worth. In my true heart 60  
 I find she names my very deed of love;  
 Only she comes too short, that I profess  
 Myself an enemy to all other joys,  
 Which the most precious square of sense possesses,  
 And find I am alone felicitate 65  
 In your dear Highness' love.

CORDELIA 60  
 [Aside] Then poor Cordelia!  
 And yet not so, since, I am sure, my love's



- 
- 34 **Several dowers:** Particular dowries.
  - 43 **Where nature ... challenge:** Where natural love (of a daughter for her father) competes ('challenge[s]'), on the strength of its merit, for the best prize.
  - 59 **Mettle:** Substance.
  - 64 **Precious square of sense:** The body.
  - 65 **Alone felicitate:** Only made happy.



KING LEAR More ponderous than my tongue.  
To thee and thine hereditary ever  
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom, 70  
No less in space, validity, and pleasure  
Than that conferred on Gonerill. – Now, our joy,  
Although the last, not least, to whose young love  
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy  
Strive to be interested: what can you say to draw 75  
A third more opulent than your sisters'? Speak!

CORDELIA Nothing, my Lord.  
KING LEAR Nothing?  
CORDELIA Nothing.  
KING LEAR Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again. 80  
CORDELIA Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave  
My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty  
According to my bond, no more nor less.

KING LEAR How, how, Cordelia! Mend your speech a little  
Lest it may mar your fortunes.  
CORDELIA Good my Lord, 85  
You have begot me, bred me, loved me:  
I return those duties back as are right fit,  
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.  
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say  
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed, 90  
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.  
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,  
To love my father all.

KING LEAR But goes thy heart with this?  
CORDELIA Ay, good my Lord. 95  
KING LEAR So young, and so untender?  
CORDELIA So young, my Lord, and true.  
KING LEAR Let it be so! Thy truth then be thy dower!  
For by the sacred radiance of the sun,  
The mysteries of Hecate and the night; 100  
By all the operation of the orbs  
From whom we do exist, and cease to be,  
Here I disclaim all my paternal care,  
Propinquity and property of blood,  
And as a stranger to my heart and me 105



- 68 **Ponderous:** Weighty.  
90 **Haply:** Perhaps.  
100 **Hecate:** Goddess of the moon, patron of black magic.



Hold thee from this for ever. The barbarous Scythian,  
 Or he that makes his generation messes  
 To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom  
 Be as well neighboured, pitied, and relieved  
 As thou my sometime daughter.

KENT

Good my Liege –

110

KING LEAR

Peace, Kent!  
 Come not between the dragon and his wrath.  
 I loved her most, and thought to set my rest  
 On her kind nursery. *[To CORDELIA]* Hence, and avoid my sight!  
 So be my grave my peace as here I give  
 Her father's heart from her! – Call France. Who stirs?  
 Call Burgundy. – Cornwall and Albany,  
 With my two daughters' dowers digest this third.  
 Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her.  
 I do invest you jointly with my power,  
 Pre-eminence, and all the large effects  
 That troop with majesty. Ourselves by monthly course,  
 With reservation of an hundred knights,  
 By you to be sustained, shall our abode  
 Make with you by due turn. Only we shall retain  
 The name and all the additions to a king;  
 The sway, revenue, execution of the rest,  
 Beloved sons, be yours; which to confirm,  
 This coronet part between you.

115

120

125

*[Giving the crown]*

KENT

Royal Lear,

Whom I have ever honoured as my King,  
 Loved as my father, as my master followed,  
 As my great patron thought on in my prayers –  
 The bow is bent and drawn; make from the shaft.

130

KING LEAR

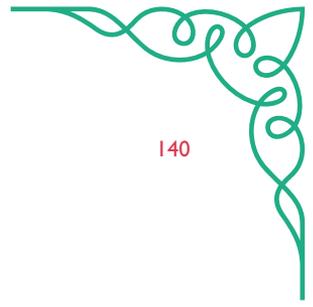
KENT

Let it fall rather, though the fork invade  
 The region of my heart: be Kent unmannerly  
 When Lear is mad. What wilt thou do, old man?  
 Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak  
 When power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's bound

135



- 106 **Barbarous Scythian:** Central Asian nomads of classical antiquity known for their savagery.
- 107 **Makes his generation messes:** Makes his children or parents ('generation') his food ('messes').
- 133 **Make from the shaft:** Get out of the way of the arrow.
- 134 **Fall:** Hit; **Fork:** Arrow point.
- 138 **Plainness:** Straight talking.



When majesty stoops to folly. Reverse thy doom,  
 And, in thy best consideration, check  
 This hideous rashness. Answer my life my judgement,  
 Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,  
 Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound  
 Reverbs no hollowness.

140

KING LEAR Kent, on thy life, no more!

KENT My life I never held but as a pawn  
 To wage against thy enemies; nor fear to lose it,  
 Thy safety being the motive.

145

KING LEAR Out of my sight!

KENT See better, Lear, and let me still remain  
 The true blank of thine eye.

KING LEAR Now, by Apollo –

KENT Now, by Apollo, King,  
 Thou swear'st thy gods in vain.

150

KING LEAR O, vassal! Miscreant!

*[Laying his hand on his sword]*

ALBANY,

CORNWALL Dear Sir, forbear.

KENT Kill thy physician, and the fee bestow  
 Upon thy foul disease. Revoke thy doom,  
 Or whilst I can vent clamour from my throat  
 I'll tell thee thou dost evil.

155

KING LEAR Hear me, recreant,

On thine allegiance hear me!  
 Since thou hast sought to make us break our vow,  
 Which we durst never yet, and, with strained pride,  
 To come between our sentence and our power,  
 Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,  
 Our potency made good, take thy reward.

160

Five days we do allot thee for provision  
 To shield thee from disasters of the world,  
 And on the sixth to turn thy hated back  
 Upon our kingdom. If on the tenth day following  
 Thy banished trunk be found in our dominions,

165



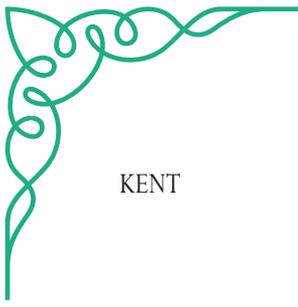
139 **Reverse thy doom:** Alter your decision.

141 **Answer my life my judgement:** I'll stake my life on my judgement (in this matter).

149 **True blank:** True aim, bull's-eye.

150 **Apollo:** The god of archery, light and truth, in classical Greek mythology.

156 **Recreant:** Traitor.



KENT The moment is thy death. Away! By Jupiter,  
This shall not be revoked!  
Fare thee well, King, since thus thou wilt appear, 170  
Freedom lives hence and banishment is here.  
[To CORDELIA] The gods to their dear shelter take thee, maid,  
That justly think'st, and hast most rightly said.  
[To REGAN and GONERILL]  
And your large speeches may your deeds approve  
That good effects may spring from words of love. – 175  
Thus Kent, O Princes, bids you all adieu;  
He'll shape his old course in a country new.

[Exit KENT]

[Flourish. Re-enter GLOUCESTER, with FRANCE, BURGUNDY and Attendants]

GLOUCESTER Here's France and Burgundy, my noble Lord.  
KING LEAR My Lord of Burgundy.  
We first address towards you, who with this king 180  
Hath rivalled for our daughter. What in the least  
Will you require in present dower with her,  
Or cease your quest of love?

BURGUNDY Most royal Majesty,  
I crave no more than what your highness offered,  
Nor will you tender less.

KING LEAR Right noble Burgundy, 185  
When she was dear to us, we did hold her so;  
But now her price is fallen. Sir, there she stands;  
If aught within that little-seeming substance,  
Or all of it, with our displeasure pieced,  
And nothing more, may fitly like your Grace, 190  
She's there and she is yours.

BURGUNDY I know no answer.  
KING LEAR Will you, with those infirmities she owes,  
Unfriended, new-adopted to our hate,  
Dowered with our curse and strangered with our oath,  
Take her or leave her?

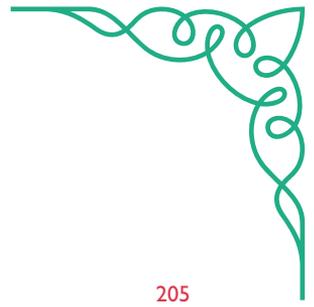
BURGUNDY Pardon me, royal Sir – 195  
Election makes not up on such conditions.

KING LEAR Then leave her, sir, for, by the power that made me,  
I tell you all her wealth. [To FRANCE] For you, great King,  
I would not from your love make such a stray,  
To match you where I hate; therefore beseech you 200



168 **Jupiter:** King of the gods in Roman mythology (Zeus in Greek mythology).

196 **Election ... conditions:** Choices are not made under such circumstances.



To avert your liking a more worthier way  
 Than on a wretch whom Nature is ashamed  
 Almost to acknowledge hers.

KING OF FRANCE

This is most strange,  
 That she whom even but now was your best object,  
 The argument of your praise, balm of your age,  
 The best, the dearest, should in this trice of time  
 Commit a thing so monstrous to dismantle  
 So many folds of favour. Sure her offence  
 Must be of such unnatural degree  
 That monsters it, or your fore-vouched affection  
 Fallen into taint; which to believe of her,  
 Must be a faith that reason without miracle  
 Could never plant in me.

205

210

CORDELIA

I yet beseech your Majesty –  
 If for I want that glib and oily art  
 To speak and purpose not, since what I well intend,  
 I'll dot before I speak – that you make known  
 It is no vicious blot, murder or foulness,  
 No unchaste action or dishonoured step  
 That hath deprived me of your grace and favour,  
 But even for want of that for which I am richer:  
 A still-soliciting eye and such a tongue  
 As I am glad I have not, though not to have it  
 Hath lost me in your liking.

215

220

KING LEAR

Better thou  
 Hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better.

KING OF FRANCE

Is it but this, a tardiness in nature  
 Which often leaves the history unspoke  
 That it intends to do? My Lord of Burgundy,  
 What say you to the lady? Love's not love  
 When it is mingled with regards that stand  
 Aloof from the entire point. Will you have her?  
 She is herself a dowry.

225

230

BURGUNDY

Royal Lear,  
 Give but that portion which yourself proposed,  
 And here I take Cordelia by the hand,  
 Duchess of Burgundy.

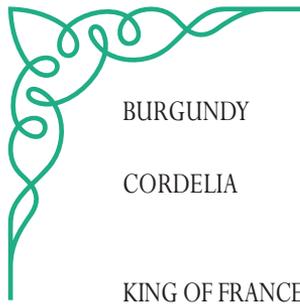
KING LEAR

Nothing! I have sworn; I am firm.

235



- 
- 201 **Liking:** Affection.
  - 210 **Monsters it:** Makes it monstrous.
  - 211 **Fallen into taint:** Seem disingenuous.
  - 214 **If for I want:** If I lack.



BURGUNDY I am sorry then you have so lost a father  
That you must lose a husband.

CORDELIA Peace be with Burgundy!  
Since that respects of fortune are his love,  
I shall not be his wife.

KING OF FRANCE Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor, 240  
Most choice, forsaken, and most loved, despised!  
Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon.  
Be it lawful I take up what's cast away.  
Gods, gods! 'Tis strange that from their cold'st neglect  
My love should kindle to inflamed respect. 245  
Thy dowerless daughter, King, thrown to my chance,  
Is Queen of us, of ours, and our fair France.  
Not all the dukes of waterish Burgundy  
Can buy this unprized precious maid of me.  
Bid them farewell, Cordelia, though unkind 250  
Thou lovest here, a better where to find.

KING LEAR Thou hast her, France: let her be thine; for we  
Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see  
That face of hers again. Therefore begone  
Without our grace, our love, our benison! 255  
Come, noble Burgundy.

*[Flourish. Exit LEAR, BURGUNDY, CORNWALL, ALBANY, GLOUCESTER and Attendants]*

KING OF FRANCE Bid farewell to your sisters.

CORDELIA The jewels of our father, with washed eyes  
Cordelia leaves you. I know you what you are;  
And, like a sister, am most loath to call 260  
Your faults as they are named. Love well our father!  
To your professed bosoms I commit him.  
But yet, alas, stood I within his grace,  
I would prefer him to a better place.  
So farewell to you both. 265

REGAN Prescribe not us our duties.

GONERILL Let your study  
Be to content your lord, who hath received you  
At Fortune's alms. You have obedience scanted,  
And well are worth the want that you have wanted.

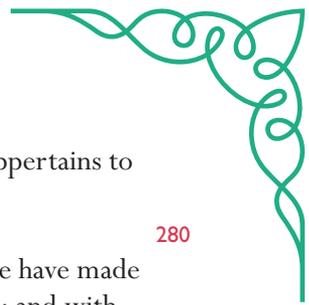
CORDELIA Time shall unfold what plaited cunning hides; 270  
Who cover faults, at last shame them derides.  
Well may you prosper!

KING OF FRANCE Come, my fair Cordelia.



248 **Waterish Burgundy:** The man, Burgundy, is weak.

249 **Unprized:** Not valued by others.



[Exit KING OF FRANCE and CORDELIA]

GONERILL Sister, it is not a little I have to say of what most nearly appertains to us both. I think our father will hence tonight.

REGAN That's most certain, and with you; next month with us. 280

GONERILL You see how full of changes his age is. The observation we have made of it hath not been little. He always loved our sister most; and with what poor judgement he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.

REGAN 'Tis the infirmity of his age. Yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.

GONERILL The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash. Then must we look to receive from his age, not alone the imperfections of long-engrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them. 285

REGAN Such unconstant starts are we like to have from him as this of Kent's banishment. 290

GONERILL There is further compliment of leave-taking between France and him. Pray you, let us hit together. If our father carry authority with such dispositions as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us.

REGAN We shall further think of it.

GONERILL We must do something, and i' the heat. 295

[Exit]

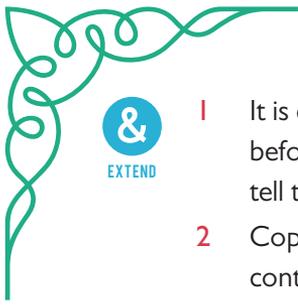


285 **The best and soundest of his time ... rash:** Even in his best and most sane ('sound') years, he has been hot-headed.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What is Edmund's relationship to the Earl of Gloucester?
- 2 Why is King Lear giving up his kingdom?
- 3 What evidence can you find in this scene that Lear loves Cordelia more than his other daughters?
- 4 Why does Cordelia say that she cannot compete with her sisters' speeches?
- 5 What is King Lear's reaction to Cordelia's speeches? What are the consequences for Cordelia?
- 6 Quote two examples of Lear using hyperbole in his anger and state what the use of this technique suggests about his character.
- 7 What part of the office of being a king is Lear trying to retain?
- 8 What is Kent's view of Lear's treatment of Cordelia? What penalty does Kent suffer for expressing his opinions?
- 9 What opinions of Lear's behaviour do Gonerill and Regan express at the end of this scene? What fear do they seem to share?



- 1 It is clear that King Lear has already decided how he will divide the kingdom before he hears his daughters' speeches. What does this seeming contradiction tell the audience about his character?
- 2 Copy and complete the table analysing how King Lear's language in this scene contributes to the audience's understanding of his character.

Technique / stylistic feature	Examples	Contribution to the audience's understanding of Lear
Mythological references		
Imperatives (commands)		
Repetition		
Use of first-person pronouns		
Hyperbole		
Insults; name-calling		

- 3 How is Lear's assertion that Cordelia's 'price is fallen' consistent with the attitude he displays in the love-test?
- 4 Traditional readings of *King Lear* interpret the words and actions of Gonerill and Regan harshly. Does Shakespeare provide any details that might make the audience sympathetic to their situation?
- 5 What effect does Shakespeare achieve by the shift from prose to poetry (iambic pentameter) when Lear enters?
- 6 Albany and Cornwall are given a coronet to divide or break between them.
  - a How could this prop be a metaphor?
  - b What could this foreshadow?

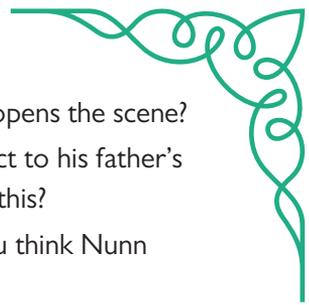


- 1 Do you admire Cordelia for sticking to her principles or do you think she should have made a compromise?
- 2 At the beginning of Scene I, Lear is presented as an authoritative figure but in the course of this scene he renounces or gives up his power. Bearing this in mind, how would you use costume to present Lear if you were directing a stage version of the play?

### Trevor Nunn: DVD Chapter 1



- 1 Why do you think Nunn employs low-key lighting and shadows for the opening of this scene?
- 2 Which of the play's themes does this emphasise?

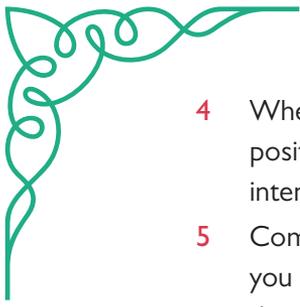


- 3 What sort of atmosphere is created by the organ music that opens the scene?
- 4 How does the actor playing the part of Edmund seem to react to his father's conversation about him? What might Nunn be suggesting by this?
- 5 Prior to the love-test, Lear enters with Cordelia. Why do you think Nunn makes this directorial decision?
- 6 Before Lear's daughters deliver their speeches we see a number of close-ups of Gonerill and Regan. How do these shots contrast with those of Cordelia?
- 7 How do costume and delivery of dialogue shape your understanding of Cordelia's character? Do you think the audience is invited to be sympathetic to her character?
- 8 How is Cordelia shown to be less respectful towards the King than the other characters onstage?
- 9 The coronet that Lear gives to Cornwall and Albany is made of metal and cannot therefore be divided. What are the implications of Nunn's use of this prop?
- 10 How does Nunn present Cordelia's parting from her sisters, towards the end of the scene? Who do you think Nunn portrays sympathetically here? Why do you think this?
- 11 Construct a table like the one below to show how Nunn portrays various aspects of Lear's personality.

Aspect of Lear's personality	Feature or technique
Rage	
	Lear initially reading from cue cards
Majesty	

### Peter Brook: DVD Chapter 1

- 1 What sort of shot is used to convey the opening of the film? What are people's facial expressions and how might they be appropriate to the film?
- 2 What atmosphere is conveyed by the silence? How might this be appropriate to the play's main themes?
- 3 How would you describe the setting of Lear's throne-room? What atmosphere does this setting create and how does it reinforce some of the play's major themes?



- 4 When he delivers his opening speech, Lear does not move from his seated position and makes little effort to project his voice. What do you think Brook intends to convey through this directorial decision?
- 5 Comment on Lear's dramatic pauses. What aspect of Lear's personality do you think Brook or Paul Scofield (the actor playing Lear) presents through these?
- 6 How is Cordelia introduced before she is asked to declare her love for her father? How does this position the audience to respond to her?
- 7 How is Kent's confrontation reinforced through camerawork?
- 8 What does Lear's costume emphasise about his personality?
- 9 Of what does the costume used in this scene remind the audience?
- 10 Do you agree with Brook's decision to abridge (cut lines from) this scene? Why or why not?

### Comparison questions

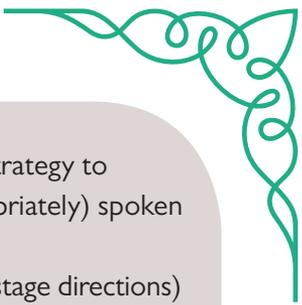
- 1 How do Brook and Nunn differ in their depiction of Lear's character?
- 2 Which of the Cordelias are you more sympathetic towards and why?
- 3 Which director more effectively establishes the atmosphere appropriate for the tragedy of *King Lear*? Which opening more clearly foreshadows the play's main themes?

## Soliloquies and asides

Picture this: you don't go to school one day and you end up watching *Days of Our Lives*. Besides the rather predictable plot and the abundance of cosmetic surgery, you notice that sometimes the characters express their thoughts aloud when nobody else is around! Actually, this is not as strange as it sounds – Shakespeare had his characters doing this hundreds of years ago and it is known as a **soliloquy** (*so-ll-lo-kwee*).

A soliloquy involves a character talking when he or she is alone. Shakespeare uses this theatrical device to help the audience understand the thoughts of the characters who are speaking and to reveal their motives for what they are doing or planning to do. We talk to ourselves all the time as we are thinking (try thinking without language!) and soliloquies reflect this. The device was used by some playwrights before Shakespeare, but he is generally considered the first writer to capture the inner workings of the human mind.

Despite Scene 1 containing some significant speeches by various characters, all of these monologues are spoken to other characters on stage and are therefore not soliloquies. The play's first soliloquy opens Act 1 Scene 2. In this soliloquy, Edmund



expresses his frustration at being denied an inheritance, and reveals his strategy to procure one by underhand means. These deceptive thoughts are (appropriately) spoken when no other characters are on stage.

Similar in some ways to soliloquies, **asides** (indicated by [*aside*] in the stage directions) also occur occasionally in *King Lear*. Whereas soliloquies are quite lengthy and are delivered with no-one else on the stage, asides are usually brief and allow a character to speak his or her thoughts without other characters being aware this is occurring. Cordelia delivers *King Lear*'s first aside: 'What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.' This aside reveals Cordelia's thoughts and her unwillingness to participate in the love-test.

## Act 1 Scene 2

### CHARACTERS

Edmund  
Gloucester  
Edgar

### IN A NUTSHELL

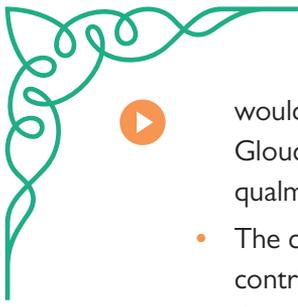


*Alone onstage, Edmund reveals his plan to disinherit his legitimate brother, Edgar, through the device of a forged letter. When Gloucester enters, Edmund pretends to hide the letter he is reading. His father demands to see the letter, which reveals a plot to murder Gloucester and divide the inheritance. Under Gloucester's questioning Edmund 'reluctantly' admits that the handwriting is Edgar's and that Edgar has expressed similar views to those articulated in the letter. Edmund persuades his father to delay any rash action until he can help determine the truth about Edgar. After Gloucester leaves, Edmund mocks his father's belief in astrology, but acts as if he shares these superstitions when Edgar enters. Edmund quickly convinces his brother that their father is exceedingly angry with him and advises him to hide for his own safety. Alone again onstage, Edmund glories in his trickery.*

### Before you read

- In the previous scene we learned that Edmund is Gloucester's illegitimate or bastard son. We also learn from Gloucester that his son has been out 'nine years', probably staying with a noble family somewhere distant, where he





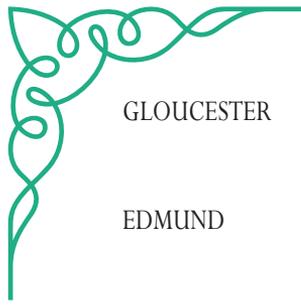
would cause his father less embarrassment. This to some extent explains why Gloucester so badly misjudges his character, and maybe why Edmund has no qualms about betraying his brother and father.

- The conversations in this scene are in prose (the language of a novel) and this contributes to their casual tone; Edmund's soliloquies, which open and close the scene, are written in poetry (blank verse). The switches in this scene between prose and poetry heighten the contrast between Edmund's private and public selves and emphasise his deceptive nature.
- Astrology involves predicting events and people's fortunes by the movements of the stars. Despite the scepticism of some of Shakespeare's contemporaries, astrology enjoyed widespread interest at this time, and even Queen Elizabeth I, who died shortly before *King Lear* was written, regularly consulted an astrologer. You will notice in the next scene that Gloucester believes in astrology while his son Edgar is more sceptical. In his soliloquies, Edmund ridicules these beliefs, and this adds to the energy and appeal of his character: as someone who defies the stars and his circumstances to shape his own destiny.
- The story of Gloucester and his sons is sometimes referred to as parallel to the main plot. You will notice, as it unfolds, that Gloucester's treatment of Edgar is similar to Lear's treatment of Cordelia, while Edmund is as cunning and deceptive as Gonerill and Regan. It is clear, too, that Gloucester is as foolish as Lear. The parallel plot serves a number of functions. It reveals that the difficulties of the King are not restricted to his particular situation; that they are, in fact, universal, reflected at different levels of society. It also provides the playwright an opportunity to contrast as well as to compare. Will Edmund end up the same as Gonerill and Regan? Will Edgar and Cordelia share the same fate?



<b>Wherefore:</b>	Why
<b>Fops:</b>	Fools
<b>Choler:</b>	Anger
<b>Beseech:</b>	Request
<b>Perused:</b>	Read carefully
<b>Fond:</b>	Foolish
<b>Casement:</b>	Window
<b>Character / Hand:</b>	Handwriting
<b>Lecherous:</b>	Lewd or lustful
<b>Wit:</b>	Cleverness





GLOUCESTER No? What needed then that terrible dispatch of it into your pocket? The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see. Come! If it be nothing I shall not need spectacles. 35

EDMUND I beseech you, Sir, pardon me. It is a letter from my brother that I have not all o'er-read; and for so much as I have perused, I find it not fit for your o'erlooking.

GLOUCESTER Give me the letter, sir.

EDMUND I shall offend either to detain or give it. The contents, as in part I understand them, are to blame. 40

GLOUCESTER Let's see, let's see.

EDMUND I hope for my brother's justification he wrote this but as an essay or taste of my virtue.

GLOUCESTER *[Reads]* 'This policy and reverence of age makes the world bitter to the best of our times, keeps our fortunes from us till our oldness cannot relish them. I begin to find an idle and fond bondage in the oppression of aged tyranny, who sways not as it hath power but as it is suffered. Come to me, that of this I may speak more. If our father would sleep till I waked him, you should enjoy half his revenue forever, and live the beloved of your brother, Edgar.' 45

Hum! Conspiracy! – 'Sleep till I waked him, you should enjoy half his revenue.' My son Edgar! Had he a hand to write this? A heart and brain to breed it in? When came this to you? Who brought it?

EDMUND It was not brought me, my Lord; there's the cunning of it; I found it thrown in at the casement of my closet. 55

GLOUCESTER You know the character to be your brother's?

EDMUND If the matter were good, my Lord, I durst swear it were his; but, in respect of that, I would fain think it were not.

GLOUCESTER It is his.

EDMUND It is his hand, my Lord; but I hope his heart is not in the contents. 60

GLOUCESTER Has he never before sounded you in this business?

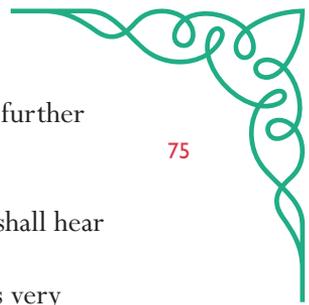
EDMUND Never, my Lord. But I have heard him oft maintain it to be fit that, sons at perfect age, and fathers declining, the father should be as ward to the son, and the son manage his revenue.

GLOUCESTER O villain, villain! His very opinion in the letter! Abhorred villain! Unnatural, detested, brutish villain! Worse than brutish! Go, sirrah, seek him. I'll apprehend him. Abominable villain! Where is he? 65

EDMUND I do not well know, my Lord. If it shall please you to suspend your indignation against my brother till you can derive from him better testimony of his intent, you shall run a certain course; where, if you violently proceed against him, mistaking his purpose, it would make a great gap in your own honour and shake in pieces the heart of his obedience. I dare pawn down my life for him that he hath 70



73 I dare pawn down my life: I bet my life.



wrote this to feel my affection to your honour and to no further pretence of danger.

75

GLOUCESTER Think you so?

EDMUND If your honour judge it meet I will place you where you shall hear us confer of this and by an auricular assurance have your satisfaction – and that without any further delay than this very evening.

80

GLOUCESTER He cannot be such a monster –

EDMUND Nor is not, sure.

GLOUCESTER To his father, that so tenderly and entirely loves him. Heaven and earth! Edmund, seek him out. Wind me into him, I pray you. Frame the business after your own wisdom. I would unstate myself to be in a due resolution.

85

EDMUND I will seek him, Sir, presently, convey the business as I shall find means and acquaint you withal.

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

Though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet Nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects: love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there's son against father; the King falls from bias of nature; there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our graves. Find out this villain, Edmund; it shall lose thee nothing; do it carefully. – And the noble and true-hearted Kent banished! His offence, honesty! 'Tis strange.

90

95

[Exit GLOUCESTER]

EDMUND This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeit of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars, as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and traitors by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that

100

105

we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star. My father compounded with my mother under the Dragon's tail, and my nativity was under Ursa Major; so that it follows I am rough



84 **Wind me into him:** Twist your way into his trust for my sake.

85 **Unstate myself:** Give up all I have.

90 **The wisdom of Nature:** An understanding of nature (hence: the natural sciences).

101 **We make guilty of:** We blame.

108–09 **Dragon's tail:** The constellation *Draco* (Latin for dragon) was associated with various classical myths.

109 **Ursa Major:** The constellation popularly known as the Great Bear.



and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am had the maidenliest 110  
star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing. Edgar –

[EDGAR enters]

and pat he comes like the catastrophe of the old comedy. My cue  
is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o' Bedlam.

– [Aloud] O, these eclipses do portend these divisions! Fa, sol, la, me.

EDGAR How now, brother Edmund! What serious contemplation are you in? 115

EDMUND I am thinking, brother, of a prediction I read this other day, what  
should follow these eclipses.

EDGAR Do you busy yourself about that?

EDMUND When saw you my father last?

EDGAR Why, the night gone by. 120

EDMUND Spake you with him?

EDGAR Ay, two hours together.

EDMUND Parted you in good terms? Found you no displeasure in him by  
word or countenance?

EDGAR None at all. 125

EDMUND Bethink yourself wherein you may have offended him: and at my  
entreaty forbear his presence till some little time hath qualified the  
heat of his displeasure, which at this instant so rageth in him that  
with the mischief of your person it would scarcely allay.

EDGAR Some villain hath done me wrong. 130

EDMUND That's my fear. I pray you have a continent forbearance till the  
speed of his rage goes slower; and, as I say, retire with me to my  
lodging, from whence I will fitly bring you to hear my Lord speak.  
Pray ye, go! There's my key. If you do stir abroad, go armed.

EDGAR Armed, brother? 135

EDMUND Brother, I advise you to the best. Go armed. I am no honest man if  
there be any good meaning towards you. I have told you what I  
have seen and heard but faintly, nothing like the image and horror  
of it. Pray you, away!

EDGAR Shall I hear from you anon? 140

EDMUND I do serve you in this business.

---

112 **The catastrophe:** Mock-tragic resolution.

113 **Tom o' Bedlam:** Bedlam was the popular name of the Hospital of St Mary of Bethlehem in London, the oldest asylum for the mentally disturbed in the city. Hence, 'Tom o' Bedlam' is a generic name for a beggar or madman.

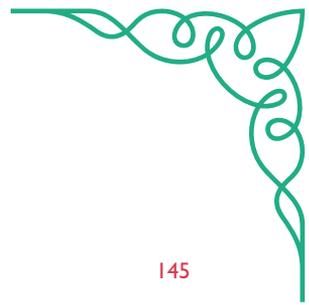
114 **Fa, sol, la, me:** Musical notes; the modern version of the standard scale of notes is do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do (as sung most famously by Maria in *The Sound of Music*). Edmund sings to himself to pretend he is not aware of Edgar's approach.

127 **Qualified:** Quelled.

131 **Have a continent forbearance:** Remain calm.

133 **Fitly:** At the appropriate time.

141 **This business:** What needs to be done.



[Exit EDGAR]

A credulous father and a brother noble,  
Whose nature is so far from doing harms  
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty  
My practices ride easy! I see the business.  
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit:  
All with me's meet that I can fashion fit.

145

[Exit]



QUESTIONS

- 1 In two or three sentences, summarise Edmund's plan to take his brother's lands.
- 2 How successful is Edmund in putting his plan into effect?
- 3 What quality or qualities does Edmund share with Gonerill and Regan?
- 4 Edmund appeals to most audiences as an extremely energetic character. Re-read his three soliloquies and brainstorm the ways Shakespeare creates this energy through language. You may like to construct a table or a concept map to organise your ideas.
- 5 Explain how Edgar's statement, 'Some villain hath done me wrong' (line 130) is ironic.
- 6 Do you think we are meant to sympathise with Edmund to some extent? Has he been fairly treated by Gloucester?

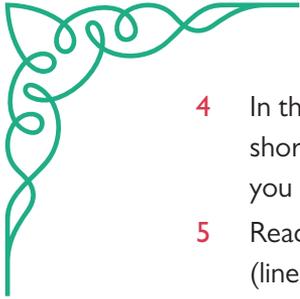


EXTEND

- 1 What tactics does Edmund employ to convince his father of Edgar's treason? In what ways does he minimise risk to himself as he does this (i.e. how does he cover himself)?
- 2 In his soliloquy at the beginning of this scene, Edmund contrasts the term 'legitimate' (which he associates with society) with 'illegitimate' (which he associates with nature). Copy and complete the table below to show how Edmund effectively contrasts these two categories.

Words Edmund associates with the term 'legitimate'	Connotations of these words	Words Edmund associates with the term 'illegitimate'	Connotations of these words
	e.g. lethargy		e.g. energy

- 3 In his short speech before Edgar enters, Edmund introduces his brother using the language of the theatre (lines 112–14). What elements of Edmund's character does this reinforce?

- 
- 4 In the conversation between Edmund and Edgar, Edgar's lines are mostly short. Why do you think Shakespeare chose to do this and what effect do you think this creates?
  - 5 Read Gloucester's speech beginning, 'These late eclipses in the sun and moon' (lines 89–99).
    - a How does this speech contribute to our understanding of Gloucester's character? Consider in particular how this speech contrasts with Edmund and Edgar's scepticism about astrology.
    - b How are the final lines of this speech, concerning Kent's banishment, ironic?



DISCUSS

Do you think Gloucester and Edgar are too easily convinced by Edmund's stories? Why or why not?

## Dramatic irony

Imagine your friend is making fun of someone and does not know (but you do!) that your teacher is standing right behind them! How would you feel? Tense? Amused? This is what **dramatic irony** is all about. Sometimes while viewing a play, we are placed in the position of knowing more than the characters on the stage. For example, we might know that around the corner is someone with a gun, but the characters, unaware of this, proceed to walk around the corner. This creates dramatic tension between the characters' limited knowledge and our greater knowledge.

Shakespeare's tragedies such as *Hamlet* and *Othello* contain a great deal of dramatic irony. We (the audience) often know things that the characters don't and this can create a sense of tension, as well as a desire to stop the characters from saying or doing things that might lead to harm.

While dramatic irony can create comedy, it does not tend to work that way in *King Lear*. In the previous scene, we are made aware of Edmund's purposes through his soliloquies. We share knowledge of the details with Edmund but Gloucester and Edgar are unaware of Edmund's plan. In *King Lear* the choices that characters make often seem dangerous or tragic in the light of the audience's more complete knowledge.

In Act 1 Scene 3 we witness a conversation between Gonerill and her steward or chief servant, Oswald, which is not witnessed by any other character. This scene will affect the way we perceive the dramatic events of Scene 4 and it therefore creates a sense of dramatic irony.

# Act 1 Scene 3



## CHARACTERS

Gonerill  
Oswald



## IN A NUTSHELL

*King Lear and his hundred knights have been staying with his daughter Gonerill for some weeks. Gonerill is angered by the King's recent mistreatment of one of her servants so tells her steward, Oswald, to advise the other servants to neglect the King and his followers. Gonerill declares her intention to write to her sister Regan informing her of recent developments.*

### Before you read

- You may remember from Scene 1 that King Lear originally intended to stay with his youngest daughter, Cordelia, for his retirement. With Cordelia banished, the King has to stay with his other daughters, Gonerill and Regan, for alternate months. In the terms of Lear's abdication he left provision to retain a personal following of one hundred knights. It is evident in Scene 4 that the King is not a well-mannered guest and it is possible that he even encourages his followers to behave badly. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that Gonerill is looking for an excuse to provoke the King so that she can act against him.



**Upbraids:** Reproaches or criticises  
**Trifle:** Trivial thing  
**Negligence:** Carelessness

## The Duke of Albany's castle.

*[GONERILL and OSWALD, her steward, enter]*

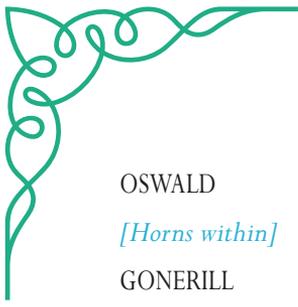
GONERILL Did my father strike my gentleman for chiding of his fool?

OSWALD Ay, Madam.

GONERILL By day and night he wrongs me. Every hour  
He flashes into one gross crime or other  
That sets us all at odds. I'll not endure it!

His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us  
On every trifle. When he returns from hunting  
I will not speak with him. Say I am sick.

5



If you come slack of former services,  
 You shall do well. The fault of it I'll answer. 10  
 He's coming, Madam, I hear him.

OSWALD

*[Horns within]*

Put on what weary negligence you please,  
 You and your fellows. I'd have it come to question.  
 If he distaste it let him to our sister, 15

GONERILL

Whose mind and mine I know in that are one,

Not to be overruled. Idle old man,

That still would manage those authorities

That he hath given away! Now, by my life,

Old fools are babes again, and must be used

With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abused. 20

Remember what I have said.

OSWALD

Well, madam.

GONERILL

And let his knights have colder looks among you;

What grows of it, no matter. Advise your fellows so:

I would breed from hence occasions, and I shall, 25

That I may speak: I'll write straight to my sister

To hold my very course. Prepare for dinner.

*[Exit]*



**9–10 If you come ... well:** Gonerill asks Oswald to show Lear less respect by becoming deliberately slack in serving him.

**12–13 Put on ... fellows:** Gonerill emphasises that Oswald and the other servants ('your fellows') should adopt ('put on') a negligent attitude towards Lear.

**14 Distaste it:** Dislike it.

**19–20 Old fools ... abused:** Gonerill asserts that when old men become like children, they should be punished ('with checks') out of kindness ('as flatteries') when they are led astray ('seen abused'), as children are.

**25–26 I would breed ... speak:** Gonerill indicates that from now on ('from hence'), she will create occasions to speak frankly (presumably to her father, about his waywardness).



QUESTIONS

- 1 What is Gonerill's complaint against the King?
- 2 What course of action does she intend to take?



DISCUSS

Do you think the King still has the right to behave as he would have done before he handed over the kingdom?

# H

*I am a fool, thou art nothing ...*

## Who played the Fool?

The next scene introduces the character of the Fool. Fools (or jesters) were employed by monarchs to provide entertainment. They were in the rare position of being able to criticise their employers without fear of punishment. In *King Lear* the Fool performs this function and in doing so brings sharply into focus the strangeness and folly of the situation Lear has created.

There are two main theories as to whom Shakespeare had in mind for the part of the Fool. The first recorded performance of the play was late in 1606. At this time, the principal comic actor of Shakespeare's company (the Lord Chamberlain's Men) was Robert Armin, and it is likely that he played the part of the Fool. Armin is recorded as playing the parts of two other famous Shakespearean fools: Touchstone in *As You Like It* and Feste in *Twelfth Night*. He also had a famous singing voice that would have been ideal for the role of the Fool in *King Lear*.

Another theory is that the same actor played the Fool and Cordelia. Doubling of characters was common in Shakespeare's day, when cast lists often included more characters than there were actors in a given company. Cordelia and the Fool never appear onstage at the same time and a number of lines connect their characters, including the first time the Fool is mentioned, when he is described as having 'much pined away' since Cordelia's exile. At the play's conclusion when Lear confronts Cordelia's death he also laments the death of his Fool. If Shakespeare (who also directed his own plays) made this decision in casting, the Fool's jokes and insults would be even more cutting, and the wisdom the Fool speaks prove even more ironic.

Women did not appear on the English stage until 1661. This was mainly because the theatre was considered too dangerous and disreputable a place for a woman to work. Theatre companies in Shakespeare's day got round this problem by using boy actors, whose voices had not yet broken, to play the parts of female characters. If this was the case for *King Lear*, the boy actor who played the demanding roles of Cordelia and the Fool would have needed to be very accomplished. Shakespeare must have had some particularly talented boy actors in his company at this time for them to be able to play such demanding roles as Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth.



Seventeenth-century engraving of Will Sommers, court jester of Henry VIII



# Act 1 Scene 4

## CHARACTERS

Lear  
Gonerill  
Fool  
Kent  
Albany  
Oswald  
Knights  
Gentleman

## IN A NUTSHELL



*Kent declares his intention to re-enter King Lear's service in disguise. When Lear returns from hunting with his knights, Kent introduces himself as a plain-speaking man (Caius). Upon demanding dinner, Lear finds Gonerill's servants to be impolite and Kent wins the King's favour by tripping Oswald, the steward of the house. The King's Fool enters and mocks the King through riddle and song. When Gonerill enters, she complains about the behaviour of the King's entourage and presses him to curb their behaviour and reduce their number. Lear is furious at this and curses her. While they are arguing, Gonerill's husband, Albany, enters and is surprised by Lear's behaviour. After Lear exits, Gonerill accuses Albany of being too soft and naive to the danger that Lear and his hundred knights present.*

## Before you read

- This scene is rich in dramatic irony. Lear and Albany do not witness the conversation of the previous scene and therefore don't know that Gonerill's servants have been advised to 'slack' their 'services'. In this way, Gonerill has indirectly orchestrated Lear's argument; he unknowingly walks into a trap.
- Part of the Fool's traditional role, when things were normal and the King ruled over his kingdom, was to keep the King's feet on the ground, to remind him that he was, after all, a mere mortal. Now that Lear has dethroned himself, however, and is on the verge of becoming an outcast, the Fool's traditional role becomes unnecessary or superfluous. He reflects on this in his little song (lines 141–44), which begins: 'Fools had ne'er less grace in a year'. A paraphrase of the song might read: fools were never in less demand at any other time than they are now, for wise men have grown stupid ('foppish'), have thrown off their intelligence ('their wits'), and now ape or copy the behaviour ('manners') of fools. As such, the song implies, wise men don't need to hire fools anymore. Lear's actions have not only cost him his kingdom, therefore, they have also put the Fool out of a job.





that is wise and says little; to fear judgement; to fight when I cannot choose; and to eat no fish. 15

KING LEAR What art thou?

KENT A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the King.

KING LEAR If thou be as poor for a subject as he is for a king, thou art poor enough. What wouldst thou?

KENT Service. 20

KING LEAR Who wouldst thou serve?

KENT You.

KING LEAR Dost thou know me, fellow?

KENT No, Sir. But you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master. 25

KING LEAR What's that?

KENT Authority.

KING LEAR What services canst thou do?

KENT I can keep honest counsel, ride, run, mar a curious tale in telling it, and deliver a plain message bluntly. That which ordinary men are fit for I am qualified in, and the best of me is diligence. 30

KING LEAR How old art thou?

KENT Not so young, Sir, to love a woman for singing, nor so old to dote on her for anything. I have years on my back forty-eight.

KING LEAR Follow me. Thou shalt serve me if I like thee no worse after dinner. I will not part from thee yet. Dinner, ho, dinner! Where's my knave, my Fool? Go you and call my Fool hither. 35

*[The 1<sup>ST</sup> KNIGHT exits; OSWALD enters]*

OSWALD You, you, sirrah! Where's my daughter?  
So please you –

*[OSWALD exits]*

KING LEAR What says the fellow there? Call the clotpoll back. 40

*[The 2<sup>ND</sup> KNIGHT exits]*

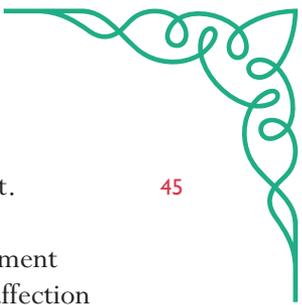
Where's my Fool? Ho, I think the world's asleep.

*[The 2<sup>ND</sup> KNIGHT re-enters]*

How now! Where's that mongrel?



- 14 **To fight when I cannot choose:** To fight when I must, when there is no other option.
- 15 **To eat no fish:** In the context of the play, Kent is indicating that he is a real man, a meat eater. However, for Shakespeare's audience this line would have reminded them of the disputes surrounding fasting and good works during the Reformation. In England, eating fish during penitential seasons (especially Lent and Advent, the periods leading up to Easter and Christmas respectively), and on Fridays, was a Roman Catholic practice that persisted in the established Church of England for many years.
- 29 **Keep honest counsel:** Keep confidences (or secrets) and give good advice.
- 31 **The best of me is diligence:** My best quality is diligence.



KNIGHT He says, my Lord, your daughter is not well.  
 KING LEAR Why came not the slave back to me when I called him?  
 KNIGHT Sir, he answered me in the roundest manner he would not. 45  
 KING LEAR He would not!  
 KNIGHT My Lord, I know not what the matter is, but to my judgement  
 your Highness is not entertained with that ceremonious affection  
 as you were wont. There's a great abatement of kindness appears  
 as well in the general dependants as in the Duke himself also and 50  
 your daughter.  
 KING LEAR Ha! Sayest thou so?  
 KNIGHT I beseech you pardon me, my Lord, if I be mistaken; for my duty  
 cannot be silent when I think your Highness wronged.  
 KING LEAR Thou but rememberest me of mine own conception. I have 55  
 perceived a most faint neglect of late, which I have rather blamed  
 as mine own jealous curiosity than as a very pretence and purpose  
 of unkindness. I will look further into it. But where's my Fool? I  
 have not seen him this two days.  
 KNIGHT Since my young Lady's going into France, sir, the Fool hath much 60  
 pined away.  
 KING LEAR No more of that. I have noted it well. Go you, and tell my daughter  
 I would speak with her.

*[An Attendant exits]*

Go you, call hither my Fool.

*[Another Attendant exits; OSWALD re-enters]*

OSWALD O, you sir, you, come you hither, sir. Who am I, sir? 65  
 My Lady's father.  
 KING LEAR 'My Lady's father'! My Lord's knave; you whoreson dog! You slave!  
 You cur!  
 OSWALD I am none of these, my Lord; I beseech your pardon.  
 KING LEAR Do you bandy looks with me, you rascal? *[Striking him]* 70  
 OSWALD I'll not be stricken, my Lord.  
 KENT Nor tripped neither, you base football player. *[Tripping him]*  
 KING LEAR I thank thee, fellow. Thou servest me and I'll love thee.  
 KENT Come, sir, arise, away! I'll teach you differences. Away, away! If  
 you will measure your lubber's length again, tarry. But away! 75



47–51 **My Lord ... your daughter:** The knight explains to Lear that, although he does not know the reason, the household staff of Albany and Gonerill no longer serve the King with the ceremony, deference and kindness they once displayed.

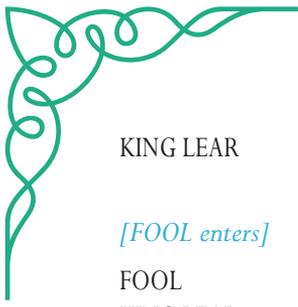
55 **Rememberest ... conception:** Remind me of my own thought.

57 **Jealous curiosity:** Paranoid preoccupation.

57 **A very pretence:** The actual intention.

74 **Differences:** Differences of rank.

74–75 **If you will measure ... tarry:** Kent says that he will trip him over again – where Oswald can measure how tall he is against the ground – if he wishes to hang around. A lubber is an oafish man.



KING LEAR Go to! Have you wisdom? [*He pushes OSWALD out*] So.  
Now, my friendly knave, I thank thee. There's earnest of thy service.  
[*Giving KENT money*]

[*FOOL enters*]

FOOL Let me hire him too. Here's my coxcomb. [*Offering KENT his cap*]

KING LEAR How now, my pretty knave! How dost thou?

FOOL [*To KENT*] Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb. 80

KENT Why, Fool?

FOOL Why, for taking one's part that's out of favour. Nay, and thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou'lt catch cold shortly. There, take my coxcomb! Why, this fellow has banished two on's daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will. If thou follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb. How now, Nuncle! Would I had two coxcombs and two daughters! 85

KING LEAR Why, my boy?

FOOL If I gave them all my living, I'd keep my coxcombs myself. There's mine. Beg another of thy daughters. 90

KING LEAR Take heed, sirrah, the whip!

FOOL Truth's a dog must to kennel. He must be whipped out when Lady Brach may stand by the fire and stink.

KING LEAR A pestilent gall to me!

FOOL Sirrah, I'll teach thee a speech. 95

KING LEAR Do.

FOOL Mark it, Nuncle:

Have more than thou showest,  
Speak less than thou knowest,  
Lend less than thou owest, 100  
Ride more than thou goest,  
Learn more than thou trowest,

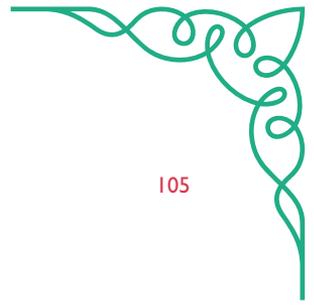


**82–87 Why, for taking one's part ... two coxcombs and two daughters:** The Fool, in his usual riddling way, explains to Kent that he is a fool for wanting to serve Lear; that he will soon find himself out in the cold; that Lear, by abdicating, has effectively released two of his daughters from his service ('banished'), and that, since Lear is losing the plot, he has done Cordelia ('the third') a favour ('blessing') despite his intention ('his will') to cause her suffering. The coxcomb denotes a fool, which is why the Fool repeatedly offers his to Kent.

**92–93 Truth's a dog ... and stink:** Truth is a dog that must go to his kennel. He must be punished ('whipped') whereas Lady Bitch gets to sit inside by the fire and stink. Dogs were often called 'lady' such-and-such. 'Brach' means bitch. Truth is presumably Cordelia; Lady Brach is either Gonerill or Regan, or both of them.

**94 A pestilent gall:** Constant bitterness.

**98–107 Have more than thou showest ... a score:** Have more than you reveal to others; speak less than you actually know; lend less money than you owe; ride your horse more often and further than you walk; hear ('learn') more than you believe (i.e. don't believe everything you hear); when gambling, set less money on the table than the number of times you throw the dice; leave alcohol and prostitutes alone; stay inside; and, if you do all this, you shall be richer than you seem to be.



Set less than thou throwest;  
 Leave thy drink and thy whore  
 And keep in-a-door, 105  
 And thou shalt have more  
 Than two tens to a score.

KENT This is nothing, Fool.  
 FOOL Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer: you gave me  
 nothing for it. Can you make no use of nothing, Nuncle? 110

KING LEAR Why no, boy. Nothing can be made out of nothing.  
 FOOL [To KENT] Prithee tell him; so much the rent of  
 his land comes to. He will not believe a Fool.

KING LEAR A bitter Fool!  
 FOOL Dost thou know the difference, my boy, between a bitter fool and  
 a sweet fool? 115

KING LEAR No, lad; teach me.  
 FOOL That lord that counselled thee  
 To give away thy land,  
 Come place him here by me, 120  
 Do thou for him stand.  
 The sweet and bitter fool  
 Will presently appear;  
 The one in motley here,  
 The other found out there. 125

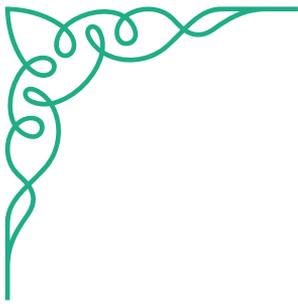
KING LEAR Dost thou call me fool, boy?  
 FOOL All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born  
 with.

KENT This is not altogether fool, my Lord.  
 FOOL No, faith, lords and great men will not let me. If I had a monopoly 130  
 out they would have part on't. And ladies too, they will not let me  
 have all the fool to myself: they'll be snatching. Nuncle, give me an  
 egg and I'll give thee two crowns.

KING LEAR What two crowns shall they be?  
 FOOL Why, after I have cut the egg i' the middle, and eat up the meat, the 135  
 two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i' the middle,  
 and gavest away both parts, thou borest thy ass on thy back o'er the



- 
- 109 **Breath of an unfee'd lawyer:** Words of an unpaid lawyer.
- 112–13 **Prithee ... fool:** There is a pun here on rent, indicating both the rent paid on the land, and the division ('rent') of the land that took place at the play's opening. The Fool is saying that the 'rent' in both senses comes to nothing, that Lear now will gain nothing from the land.
- 135 **Eat up the meat:** Eat the edible part (of the egg), leaving two parts of the shell.
- 136 **Clovest:** Cut.
- 137 **Borest thy ass on thy back:** In Aesop's fable, the ass (donkey) rides the man instead of the man riding the ass, indicating an inversion of nature. The point the Fool makes is that, when Lear divided his kingdom ('crown') between Gonerill and Regan, he inverted the natural order. He is now subject to them, rather than the other way around.



dirt. Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gavest thy golden one away. If I speak like myself in this, let him be whipped that first finds it so. 140

*[Sings]*

*Fools had ne'er less grace in a year,  
For wise men are grown foppish  
They know not how their wits to wear,  
Their manners are so apish.*

KING LEAR 145  
FOOL When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?  
I have used it, Nuncle, ever since thou madest thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou gavest them the rod, and putt'st down thine own breeches,

*[Sings]*

*Then they for sudden joy did weep,  
And I for sorrow sung, 150  
That such a king should play bo-peep  
And go the fools among.*

Prithee, Nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can teach thy fool to lie. I would fain learn to lie.

KING LEAR 155  
FOOL And you lie, sirrah, we'll have you whipped.  
I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They'll have me whipped for speaking true, thou'lt have me whipped for lying, and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind o' thing than a fool. And yet I would not be thee, Nuncle. Thou hast pared thy wit o' both sides and left nothing i' the middle. Here comes one o' the parings. 160

*[Enter GONERILL]*

KING LEAR How now, daughter! what makes that frontlet on? Methinks you are too much of late i' the frown.

FOOL 165  
Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning. Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing. *[To GONERILL]* Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue. So your face bids me, though you say nothing.

Mum, mum,  
He that keeps nor crust nor crumb, 170

139 **If I speak like myself:** If I speak like a fool.

141–44 **Fools had ne'er ... apish:** See **Before you read** on page 48.

147–48 **Putt'st down thine own breeches:** Pulled down your pants (in order to be spanked).

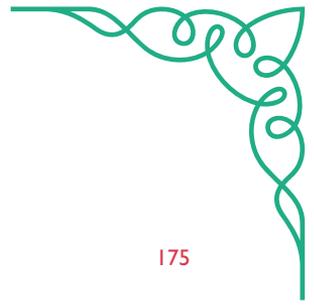
151 **Play bo-peep:** Play a game, perhaps hide-and-seek.

156 **What kin:** How similar (literally, by reason of kinship).

162 **Frontlet:** Literally a headband, but metaphorically a frown, in this context.

165 **O without a figure:** A zero without a number before it (therefore, nothing).





Weary of all, shall want some.  
 [Pointing to KING LEAR] That's a shelled peascod.

GONERILL Not only, Sir, this your all-licensed fool  
 But other of your insolent retinue  
 Do hourly carp and quarrel, breaking forth 175  
 In rank and not-to-be endured riots. Sir,  
 I had thought by making this well known unto you,  
 To have found a safe redress; but now grow fearful  
 By what yourself too late have spoke and done  
 That you protect this course and put it on 180  
 By your allowance; which if you should, the fault  
 Would not 'scape censure, nor the redresses sleep,  
 Which, in the tender of a wholesome weal,  
 Might in their working do you that offence  
 Which else were shame, that then necessity 185  
 Will call discreet proceeding.

FOOL For, you know, Nuncle,  
 The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long  
 That it had its head bit off by its young.  
 So out went the candle, and we were left darkling. 190

KING LEAR Are you our daughter?  
 GONERILL I would you would make use of that good wisdom,  
 Whereof I know you are fraught, and put away  
 These dispositions, that of late transform you  
 From what you rightly are. 195

FOOL May not an ass know when the cart draws the horse?  
 Whoop, Jug! I love thee.

KING LEAR Doth any here know me? This is not Lear.  
 Doth Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?  
 Either his notion weakens, his discernings 200  
 Are lethargied – Ha! Waking? 'Tis not so.  
 Who is it that can tell me who I am?

FOOL Lear's shadow.



172 **Shelled peascod:** A shelled pea pod (therefore, empty of peas).

176 **Rank:** Base, foul.

181–86 **Which if you should ... proceeding:** Gonerill warns that if Lear continues to allow these wild parties to take place, he will not escape censure and retribution (criticism and punishment), and that for the good of the commonwealth ('tender of a wholesome weal'), the result might be a punishment ('offence') which in other times would be considered shameful and wrong ('which else were shame'), but which would be necessary in this instance ('then necessity').

190 **Left darkling:** Left in the dark.

197 **Jug:** Just as 'Tom o' Bedlam' was generically used to indicate a madman, so 'Jug' (as a nickname for Joan) was used as a generic name for a prostitute. The Fool, in effect, is calling Gonerill a prostitute.

200 **Discernings:** Perceptions.

201 **Lethargied:** Tired.



KING LEAR I would learn that; for by the marks of sovereignty, knowledge, and reason, I should be false persuaded I had daughters. 205

FOOL Which they will make an obedient father.

KING LEAR Your name, fair gentlewoman?

GONERILL This admiration, Sir, is much o' the savour Of other your new pranks. I do beseech you To understand my purposes aright. 210

As you are old and reverend, you should be wise. Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires, Men so disordered, so deboshed and bold, That this our court, infected with their manners, Shows like a riotous inn. Epicurism and lust 215

Make it more like a tavern or a brothel Than a graced palace. The shame itself doth speak For instant remedy. Be then desired By her that else will take the thing she begs, A little to disquantity your train, 220

And the remainder that shall still depend, To be such men as may besort your age, And know themselves and you.

KING LEAR Darkness and devils! –

Saddle my horses! Call my train together – Degenerate bastard! I'll not trouble thee. – Yet have I left a daughter. 225

GONERILL You strike my people, and your disordered rabble Make servants of their betters.

[ALBANY enters]

KING LEAR Woe, that too late repents, – [To ALBANY] O, Sir, are you come? 230

Is it your will? Speak, Sir. – Prepare my horses! – Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend, More hideous when thou showest thee in a child Than the sea-monster!

ALBANY Pray, Sir, be patient.



205 **I should be false persuaded:** I would be wrongly persuaded to believe.

208 **Admiration:** Astonishment.

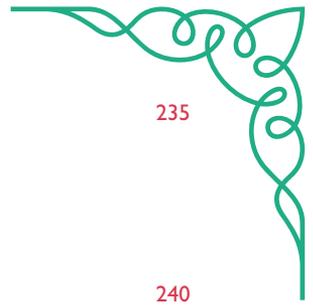
213 **Deboshed:** Debauched; morally corrupted.

215 **Epicurism:** The Epicureans of classical antiquity followed the ideas of the philosopher Epicurus. They were, mistakenly, believed to advocate free love and general self-indulgence. Epicurism (Epicureanism) became a byword for gluttony and riotous behaviour.

220 **Disquantity your train:** Reduce the numbers of your retinue.

222 **Besort:** Benefit.

232 **Marble-hearted:** We use a variant of this today: stone-hearted.



KING LEAR      *[To GONERILL]* Detested kite! Thou liest. 235  
 My train are men of choice and rarest parts,  
 That all particulars of duty know  
 And in the most exact regard support  
 The worships of their name. – O most small fault,  
 How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show! 240  
 That, like an engine, wrenched my frame of nature  
 From the fixed place, drew from heart all love,  
 And added to the gall. O Lear, Lear, Lear!  
 Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in *[Striking his head]*  
 And thy dear judgement out! Go, go, my people. 245

ALBANY      My Lord, I am guiltless, as I am ignorant  
 Of what hath moved you.

KING LEAR      It may be so, my Lord.  
 Hear, Nature, hear! Dear Goddess, hear!  
 Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend  
 To make this creature fruitful! 250  
 Into her womb convey sterility,  
 Dry up in her the organs of increase  
 And from her derogate body never spring  
 A babe to honour her. If she must teem,  
 Create her child of spleen, that it may live 255  
 And be a thwart disnatured torment to her!  
 Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth;  
 With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,  
 Turn all her mother's pains and benefits  
 To laughter and contempt, that she may feel 260  
 How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is  
 To have a thankless child! Away, away!

*[Exit]*

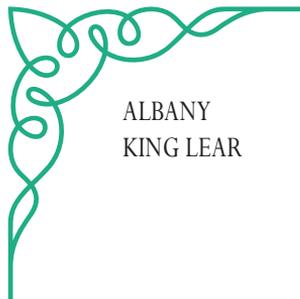
ALBANY      Now, gods that we adore, whereof comes this?  
 GONERILL      Never afflict yourself to know the cause;  
 But let his disposition have that scope 265  
 That dotage gives it.

*[KING LEAR re-enters]*

KING LEAR      What, fifty of my followers at a clap!  
 Within a fortnight!



- 
- 235      **Kite:** A kite hawk: a bird symbolising cowardice, meanness and cruelty.
  - 241      **Engine:** Machine; perhaps refers to the torture rack. See text note for lines 286–88 on page 198.
  - 253      **Derogate:** Degenerate.
  - 255      **Spleen:** Bitterness.
  - 258      **Fret:** Carve.



ALBANY  
KING LEAR

What's the matter, Sir?  
I'll tell thee. *[To GONERILL]* Life and death! I am ashamed 270  
That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus;  
That these hot tears, which break from me perforce  
Should make thee worth them. Blasts and fogs upon thee!  
The untented woundings of a father's curse  
Pierce every sense about thee! Old fond eyes, 275  
Bewep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out  
And cast you, with the waters that you lose  
To temper clay. Yea, is it come to this? Ha!  
Let it be so. Yet have I left a daughter,  
Who I am sure is kind and comfortable. 280  
When she shall hear this of thee, with her nails  
She'll flay thy wolvisish visage. Thou shalt find  
That I'll resume the shape which thou dost think  
I have cast off for ever.

*[KING LEAR, KENT and Attendants exit]*

GONERILL Do you mark that, my Lord? 285

ALBANY I cannot be so partial, Gonerill,  
To the great love I bear you –

GONERILL Pray you, content. What, Oswald, ho!

*[To the FOOL]* You, sir, more knave than fool, after your master!

FOOL Nuncle Lear, Nuncle Lear, tarry and take the Fool with thee. 290

A fox, when one has caught her,

And such a daughter,

Should sure to the slaughter,

If my cap would buy a halter.

So the Fool follows after. 295

*[FOOL exits]*

GONERILL This man hath had good counsel. A hundred knights?  
'Tis politic and safe to let him keep  
At point a hundred knights? Yes, that on every dream,  
Each buzz, each fancy, each complaint, dislike,  
He may enguard his dotage with their powers, 300  
And hold our lives in mercy. Oswald, I say!

ALBANY Well, you may fear too far.

GONERILL Safer than trust too far.

Let me still take away the harms I fear,

---

274 **Untented wounds:** Untreated or undressed wounds.

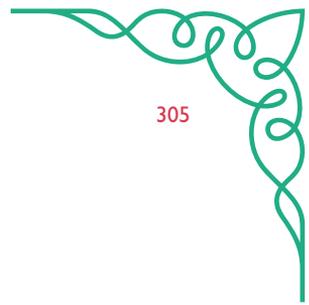
286 **Partial ... To:** Biased because of.

288 **Content:** Enough.

298 **At point:** 'At most' but also playing on 'point', indicating that the men are armed.

300 **Enguard:** Guard.





Not fear still to be taken. I know his heart.  
 What he hath uttered I have writ my sister  
 If she sustain him and his hundred knights  
 When I have showed the unfitness –

305

[OSWALD re-enters]

OSWALD How now, Oswald!  
 What, have you writ that letter to my sister?  
 GONERILL Ay, Madam.  
 Take you some company, and away to horse.  
 Inform her full of my particular fear,  
 And thereto add such reasons of your own  
 As may compact it more. Get you gone,  
 And hasten your return.

310

315

[OSWALD exits]

ALBANY No, no, my Lord,  
 This milky gentleness and course of yours  
 Though I condemn not, yet, under pardon,  
 You are much more a-taxed for want of wisdom  
 Than praised for harmful mildness.  
 How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell:  
 Striving to better, oft we mar what's well.  
 GONERILL Nay, then –  
 ALBANY Well, well, the event!

320

[Exit]



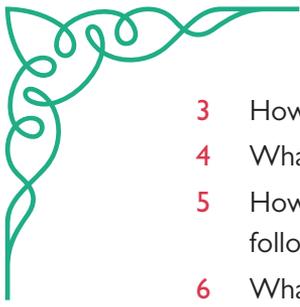
319 **A-taxed for:** Rebuked, taken to task.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What is Kent's intended purpose at the beginning of this scene? Does he achieve his purpose?
- 2 Complete the table below to show how Shakespeare suggests that Lear is a difficult guest (lines 1–50).

Technique / stylistic feature	Examples	Potential effect on Gonerill and her household
Use of imperatives (commands)		
Use of insults		
Encouraging disrespectful behaviour in his followers		

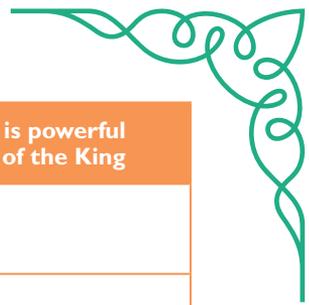


- 3 How does the Fool reason that Lear made his 'daughters his mothers'?
- 4 What is Gonerill's general complaint against her father?
- 5 How would you describe the language Gonerill uses to criticise Lear and his followers (lines 173–76)? (Use three or four adjectives.)
- 6 What does the audience know about Gonerill's intentions of which Lear is ignorant? What do we call this dramatic device?
- 7 What evidence can you find that Lear is rash in this scene? Has he behaved in a similar way earlier in the play?
- 8 What do you think the Fool means by describing the King as 'Lear's shadow'?
- 9 How is Lear's assertion that Regan will be much more hospitable ironic?
- 10 Re-read Lear's speeches (lines 235–45, 247–62, 270–84) and then copy and complete the table below to show how Shakespeare presents the severity of Lear's anger. Try to use different example(s) each time.

Technique / stylistic feature	Example	Explanation of effect
Hyperbole		
Bestial imagery		
Violent language / threats		
Insults and name-calling		
Harsh consonants, e.g. 'detested kite', 'spleen'		
Variation between short and long sentences		



- 1 What is the relevance of Kent presenting himself as a plain-speaking, honest man? How does his chosen persona have a greater resonance for the themes of the play?
- 2 How is Oswald addressing Lear as his 'Lady's father' intended to enrage the king?
- 3 Why does the Fool speak in such a riddling way? Why is he not more straightforward?
- 4 Copy and complete the table on the next page to show how the language and imagery used by the Fool resonates with earlier scenes, and how his criticisms are particularly effective or powerful.



Language and imagery	How this is significant to earlier events	How this is powerful criticism of the King
Can you make no use of nothing, Nuncle? (line 110)		
Two crowns of the egg (line 136)		

- 5 Re-read the following line in context: ‘Hear, Nature, hear! Dear Goddess, hear!’ (line 248).
  - a Lear calls on Nature in cursing his daughter. What does this imply about nature?
  - b Is this in any way ironic?
  - c Does this echo a speech by another character earlier in the play?

### Peter Brook: DVD Chapter 3



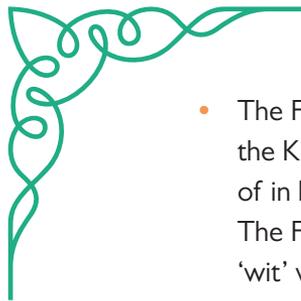
- 1 What elements of this scene validate Gonerill’s claim that Lear’s followers are ‘riotous’?
- 2 What type of camerawork is used to introduce the character of the Fool? Why do you think this is?
- 3 Lear seems calm when he curses Gonerill towards the end of this scene. How does this affect your interpretation of this speech?
- 4 What elements of this scene cause you to feel sympathy for Gonerill?

## Act 1 Scene 5

CHARACTERS	IN A NUTSHELL
King Lear Fool Kent Gentleman	<i>Lear sends Kent to Regan with some letters. Left alone with the Fool, Lear reflects on his situation while the Fool cracks jokes at his expense. His horses ready, Lear rides off for Regan’s household.</i>

### Before you read

- Lear does not always seem to listen to and converse with the Fool. It seems that he is still in shock from his argument with Gonerill. As he reflects on this, the Fool’s jokes often seem to wash over him.



- The Fool insults the King through a bizarre and humorous metaphor. He sets the King up by asking (line 6): if a man’s brains (‘wits’) were in his heels (instead of in his head), would they not get blistered? Lear answers that yes, they would. The Fool replies that the King doesn’t have to worry, explaining that the King’s ‘wit’ will never need to wear slippers (to protect from blisters). The Fool is suggesting that Lear is foolish to seek refuge with his other daughter – as such, he is not using his brains, and therefore, if they were feet, he would not be in any danger of blistering them.

V

**Diligence:** Care and attention  
**Kibes:** Chilblains (blisters caused by cold and damp)  
**Slipshod:** Wearing slippers  
**Perforce:** By force; necessarily

## The court in Albany’s castle.

*[KING LEAR, KENT and FOOL enter]*

KING LEAR      Go you before to Gloucester with these letters. Acquaint my daughter no further with any thing you know than comes from her demand out of the letter. If your diligence be not speedy, I shall be there afore you.

KENT              I will not sleep, my Lord, till I have delivered your letter. 5

*[KENT exits]*

FOOL              If a man’s brains were in’s heels, were’t not in danger of kibes?

KING LEAR      Ay, boy.

FOOL              Then I prithee be merry. Thy wit shall ne’er go slip-shod.

KING LEAR      Ha, ha, ha!

FOOL              Shalt see thy other daughter will use thee kindly, for though she’s as like this as a crab’s like an apple, yet I can tell what I can tell. 10

KING LEAR      What canst thou tell, boy?

FOOL              She will taste as like this as a crab does to a crab. Thou canst tell why one’s nose stands i’ the middle on’s face?

KING LEAR      No. 15

FOOL              Why, to keep one’s eyes of either side’s nose, that what a man cannot smell out he may spy into.

KING LEAR      I did her wrong.




---

**I-3 Acquaint my daughter ... out of the letter:** Don’t inform her of anything apart from what is in this letter.

**11 Crab:** Crabapple.

FOOL Canst tell how an oyster makes his shell?  
 KING LEAR No. 20  
 FOOL Nor I neither. But I can tell why a snail has a house.  
 KING LEAR Why?  
 FOOL Why, to put his head in – not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case.  
 KING LEAR I will forget my nature. So kind a father! Be my horses ready? 25  
 FOOL Thy asses are gone about 'em. The reason why the seven stars are no more than seven is a pretty reason.  
 KING LEAR Because they are not eight?  
 FOOL Yes, indeed. Thou wouldst make a good fool.  
 KING LEAR To take't again performe! Monster ingratitude! 30  
 FOOL If thou wert my fool, Nuncle, I'd have thee beaten for being old before thy time.  
 KING LEAR How's that?  
 FOOL Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise.  
 KING LEAR O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven; 35  
 Keep me in temper; I would not be mad!

[GENTLEMAN enters]

How now! Are the horses ready?  
 GENTLEMAN Ready, my Lord.  
 KING LEAR Come, boy.  
 FOOL She that's a maid now, and laughs at my departure, 40  
 Shall not be a maid long, unless things be cut shorter.

[Exit]



26

**Asses:** Servants.



QUESTIONS

- 1 Choose one of the Fool's insults and explain it.
- 2 How does Lear calling the Fool 'boy' affect your interpretation of the Fool's character and Lear's attitude towards him?



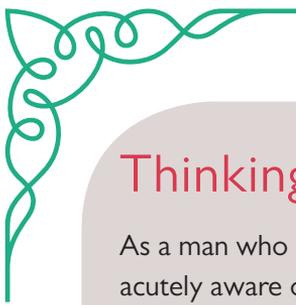
EXTEND

- 1 The line 'I did her wrong' (line 18) is generally delivered in a reflective tone and 'her' is interpreted as 'Cordelia'. Can you think of a different interpretation of these lines? Hint: Play around with the way you emphasise words in this line.
- 2 The Fool in effect accuses the King in this scene of failing to use his wits. Identify examples in which he also implies that the King fails to use his senses.



DISCUSS

Why do you think the generally rash and intolerant Lear accepts the Fool's insults and insensitive joking?



## Thinking about appearance and reality

As a man who spent his career writing, directing and acting in plays, Shakespeare was acutely aware of the strange connections between acting on the stage and living life in the 'real world'. In his comedy *As You Like It*, Shakespeare places the following immortal words in the mouth of his character Jaques:

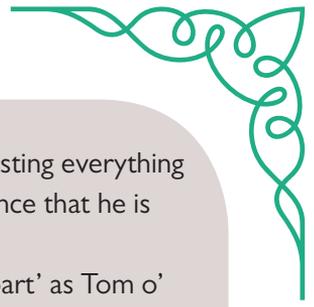
All the world's a stage  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts.

The metaphor of the world as a stage also appears in *King Lear*, when Lear declares: 'When we are born we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools' (Act 4 Scene 6).

One reason for the effectiveness of this metaphor is that members of the audience already sense that what they are watching relates to real life, even as they are conscious that it is 'make-believe'. They realise, too, that just as the actors in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres played more than one role in any given play, so in life each of us 'plays many parts'. In one sense we have all played or will play 'the part' of a child, a teenager, an adult, a husband or a wife, a best friend, and so on, at the different stages in our lives. Often we even feel as though we are different people in these various 'roles'. Consider how your behaviour and language changes when you are with your close friends compared with how you behave and speak around your parents or teachers! Sometimes we even 'act' in ways contrary to what we regard as our 'real' selves – such as when we pretend to like someone we actually dislike, or pretend to be good when we are not (a 'simular man of virtue', as Lear describes it). Shakespeare exploits all of these senses of role-playing in *King Lear*.

To start with, in the love-test of the opening scene, he shows Gonerill and Regan pretending to be other than what they are. Their language disguises their real feelings. Similarly, like Lear's two evil daughters, Edmund pretends to be a loyal son when he is in fact quite otherwise. These three characters are all 'playing the part' of loving children. Shakespeare's audience would also have appreciated that the actors were playing the parts of people who were, metaphorically, also 'playing' parts.

The same is true of Kent who plays the part of Caius, after he is banished for his plain speaking. When Kent tells the gentleman: 'I am much more than my out-wall' (Act 3 Scene 1) and tells Lear: 'I do profess to be no less than I seem' (Act 1 Scene 4), the audience appreciates the layers of irony. Lear's readiness to trust 'Caius' immediately (giving him the important task of delivering letters on the same day he meets him), also serves to reinforce our sense that Lear places too much importance on appearances.



Kent is, in an ironic way, playing on the gullibility Lear has shown in entrusting everything to Gonerill and Regan. At the same time, Kent is suggesting to the audience that he is the same loyal aid he has always been.

Probably the most famous example of disguise in the play is Edgar's 'part' as Tom o' Bedlam. One of the noblest and most virtuous of characters, Edgar nonetheless takes 'the basest and poorest shape' (Act 2 Scene 3). In this case his outward appearance is at odds with what we, the audience, know to be the reality. At the same time, since the reality of Edgar's virtue is no longer visible to Gloucester, his appearance as Tom o' Bedlam outwardly represents what Gloucester believes to be the ugliness of Edgar's soul.

This tension between appearance and reality comes to a head in Act 4 Scene 6: Edgar pretends to lead the blind Gloucester to the cliffs of Dover, and then convinces the old man that he has miraculously survived his 'fall' from those cliffs. He then ceases to play the part of Tom o' Bedlam and here appearance and reality come together again, in a metaphorical sense. Prior to his 'fall' down the cliffs, Gloucester believes Edgar has undergone a change since the end of Act 4 Scene 1, that he 'speak'st / In better phrase and matter' than he did before (Act 4 Scene 6), but Edgar ironically reassures him: 'In nothing am I changed / But in my garments'. This echoes what Edgar has said earlier when he first adopted the disguise: 'Edgar I nothing am' (Act 2 Scene 3). In a profound way, though, Edgar speaks the truth – it is Gloucester who has undergone an inward, moral change, not Edgar, who has only changed outwardly.

One of the moral points Shakespeare makes through his explorations of the difference between appearances and reality, is that things (and people) are not always what they seem. We must look beneath the surface to give ourselves the best chance of arriving at the truth. Had Lear and Gloucester done this at the start – had they been more interested in substance rather than appearance – the tragic events that engulf them would most likely have been avoided.

# Act 2

## Act 2 Scene 1

### CHARACTERS

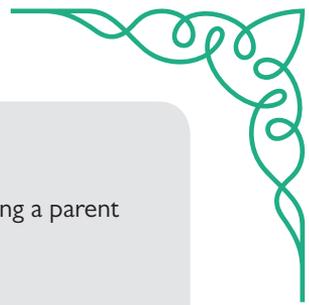
Edmund  
Gloucester  
Regan  
Cornwall  
Curan  
Edgar

### IN A NUTSHELL

Curan, who is a courtier, informs Edmund of rumours of an imminent war between the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall, and also tells him that Regan and the Duke of Cornwall will arrive at Gloucester's castle that night. Edmund deceives his brother Edgar by warning him of great danger. After Edgar flees, Edmund cuts himself to make it appear as though Edgar has wounded him. Gloucester, convinced by Edmund's story, states that Edgar will be put to death for his crimes and promises to reward Edmund for his loyalty. When Regan and Cornwall arrive they have already heard of Edgar's disloyalty and are impressed by Edmund's allegedly heroic actions. Regan explains the rift between Lear and Gonerill and their need to seek Gloucester's advice.

### Before you read

- The parallel narratives, or plots, of Scene 1 (Lear and his daughters) and Scene 2 (Gloucester and his sons) come together, or fuse, in this scene.
- Watch out for **dramatic irony**. None of the other characters knows Edmund's true motivations, and Gloucester lacks insight into Edgar's true character. Also look for similarities in the behaviour of Lear and Gloucester, Edgar and Cordelia, and Edmund and the sisters who now rule the kingdom. (See page 44 for more information on dramatic irony.)



V	<b>Abroad:</b>	Around the place
	<b>'Twixt:</b>	Between (a contraction of betwixt)
	<b>Parricide:</b>	Someone who murders a parent; the act of murdering a parent
	<b>Manifold:</b>	Of many different kinds or parts
	<b>Fell:</b>	Cruel
	<b>Gasted:</b>	Frightened
	<b>Dullard:</b>	An idiot
<b>Sojourn:</b>	Stopover or stay for a time	

## Gloucester's castle.

*[EDMUND enters and CURAN meets him]*

EDMUND            Save thee, Curan.  
 CURAN            And you, sir. I have been with your father, and given him notice  
                          that the Duke of Cornwall and Regan his Duchess will be here with  
                          him this night.

EDMUND            How comes that? 5

CURAN            Nay, I know not. You have heard of the news abroad? I mean the  
                          whispered ones, for they are yet but ear-kissing arguments.

EDMUND            Not I: pray you, what are they?

CURAN            Have you heard of no likely wars toward, 'twixt the Dukes of  
                          Cornwall and Albany? 10

EDMUND            Not a word.

CURAN            You may do, then, in time. Fare you well, sir.

*[Exit CURAN]*

EDMUND            The Duke be here tonight? The better, best!  
                          This weaves itself perforce into my business.  
                          My father hath set guard to take my brother; 15  
                          And I have one thing, of a queasy question,  
                          Which I must act. Briefness and fortune, work!  
                          Brother, a word; descend: brother, I say!

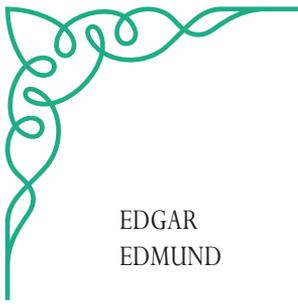
*[Enter EDGAR]*

My father watches: O sir, fly this place;  
 Intelligence is given where you are hid; 20  
 You have now the good advantage of the night.  
 Have you not spoken 'gainst the Duke of Cornwall?  
 He's coming hither: now, i' the night, i' the haste,



7     **Ear-kissing arguments:** Rumours.

9     **Wars toward:** Imminent wars.



And Regan with him. Have you nothing said  
Upon his party 'gainst the Duke of Albany?  
Advise yourself. 25

EDGAR I am sure on't, not a word.

EDMUND I hear my father coming. Pardon me:  
In cunning I must draw my sword upon you  
Draw; seem to defend yourself; now quit you well.  
Yield: come before my father. Light, ho, here! 30  
Fly, brother. Torches, torches! So, farewell.

[EDGAR exits]

Some blood drawn on me would beget opinion. [Wounds his arm]  
Of my more fierce endeavour: I have seen drunkards  
Do more than this in sport. Father, father!  
Stop, stop! No help?

[GLOUCESTER enters, with Servants with torches]

GLOUCESTER Now, Edmund, where's the villain? 35

EDMUND Here stood he in the dark, his sharp sword out,  
Mumbling of wicked charms, conjuring the moon  
To stand auspicious mistress, –

GLOUCESTER But where is he?

EDMUND Look, Sir, I bleed.

GLOUCESTER Where is the villain, Edmund?

EDMUND Fled this way, Sir. When by no means he could – 40

GLOUCESTER Pursue him, ho! Go after.

[Some Servants exit]

EDMUND By no means what?  
Persuade me to the murder of your Lordship;  
But that I told him, the revenging gods  
'Gainst parricides did all their thunders bend;  
Spoke, with how manifold and strong a bond 45  
The child was bound to the father; Sir, in fine,  
Seeing how loathly opposite I stood  
To his unnatural purpose, in fell motion,  
With his prepared sword, he charges home  
My unprovided body, latched mine arm: 50



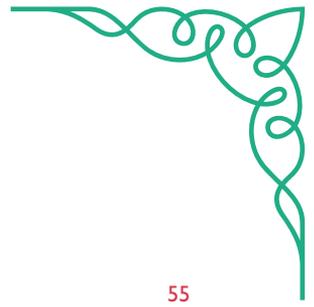
24–25 **Have you nothing ... Upon his party:** Have you not spoken against his side?

32–33 **Some blood drawn on me ... fierce endeavour:** Some blood appearing on my body would create the belief ('opinion') that I have been in a 'fierce' fight.

38 **To stand auspicious mistress:** To stand in as his favourable (auspicious) patron; to act on his behalf.

46 **In fine:** In conclusion.

50 **Unprovided:** Unprotected; **Latched:** Caught.



But when he saw my best alarum'd spirits,  
 Bold in the quarrel's right, roused to the encounter,  
 Or whether gasted by the noise I made,  
 Full suddenly he fled.

GLOUCESTER

Let him fly far,  
 Not in this land shall he remain uncaught;  
 And found – dispatch. The noble Duke my master,  
 My worthy arch and patron, comes tonight.  
 By his authority I will proclaim it,  
 That he which finds him shall deserve our thanks,  
 Bringing the murderous coward to the stake;  
 He that conceals him, death. 55 60

EDMUND

When I dissuaded him from his intent,  
 And found him pight to do it, with curst speech  
 I threatened to discover him. He replied,  
 'Thou unpossessing bastard, dost thou think,  
 If I would stand against thee, would the reposal  
 Of any trust, virtue, or worth in thee  
 Make thy words faithed? No, what I should deny –  
 As this I would: ay, though thou didst produce  
 My very character – I'd turn it all  
 To thy suggestion, plot, and damned practice;  
 And thou must make a dullard of the world,  
 If they not thought the profits of my death  
 Were very pregnant and potential spurs  
 To make thee seek it.' 65 70

GLOUCESTER

O strange and fastened villain  
 Would he deny his letter, said he? I never got him. 75

[Trumpets within]



- 
- 51–52 **When he saw my best alarum'd spirits ... quarrel's right:** When he saw my most virtuous ('best') spirits stirred-up ('alarum'd') [and] made courageous by the righteousness of the cause ('quarrel's right').
  - 53 **Gasted:** Frightened.
  - 63 **Pight:** Fully determined.
  - 64 **Discover:** Turn him in.
  - 66 **Reposal:** Placing.
  - 68 **Faithed:** Believed.
  - 70 **Character:** Handwriting.
  - 70–71 **I'd turn it all / To thy suggestion:** I'd make it seem as if it were all your idea.
  - 72–75 **And thou must make a dullard ... make thee seek it:** You must think the world stupid if you think everyone would not recognise that the benefits ('profits') of my dying were not powerful temptations ('potential spurs') to make you plot against me.
  - 75 **Fastened villain:** Fixed in his evil ways.
  - 76 **I never got him:** I never begot (fathered) him.



Hark, the Duke's trumpets! I know not why he comes.  
 All ports I'll bar; the villain shall not 'scape;  
 The Duke must grant me that. Besides, his picture  
 I will send far and near, that all the kingdom 80  
 May have the due note of him; and of my land,  
 Loyal and natural boy, I'll work the means  
 To make thee capable.

[*CORNWALL, REGAN and Attendants enter*]

CORNWALL How now, my noble friend? Since I came hither,  
 which I can call but now, I have heard strange news. 85

REGAN If it be true, all vengeance comes too short  
 Which can pursue th'offender. How dost, my Lord?

GLOUCESTER O, Madam, my old heart is cracked, it's cracked!

REGAN What, did my father's godson seek your life?  
 He whom my father named? Your Edgar? 90

GLOUCESTER O, Lady, Lady, shame would have it hid!

REGAN Was he not companion with the riotous knights  
 That tended upon my father?

GLOUCESTER I know not, Madam. 'Tis too bad, too bad!

EDMUND Yes, Madam, he was of that consort. 95

REGAN No marvel, then, though he were ill affected.  
 'Tis they have put him on the old man's death,  
 To have the expense and waste of his revenues.  
 I have this present evening from my sister  
 Been well informed of them, and with such cautions 100  
 That if they come to sojourn at my house  
 I'll not be there.

CORNWALL Nor I, assure thee, Regan.  
 Edmund, I hear that you have shown your father  
 A child-like office.

EDMUND It was my duty, Sir.

GLOUCESTER He did bewray his practice, and received 105  
 This hurt you see, striving to apprehend him.



78 **Ports:** Gates or seaports.

82 **Natural:** According to nature (rather than the laws of marriage). It therefore signifies that Edmund was conceived out of wedlock. However, it also refers to the natural affection a child should have for his father. Gloucester is playing with the word to show how the two realities remarkably merge in Edmund.

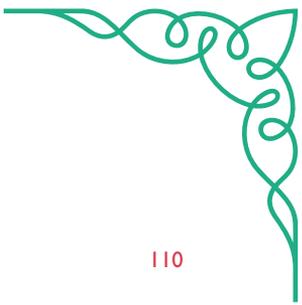
83 **Capable:** Able to inherit.

95 **Consort:** Company.

96 **Though:** That.

97 **Put him on:** Put him up to it.

105 **Bewray his practice:** Reveal his scheme.



CORNWALL Is he pursued?  
 GLOUCESTER Ay, my good Lord.  
 CORNWALL If he be taken, he shall never more  
 Be feared of doing harm. Make your own purpose,  
 How in my strength you please. For you, Edmund,  
 Whose virtue and obedience doth this instant  
 So much commend itself, you shall be ours.  
 Natures of such deep trust we shall much need;  
 You we first seize on. 110

EDMUND I shall serve you, Sir,  
 Truly, however else.

GLOUCESTER For him I thank your Grace. 115  
 CORNWALL You know not why we came to visit you –  
 REGAN Thus out of season, threading dark-eyed night –  
 Occasions, noble Gloucester, of some price,  
 Wherein we must have use of your advice. 120  
 Our father he hath writ, so hath our sister,  
 Of differences, which I least thought it fit  
 To answer from our home. The several messengers  
 From hence attend dispatch. Our good old friend,  
 Lay comforts to your bosom, and bestow  
 Your needful counsel to our businesses, 125  
 Which craves the instant use.

GLOUCESTER I serve you, Madam.  
 Your Graces are right welcome.

[Exit]



- 
- 109–10 **Make your own purpose ... in my strength you please:** Make plans according to how you would like me to help you.
- 117 **Threading dark-eyed night:** Travelling on roads at night.
- 121 **Differences:** Disputes.
- 122 **From:** Away from.
- 123 **Attend dispatch:** Await orders.
- 126 **Instant use:** Immediate action.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What news does Edmund learn from the courtier, Curan?
- 2 Copy and complete the table below to show how the dialogue between Edmund and Edgar (lines 19–31) conveys a sense of urgency.

Technique / Stylistic feature	Example(s)	How this conveys a sense of urgency
Exclamation	'O'	
Punctuation		
Short sentences		
Edgar being allowed little time to speak		

- 3 In what ways is Gloucester's behaviour in this scene similar to Lear's in the opening scene of the play?
- 4 Why are both Regan and Edmund keen to associate Edgar with the 'riotous knights'?
- 5 Why do you think Regan describes Edgar as her father's godson?



EXTEND

- 1 In this scene Edmund plays the part of the loyal brother. Construct a table, similar to that used in question 2 above, to explain why he is so persuasive.
- 2 The darkness of the night is made clear through Edmund's dialogue in this scene.
  - a How could this darkness further aid Edmund's purposes?
  - b How could this darkness be metaphorical?
- 3 How does Gloucester's initial reaction to Edmund's account suggest his priorities in regard to his sons?
- 4 Assess how effectively Edmund anticipates any potential scepticism from Gloucester about his son's treachery.
- 5 List the words or phrases that Gloucester uses that seem to show deference to the Duke. Why do you think Shakespeare chooses to emphasise this aspect of their relationship?
- 6 What can we tell about Cornwall and Regan's relationship from their dialogue?



DISCUSS

Are Gloucester and Edgar overly gullible? Given their limited knowledge, could their actions have been any different?

# Act 2 Scene 2



## CHARACTERS

Kent  
Cornwall  
Oswald  
Gloucester  
Regan  
Edmund



## IN A NUTSHELL

*Kent and Oswald reach Gloucester's castle at a similar time, so Oswald mistakenly assumes that Kent is a servant of Gloucester's household. Because Kent knows that Oswald is bringing letters against King Lear, he pours out a torrent of insults and then attacks him. Oswald's cries for help attract Gloucester, Cornwall and Regan; their appearance halts the brawl. When Kent is questioned about the nature of the quarrel he continues to insult Oswald and is also rude to Cornwall. Despite Kent and Gloucester's protests, Cornwall puts Kent in the stocks and Regan insists he remain there through the following night. Although Gloucester offers to plead on his behalf, Kent tells him that he is used to suffering. When alone, Kent reveals that he has a letter from Cordelia, who promises to restore her father's fortunes if she is able. With the sun rising, Kent falls asleep.*

## Before you read

- When Oswald arrives at Gloucester's castle, Kent greets him with a barrage of insults. He opens by advising Oswald that he can set his horses in the mire (swamp or bog). Many of the insults that follow relate to Oswald's position or class. The names 'knave' and 'varlet' roughly mean rascal or servant, and 'three-suited' refers to the three suits that a servant was given per year. Kent also suggests that Oswald eats scraps or 'broken meats', that he wears woollen stockings instead of the silk ones worn by nobles, and questions Oswald's moral character, calling him a 'bawd' and a 'pander' (both synonyms for a pimp), and a coward ('lily-livered'). Lines 1–34 are great to read in pairs. As you read, enjoy the sound of the language and the imaginative use of words. Don't be too concerned if you don't understand every insult.
- In this scene Kent is placed in the stocks. The stocks, a wooden contraption, immobilised victims by holding their feet in place. In addition, the victim's hands were often chained. This punishment was generally associated with public humiliation, which explains Gloucester's concern that putting Kent in stocks will be an insult to the King. Given Kent's age, leaving him in the stocks through the night could prove dangerous, even fatal.



V

<b>Sirrah:</b>	Equivalent to 'sir' but used to address someone of lower rank
<b>Countenance:</b>	Somebody's face or facial expression
<b>Saucy:</b>	Cheeky or rude
<b>Garb:</b>	Clothing
<b>Verity:</b>	Truth
<b>Beguile:</b>	Deceive or charm
<b>Entreat:</b>	Beg or request forcefully (beseech)
<b>Disposition:</b>	Mood

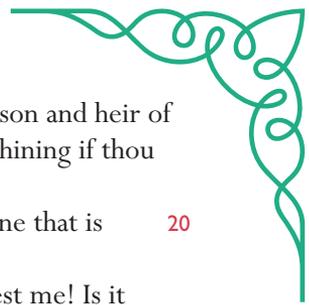
## Before Gloucester's castle.

[KENT and OSWALD enter, severally]

OSWALD            Good dawning to thee, friend. Art of this house?  
 KENT                Ay.  
 OSWALD            Where may we set our horses?  
 KENT                I' the mire.  
 OSWALD            Prithee, if thou lovest me, tell me. 5  
 KENT                I love thee not.  
 OSWALD            Why, then I care not for thee.  
 KENT                If I had thee in Lipsbury pinfold, I would make thee care for me.  
 OSWALD            Why dost thou use me thus? I know thee not.  
 KENT                Fellow, I know thee. 10  
 OSWALD            What dost thou know me for?  
 KENT                A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats, a base, proud, shallow,  
 beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted-stocking knave;  
 a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing,  
 super-serviceable finical rogue, one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that 15  
 wouldst be a bawd in way of good service, and art nothing but the



- 
- 1     **Art of this house:** Are you a servant of the house?
  - 5     **If thou lovest me:** If you would be kind enough.
  - 8     **If I had thee in Lipsbury pinfold:** Lipsbury seems to be a made-up place name, which may play on the word 'lips'. A pinfold is an animal pen. As such, the expression implies: 'if I had you in my mouth' (i.e. in my clutches).
  - 13    **Hundred-pound:** £100 was the amount needed to purchase a knighthood during the reign of James I. This is in keeping with Kent's belief that Oswald is on the make or looking to rise above his station by underhand means.
  - 13    **Worsted-stocking:** A woollen stocking named after the famous manufacturing village of Worsted where such cloth was commonly produced (an insult, because noblemen wore silk stockings).
  - 14    **Action-taking:** Litigious; one who would rather resolve his disputes through courts of law than fight man to man.
  - 15    **Super-serviceable:** Obsequious (overly submissive and flattering) to his master.
  - 15    **One-trunk-inheriting:** Due to inherit only what will fill one trunk.



composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch; one whom I will beat into clamorous whining if thou deniest the least syllable of thy addition.

OSWALD Why, what a monstrous fellow art thou, thus to rail on one that is neither known of thee nor knows thee! 20

KENT What a brazen-faced varlet art thou, to deny thou knowest me! Is it two days ago since I tripped up thy heels and beat thee before the King? Draw, you rogue! For though it be night, yet the moon shines. I'll make a sop o' the moonshine of you. Draw, you whoreson cullionly barber-monger! Draw! 25

*[Drawing his sword]*

OSWALD Away! I have nothing to do with thee.

KENT Draw, you rascal! You come with letters against the King, and take Vanity the puppet's part against the royalty of her father. Draw, you rogue, or I'll so carbonado your shanks – Draw, you rascal! Come your ways! 30

OSWALD Help, ho! Murder! Help!

KENT Strike, rogue! Stand, you neat slave! Strike!

*[Beating him]*

OSWALD Help, ho! Murder! Murder!

*[EDMUND, with his rapier drawn, CORNWALL, REGAN, GLOUCESTER and Servants enter]*

EDMUND How now! What's the matter? 35

KENT With you, goodman boy, an you please! Come, I'll flesh ye; come on, young master.

GLOUCESTER Weapons? Arms? What's the matter here?

CORNWALL Keep peace, upon your lives!

He dies that strikes again. What is the matter? 40

REGAN The messengers from our sister and the King –

CORNWALL What is your difference? Speak.

OSWALD I am scarce in breath, my Lord.



19 **Thy addition:** The list of titles I have just conferred upon you. This again hints at Oswald looking to rise above his station.

25 **Sop of the moonshine:** Kent plans to put holes in him so that he will metaphorically sop up (soak up) the moonlight, as one sops up liquid or soup with bread.

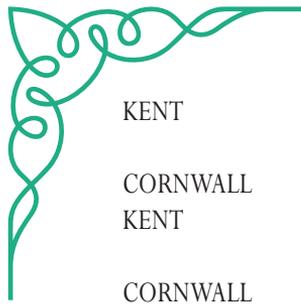
26 **Cullionly barber-monger:** Someone who frequents the barber (and is therefore regarded as vain). Cullion was a term for testicle.

29 **Vanity the puppet's part:** Vanity was an allegorical character, a personification of the vice of vanity, in medieval morality plays. These plays were put on by the trade guilds in major towns during the medieval period up until the time of Shakespeare's childhood.

30 **Carbonado:** Cut up and cook.

30–31 **Come your ways:** Come over here.

36 **With you, goodman boy ... I'll flesh ye:** Kent is addressing Edmund, in effect telling him that he is the problem. The threat ('I'll flesh ye' = 'I'll stab you') is likewise addressed to Edmund.



KENT No marvel, you have so bestirred your valour. You cowardly rascal,  
nature disclaims in thee; a tailor made thee. 45

CORNWALL Thou art a strange fellow: a tailor make a man?

KENT Ay, a tailor, sir. A stone-cutter or painter could not have made  
him so ill, though he had been but two years at the trade.

CORNWALL *[To OSWALD]* Speak yet, how grew your quarrel?

OSWALD This ancient ruffian, Sir, whose life I have spared  
at suit of his gray beard – 50

KENT Thou whoreson zed! Thou unnecessary letter! – My  
Lord, if you will give me leave, I will tread this  
unbolted villain into mortar, and daub the wall of  
a jakes with him. ‘Spare my gray beard’, you wagtail? 55

CORNWALL Peace, sirrah!  
You beastly knave, know you no reverence?

KENT Yes, sir; but anger hath a privilege.

CORNWALL Why art thou angry?

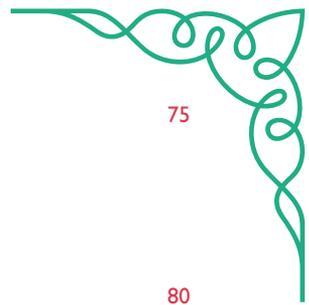
KENT That such a slave as this should wear a sword 60  
Who wears no honesty. Such smiling rogues as these,  
Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain  
Which are too intrinse t’unloose; smooth every passion  
That in the natures of their lords rebel,  
Bring oil to fire, snow to their colder moods, 65  
Renege, affirm, and turn their halcyon beaks  
With every gale and vary of their masters,  
Knowing naught, like dogs, but following. –  
A plague upon your epileptic visage!  
Smile you my speeches, as I were a fool? 70  
Goose, if I had you upon Sarum plain,  
I’d drive ye cackling home to Camelot.

CORNWALL Why, art thou mad, old fellow?

GLOUCESTER How fell you out? Say that.



- 
- 45 **Disclaims in:** Disowns.
- 45 **A tailor made thee:** Implying that Oswald is effete or soft.
- 48 **Though he had been but two years at the trade:** Even if he had only been in the trade two years.
- 55 **Jakes:** Toilet.
- 63 **Intrinse:** Intricate.
- 66 **Renege:** Deny.
- 66 **Halcyon:** A dead kingfisher used as a weather vane. Hung by a thread, it would turn in the wind, indicating the wind’s direction.
- 69 **Epileptic visage:** Contorted facial expression like that of someone having a fit.
- 70 **Smile you my speeches, as I were a fool:** Are you laughing at my speeches, as if I were a fool?
- 71–72 **Upon Sarum plain ... Camelot:** If I found you on Salisbury (‘Sarum’) Plain, I’d drive you weeping (‘cackling’) home to Camelot.



KENT No contraries hold more antipathy 75  
 Than I and such a knave.

CORNWALL Why dost thou call him a knave? What's his fault?  
 KENT His countenance likes me not.

CORNWALL No more, perchance, does mine, nor his, nor hers.  
 KENT Sir, 'tis my occupation to be plain. 80  
 I have seen better faces in my time  
 Than stands on any shoulder that I see  
 Before me at this instant.

CORNWALL This is some fellow,  
 Who, having been praised for bluntness, doth affect  
 A saucy roughness, and constrains the garb 85  
 Quite from his nature. He cannot flatter, he,  
 An honest mind and plain, he must speak truth!  
 An they will take it, so; if not, he's plain.  
 These kind of knaves I know, which in this plainness  
 Harbour more craft and more corrupter ends 90  
 Than twenty silly-ducking observants  
 That stretch their duties nicely.

KENT Sir, in good faith, in sincere verity,  
 Under the allowance of your great aspect  
 Whose influence like the wreath of radiant fire 95  
 On flickering Phoebus' front –

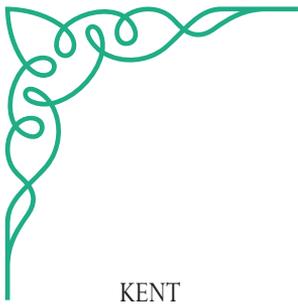
CORNWALL What mean'st by this?

KENT To go out of my dialect, which you  
 discommend so much. I know, Sir, I am no  
 flatterer. He that beguiled you in a plain  
 accent was a plain knave; which, for my part, 100  
 I will not be, though I should win your displeasure  
 to entreat me to't.

CORNWALL What was the offence you gave him?  
 OSWALD I never gave him any.  
 It pleased the King his master very late 105  
 To strike at me, upon his misconstruction,  
 When he, conjunct and flattering his displeasure,  
 Tripped me behind; being down, insulted, railed,



- 86 **Quite from his nature:** Against his true nature.
- 91 **Silly-ducking observants:** Servants who look silly because they are constantly bobbing and bowing ('ducking') before their masters. The implication is that such servants are sucking up to their masters.
- 93–96 **Sir, in good faith, in sincere verity ... Phoebus' front:** In response to Cornwall's remark, Kent is here facetiously adopting the type of speech of a 'silly-ducking observant'. 'Phoebus' front' refers to the god of the sun's forehead.
- 106 **Misconstruction:** Misunderstanding.
- 107 **Conjunct:** Joined with the King.



And put upon him such a deal of man,  
That worthied him, got praises of the King  
For him attempting who was self-subdued;  
And, in the fleshment of this dread exploit,  
Drew on me here again. 110

KENT None of these rogues and cowards  
But Ajax is their fool.

CORNWALL Fetch forth the stocks!  
You stubborn ancient knave, you reverend braggart,  
We'll teach you – 115

KENT Sir, I am too old to learn.  
Call not your stocks for me. I serve the King,  
On whose employment I was sent to you.  
You shall do small respect, show too bold malice  
Against the grace and person of my master,  
Stocking his messenger. 120

CORNWALL Fetch forth the stocks!  
As I have life and honour, there shall he sit till noon.

REGAN Till noon? Till night, my Lord, and all night too.

KENT Why, Madam, if I were your father's dog,  
You should not use me so.

REGAN Sir, being his knave, I will. 125

CORNWALL This is a fellow of the self-same colour  
Our sister speaks of. Come, bring away the stocks.

*[Stocks brought out]*

GLOUCESTER Let me beseech your Grace not to do so.  
The King, his master, must take it ill,  
That he, so slightly valued in his messenger,  
Should have him thus restrained. 130

CORNWALL I'll answer that.

REGAN My sister may receive it much more worse,  
To have her gentleman abused, assaulted,  
For following her affairs. – Put in his legs.

*[KENT is put in the stocks]*

Come, my good Lord, away. 135

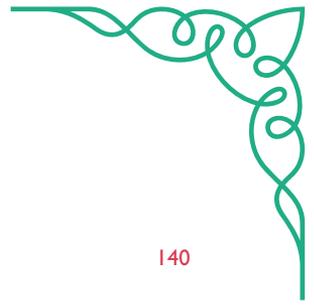
*[All exit except GLOUCESTER and KENT]*



112 **Fleshment:** Excitement.

114 **But Ajax is their fool:** Believe themselves superior to Ajax (one of the great warriors in Homer's *Iliad*).

115 **Reverend braggart:** Old boaster.



GLOUCESTER I am sorry for thee, friend. 'Tis the Duke's pleasure,  
Whose disposition all the world well knows  
Will not be rubbed nor stopped. I'll entreat for thee.

KENT Pray, do not, Sir. I have watched and travelled hard.  
Some time I shall sleep out, the rest I'll whistle.  
A good man's fortune may grow out at heels.  
Give you good morrow!

140

GLOUCESTER The Duke's to blame in this. 'Twill be ill taken.

[GLOUCESTER exits]

KENT Good King, that must approve the common saw,  
Thou out of heaven's benediction comest  
To the warm sun.

145

Approach, thou beacon to this under globe,  
That by thy comfortable beams I may  
Peruse this letter. Nothing almost sees miracles

But misery. I know 'tis from Cordelia,  
Who hath most fortunately been informed  
Of my obscured course; and shall find time

150

From this enormous state, seeking to give  
Losses their remedies. All weary and o'erwatched,  
Take vantage, heavy eyes, not to behold

155

This shameful lodging.

Fortune, good night; smile once more; turn thy wheel.

[KENT sleeps]



138 **Rubbed:** Altered.

139 **Watched:** Kept watch (stayed awake).

141 **Grow out at heels:** Be worn out.

144 **Approve:** Prove; **Saw:** Saying.

145–46 **Thou out of heaven's benediction comest ... warm sun:** You come out of the shade ('heaven's benediction') into the hot sun: from good to bad. Heaven's benediction is equated with shade in this analogy, while discomfort and suffering are equated with a hot sun. Instead of seeking the metaphorical shade, he's exposed himself to the burning hot sun.

147 **Beacon:** Either the moon or the sun.

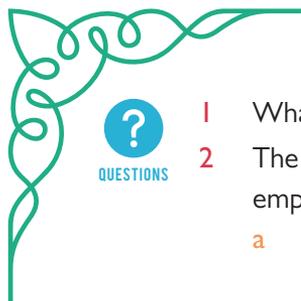
149–50 **Nothing almost sees miracles / But misery:** Only in a state of misery do people perceive miracles.

153 **Enormous state:** Awful situation.

153–54 **Seeking to give / Losses their remedies:** Seeking to find remedies for what has been lost since Lear gave up the throne.

154 **O'erwatched:** Too long awake.

157 **Turn thy wheel:** This is a reference to the wheel of Fortune. Kent obviously wants his to turn, taking him from his present state of misfortune to fortune.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What is Kent's attitude towards Oswald? What provokes this?
- 2 The characters of Oswald and Kent contrast enormously, and this contrast is emphasised by the insults Kent directs at Oswald and what he says about him.
  - a Copy and complete the table below to demonstrate this contrast between the two characters in the play so far. Add quotations where you can to support your argument.

Kent		Oswald	
Feature	Quotations	Feature	Quotations
Plain-speaking and rough in speech			
		A coward	
Does not care about the rank of the person to whom he is speaking			
		Keen to seek his own advancement (a careerist)	

- b Do you feel this contrast is over-exaggerated by Kent?
  - c How does Kent being disguised in this scene reinforce or undermine the contrast?
- 3 In what way or ways is the ending of this scene optimistic?



EXTEND

- 1 What does the audience know about Kent that explains why many of his insults focus on class and Oswald's lowborn nature? Explain how this is another example of dramatic irony.
- 2 Choose one of Kent's insults that you think may have lost some of its original power and explain why you think this has occurred.
- 3 Read lines 93–95 again. How does Kent's language as he imitates those obsequious servants who flatter their masters contrast with the language he employs as Caius? Consider how this language is similar to or different from the language Kent uses in Act I.
  - a Copy and complete the table on the next page to show your understanding of how Kent's dialogue changes.



Kent (Act I Scene 1)	Caius (Act I Scene 4)	Caius playing the part of an obsequious servant	The effect of this contrast
	Prose		
Polite and respectful but becomes passionate or fiery in certain situations			
		Verbose or long- winded	Emphasises Kent's direct or plain-speaking nature, highlighting his honesty
Uses a moderate number of classical allusions			
	Insulting		

- b Which features of Kent's personality do you think are reinforced through the characters he plays (Caius and the obsequious servant)?
  - c What do you think is Shakespeare's dramatic purpose in having Kent play the character Caius, who imitates an obsequious (or sycophantic) servant?
- 4 What greater resonance do Kent's lines about flattery have in the context of the play as a whole?



DISCUSS

- 1 Which of Kent's insults do you consider to be the most powerful? Why?
- 2 Why do you think Kent is so ineffective at stating his cause and gaining Regan and Cornwall's sympathy?

## A word about repetition and nothing

Arguably, the best way to learn something (times tables, a musical instrument, a foreign language or even how to drive a car) is repetition, repetition, repetition. And sometimes the best way for an author to emphasise the central themes and important aspects of character in a text is by repetition of key words, phrases and ideas.

Repetition is a prominent or salient feature of *King Lear*. Towards the end of Act 2, Lear will repeat the phrase 'return with her' to reinforce his opposition to returning to





Gonerill's castle. And at the play's end Lear will register the shocking death of his favourite daughter with the words: 'Howl, howl, howl!' and later in the scene: 'Never, never, never, never, never'. Words such as 'nature' and 'love' are repeated and, you might say, scrutinised throughout the play.

### **Nothing**

The word 'nothing' recurs frequently in *King Lear*. We first encounter it in Act I Scene I when Cordelia, in answer to Lear's question, 'what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters'? Speak!', replies: 'Nothing, my Lord'. In response, the word is immediately repeated by Lear, phrased this time as a question: 'Nothing?', then again by Cordelia, phrased again as a statement: 'Nothing'. Lear's protest that 'Nothing will come of nothing' means simply that Cordelia will deny herself her share of the kingdom if she refuses to play along with the love-test – if she continues to say 'nothing' – but it also playfully comments on the fact of repetition itself, since Lear's 'nothing?' comes from Cordelia's 'nothing' and Cordelia's, in turn, from Lear's, literally demonstrating the truth of Lear's conclusion: 'Nothing will come of nothing'. Actors would have had great fun with these lines, and yet they are far from playful in their implications. Quite the contrary, they anticipate that Lear will be left with nothing – no title, no kingdom, no home, no children, no life.

Another important example comes from Act I Scene 4 when the Fool rebukes Lear: 'I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing'. The point here is that the Fool at least has a function, whereas Lear does not. And as we learn, not only fools but also the lowest of the low are *something* in comparison with Lear. Even Edgar, who says 'Edgar I nothing am' when assuming the disguise of Tom o' Bedlam in Act 2 Scene 2, realises in becoming Tom o' Bedlam: 'That's something yet'. If only Lear had seen, in a different way, that Cordelia's 'nothing' 'was something yet', the tragedy would never have unfolded.

### **Cumulation**

The heaping on of words and images to saturation point is an effect called **cumulation**. In the above examples, the repetition of 'nothing' emphasises that Lear has been reduced to nothing, 'an O without a figure' (that is, a zero or a naught) as the Fool notes. When Gloucester encounters Lear in Act 4 Scene 5, and declares: 'O ruined piece of nature! This great world / Shall so wear out to naught' (that is, nothing), Shakespeare's visual and aural imaginations memorably fuse. Here the naught (the numerical 0) is visually and symbolically linked with the letter O, signifying a sigh of grief. More remarkably, these fused signs of nothingness and grief are visually 'repeated' on the stage: in Gloucester's face with the two vacant *nothings* of his eye sockets.

# Act 2 Scene 3



## CHARACTERS

Edgar



## IN A NUTSHELL

*Edgar appears onstage alone and speaks about his situation. Nowhere is safe for him and there seems to be no possibility of escape. To survive, Edgar will take the form of an extremely poor and mad beggar.*

### Before you read

- It is likely that you will find some of the vocabulary of this scene unfamiliar. At the beginning of Edgar's soliloquy he states that he has heard himself 'proclaimed' or accused of treachery, and has managed to escape by hiding in the 'happy' (luckily discovered) hollow of a tree. The word 'Turlygod' baffles audiences and critics alike and its origins are unknown. You might find this fitting for such a strange scene.



**Whiles:** Until  
**Penury:** Poverty  
**Low:** Humble  
**Bans:** Curses

## A wood.

[EDGAR enters]

EDGAR            I heard myself proclaimed,  
                         And by the happy hollow of a tree  
                         Escaped the hunt. No port is free, no place  
                         That guard and most unusual vigilance  
                         Does not attend my taking. Whiles I may 'scape  
                         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. My face I'll grime with filth,

5



- 1 **I heard myself proclaimed:** I heard myself declared a traitor.
- 5 **My taking:** My capture.
- 6 **Bethought:** Determined.
- 9 **Brought near to beast:** Brought down to the level of an animal.



Blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots, 10  
 And with presented nakedness outface  
 The winds and persecutions of the sky.  
 The country gives me proof and precedent  
 Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices, 15  
 Strike in their numbed and mortified bare arms  
 Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary;  
 And with this horrible object, from low farms,  
 Poor pelting villages, sheepcotes, and mills  
 Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,  
 Enforce their charity. Poor Turlygod! poor Tom! 20  
 That's something yet! Edgar I nothing am.

[Exit EDGAR]



- 10 **Elf all my hair in knots:** A superstition in Shakespeare's time held that elves were responsible for knotting hair during sleep. Such beliefs were seldom taken seriously.
- 11 **Outface:** Confront.
- 13 **Proof and precedent:** Various examples.
- 14 **Bedlam beggars:** Mad beggars (see **Bedlam and Beggars** on pages 114–15 and the note for Act I Scene 2, line 113, on page 42).
- 15 **Strike:** Stick.
- 17 **Object:** Spectacle.
- 18 **Pelting:** Petty.
- 21 **Edgar I nothing am:** I am no longer Edgar (because Edgar is nothing).



QUESTIONS

- 1 What action does Edgar take to preserve his life?
- 2 Many directors choose to have displayed onstage the discarded expensive clothes of the nobleman, Edgar. What themes would such a directorial decision emphasise?

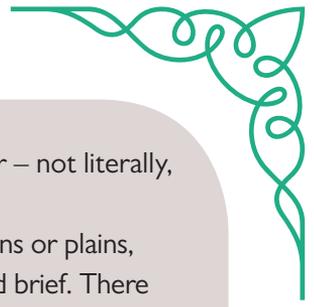


DISCUSS

How would Edgar's lines be delivered: in haste or slowly and reflectively? What do you think his appearance and costume should be? What sort of movement (blocking) should the actor playing his character employ? What props, if any, should be employed in this scene?

## A look at imagery

**Imagery** is the use of words to create pictures in the minds of readers or audiences. Sometimes imagery is all about seeing everyday things in a fresh, new way. It can be in the form of a **simile** ('the beach is like a glistening quarter of an orange'), when we say one thing is *like* another. Imagery can also be in the form of a **metaphor** ('the beach is



a glistening quarter of an orange'), when one object is said to *be* another – not literally, of course, but metaphorically.

Imagery can also just be about what we see (light or darkness, mountains or plains, cities or deserts) and in this sense it can be richly descriptive, or simple and brief. There are a number of image clusters that recur throughout *King Lear*. The most prominent kinds are those of animal (or bestial) imagery (discussed in Act 3) and references to eyesight and blindness (discussed in Act 4). Two other kinds that feature prominently in the next scene are imagery of disease and imagery of clothing (and by extension, nakedness).

### **Imagery of disease**

The imagery of disease is a prominent feature of most Shakespearean tragedies. In *Hamlet*, the King (Claudius) is corrupt, thus the whole of Denmark is morally contaminated or poisoned. One of the characters, Marcellus, rightly observes that 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark'. Images of sickness, disease and poison saturate the play and it is no accident that numerous characters die as a result of being physically poisoned.

*King Lear* also contains numerous references to sickness, disease and pain, and one of the major characters, Regan, is poisoned in the final act. In Act 2 Scene 4, Lear calls down the following curse upon his daughter:

... Infect her beauty,  
You fen-sucked fogs, drawn by the powerful sun,  
To fall and blister.

This kind of language is a common feature of Lear's speech and he later refers to sores, diseases, fevers, various types of sexually transmitted infections and tortures. The imagery of disease is not limited to Lear's speeches. Kent describes Lear's decision to banish Cordelia as 'a foul disease' and the Fool also refers to sexually transmitted infections somewhat more cryptically. This imagery mirrors the corruption and chaos of the divided kingdom and the immorality of those who rule it. It is interesting that Cordelia, in contrast to this imagery, is associated with medicine and healing when she returns in Act 4.

### **Imagery of clothes and nakedness**

Images of clothing and, by contrast, of nakedness, are other salient features of *King Lear*. In Act 2 Scene 4, clothes are associated with wealth or opulence, when Lear states:

... Thou art a lady;  
If only to go warm were gorgeous,  
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wearest,  
Which scarcely keeps thee warm.





It is clear that Lear's daughters, Gonerill and Regan, are richly attired in contrast to Edgar who, in the previous scene, chooses to go virtually naked. Jacobean theatre companies spent a great deal of money on costumes for noble characters and Edgar's stripping down would most likely have involved him discarding his expensive clothes while onstage. Similarly, Lear would have been richly attired at the play's opening. However, when he realises that the trappings of kingship hide his basic, more vulnerable humanity; that man is 'a bare, forked animal' he, like Edgar, chooses to discard his clothes: 'Off, off, you lendings! Come; unbutton here'. For more on this topic see **Thinking about appearance and reality** on page 64.

## Act 2 Scene 4

### CHARACTERS

Lear  
Regan  
Fool  
Kent  
Gonerill  
Gloucester  
Cornwall  
Gentleman



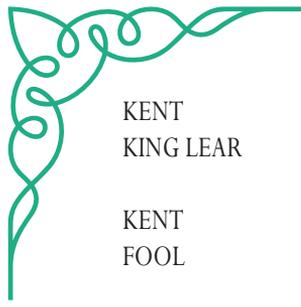
### IN A NUTSHELL

*On his arrival at Gloucester's castle, Lear is shocked to find Kent in the stocks. As Kent explains his situation and the Fool cracks jokes, Lear seethes with anger. When Gloucester enters, Lear demands to speak instantly with his daughter and son-in-law, losing his temper at Gloucester's attempted delays. When Regan and Cornwall finally enter, Lear praises Regan and contrasts her with her cruel sister, Gonerill, whom he curses. Regan defends her sister's actions and insists that Lear return to Gonerill. When Gonerill arrives, it is immediately clear that the sisters are in collusion, as they insist Lear should reduce the size of his entourage. Lear is outraged and recklessly heads out into the storm.*

### Before you read

- The Fool makes a number of cryptic remarks. One of the most enigmatic or mysterious occurs in lines 117–20, when he refers to two well-known proverbs of the time – the Cockney putting eels in paste while they are still alive, and the man who butters his horse's hay. 'Cockney' refers to a woman from London, a city dweller unable to face the fact (known to rural folk) that if she wants to bake eel pie she must first kill the eels. Too squeamish to do this, she instead hits them over 'the coxcombs [heads] with a stick', shouting at them





KENT Hail to thee, noble master!

KING LEAR Ha! 5  
Makest thou this shame thy pastime?

KENT No, my Lord.

FOOL Ha, ha! He wears cruel garters. Horses are tied by the heads,  
dogs and bears by the neck, monkeys by the loins, and men by  
the legs. When a man's over-lusty at legs, then he wears  
wooden nether-stocks. 10

KING LEAR What's he that hath so much thy place mistook  
To set thee here?

KENT It is both he and she;  
Your son and daughter.

KING LEAR No.

KENT Yes. 15

KING LEAR No, I say.

KENT I say, yea.

KING LEAR No, no, they would not.

KENT Yes, yes, they have.

KING LEAR By Jupiter, I swear, no! 20

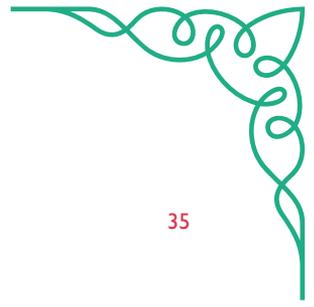
KENT By Juno, I swear, ay!

KING LEAR They durst not do it;  
They could not, would not do it; 'tis worse than murder,  
To do upon respect such violent outrage:  
Resolve me, with all modest haste, which way  
Thou mightst deserve or they impose this usage, 25  
Coming from us.

KENT My Lord, when at their home  
I did commend your highness' letters to them,  
Ere I was risen from the place that showed  
My duty kneeling, came there a reeking post,  
Stewed in his haste, half breathless, panting forth 30  
From Gonerill his mistress salutations;



- 7 **Cruel garters:** Worsted garters (see note to Act 2 Scene 2, line 13, on page 74). The Fool, in referring to the stocks in which Kent is bound, is punning on 'crewel', a type of worsted yarn from which garters were made.
- 9 **Over-lusty at legs:** Both someone who 'runs around' (is sexually promiscuous) and 'runs away' (is a criminal on the run).
- 13 **Son:** Son-in-law.
- 22–23 **'Tis worse than murder ... such violent outrage:** It is worse than murder to disrespect the King (by disrespecting the King's messenger with such an action).
- 24 **Resolve:** Inform.
- 27 **Commend:** Recommend (by handing over); entrust.
- 29 **A reeking post:** A smelly messenger.
- 30 **Stewed in his haste:** Covered in sweat from running in such a hurry ('haste').



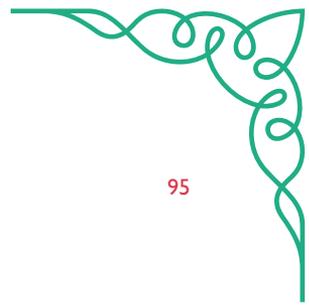
Delivered letters, spite of intermission,  
 Which presently they read; on whose contents  
 They summoned up their meiny, straight took horse,  
 Commanded me to follow and attend 35  
 The leisure of their answer, gave me cold looks;  
 And meeting here the other messenger,  
 Whose welcome I perceived had poisoned mine –  
 Being the very fellow that of late  
 Displayed so saucily against your Highness – 40  
 Having more man than wit about me, drew.  
 He raised the house with loud and coward cries.  
 Your son and daughter found this trespass worth  
 The shame which here it suffers.  
 FOOL Winter's not gone yet, if the wild-geese fly that way. 45  
     Fathers that wear rags  
         Do make their children blind;  
     But fathers that bear bags  
         Shall see their children kind.  
     Fortune, that arrant whore, 50  
     Ne'er turns the key to the poor.  
 But, for all this, thou shalt have as many dolours for thy daughters  
 as thou canst tell in a year.  
 KING LEAR O, how this mother swells up toward my heart!  
     *Hysterica passio*, down, thou climbing sorrow! 55  
     Thy element's below. Where is this daughter?  
 KENT With the Earl, Sir, here within.  
 KING LEAR Follow me not; stay here.

[LEAR exits]



- 
- 32 **Spite of intermission:** Not caring that he interrupted me.  
 34 **Meiny:** Servants.  
 35–36 **Attend / The leisure of their answer:** Wait for their answer, which they would provide only when they felt like it (at their 'leisure').  
 40 **Displayed so saucily:** Behaved outrageously.  
 41 **More man than wit:** More courage than prudence.  
 45 **Winter's ... way:** Worse is still to come. Also see the third dot point of **Before you read**, on page 87.  
 47 **Blind:** Unable to see their duties towards their father.  
 48 **Bags:** Money-bags.  
 50–51 **Fortune ... Ne'er turns the key to the poor:** Fortune never opens the door ('turns the key') to let the poor inside.  
 52 **Dolours:** Sorrows, punning on 'dollars'.  
 54–55 **Mother ... *Hysterica passio*:** The colloquial term ('mother') and the technical Latin name for an inflammation in the chest believed to originate in the stomach.  
 56 **Element:** Proper place.





GLOUCESTER Well, my good Lord, I have informed them so.  
 KING LEAR Informed them! Dost thou understand me, man?  
 GLOUCESTER Ay, my good Lord. 95  
 KING LEAR The King would speak with Cornwall, the dear father  
 Would with his daughter speak, commands her service.  
 Are they informed of this? My breath and blood!  
 Fiery? The fiery Duke? Tell the hot Duke that –  
 No, but not yet! Maybe he is not well: 100  
 Infirmary doth still neglect all office  
 Whereto our health is bound; we are not ourselves  
 When Nature, being oppressed, commands the mind  
 To suffer with the body. I'll forbear;  
 And am fallen out with my more headier will 105  
 To take the indisposed and sickly fit  
 For the sound man. – Death on my state! Wherefore [*Looking on KENT*]  
 Should he sit here? This act persuades me  
 That this remotion of the Duke and her  
 Is practice only. Give me my servant forth. 110  
 Go tell the Duke and's wife I'd speak with them –  
 Now, presently! Bid them come forth and hear me,  
 Or at their chamber door I'll beat the drum  
 Till it cry sleep to death.  
 GLOUCESTER I would have all well betwixt you. 115

[*GLOUCESTER exits*]

KING LEAR O me, my heart, my rising heart! But down!  
 FOOL Cry to it, Nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels when she put  
 'em i' the paste alive. She knapped 'em o' the coxcombs with a stick,  
 and cried 'Down, wantons, down!' 'Twas her brother that in pure  
 kindness to his horse buttered his hay. 120

[*CORNWALL, REGAN, GLOUCESTER and Servants enter*]

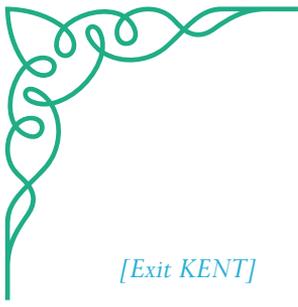
KING LEAR Good morrow to you both.  
 CORNWALL Hail to your Grace!

[*KENT is set free*]

REGAN I am glad to see your Highness.  
 KING LEAR Regan, I think you are. I know what reason



- 
- 105 **And am fallen out my more headier will:** I've had a falling out with my earlier rash decision (I've changed my mind).
  - 110 **Practice:** Pretence.
  - 114 **Till it cry sleep to death:** Till the beat of the drum kills sleep (with its noise).
  - 117–20 **As the cockney ... his hay:** See **Before you read** on page 86.



I have to think so. If thou shouldst not be glad,  
 I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb, 125  
 Sepulchring an adult'ress. *[To KENT]* O, are you free?  
 Some other time for that. –

*[Exit KENT]*

Beloved Regan,  
 Thy sister's naught. O Regan, she hath tied  
 Sharp-toothed unkindness like a vulture here –  
*[Points to his heart]* I can scarce speak to thee – thou'lt not believe 130  
 With how depraved a quality – O Regan!  
 REGAN I pray you, Sir, take patience. I have hope  
 You less know how to value her desert  
 Than she to scant her duty.

KING LEAR 135  
 REGAN Say, how is that?  
 I cannot think my sister in the least  
 Would fail her obligation. If, Sir, perchance  
 She have restrained the riots of your followers,  
 'Tis on such ground, and to such wholesome end  
 As clears her from all blame.

KING LEAR 140  
 REGAN My curses on her!  
 O, Sir, you are old.  
 Nature in you stands on the very verge  
 Of her confine. You should be ruled and led  
 By some discretion, that discerns your state  
 Better than you yourself. Therefore, I pray you,  
 That to our sister you do make return. 145  
 Say you have wronged her, Sir.

KING LEAR 150  
 Ask her forgiveness?  
 Do you but mark how this becomes the house:  
*[Kneeling]* 'Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;  
 Age is unnecessary: on my knees I beg  
 That you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food.'  
 REGAN Good Sir, no more! These are unsightly tricks.  
 Return you to my sister.

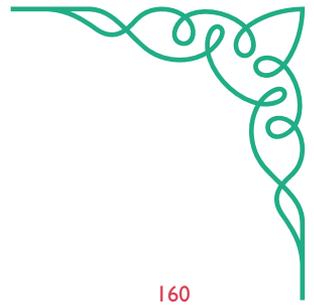
KING LEAR 155  
*[Rising]* Never, Regan.  
 She hath abated me of half my train,  
 Looked black upon me, struck me with her tongue,  
 Most serpent-like, upon the very heart.

---

**124–26 If thou shouldst not be glad ... Sepulchring an adult'ress:** If you were not glad to see me, I would refuse to be buried with your mother, because any lack of gladness to see me, on your part, would mean you were not truly my daughter and, therefore, that my dead wife (your mother) was an adulteress.

**147 How this becomes the house:** Lear is being sarcastic; in fact, he believes it is improper for (does not 'become') fathers to beg for the kindness or forgiveness of their children.





All the stored vengeances of heaven fall  
 On her ingrateful top! Strike her young bones,  
 You taking airs, with lameness!

CORNWALL Fie, Sir, fie!

KING LEAR You nimble lightnings, dart your blinding flames  
 Into her scornful eyes! Infect her beauty, 160  
 You fen-sucked fogs, drawn by the powerful sun,  
 To fall and blister her!

REGAN O the blest gods! So will you wish on me,  
 When the rash mood is on.

KING LEAR No, Regan, thou shalt never have my curse. 165

Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give  
 Thee o'er to harshness. Her eyes are fierce; but thine  
 Do comfort and not burn. 'Tis not in thee  
 To grudge my pleasures, to cut off my train,  
 To bandy hasty words, to scant my sizes, 170  
 And in conclusion to oppose the bolt  
 Against my coming in. Thou better knowest  
 The offices of nature, bond of childhood,  
 Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude.  
 Thy half o' the kingdom hast thou not forgot, 175  
 Wherein I thee endowed.

REGAN Good Sir, to the purpose.

KING LEAR Who put my man i' the stocks?

*[Flourish of trumpets within]*

CORNWALL What trumpet's that?

REGAN I know't – my sister's. This approves her letter,  
 That she would soon be here.

*[OSWALD enters]*

Is your lady come?

KING LEAR This is a slave, whose easy-borrowed pride 180  
 Dwells in the fickle grace of her he follows.  
 Out, varlet, from my sight!

CORNWALL What means your Grace?



157 **Top:** Head.

158 **Taking airs:** Malignant vapours.

160–62 **Infect her beauty ... fall and blister her:** Fogs, sucked from the marshes by the sun (as moisture evaporates and forms clouds), come and rain ('fall') on her and ruin her beauty.

170 **Scant my sizes:** Reduce my funds and retinue.

171–72 **Oppose the bolt / Against my coming in:** Lock the door to stop me entering the house.

180 **Easy-borrowed:** Unmerited.

182 **Varlet:** Wretch.







With such a number. What, must I come to you  
 With five-and-twenty, Regan, said you so? 250  
 REGAN And speak't again, my Lord. No more with me.  
 KING LEAR Those wicked creatures yet do look well-favoured,  
 When others are more wicked. Not being the worst  
 Stands in some rank of praise. *[To GONERILL]* I'll go with thee.  
 Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty, 255  
 And thou art twice her love.

GONERILL Hear me, my Lord;  
 What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five  
 To follow in a house where twice so many  
 Have a command to tend you?

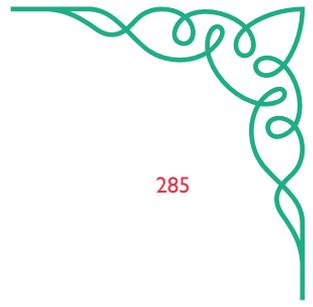
REGAN What need one?  
 KING LEAR O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars 260  
 Are in the poorest thing superfluous.  
 Allow not nature more than nature needs,  
 Man's life's as cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady;  
 If only to go warm were gorgeous,  
 Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wearest, 265  
 Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But, for true need –  
 You Heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!  
 You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,  
 As full of grief as age, wretched in both!  
 If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts 270  
 Against their father, fool me not so much  
 To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,  
 And let not women's weapons, water-drops,  
 Stain my man's cheeks. No, you unnatural hags,  
 I will have such revenges on you both, 275  
 That all the world shall – I will do such things –  
 What they are, yet I know not; but they shall be  
 The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep.  
 No, I'll not weep.  
 I have full cause of weeping; but this heart 280  
 Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,  
 Or ere I'll weep. O Fool, I shall go mad!

*[KING LEAR, GLOUCESTER, KENT and FOOL exit]*

*[Storm and tempest]*



- 254 **Stands in some rank of praise:** Deserves at least a little praise. Lear is probably referring to Cordelia, who now seems not so bad, in his eyes, compared to Gonerill and Regan.
- 261 **Are in the poorest thing superfluous:** Have little more than they need (to survive).
- 262 **Allow not:** If you don't allow.
- 281 **Flaws:** Pieces.



CORNWALL Let us withdraw; 'twill be a storm.  
 REGAN This house is little; the old man and's people  
 Cannot be well bestowed. 285  
 GONERILL 'Tis his own blame; hath put himself from rest,  
 And must needs taste his folly.  
 REGAN For his particular, I'll receive him gladly,  
 But not one follower.  
 GONERILL So am I purposed.  
 Where is my Lord of Gloucester? 290  
 CORNWALL Followed the old man forth. He is returned.

[*GLOUCESTER re-enters*]

GLOUCESTER The King is in high rage.  
 CORNWALL Whither is he going?  
 GLOUCESTER He calls to horse; but will I know not whither.  
 CORNWALL 'Tis best to give him way. He leads himself.  
 GONERILL My Lord, entreat him by no means to stay. 295  
 GLOUCESTER Alack, the night comes on, and the bleak winds  
 Do sorely ruffle. For many miles about  
 There's scarce a bush.  
 REGAN O, Sir, to wilful men,  
 The injuries that they themselves procure  
 Must be their schoolmasters. Shut up your doors. 300  
 He is attended with a desperate train,  
 And what they may incense him to, being apt  
 To have his ear abused, wisdom bids fear.  
 CORNWALL Shut up your doors, my Lord; 'tis a wild night.  
 My Regan counsels well. Come out o' the storm. 305

[*Exit*]

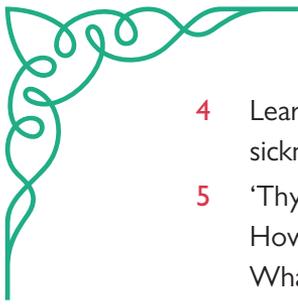


- 
- 285 **Bestowed:** Housed.
  - 286 **Rest:** A place to rest.
  - 288 **His particular:** Him himself (on his own).



QUESTIONS

- 1 Do you think the summary Kent gives of how he came to be in the stocks is an accurate representation of events?
- 2 In what way or ways does Gloucester find himself in an awkward situation in this scene?
- 3 In what way or ways does Lear exacerbate (worsen) his situation by his behaviour?

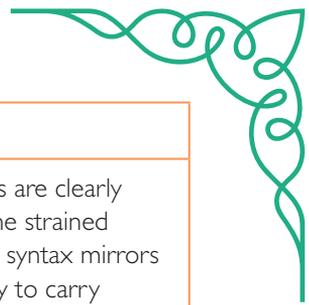


- 4 Lear's speeches directed against his daughter are replete with imagery of sickness and disease. Identify some examples and explain why Lear uses them.
- 5 'Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty, / And thou art twice her love.' How does this statement (lines 255–56) echo Lear's dialogue from Act 1? What mistake does he seem to be repeating?
- 6 How is Regan and Gonerill's lack of concern for their father made clear at the end of this scene?



- 1 Read the Fool's speech (lines 117–20) and the first dot point in **Before you read** on page 86. How is Lear's situation similar to:
  - a the Cockney woman making the eel pie? (consider in particular his angry insults)
  - b the Cockney's brother who buttered his horses' hay?
- 2 Read the Fool's speech beginning 'That sir which serves and seeks for gain' (line 73). What does the Fool suggest about Lear's followers?
- 3 Give two examples of Lear being theatrical in his actions or his use of language.
- 4 Shakespeare emphasises Lear's impotence or lack of power in this scene through a number of devices. Copy and complete the table below to show how he does this.

Device or stylistic feature	Example(s)	Effect
Lear's hyperbolic language.		Emphasises that he lacks real power and instead makes him sound deluded.
In contrast to the opening scene of the play, he checks his own anger:		
His questions go ignored.		
Lear's sentences break off and he fails to articulate.	'thou'lt not believe / With how depraved a quality – O Regan!' (lines 130–31)	
	'What, must I come to you / With five and twenty, Regan, said you so?' (lines 249–50)	
Others question his judgement.		
	Regan refers to him as 'the old man' (line 284)	



Blocking etc.	Departs with few followers	
		These threats are clearly empty and the strained language and syntax mirrors Lear's inability to carry them out.

5 How is Cornwall's statement about Lear 'he leads himself' (line 294) poignant or ironic?



DISCUSS

1 Line 5 constitutes a single syllable 'Ha!' which suggests a nine-beat pause. What do you think the actor playing King Lear should be doing during this? How should he be acting?

2 Blocking is the movement of characters and their positioning onstage. If you were directing this scene, how would you manage the blocking, in the lines shortly after Gonerill arrives, to emphasise Lear's humiliation?

3 Do you think Regan and Gonerill simply want to be free of their father or do you think their motivations are more sinister and malicious?

### Trevor Nunn: DVD Act 2 Scene 4



PRESS PLAY

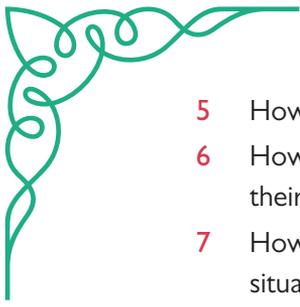
1 How would you describe Lear's appearance and mannerisms at the beginning of this scene? What does Nunn convey through this?

2 When protesting about Regan not seeing him immediately, Lear emphasises 'they' in the phrase: 'they have travelled all the night'. Why do you think he emphasises this word?

3 How does the acting style of Ian McKellen emphasise Lear's lack of control over his situation?

4 When Regan and Cornwall first come out to meet the King they seem respectful towards him, but when Gonerill arrives (line 185 in this edition), the characters soon show their true feelings. Construct a table like the one below to show how these characters' feelings towards Lear are conveyed.

Character	Attitude towards Lear	How this attitude is conveyed



- 5 How is Lear's stubbornness conveyed through McKellen's actions?
- 6 How does Nunn employ the non-speaking actors in this scene? What do their facial expressions convey about Lear's situation?
- 7 How has Nunn portrayed Regan as more sympathetic to her father's situation than Gonerill?
- 8 How are blocking and delivery of dialogue used towards the end of the scene to emphasise Gloucester's subservience to Cornwall, Regan and Gonerill?

### **Peter Brook: DVD Chapter 7 Act 2 Scene 4**

- 1 How does Brook emphasise Kent's suffering in the stocks at the beginning of this scene?
- 2 Most directors portray Regan as being condescending towards Lear even before her sister arrives. How do you think Brook portrays her in the earlier part of this scene?
- 3 Brook employs numerous close-ups shortly after Gonerill arrives. What purpose do you think these close-ups serve?
- 4 How is the two-shot of Gonerill and Regan (where the characters are both in the frame) effective when they are debating with Lear about the number of his followers?
- 5 How does Brook portray Lear's powerlessness near the end of the scene?
- 6 How is the contrast between indoors and outdoors employed effectively by Brook? How does this emphasise Lear's bleak circumstances?
- 7 How does Brook use camerawork to emphasise the ferocity of the storm?

### **Comparison questions**

- 1 Which film portrays Lear as more rational and self-controlled?
- 2 Which version portrays Cornwall, Regan and Gonerill as more malicious (cruel)?
- 3 In which version do you think the storm is portrayed as more menacing?
- 4 Which version do you prefer and why?

# Act 3

## Act 3 Scene 1

### CHARACTERS

Kent  
Gentleman



### IN A NUTSHELL

*As a storm rages, Kent (who has become temporarily separated from Lear) calls out to an unidentified gentleman. The gentleman, whom Kent recognises, conveys news that Lear is out in the storm accompanied only by the Fool. Kent reveals news, obtained through spies, of the division already evident between the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany. Kent gives the gentleman a ring so that Cordelia will be able to correctly identify him when the gentleman meets with her.*

### Before you read

- This scene serves to advance the plot and anticipates Cordelia returning from France and landing in Britain with an army. It also reinforces the suspicious nature of the ruling elites of the kingdom.



**Elements:** The weather

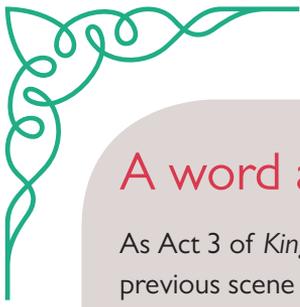
**Jest:** Joke

**Warrant:** Permit or give permission

**Snuffs:** Hatreds or resentments

**Packings:** Plots

**Fie:** Expression of annoyance, disapproval or disgust



## A word about pathetic fallacy and foreshadowing

As Act 3 of *King Lear* begins, the stage directions indicate that the storm from the previous scene continues to rage. Storms are key theatrical devices in many of Shakespeare's plays, including *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*. They can act as catalysts for change in the central characters, or perhaps as symbols of supernatural intervention. In *King Lear*, the storm serves two quite different purposes.

### 1 Pathetic fallacy

In drama, pathetic fallacy is the attribution of human feelings and responses to natural events, such as when the weather reflects the atmosphere of a scene or the mood of the characters. 'Pathetic' derives from the Greek word 'pathos' meaning feeling. For example, *Macbeth* opens with thunder and lightning, establishing an atmosphere of chaos and foreboding that is reinforced by the entrance of the Witches. An example of pathetic fallacy in *King Lear* occurs in Act 3 Scene 1, when a gentleman introduces himself as being: 'One minded like the weather, most unquietly'. The storm in Act 3 mainly mirrors Lear's turbulent emotional state.

### 2 Foreshadowing

When the creepy music starts in a film, you know something frightening or terrible is about to happen. In a similar way, authors give us hints or warnings about what will happen later in the text, and this is known as foreshadowing.

For example, in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the appearance of rats in the central character's apartment not only creates a feeling of unease but also hints at later events when rats are used to torture him. Likewise, in TS Eliot's poem 'Journey of the Magi' the three wise men, on their way to view the newborn Jesus, see 'three trees on the low sky', and this foreshadows Jesus' death on the cross between two criminals.

In *King Lear* the storm creates a foreboding atmosphere and foreshadows the coming conflict. This is not the only example of foreshadowing in the play. The frequent references to eyes and eyesight, for example, foreshadow Gloucester's horrific blinding at the end of Act 3.

## A heath.

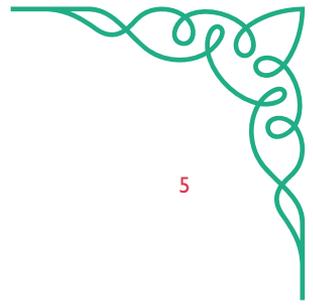
[Storm still. KENT and a GENTLEMAN enter from opposite sides, meeting]

KENT                      Who's there besides foul weather?  
GENTLEMAN            One minded like the weather, most unquietly.



2

**One minded ... unquietly:** One whose mind is like the weather, stormy.



KENT I know you. Where's the King?  
 GENTLEMAN Contending with the fretful elements:  
 Bids the winds blow the earth into the sea,  
 Or swell the curlèd water 'bove the main,  
 That things might change or cease. 5

KENT But who is with him?  
 GENTLEMAN None but the Fool, who labours to out-jest  
 His heart-struck injuries.

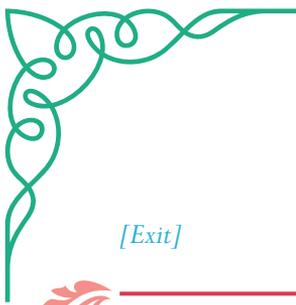
KENT Sir, I do know you  
 And dare, upon the warrant of my note, 10  
 Commend a dear thing to you. There is division –  
 Although as yet the face of it be covered  
 With mutual cunning – 'twixt Albany and Cornwall;  
 Who have – as who have not that their great stars  
 Throned and set high? – servants, who seem no less, 15  
 Which are to France the spies and speculations  
 Intelligent of our state. What hath been seen,  
 Either in snuffs and packings of the Dukes,  
 Or the hard rein which both of them have borne  
 Against the old kind King, or something deeper, 20  
 Whereof, perchance, these are but furnishings –  
 GENTLEMAN I will talk further with you.

KENT No, do not.  
 For confirmation that I am much more  
 Than my out-wall, open this purse and take  
 What it contains. If you shall see Cordelia, 25  
 As fear not but you shall, show her this ring,  
 And she will tell you who your fellow is  
 That yet you do not know. Fie on this storm!  
 I will go seek the King.

GENTLEMAN Give me your hand. Have you no more to say? 30  
 KENT Few words, but to effect more than all yet:



- 
- 6 **Main:** Mainland.
  - 10 **The warrant of my note:** That (skill) for which I am noted (which, in Kent's case, is his offering of advice).
  - 14–15 **As who have not their great stars ... set high:** As has everyone whom the great stars have placed in this royal ('throned') and high position.
  - 15 **Who seem no less:** Who seem to be nothing other than servants.
  - 17 **Intelligent of:** Informed about.
  - 19 **Rein:** Treatment.
  - 21 **Furnishings:** Disguises (hiding the real purpose).
  - 24 **Out-wall:** Outward appearance.
  - 31 **To effect:** In effect.



That when we have found the King – in which your pain  
That way, I'll this – he that first lights on him  
Holla the other.

[Exit]



**32–33 In which your pain ... I'll this:** For reason of which you should go that way, I'll go this way.



- 1 What positive outcomes does this scene present for King Lear's situation?
- 2 There were few special effects in Shakespeare's theatre; he created most of the physical atmosphere through dialogue. Quote two phrases from this scene that capture the ferocity of the storm.

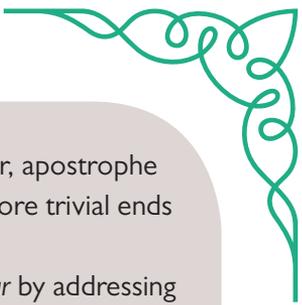


How does this short scene further the idea of the kingdom being unstable and dangerous?

## Introducing personification and apostrophe

**Personification** is a special kind of metaphor where human feelings or qualities are attributed to unconscious or inanimate things. Poets often use personification; for example, Sylvia Plath's poem 'Mushrooms' gives mushrooms human features such as 'toes' and 'noses'. Jemal Sarah writes in her poem 'Motorbike Accident': 'the road / slapped up like a violent hand'. Here, Sarah gives the inanimate or lifeless road the feature of a human hand slapping, to capture the shock and the shattering impact of coming off a motorbike at high speed. We use personification in everyday speech; perhaps you have heard such phrases as 'a lonely road', 'a biting wind' or 'a welcoming fire' and never considered the metaphorical strangeness of these expressions. In Act 3 Scene 1, the Gentleman describes the storm using terms we ordinarily associate with human feelings such as 'fretful' and 'fury'; in Scene 2 personification is used when Lear commands the storm to 'rumble thy bellyful' and when Kent describes it as 'wrathful'.

**Apostrophe** is a rhetorical device in which a speaker addresses, as if it were present, an inanimate object, an abstraction (thought or feeling) or a dead or absent person. Two famous examples of this are the poems 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' by John Keats and 'Death be not Proud' by John Donne. In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' Keats addresses the object of the urn (a vase or jug) directly: 'Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness'; and in 'Death be not Proud' Donne addresses the abstraction of death, mocking it from a Christian standpoint: 'Death be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful'. Donne's sonnet looks forward to eternal life and so ends:



‘death, thou shalt die’. While this poem employs some degree of humour, apostrophe generally suits lofty rhetorical purposes. You have probably used it for more trivial ends when you abuse your car or computer.

You may remember that Edmund opens the second scene of *King Lear* by addressing the abstraction of nature: ‘Thou, Nature, art my goddess’. In Act 3 Scene 2, Lear again uses apostrophe when he addresses the storm:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
Till you have drenched our steeples ...

It is interesting to note Lear’s continuing use of imperatives (or commands). He uses similar language in Acts 1 and 2, even as his real power is declining, and at the opening of Act 3 Scene 2 his commanding of the elements portrays him as increasingly delusional.

## Act 3 Scene 2

### CHARACTERS

Lear  
Fool  
Kent



### IN A NUTSHELL

*Lear commands the ferocious storm to rage. While the Fool continues to sing and joke, Kent encourages Lear to take cover. Eventually Kent persuades the King to accompany him to shelter and the pair exit. Left alone onstage the Fool pronounces a mysterious prophecy.*

### Before you read

- The old King on the heath, raging in the storm, may be the best-known image from *King Lear*. In a famous speech at the beginning of this scene, Lear commands the elements – ‘cataracts and hurricanoes’ (torrential showers and waterspouts with the appearance of tornadoes), ‘thought-executing fires’ (thunderbolts and lightning) – to rage. He then goes even further in wishing destruction on the entire human race. While this gives the audience an insight into the depths of Lear’s anger and despair, it also emphasises how powerless he has become, as the storm will rage as it will, regardless of his commands.
- The prophecy the Fool makes (lines 78–91) is puzzling and intriguing. It is in two contrasting sections. The first part describes a period of confusion and





chaos: Britain ('Albion') has been turned upside down by hypocrisy, greed, vanity, lawlessness and lust. Priests' words are greater than their actions; brewers water down their beer; noblemen know more about fashion than do tailors (and thus are their tailors' 'tutors'); and law and order has been overthrown – meaning that no heretics are burned at the stake and the only ones burned (by venereal disease) are prostitutes' lovers ('wenches' suitors').

- The second part of the prophecy describes a world governed not by evil but by *virtue*, a utopia where order reigns. In this age, every legal case is judged correctly in the courts; no squire or knight is in debt; no false rumours are spoken; and no pickpockets ('cutpurses') come to crowded places ('throngs'). It is a time when moneylenders ('usurers') count their gold openly ('i' the field') rather than secretly. When this age arrives, feet shall be used for walking ('going shall be used with feet'), meaning that everything will fulfil its natural purpose. This curious conclusion to the prophecy is important, for in the next scene we learn that the party of France, which has come to restore order, has 'footed' (landed) in Britain. Moreover, at the end of Act 3 we see Cornwall 'set [his] foot' on Gloucester's eyes (Act 3 Scene 7, line 64). This, it seems, is the use of the foot that does not conform to nature, indicating the evil of the times as described in the first part of the Fool's prophecy.



<b>Pernicious:</b>	Destructive or harmful
<b>Marry:</b>	By the Virgin Mary (an expression of surprise or frustration)
<b>Caitiff:</b>	Wretch
<b>Hovel:</b>	A hole used as a house or a severely impoverished house
<b>Courtesan:</b>	Expensive prostitute
<b>Heretics:</b>	People who deviate from the true faith

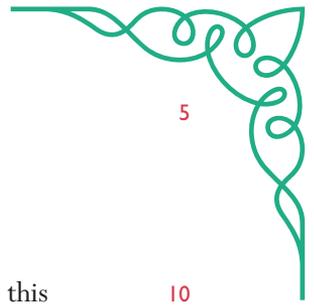
## Another part of the heath. Storm still.

[KING LEAR and FOOL enter]

KING LEAR      Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!  
                          You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
                          Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!  
                          You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,



- 3 **Cocks:** Weathercocks were often placed on the steeples of churches. A flood that reaches so high as to drown church steeples would drown the entire population.
- 4 **Thought-executing fires:** The 'fires' refer to lightning. It is not clear, though, in precisely what sense these fires are 'thought-executing'. It could be either that they carry out ('execute') the thought of Lear, or that they destroy thought by killing.



Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts, 5  
 Singe my white head! And thou all-shaking thunder,  
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world,  
 Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once  
 That make ingrateful man!

FOOL O Nuncle, court holy-water in a dry house is better than this 10  
 rain-water out o'door. Good Nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters' blessing.  
 Here's a night pities neither wise men nor fools.

KING LEAR Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!  
 Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters.  
 I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness; 15  
 I never gave you kingdom, called you children.  
 You owe me no subscription: then let fall  
 Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand, your slave,  
 A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man.  
 But yet I call you servile ministers, 20  
 That have with two pernicious daughters joined  
 Your high engendered battles 'gainst a head  
 So old and white as this. O! O! 'Tis foul!

FOOL He that has a house to put's head in has a good headpiece.  
 The cod-piece that will house 25  
 Before the head has any,  
 The head and he shall louse;  
 So beggars marry many.



- 
- 5 **Vaunt-couriers:** Heralds.
  - 8 **Moulds:** Wombs.
  - 8 **Germens:** Germs, seeds of life (specifically human sperm in this case, in light of what immediately follows).
  - 10 **Court holy-water:** Empty flattery or blessings from a courtier (as distinct, presumably, from 'church holy-water' – meaningful blessings). The point is clear: it would have been better to remain in the court and receive empty flattery, than to be outside exposed to the rain.
  - 15 **Tax you not:** Do not accuse you.
  - 17 **Subscription:** Allegiance.
  - 20 **Servile ministers:** Servants obediently carrying out the orders of their masters.
  - 22 **Your high engendered battles:** Your battles produced in the skies.
  - 25–28 **The cod-piece that will house ... beggars marry many:** The man who seeks a house for his penis ('cod-piece' = a conspicuous covering for male genitals; also, euphemistically, a penis) before he secures one for his head, shall end up ridden with lice; which is why beggars have so many lice (and wives). The Fool is pointing to Lear's mistake of giving in to his passions of anger and pride (rather than lust, in this case) without first securing his own lodging.



The man that makes his toe  
 What he his heart should make 30  
 Shall of a corn cry woe,  
 And turn his sleep to wake.

KING LEAR For there was never yet fair woman but she made mouths in a glass.  
 No, I will be the pattern of all patience.  
 I will say nothing. 35

[Enter KENT]

KENT Who's there?

FOOL Marry, here's grace and a cod-piece – that's a wise man and a fool.

KENT Alas, Sir, are you here? Things that love night  
 Love not such nights as these. The wrathful skies 40  
 Gallow the very wanderers of the dark  
 And make them keep their caves. Since I was man,  
 Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,  
 Such groans of roaring wind and rain I never  
 Remember to have heard. Man's nature cannot carry 45  
 The affliction nor the fear.

KING LEAR Let the great gods,  
 That keep this dreadful pother o'er our heads  
 Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch  
 That hast within thee undivulgèd crimes,  
 Unwhipped of justice. Hide thee, thou bloody hand; 50  
 Thou perjured, and thou simular man of virtue  
 That art incestuous. Caitiff, to pieces shake,  
 That under covert and convenient seeming  
 Hast practised on man's life. Close pent-up guilts,



29–32 **The man that makes his toe ... sleep to wake:** The moral of these lines is that a man who makes his lower parts what his higher parts should be (here the toe represents Gonerill and Regan; the heart, Cordelia), shall suffer as a consequence and not be able to sleep. There is a possible pun on 'wake' (a gathering after a funeral), which would suggest that such a misjudgement would lead to death.

33 **Glass:** Mirror.

41 **Gallow:** Terrify.

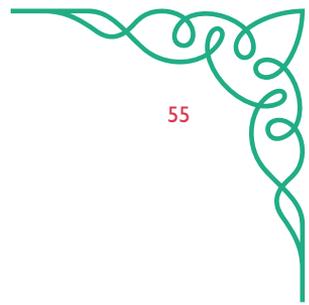
42 **Keep their caves:** Stay inside their caves.

45 **Man's nature cannot carry:** Human nature cannot bear.

47 **Pother:** Bother.

48–52 **Tremble, thou wretch ... art incestuous:** Lear is saying that the wretch who has not acknowledged his sins ('undivulgèd crimes') and been punished for them ('unwhipped of justice'), should 'tremble' in fear for his life. He urges such people to hide, listing three types of sinner in particular: a murderer ('thou bloody hand'); a perjurer (someone who has lied under oath); and a man who seemed virtuous ('simular man of virtue') but who is in fact guilty of incest. The question may be asked why Lear lists these three in particular. Is he perhaps counselling himself?

52–54 **Caitiff, to pieces shake ... on man's life:** Wretch, I hope you're torn to pieces, you who have used against man a secret ('covert') and fitting deception ('convenient seeming').



Rive your concealing continents, and cry  
 These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man  
 More sinned against than sinning. 55

KENT Alack, bare-headed?  
 Gracious my Lord, hard by here is a hovel;  
 Some friendship will it lend you 'gainst the tempest.  
 Repose you there while I to this hard house – 60  
 More harder than the stones whereof 'tis raised;  
 Which even but now, demanding after you,  
 Denied me to come in – return and force  
 Their scanted courtesy.

KING LEAR My wits begin to turn. 65  
 Come on, my boy. How dost my boy? Art cold?  
 I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow?  
 The art of our necessities is strange  
 That can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel.  
 Poor Fool and knave, I have one part in my heart  
 That's sorry yet for thee. 70

FOOL *[Singing]*  
*He that has and a little tiny wit –*  
*With hey, ho, the wind and the rain –*  
*Must make content with his fortunes fit,*  
*For the rain it raineth every day.*

KING LEAR True, my good boy. Come, bring us to this hovel. 75  
*[KING LEAR and KENT exit]*

FOOL This is a brave night to cool a courtesan.  
 I'll speak a prophecy ere I go:  
 When priests are more in word than matter,  
 When brewers mar their malt with water,  
 When nobles are their tailors' tutors, 80  
 No heretics burned but wenches' suitors –  
 Then shall the realm of Albion  
 Come to great confusion.  
 When every case in law is right,  
 No squire in debt, nor no poor knight, 85



54–56 **Close pent-up guilts ... summoners grace:** Secret ('close'), repressed ('pent-up') guilts, burst open ('rive') the places you are hidden ('your concealing continents') and cry for pardon ('grace') from the terrifying ('dreadful') summoner. A 'summoner' was the person responsible for bringing people to trial before a Church court (for sins such as adultery).

58 **Gracious my Lord:** My gracious Lord; **Hard by:** Close by.

60 **Hard house:** Cruel house.

76 **Courtesan:** Expensive prostitute.



When slanders do not live in tongues,  
 Nor cutpurses come not to throngs,  
 When usurers tell their gold i' the field,  
 And bawds and whores do churches build –  
 Then comes the time, who lives to see't,  
 That going shall be used with feet.  
 This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time.

[Exit]



**76–91 This a brave night ... be used with feet:** See **Before you read**, pages 105–06.

**92 This prophecy Merlin shall make ... time:** Merlin, a wizard, is believed to have lived in the court of King Arthur.



QUESTIONS

- 1 In what ways does Lear compare the storm to his daughters? How are his daughters similar to the storm and how are they dissimilar?
- 2 Why do you think Lear wants the storm to bring judgement?
- 3 What do you think Lear means when he describes himself as 'a man / More sinned against than sinning' (lines 56–57)?
- 4 Quote an example, or examples, of Lear beginning to show compassion in this scene.
- 5 How is Lear's commanding of the elements ironic? How is it a metaphor for his situation?



EXTEND

- 1 Lear seems to convey his rage through the way he commands the storm. Copy and complete the table below to show how Shakespeare conveys this rage and the power of the storm through the language of Lear's speeches (lines 1–9, 13–23, 46–57, 64–70).

Technique / stylistic feature	Quotations	Effect
Verbs		
Adjectives		
Nouns		
Compound words		
Lists of monosyllables		
Violent images		

- 
- 2 The Fool concludes the scene by explaining that his prophecy will be made by Merlin, the wizard in the court of King Arthur, which places it in the context of Christian Britain rather than, as here, in pre-Christian Britain. Why do you think Shakespeare might have done this?



DISCUSS

If you were directing a production of *King Lear* how would you portray a ferocious storm while at the same time not interfering with (or reducing the impact of) the dialogue?

## A word about nature

In the age of Shakespeare, the natural order was regarded as the all-encompassing power that held together and regulated the relationships between God and humankind, humankind and the animal kingdom, kings and their people, fathers and their families, and so on. When these relationships were in harmony, according to the beliefs of the time, they were said to be natural. In *King Lear*, Lear calls the duties of a child towards a parent 'the offices of nature' (Act 2 Scene 4). Thus when Gloucester hears that Edgar has planned to murder him, he describes Edgar as an 'Unnatural, detested, brutish villain' (Act 1 Scene 2). Likewise, because of Cordelia's behaviour, Lear says that:

Nature is ashamed  
Almost t'acknowledge hers. (Act 1 Scene 1)

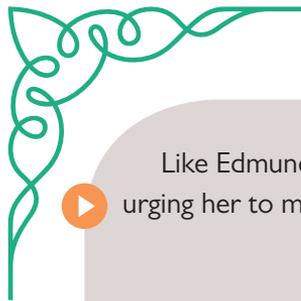
Similarly, when Gonerill and Regan do not measure up to his expectations, Lear describes them as 'unnatural hags' (Act 2 Scene 4). Although Lear's rhetoric may seem over the top, Gloucester, too, describes Gonerill and Regan's behaviour, in which they cast him out for defending Lear's interests, as 'unnatural dealing' (Act 3 Scene 3).

Nature takes on other related, though slightly different meanings in the play. When Edmund declares:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law  
My services are bound. (Act 1 Scene 2)

the implication is that 'Nature' (in this case with a capital 'N') is somehow more fundamental and elemental than the laws of man (including marriage), which, in Edmund's view, are not extensions of nature but artificial impositions that seek to constrain and control it. Edmund is 'natural' because he was born out of wedlock, in a state of nature, like animals that do not observe the human law of marriage. And he thus adopts the law of Nature (what we today might call the 'law of the jungle').





Like Edmund, Lear also calls on ‘Nature’ (again with a capital ‘N’) as a goddess, urging her to make Gonerill sterile:

Hear, Nature, hear! Dear goddess, hear!  
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend  
To make this creature fruitful. (Act 1 Scene 4)

The irony is that Lear is asking ‘Nature’ to be *unnatural*, to ‘suspend [her] purpose’. Later, when summoning the storm, he even asks that ‘Nature’s moulds’ be cracked (Act 3 Scene 2).

In a way, Lear’s behaviour at different points in the play is shown to be as ‘unnatural’ as his evil daughters’. Indeed, the act of abdicating the throne was regarded in Shakespeare’s day as highly suspect, even unnatural. The events that follow – the ‘sequent effects’, as Gloucester calls them, which scourge nature (Act 1 Scene 2) – all ultimately derive in some way from this initial event. Gloucester believes these ‘effects’ are foretold in the skies, ‘by the late eclipses of the sun and moon’ (Act 1 Scene 2), and they are certainly all symbolised by the storm (Act 2 Scene 4, Act 3 Scene 2). Whatever it was that inspired Lear to abdicate the throne, the effect is the same:

love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies;  
in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked  
’twixt son and father ... the King falls from bias of nature ...  
(Gloucester, Act 1 Scene 2)

## Act 3 Scene 3

### CHARACTERS

Gloucester  
Edmund



### IN A NUTSHELL

*Gloucester complains to Edmund about Cornwall and Regan’s refusal to grant Lear shelter in his castle. Gloucester tells Edmund of the widening division between the Dukes and of a letter he received reporting that an army loyal to the King has already landed in Britain. Gloucester asserts his loyalty to Lear and his intention to comfort the King whatever the consequences but tells Edmund to inform Cornwall and Regan that he is ill and gone to bed. After he exits, Edmund reveals his intention to betray his father.*



## Before you read

- You will notice that events are moving very fast. It is less than a month since Lear's banishment of Cordelia and the true attitude of Lear's other daughters has come to light far more recently. The events of Act 2 would seem to constitute no more than a 24-hour day, yet Cordelia has already landed in Britain at the head of a French army.

While critics have attempted to explain this in various ways, the important thing to remember is that Shakespeare's theatre doesn't always look to create realism, and Shakespeare manipulates time to suit his dramatic purposes. The chaotic and tragic events of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, take place over a mere five days. Many of Shakespeare's plays employ what can be referred to as double-time which, while not mathematically accurate or true to real time, does strike audiences as emotionally true and compelling.

- The Romantic poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge made the point that an audience willingly suspends its disbelief when reading (or by extension viewing) literature if the work is infused with 'human interest and a semblance of truth'. This rings true for Shakespeare. Despite being in a dry theatre, we take it for granted that a storm is raging, and willingly accept an actor as King; so, too, we forget that sometimes the timeframes are unrealistic as we get caught up in the human drama.

V

<b>Alack:</b>	An expression of grief
<b>Closet:</b>	Private room
<b>Footed:</b>	Landed
<b>Privily:</b>	Secretly

## Gloucester's castle.

[GLOUCESTER and EDMUND enter]

GLOUCESTER    Alack, alack! Edmund, I like not this unnatural dealing. When I desired their leave that I might pity him, they took from me the use of mine own house, charged me on pain of their perpetual displeasure neither to speak of him, entreat for him, nor any way sustain him.

EDMUND        Most savage and unnatural! 5

GLOUCESTER    Go to. Say you nothing. There's a division betwixt the Dukes; and a worse matter than that. I have received a letter this night; 'tis dangerous to be spoken; I have locked the letter in my closet. These injuries the King now



1-2    **When I desired their leave that I might pity him:** When I asked their permission to show pity to him (Lear).



Jacobean England rather than ancient Britain. St Mary of Bethlehem Hospital, also known as Bethlem Hospital and, in Shakespeare's day, as Bedlam, was founded in 1247 as a priory. From the fourteenth century it was used to accommodate the mentally ill and housed as many as 60 people. The conditions there were harsh and primitive treatments were employed, including the whipping of violent patients. It was mistakenly believed that those patients deemed well enough to leave the hospital were given licence to beg. In *King Lear* it is Edgar's intention to blend into the countryside as one of these roaming beggars.



*Bethlem Hospital at its nineteenth-century location, St George's Fields in Southwark*

Rising numbers of beggars in England had been a problem since the Wars of the Roses in the fifteenth century. Confiscation of Church property by Henry VIII in the 1530s, during the English Reformation, further exacerbated the problem because this caused the almshouses and hospitals that provided charity and housing for the poor to be closed. In the twenty-first century we see it as the role of government to provide welfare, but this is a relatively new situation from a historical perspective. In medieval England it was the role of the Church to provide social services such as care for the sick and the poor. By abolishing many of the church's institutions, Henry indirectly caused an increase in the number of beggars on the streets.

In the second half of the sixteenth century some new hospitals were created and some of the old ones reopened, run by local councils. Following particularly severe famines in 1586 and 1596, Elizabeth I developed the first complete policy of relief for the poor in 1597. This was supervised centrally by the Privy Council and administered through local justices. While these reforms ensured, so far as the government was able, that no-one would starve, some elements of the legislation were unsympathetic. The new law differentiated between impotent (the sick and disabled) and sturdy beggars (those people deemed fit enough to work). Elizabethans had little knowledge of economics or the business cycle and generally thought these sturdy beggars were wilfully lazy. Refusal to work became a punishable offence and people who couldn't gain employment were forced into poor houses, such as Bridewell in London, where forced labour was imposed. It is probable that many beggars would have, like Edgar, claimed they were Bedlam beggars (or Bedlamites) to avoid this fate.





▶ It is surprising, from a modern perspective, that the Elizabethan Poor Laws also extended to groups of actors and entertainers who toured the country. The best way for a company of actors to avoid harassment by the authorities was to come under the protection of a powerful noble. Shakespeare's company was called the Lord Chamberlain's Men while under the protection of the Lord Chamberlain during Elizabeth's reign, and later became the King's Men when James I ascended the throne. Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that Shakespeare had such an affinity for the poor.

## Act 3 Scene 4

### CHARACTERS

Lear  
Edgar  
Gloucester  
Fool  
Kent

### IN A NUTSHELL



*Although Kent encourages the King to take shelter, Lear initially refuses to enter the hovel because the storm at least distracts him from his suffering. Lear orders the Fool inside and then prays, noting how little care he has shown for the poor during his reign. The party is confronted by Edgar, in the guise of Tom o' Bedlam, who has already taken refuge in the hovel. When Edgar delivers a number of enigmatic (mysterious) and rambling speeches, Lear seems instantly drawn to him, calling him a philosopher. Gloucester arrives, intent on bringing the King relief. Eventually Kent and Gloucester persuade Lear to take shelter in the hovel but the King insists on taking his philosopher (Tom o' Bedlam) with him.*

### Before you read

- In his first substantial speech in this scene, Tom o' Bedlam explains that he is 'vexed' (troubled) by a demon, probably the Devil himself, 'the foul fiend' who has tempted him to commit suicide by laying knives under his pillows and putting ratsbane (rat poison) by his porridge, among other things. Because suicide was believed to lead to eternal damnation, Tom's struggle should be viewed as spiritual (a struggle for salvation), as well as psychological (a struggle against madness) and physical (a struggle against destitution).





KENT  
KING LEAR

Good my Lord, enter here.

Prithee, go in thyself: seek thine own ease.  
This tempest will not give me leave to ponder  
On things would hurt me more; but I'll go in. 25

*[To FOOL]* In, boy; go first. – You houseless poverty –  
Nay, get thee in. I'll pray and then I'll sleep.

*[FOOL goes in]* Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, 30

Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them 35  
And show the heavens more just.

EDGAR *[Within]* Fathom and half, fathom and half! Poor Tom!

*[FOOL runs out from the hovel]*

FOOL Come not in here, Nuncle; here's a spirit. Help me, help me!

KENT Give me thy hand. Who's there?

FOOL A spirit, a spirit. He says his name's Poor Tom. 40

KENT What art thou that dost grumble there i' the straw?  
Come forth.

*[EDGAR enters, disguised as a mad man]*

EDGAR Away! The foul fiend follows me. Through the sharp hawthorn blow  
the cold winds. Hum! Go to thy cold bed, and warm thee.

KING LEAR Hast thou given all to thy two daughters? And art thou come to this? 45

EDGAR Who gives anything to Poor Tom, whom the foul fiend hath led  
through fire and through flame, through ford and whirlpool, e'er  
bog and quagmire, that hath laid knives under his pillow and halters in  
his pew, set ratsbane by his porridge, made him proud of heart, to  
ride on a bay trotting horse over four-inched bridges to course his own 50



26 **Houseless poverty:** Homeless paupers.

29 **Bide:** Abide; endure.

30 **Unfed:** Gaunt; skinny.

31 **Windowed:** Full of holes; torn.

33 **Take physic, pomp:** Take medicine (heal yourself), vain person.

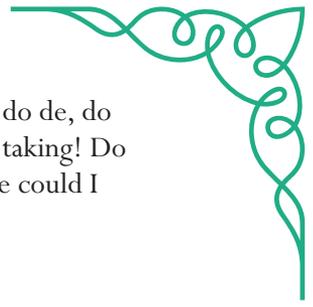
35 **Superflux:** Surplus.

37 **Fathom and half:** This is a sailor's cry (a fathom and a half is about 2.7 metres). Tom o' Bedlam is probably alluding to all the rain.

48 **Halters:** Nooses.

49 **Ratsbane:** Rat poison.

50 **Course:** Pursue.



shadow for a traitor? Bless thy five wits! Tom's a-cold. O do de, do de, do de. Bless thee from whirlwinds, star-blasting, and taking! Do Poor Tom some charity, whom the foul fiend vexes. There could I have him now, and there, and there again, and there.

[*Storm still*]

KING LEAR	What, have his daughters brought him to this pass? Couldst thou save nothing? Didst thou give them all?	55
FOOL	Nay, he reserved a blanket, else we had been all shamed.	
KING LEAR	Now, all the plagues that in the pendulous air Hang fated o'er men's faults light on thy daughters!	
KENT	He hath no daughters, Sir.	60
KING LEAR	Death, traitor! Nothing could have subdued nature To such a lowness but his unkind daughters. Is it the fashion, that discarded fathers Should have thus little mercy on their flesh? Judicious punishment! 'Twas this flesh begot Those pelican daughters.	65
EDGAR	Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill: Halloo, halloo, loo, loo!	
FOOL	This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.	
EDGAR	Take heed o' the foul fiend: obey thy parents; keep thy word justly; swear not; commit not with man's sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on proud array. Tom's a-cold.	70
KING LEAR	What hast thou been?	
EDGAR	A servingman, proud in heart and mind, that curled my hair, wore gloves in my cap, served the lust of my mistress' heart and did the act of darkness with her, swore as many oaths as I spake words and broke them in the sweet face of heaven; one that slept in the contriving of lust and waked to do it. Wine loved I deeply, dice dearly, and in woman out-paramoured the Turk – false of heart, light of ear,	75



- 
- 51 **Five wits:** During the Renaissance five types of intelligence (or wit) were recognised: common wit (common sense), imagination, fantasy, estimation and memory.
  - 66 **Pelican:** Pelican chicks were believed to drink blood from and nibble at wounds in their mother's flesh. In medieval iconography, the pelican was often depicted piercing its own side to feed its young, to symbolise Christ feeding his flock with his body and blood (Matthew 26:26–28). The image was complex, because pelican chicks were also believed to attack their parents, as – in Christian belief – human sins caused Christ's death.
  - 67 **Pillicock:** Comic term for the penis.
  - 70–72 **Take heed o' the foul fiend ... array:** Tom o' Bedlam urges his hosts to take heed of the Devil, before listing several of the Ten Commandments.
  - 75 **Gloves in my cap:** His mistress's gloves given to him by her as tokens of affection, which he kept in his hat.
  - 79 **Out-paramoured:** Out-sleazed (a paramour is an adulterous lover).
  - 79 **Light of ear:** Enjoying gossip.



bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog 80  
 in madness, lion in prey. Let not the creaking of shoes nor the rustling  
 of silks betray thy poor heart to woman. Keep thy foot out of brothels,  
 thy hand out of plackets, thy pen from lenders' books, and defy the foul  
 fiend. Still through the hawthorn blows the cold wind, Says suum,  
 mun, ha, no, nonny. Dolphin my boy, my boy, sesey! Let him trot by. 85

[*Storm still*]

KING LEAR Thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body  
 this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well.  
 Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the  
 cat no perfume. Ha! Here's three on's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing  
 itself! Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked 90  
 animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.

[*Tearing off his clothes*]

FOOL Prithee, Nuncle, be contented; 'tis a naughty night to swim in. Now a little  
 fire in a wild field were like an old lecher's heart – a small spark, all  
 the rest on's body cold. Look, here comes a walking fire.

[*GLoucester enters, with a torch*]

EDGAR This is the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet. He begins at curfew, and walks till  
 the first cock; he gives the web and the pin, squints the eye and makes  
 the hare-lip; mildews the white wheat, and hurts the poor creature of earth.  
 St. Withold footed thrice the old;  
 He met the nightmare and her nine-fold;  
 Bid her alight and her troth plight, 100  
 And aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!



81–82 **The creaking of shoes ... silks:** Creaking shoes were a fashionable item at the time. 'Silks' was a term for a woman's dress.

83 **Plackets:** Slits in garments (with sexual overtones).

83 **Thy pen from lenders' books:** When borrowing money, you would record the sum with your name in the lender's book; therefore don't get into debt.

84–85 **Still through the hawthorn ... Let him trot by:** Probably lines from popular ballads.

89 **Three on's:** Three of us.

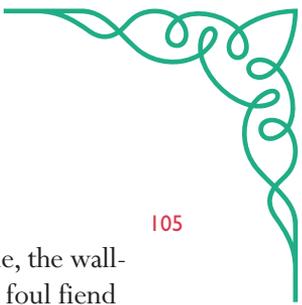
91 **Lendings:** Borrowed robes.

93–94 **All the rest on's body cold:** All the rest of his body is cold.

95 **Flibbertigibbet:** A demon from folklore referred to (as are a number of the demon names that follow) in Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popishe Impostures* (1603), an anti-Catholic work of polemics or argumentative essays.

97 **Mildews the white wheat:** Rots the ripe wheat crop.

98–101 **St. Withold footed thrice the old ... aroint thee:** Legend has it that St Withold crossed the 'old' (the countryside) three times to confront the 'Nightmare' (a changeling demon, adopting male and female forms) and her offspring ('nine-fold'). He commanded the demon to step out ('alight'), made her give her word ('her troth plight') not to harm him, and dismissed her with the formula: 'Aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!', meaning 'begone!'



KENT How fares your Grace?  
 KING LEAR What's he?  
 KENT Who's there? What is it you seek?  
 GLOUCESTER What are you there? Your names? 105  
 EDGAR Poor Tom; that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-  
 newt and the water; that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend  
 rages, eats cow-dung for salads; swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog,  
 drinks the green mantle of the standing pool; who is whipped from  
 tithing to tithing and stock-punished and imprisoned; who hath had 110  
 three suits to his back, six shirts to his body,  
 Horse to ride and weapon to wear –  
 But mice and rats and such small deer,  
 Have been Tom's food for seven long year.  
 Beware my follower! Peace, Smulkin, peace, thou fiend! 115  
 GLOUCESTER What, hath your Grace no better company?  
 EDGAR The Prince of Darkness is a gentleman: Modo he's called, and Mahu.  
 GLOUCESTER Our flesh and blood is grown so vile, my Lord,  
 That it doth hate what gets it.  
 EDGAR Poor Tom's a-cold. 120  
 GLOUCESTER Go in with me. My duty cannot suffer  
 To obey in all your daughters' hard commands;  
 Though their injunction be to bar my doors  
 And let this tyrannous night take hold upon you,  
 Yet have I ventured to come seek you out 125  
 And bring you where both fire and food is ready.  
 KING LEAR First let me talk with this philosopher.  
 [To EDGAR] What is the cause of thunder?  
 KENT Good my Lord, take his offer, go into the house.  
 KING LEAR I'll talk a word with this same learnèd Theban. 130  
 [To EDGAR] What is your study?  
 EDGAR How to prevent the fiend and to kill vermin.  
 KING LEAR Let me ask you one word in private.

---

108 **Ditch-dog:** Dead dog in a ditch.

109 **Green mantle:** The slimy, scummy film on stagnant water.

109–10 **Whipped from tithing to tithing:** Tom is saying that he is whipped each time he fails to fulfil the requirements of 'tithing'. 'Tithing' was the practice of giving a portion of one's income to the Church at regular intervals through the year.

111 **Three suits:** Servants were given three suits of clothes per year.

115 **Smulkin:** Another demon.

117 **Gentleman:** Edgar's point is that the Devil is appropriate company for a king (especially a king who, like the Devil, has fallen from heaven; has fallen from his former glory).

117 **Modo he's called, and Mahu:** More names for the Devil.

130 **Learnèd Theban:** In Sophocles' famous tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, the blind prophet of Thebes, Tiresias, prophesies that Oedipus the King is the polluter of Thebes having unwittingly killed his father and married his mother. Lear may have him in mind.







QUESTIONS

- 1 Lear describes himself as ‘an old kind father, whose frank heart gave all’ (line 20). Do you think this is an accurate description of Lear or do you think he is deluded? Justify your answer.
- 2 In what ways has Lear’s character changed since Act 1?
- 3 Give an example from the dialogue where Shakespeare conveys the darkness of night. Why was this important for his original audience?
- 4 How does Lear’s situation parallel Edgar’s?
- 5 What sort of atmosphere is created by Edgar’s rhyme (lines 155–57) at the end of this scene?
- 6 Shakespeare created the character of Tom o’ Bedlam to fascinate, terrify and repulse. Copy and complete the table below to demonstrate your understanding of how Shakespeare constructed his character.

Element of characterisation	Example(s)	Effect on the audience
Demonic imagery		
Bestial imagery		
Punitive language (to do with punishment)		
Digression / fragmentation		
Obscure language		
Repetition		
Use of prose rather than iambic pentameter		
Reactions of other characters to him (especially the Fool and Gloucester)		

- 7 How does dramatic irony make Gloucester’s speech (lines 139–44) about his son, Edgar, particularly emotive?



EXTEND

- 1 Read Lear’s first speech (lines 6–22). You may notice that many of his sentences are incomplete or digress (stray from the topic). Complete the table on the next page to demonstrate how Shakespeare conveys Lear’s emotional and mental state through the structure of his sentences.





Stylistic feature	Quotations (one or two for each)	What this conveys about Lear's emotional and mental state
Short sentences		
Broken sentences		
Digression		

- 2 Before he prays, Lear orders the Fool to go inside before him. What is the significance of this?
- 3 Complete the table below to demonstrate how Shakespeare conveys the Fool's fear of Edgar in lines 38–40.

Feature	Examples	How this conveys the Fool's fear
Repetition		
Short sentences		
Punctuation		
Stage directions		

- 4 Why does Lear choose this moment to disrobe (undress)? What is the symbolic significance of his disrobing?
- 5 What do you think is the significance of Lear delivering his speech beginning: 'Thou wert better in thy grave' (lines 86–91) in prose instead of iambic pentameter? Why do you think Shakespeare made this stylistic decision?
- 6 Quote and explain an example of Edgar's lines in which he may have been affected by the presence of his father (Gloucester).
- 7 Why is Gloucester's comment 'Our flesh and blood is grown so vile, my Lord, / That it doth hate what gets it' (lines 118–19) ironic in the context of this scene?

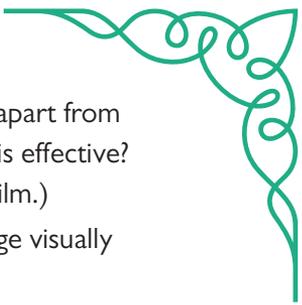


How do you think the character of Tom o' Bedlam should be played and portrayed? Discuss make-up, costume, props, movement and voice.

### Peter Brook: DVD Chapter 9



- 1 This chapter of the film opens with an interior of Gloucester's castle. How would you describe the atmosphere? Why do you think Brook includes these few seconds of footage?
- 2 What shots (size, angle, movement, focus) are employed to show Lear delivering his anguished speeches? Do you think these shots are effective?

- 
- 3 For part of Lear's speech Brook cuts all other diegetic sound apart from Lear's voice. What effect does this create and do you think it is effective? (Diegetic sounds are sounds that belong to the world of the film.)
  - 4 Comment on the image of the drowned rats. How is this image visually striking? How does this image complement Lear's speeches?
  - 5 Comment on the camerawork employed to introduce Edgar as Tom o' Bedlam in this scene. Do you think this is effective?
  - 6 Do you think Edgar's costume effectively conveys his situation? What connotations does this costume have?
  - 7 Comment on the shots of Edgar during Lear's 'Bare forked animal' speech. What do you think Brook emphasises through these shots?
  - 8 What sort of shot is initially employed to show Gloucester trudging through the storm to meet Lear? What do you think Brook is looking to convey through this?
  - 9 Do you think the black screen and the camerawork are effective for Edgar's 'Child Rowland' speech?



*O, I have ta'en too little care of this!*

## A performance at the court before the King

When James I ascended the English throne in 1603, he took over the patronage of Shakespeare's theatre company. The Lord Chamberlain's Men were subsequently renamed the King's Men. While this wasn't as financially lucrative as it sounds, it did come with certain privileges, which included regular performances at court. The first recorded performance of *King Lear* was before King James at Whitehall Palace on 26 December 1606. As King of England, James united the crowns of Scotland and England. One of his pet projects throughout his reign was to bring about a political union between the two countries. *King Lear* shows the dangers of a divided kingdom and the strife that follows from such a partition; this would surely have met with the King's approval.

We perhaps underestimate how radical *King Lear* would have seemed to the King. James believed in the Divine Right of Kings, a doctrine that viewed the monarch as above the law, answerable only to God. The opening of the play shows Lear richly attired, much like James himself, but in Act 3 the audience sees the King reduced to nothing, recognising that the only difference between a king and a beggar is pomp and ceremony. Later in the play Lear reflects that 'a dog's obeyed in office'. This demystifying or stripping bare of the role of kingship would surely not have been to King James' taste





and, while we have no record of the King's response to the play, Shakespeare was taking the risk of offending his powerful patron.

The date 26 December is also known as the Feast of St Stephen, and was a traditional day for giving to the poor, so Lear's description of the 'houseless', 'unfed' and 'poor naked wretches' may have pricked the consciences of many in the royal court. King James was famous for his lavish spending on pleasure. In addition to hunting, James enjoyed presenting a great number of plays at court, including many masques – a particularly expensive form of drama involving music, dancing, singing and elaborate sets. James spent excessively on clothes, buying a new suit every ten days and a new pair of gloves daily. More outrageous was James' vast spending on his Scottish favourites. The signs of this tendency were evident when, during his progress from Scotland to London, James knighted 300 people – a greater number than Elizabeth I ennobled in her entire reign. An inner circle of young courtiers, including such characters as Robert Carr and James Hay, benefitted hugely from the King's patronage. James Hay, in particular, invented the notorious double supper, at which guests were shown an extravagant supper only to have it discarded and replaced with another, before their eyes. Such excesses angered the English population and their frustrations were compounded when James raised import taxes in 1605. When Lear rebukes himself for taking 'too little care' of the poor, the play covertly rebukes the court of King James.

## Act 3 Scene 5

### CHARACTERS

Edmund  
Cornwall



### IN A NUTSHELL

*Edmund reveals, to Cornwall, his father's collaboration with Lear and the imminent arrival of the invading army. He laments the fact that, because of his loyalty, he has to betray his father. Cornwall vows revenge on Edmund's father and awards Edmund the title Earl of Gloucester.*

### Before you read

- Edmund is awarded the title 'Earl of Gloucester' unlawfully by Cornwall. Although the stage directions will continue to acknowledge him as Edmund, Cornwall, Gonerill and Regan will sometimes refer to him by this title in subsequent scenes.



<b>Ere:</b>	Before
<b>Censured:</b>	Judged
<b>Apprehension:</b>	Arrest
<b>Persever:</b>	Persist or persevere



## Gloucester's castle.

[CORNWALL and EDMUND enter]

CORNWALL I will have my revenge ere I depart his house.  
 EDMUND How, my Lord, I may be censured, that nature thus gives way to loyalty, something fears me to think of.

CORNWALL I now perceive it was not altogether your brother's evil disposition made him seek his death; but a provoking merit set a-work by a reprobable badness in himself. 5

EDMUND How malicious is my fortune that I must repent to be just! This is the letter he spoke of, which approves him an intelligent party to the advantages of France. O heavens, that this treason were not, or not I the detector! 10

CORNWALL Go with me to the Duchess.  
 EDMUND If the matter of this paper be certain, you have mighty business in hand.  
 CORNWALL True or false, it hath made thee Earl of Gloucester. Seek out where thy father is, that he may be ready for our apprehension.

EDMUND [Aside] If I find him comforting the King it will stuff his suspicion more fully. [Aloud] I will persever in my course of loyalty, though the conflict be sore between that and my blood. 15

CORNWALL I will lay trust upon thee, and thou shalt find a dearer father in my love.

[Exit]

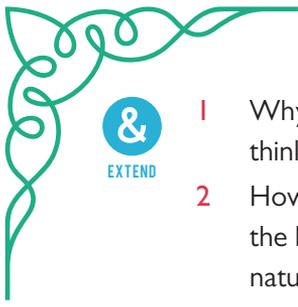


- 3 **Fears me:** It frightens me.
- 4-6 **I now perceive it was not ... badness in himself:** Cornwall is referring to Gloucester, whose death, he believes, Edgar had good reason to seek (it was not simply because Edgar was altogether evil, in other words).
- 8 **Intelligent party:** Spy, informant.
- 15 **If I find him comforting the King ... his suspicion:** Edmund states that if he finds Gloucester comforting Lear, it will fill ('stuff') Cornwall with even more suspicion of Gloucester.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What news does Edmund reveal to Cornwall?
- 2 How does revealing this news benefit Edmund?
- 3 Explain how Shakespeare employs dramatic irony in this scene.



- 1 Why do you think Shakespeare begins this scene mid-conversation? Do you think this is effective? Why or why not?
- 2 How is the language of Edmund's conversation with Cornwall different to the language he uses in his aside? How does this emphasise his deceptive nature?
- 3 What do you think the statement 'True or false, it hath made thee Earl of Gloucester' (line 13) suggests about the nature of Cornwall's rule?



Do you think Cornwall is too quick or eager to make a judgement? Do you think Cornwall's decision is based on political expediency (convenience)?

## Act 3 Scene 6

### CHARACTERS

Gloucester  
Lear  
Fool  
Kent  
Edgar



### IN A NUTSHELL

*The scene opens with Gloucester promising to return quickly with provisions. While the Fool jokes and Edgar continues his rants about the 'foul fiend' and other topics, Lear invites them both to assist him in a delusional trial of Gonerill and Regan. Lear deteriorates into more incoherent ramblings before finally falling asleep. Gloucester returns with news of a plot against Lear and urges Kent to hurry with the King to Dover where they shall meet an army loyal to the King.*

### Before you read

- In this scene, Lear's language is strangely similar to his language in Act 1. He issues orders ('Stop her there') and makes wild accusations ('False justicer'), just as he does in Act 1, and he does so at times in a tone suggesting he holds complete authority ('It shall be done'). The difference in this scene, however, is that his tone is starkly at odds with the reality of his circumstances. His words are no longer backed by any genuine power or authority.
- This scene marks the final appearance of the Fool. Some critics think he has been so out-fooled by Edgar and Lear that his presence is now unnecessary; others suggest that his role in bringing Lear to the brink of wisdom has been completed.



V

- Yeoman:** A land-holding farmer
- Arraign:** Prosecute or accuse
- Sapient:** Wise
- Hither:** Here, to this place
- Avaunt:** Be gone
- Curs:** Mongrel dogs
- Litter:** A type of wheeled vehicle

## A chamber in a farmhouse adjoining the castle.

[*GLoucester, King Lear, Kent, Fool and Edgar enter*]

GLoucester Here is better than the open air. Take it thankfully. I will piece out the comfort with what addition I can. I will not be long from you.

Kent All the power of his wits have given way to his impatience. The gods reward your kindness!

[*GLoucester exits*]

Edgar Frateretto calls me and tells me Nero is an angler in the Lake of Darkness. Pray, innocent, and beware the foul fiend. 5

Fool Prithee, Nuncle, tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman?

King Lear A king, a king!

Fool No! He's a yeoman that has a gentleman to his son; for he's a mad yeoman that sees his son a gentleman before him. 10

King Lear To have a thousand with red burning spits  
Come hissing in upon 'em!

Edgar The foul fiend bites my back.

Fool He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath. 15

King Lear It shall be done. I will arraign them straight.

[*To Edgar*] Come, sit thou here, most learned justicer.

[*To Fool*] Thou, sapient sir, sit here. Now, you she foxes!

Edgar Look, where he stands and glares! Wantest thou eyes at trial, Madam?

[*Sings*]

*Come o'er the bourn, Bessy, to me —* 20

1-2 **Piece out the comfort:** Share out bedding.

5 **Frateretto:** Another devil.

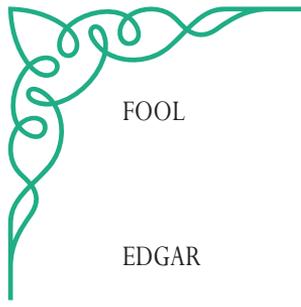
5-6 **Nero is an angler in the ... Darkness:** The famous medieval English poet, Chaucer, describes Nero fishing in hell in 'The Monk's Tale', from *The Canterbury Tales*.

9-10 **For he's a mad ... gentleman before him:** If the son is made a gentleman he will look down on his father for being of lower status. Shakespeare obtained a coat of arms for his father in 1596 thus making them both gentlemen.

11 **A thousand:** A thousand devils.

14 **A horse's health:** Horses were thought to be very prone to disease.





FOOL *[Sings]*  
*Her boat hath a leak*  
*And she must not speak*  
*Why she dares not come over to thee.*

EDGAR The foul fiend haunts Poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale.  
Hoppedance cries in Tom's belly for two white herring. Croak not, 25  
black angel; I have no food for thee.

KENT How do you, Sir? Stand you not so amazed.  
Will you lie down and rest upon the cushions?

KING LEAR I'll see their trial first. Bring in the evidence.  
*[To EDGAR]* Thou robed man of justice, take thy place. 30  
*[To FOOL]* And thou, his yoke-fellow of equity, bench by his side.  
*[To KENT]* You are of the commission; sit you too.

EDGAR Let us deal justly.  
Sleepest or wakest thou, jolly shepherd?  
Thy sheep be in the corn, 35  
And for one blast of thy minikin mouth  
Thy sheep shall take no harm.

KING LEAR Purr, the cat is grey.  
Arraign her first. 'Tis Gonerill! I here take my oath before this  
honourable assembly she kicked the poor King her father. 40

FOOL Come hither, mistress. Is your name Gonerill?

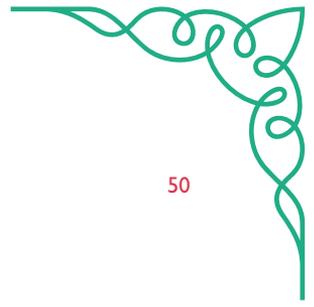
KING LEAR She cannot deny it.

FOOL Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool.

KING LEAR And here's another whose warped looks proclaim  
What store her heart is made on. Stop her there! 45  
Arms, arms, sword, fire! Corruption in the place!  
False justicer, why hast thou let her 'scape?



- 
- 20–23 **Come o'er the bourn ... come over to thee:** Edgar begins to sing a love song and the Fool improvises a comic ending ('bourn' = stream).
- 24 **The foul fiend ... voice of a nightingale:** He is talking about the Fool.
- 25 **Hoppedance:** A devil.
- 26 **Black angel:** A devil.
- 30 **Robed:** Lear is perhaps referring to Edgar's blanket.
- 31 **Yoke-fellow of equity, bench by his side:** Lear asks the Fool, as a partner in justice, to take a place at the bench alongside Edgar.
- 32 **You are of the commission:** You who are commissioned to be a justice.
- 36–37 **For one blast of thy ... take no harm:** The sheep will come to no harm while the shepherd plays a few notes on his pipe (minikin = fine or delicate).
- 43 **I took you for a joint-stool:** I took you for a cheaply made stool. This was a Jacobean proverb for not noticing someone.
- 44 **Warped:** Twisted.
- 45 **What store her heart is made on:** What kind of material her heart is made from.
- 45–47 **Stop her there ... thou let her 'scape:** These lines suggest Lear's dismay at his daughters' escape from their trial. Lear thinks that they have been allowed to escape by the corrupt court.



EDGAR Bless thy five wits!

KENT O pity! Sir, where is the patience now  
That thou so oft have boasted to retain? 50

EDGAR *[Aside]* My tears begin to take his part so much  
They'll mar my counterfeiting.

KING LEAR The little dogs and all –  
Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart – see, they bark at me.

EDGAR Tom will throw his head at them. Avaunt, you curs! 55  
Be thy mouth or black or white,  
Tooth that poisons if it bite,  
Mastiff, greyhound, mongrel grim,  
Hound or spaniel, brach or lym,  
Or bobtail tike, or trundle-tail, 60  
Tom will make them weep and wail;  
For, with throwing thus my head,  
Dogs leapt the hatch and all are fled.

Do de, de, de. Sese! Come, march to wakes and  
fairs and market-towns. Poor Tom, thy horn is dry. 65

KING LEAR Then let them anatomise Regan, see what breeds about her heart. Is there  
any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts? *[To EDGAR]* You, sir,  
I entertain for one of my hundred. Only I do not like the fashion of your  
garments. You will say they are Persian; but let them be changed.

KENT Now, good my Lord, lie here and rest awhile. 70

KING LEAR Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains. So, so. We'll go to  
supper i' the morning.

FOOL And I'll go to bed at noon.

*[GLOUCESTER re-enters]*

GLOUCESTER Come hither, friend. Where is the King my master?

KENT Here, sir; but trouble him not. His wits are gone. 75

GLOUCESTER Good friend, I prithee, take him in thy arms;  
I have o'erheard a plot of death upon him.  
There is a litter ready; lay him in't  
And drive towards Dover, friend, where thou shalt meet  
Both welcome and protection. Take up thy master; 80



- 
- 49 **Where is the patience now:** Kent is concerned about the King's sanity.
  - 52 **Mar my counterfeiting:** Hamper my deception.
  - 54 **Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart:** Names of pet dogs.
  - 56–60 **Be thy mouth or black or white ... trundle-tail:** Edgar lists various types of dogs.
  - 64 **Do de, de, de. Sese:** This line is deliberate nonsense.
  - 65 **Thy horn is dry:** Beggars carried a horn, which they blew to beg for money. Edgar means he is no longer able to play his part.
  - 66 **Then let them anatomise Regan:** Let them cut Regan open.
  - 68 **Entertain for one of my hundred:** Retain as one of my hundred knights.



If thou shouldst dally half an hour, his life,  
 With thine and all that offer to defend him,  
 Stand in assured loss. Take up, take up,  
 And follow me, that will to some provision  
 Give thee quick conduct. Come, come, away.

[Exit]



**84–85 That will to some provision / Give thee quick conduct:** Who will take you quickly to some food supplies.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What news does Gloucester disclose at the end of this scene and what does he advise Kent to do?
- 2 Find one or more quotations from this scene that reinforce the following themes.

Theme	Quotation(s)
Judgement	
Injustice	
The gap between appearance and reality	
Mistreatment of parents	

- 3 Lear describes his daughters as 'she foxes'. Why do you think he compares them to this particular animal?
- 4 How does Lear's language mirror his mental deterioration?
- 5 What is the effect on the tone of this scene of Edgar's aside: 'My tears begin to take his part ...' (line 51)? Why might Shakespeare have thought it necessary to include this aside?



EXTEND

- 1 Read the Fool's lines about gentleman and yeoman (lines 9–10) and the text notes. How are the Fool's comments relevant to Lear's situation?
- 2 How does Lear's imaginary trial of his daughters mirror the nature of the love-test in the opening scene? In what ways is it a cruel parody of this scene?
- 3 Lear asks: 'Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?' This may cause us to think of arguments that set nature in opposition to nurture.
  - a Do you think the way Lear raised his daughters is partially or totally to blame for the way they are?
  - b Which aspects of Lear's personality do you think Shakespeare is emphasising through having him ask this question?
- 4 'And I'll go to bed at noon' (line 73) is the Fool's final line. In what way or ways is this fitting as his final line?

- 5 Lear's mock trial of his daughters doesn't appear in the First Folio text of the play (1623), and many critics argue that this constituted Shakespeare's final editorial decision. Write a paragraph arguing why this part should be included or omitted from a production of the play.



DISCUSS

Does this scene increase your sympathy for Lear? Why or why not?

## Act 3 Scene 7

### CHARACTERS

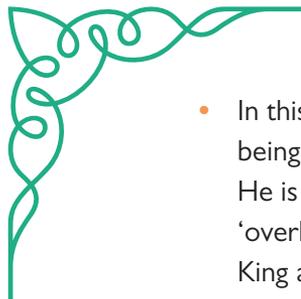
Cornwall  
Gloucester  
Regan  
Servant  
Oswald  
Gonerill  
Edmund

### IN A NUTSHELL

*Cornwall gives instructions for meeting the French army and finding Gloucester, warning Edmund that he will not want to be present for the punishments they will give his father. Edmund quickly exits with Gonerill. When Gloucester is brought in, Cornwall and Regan physically and verbally abuse him. After a brief interrogation, Cornwall plucks out one of Gloucester's eyes. Before he can pluck out the other, a servant attempts to prevent him and in the fighting Cornwall is mortally wounded. The servant is then stabbed from behind by Regan, killing him almost instantly. Cornwall finishes blinding Gloucester who, in agony, calls out for Edmund to take revenge. Regan cruelly reveals the truth to Gloucester before Cornwall gives the instruction to turn Gloucester out of doors.*

### Before you read

- When reading Shakespeare it is helpful to remember that the meanings of some words shift over time. For example, in the late seventeenth century King Charles II described the newly constructed St Paul's Cathedral as 'awful, pompous and artificial' and he was being positive about the building. By 'awful', Charles meant that the building inspired awe; by 'pompous' that it was appropriate for ceremonies; and by 'artificial' that the building was constructed artfully with great craftsmanship. In this scene Gloucester calls Gonerill a 'naughty lady', by which he means something more like evil or malevolent. Some modern productions cut this line for fear of laughter from the audience, which might release some of the tension in this terrible and disturbing scene.



- In this scene both Cornwall and Regan accuse Gloucester of treachery, of being a traitor. You might reflect on the ambiguity of Gloucester's position. He is a powerful noble but, as ruler of half of Britain, Cornwall is his 'overlord' or 'arch-patron'. Despite this, Gloucester still recognises Lear as King and when he discovers the plot on Lear's life, he rallies to the King.



<b>Festinate:</b>	Speedy
<b>Posts:</b>	Messengers
<b>Hence:</b>	From here
<b>Pinion:</b>	Bind or tie up
<b>Ruffle:</b>	Manhandle or treat roughly
<b>Confederacy:</b>	Conspiracy
<b>Wherefore:</b>	Why
<b>Overture:</b>	Revelation

## Gloucester's castle.

*[CORNWALL, REGAN, GONERILL, EDMUND and Servants enter]*

CORNWALL *[To GONERILL]* Post speedily to my Lord your husband, show him this letter. The army of France is landed. Seek out the traitor Gloucester.

*[Some of the Servants exit]*

REGAN Hang him instantly.

GONERILL Pluck out his eyes.

CORNWALL Leave him to my displeasure. Edmund, keep you our sister company; 5  
the revenges we are bound to take upon your traitorous father are  
not fit for your beholding. Advise the Duke where you are going, to  
a most festinate preparation. We are bound to the like. Our posts  
shall be swift and intelligent betwixt us. Farewell, dear sister.  
Farewell, my Lord of Gloucester. 10

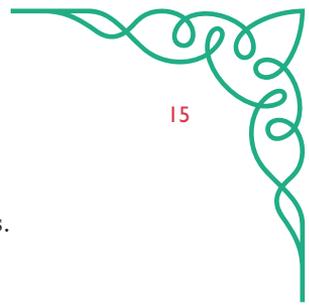
*[OSWALD enters]*

OSWALD How now! Where's the King?  
My Lord of Gloucester hath conveyed him hence.  
Some five or six-and-thirty of his knights,  
Hot questrists after him, met him at gate,



7-8 **Advise the Duke where you are going ... preparation:** Advise the Duke, to whom you are going, to get ready quickly.

14 **Hot questrists after him:** Seeking after him hotly (as in, 'hot on his trail').



Who, with some other of the Lord's dependants  
 Are gone with him towards Dover, where they boast  
 To have well-armed friends.

15

CORNWALL Get horses for your mistress.

*[OSWALD exits]*

GONERILL Farewell, sweet Lord, and sister.

CORNWALL Edmund, farewell.

*[GONERILL and EDMUND exit]*

Go seek the traitor Gloucester.  
 Pinion him like a thief; bring him before us.

20

*[Servants exit]*

Though well we may not pass upon his life  
 Without the form of justice, yet our power  
 Shall do a courtesy to our wrath, which men  
 May blame but not control. Who's there? The traitor?

25

*[GLOUCESTER enters, brought in by two or three Servants]*

REGAN Ingrateful fox! 'tis he!

CORNWALL Bind fast his corky arms.

GLOUCESTER What mean your Graces? Good my friends, consider  
 You are my guests. Do me no foul play, friends.

CORNWALL Bind him, I say.

*[Servants bind him]*

REGAN Hard, hard! O filthy traitor!

30

GLOUCESTER Unmerciful lady as you are, I'm none.

CORNWALL To this chair bind him. Villain, thou shalt find –

*[REGAN plucks his beard]*

GLOUCESTER By the kind gods, 'tis most ignobly done  
 To pluck me by the beard.

REGAN So white, and such a traitor!

GLOUCESTER Naughty lady,  
 These hairs, which thou dost ravish from my chin,

35



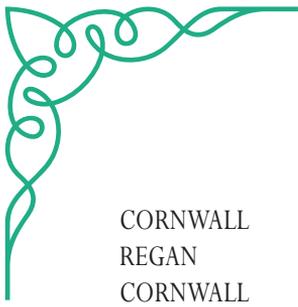
**22–23** **Though well we may not pass ... form of justice:** Even though we may not sentence him to death in the absence of a proper trial.

**24** **Shall do a courtesy to our wrath:** Shall 'curtsy' to our wrath (as in, shall defer to our wrath).

**27** **Corky arms:** Weak arms (dry and withered, as if made from cork).

**30** **Hard, hard:** Regan seems to be responding to some unwillingness in the servants to bind Gloucester.

**35** **So white:** From age, yet also implying that Gloucester is a coward. White also has connotations of moral purity, which Regan implies he is lacking.

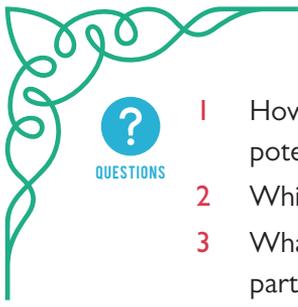


Will quicken and accuse thee. I am your host;  
 With robbers' hands my hospitable favours  
 You should not ruffle thus. What will you do?  
 CORNWALL Come, sir, what letters had you late from France? 40  
 REGAN Be simple-answered, for we know the truth.  
 CORNWALL And what confederacy have you with the traitors  
 Late footed in the kingdom?  
 REGAN To whose hands  
 Have you sent the lunatic King? Speak!  
 GLOUCESTER I have a letter guessingly set down, 45  
 Which came from one that's of a neutral heart  
 And not from one opposed.  
 CORNWALL Cunning.  
 REGAN And false.  
 CORNWALL Where hast thou sent the King?  
 GLOUCESTER To Dover.  
 REGAN Wherefore to Dover? Wast thou not charged at peril –  
 CORNWALL Wherefore to Dover? Let him first answer that. 50  
 GLOUCESTER I am tied to the stake, and I must stand the course.  
 REGAN Wherefore to Dover?  
 GLOUCESTER Because I would not see  
 Thy cruel nails pluck out his poor old eyes;  
 Nor thy fierce sister in his anointed flesh  
 Stick boarish fangs. The sea, with such a storm 55  
 As his bare head in hell-black night endured,  
 Would have buoyed up and quenched the stelled fires;  
 Yet, poor old heart, he holp the heavens to rain.  
 If wolves had at thy gate howled that dern time  
 Thou shouldst have said, 'Good porter, turn the key.' 60  
 All cruels else subscribed, but I shall see  
 The winged Vengeance overtake such children.  
 CORNWALL See't shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair.  
 Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.



- 49 **Wast thou not charged at peril:** Were you not warned (not to do this) and threatened with death?
- 51 **I am tied to the stake ... stand the course:** This evokes the burning of heretics at the stake. Gloucester is saying, in effect, that he must stand firm and not renounce his position despite the terrible threats.
- 54 **Anointed:** Kings were anointed with oil during coronation ceremonies.
- 57 **Stelled fires:** The fires of the stars.
- 58 **Holp:** Helped.
- 61–62 **All cruels else subscribed ... overtake such children:** I'll forgive all other crimes, but I shall see Vengeance destroy children such as you (i.e. I won't forgive you for this).





QUESTIONS

- 1 How does the beginning of this scene present Gonerill and Regan as potentially more vindictive and brutal than Cornwall?
- 2 Which elements particularly convey the brutality of Gloucester's blinding?
- 3 What action does the 1<sup>ST</sup> Servant take and why are Cornwall and Regan particularly surprised and incensed by this?



EXTEND

- 1 How does Shakespeare's language convey a sense of urgency in the first 55 lines of this scene? You may like to present your thoughts in a table.
- 2 How is Gloucester's brutal treatment foreshadowed in this scene? Try to find two or three examples and comment on their effect.



DISCUSS

How would you portray the blinding of Gloucester if you were directing this play? Consider how you might use sound, light, colour and blocking to emphasise the horror of this scene.

## Thinking about human nature

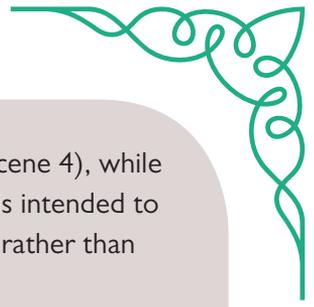
Ancient philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and the Christian civilisation in which Shakespeare lived and worked, defined the human being as a 'rational animal'. They regarded human beings as part of the animal kingdom, in the sense that we have animate bodies, but taught that we are also distinguished from the rest of the animal kingdom by our ability to think and to reason. This is demonstrated by such things as our ability to choose between good or evil, to lie or tell the truth, and to act upon or resist our desires and passions. Even today, most scientists and philosophers believe that these choices are impossible for other animals.

Nonetheless, when people give in to their desires and passions, their behaviour is often compared to that of animals, to suggest that such behaviour is less than human. If a friend (or more likely an enemy!) calls you a 'bitch' or a 'cow', a 'dog' or a 'pig', they are making use of a very old form of verbal abuse, one with an interesting background. In the Middle Ages, animals were often used to symbolise various sins. Shakespeare draws on this tradition when he has Edgar (as Tom o' Bedlam) refer to himself as a 'hog in sloth' and a 'wolf in greediness' (Act 3 Scene 4).

Throughout *King Lear*, Shakespeare explores the tension between the animal and the rational aspects of being human. He does this principally through the use of bestial imagery.

### **Bestial imagery**

With one or two exceptions (such as Lear's description of himself and Cordelia, in Act 5 Scene 3, as two birds in a cage), the bestial imagery has negative connotations.



Lear, for example, calls Gonerill and Regan ‘Pelican daughters’ (Act 3 Scene 4), while Regan calls Gloucester a ‘dog’ (Act 3 Scene 7). In each case, the insult is intended to suggest that the person has behaved in a manner befitting wild animals rather than rational human beings.

This degradation of human nature, to the condition of brute animals, is explored elsewhere. Lear describes ‘Unaccommodated man’ as ‘no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal’ (Act 3 Scene 4), when he encounters Tom o’ Bedlam. He had earlier declared to his daughters that ‘Man’s life is cheap as beast’s’ (Act 2 Scene 4) unless he has more than the barest necessities. Certainly without money, power, elaborate shelter or clothing, humankind appears to Lear to be less a rational animal than merely a brutish creature in which nature has been ‘subdued ... To such a lowness’ (Act 3 Scene 4). And Tom o’ Bedlam seems to confirm this by describing his diet of rats, dung and ‘ditch-dog’! Whereas those with many ‘additions’ of clothing, retinue, authority and power (such as a king) are seen as being at the furthest remove from the animal state, beggars by contrast are regarded in the play as just above the state of animals, ‘near to beast’ (Act 2 Scene 3), on account of their ‘penury’ and lack of such ‘addition’.

It is more than a little ironic, therefore, that Tom o’ Bedlam is regarded as both a brutish animal *and* a ‘philosopher’. Indeed, the various references to him as a Greek philosopher draw attention to ancient philosophy’s view of the human being as a reasoning animal. This is reinforced much later in the play when Gloucester logically concludes that beggars are not in fact mad, since they actually have reason: ‘He has some reason, else he could not beg’ (Act 4 Scene 1). At the same time, however, the encounter with Tom o’ Bedlam also leads Gloucester to ‘think a man a worm’ (Act 4 Scene 1).

Both Kent and Cordelia lament the collapse of the distinction between the human and the animal at different times in the play. In Act 2 Scene 2 Kent complains to Regan that she would treat her father’s dog better than she treats Kent himself. In Act 5, meanwhile, Cordelia muses that, whereas her sisters were content to leave Lear out in the storm:

Mine enemy’s dog,  
Though he had bit me, should have stood that night  
Against my fire.

The distinction between the animal and the human is, finally, brought to its greatest intensity after Cordelia’s death, in Lear’s desperate question in Act 5 Scene 3:

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,  
And thou no breath at all?

# Act 4

## Act 4 Scene 1

### CHARACTERS

Gloucester  
Edgar  
Old man



### IN A NUTSHELL

*Edgar reflects upon his unhappy state and concludes that his situation cannot get worse. At this moment, his father Gloucester enters led by an old man. In his tortured state, Gloucester laments his unjust treatment of Edgar and reflects upon the harsh reality of life. Gloucester requests that the mad beggar, Tom o' Bedlam (Edgar in disguise) lead the way to the Cliffs of Dover where he wishes to commit suicide.*

### Before you read

- This scene includes a number of asides (see page 37), all delivered by Edgar. Any director of this scene will need to pay close attention to blocking – that is, the positioning of the actors onstage. Most directors would place Edgar upstage (in the foreground) where his comments will be heard by the audience but (apparently) not by the other characters.



**Esperance:** Hope  
**Tenant:** Someone who rents land  
**Fourscore:** Eighty (a score is twenty)





Our means secure us, and our mere defects 20  
 Prove our commodities. O dear son Edgar,  
 The food of thy abused father's wrath!  
 Might I but live to see thee in my touch,  
 I'd say I had eyes again!

OLD MAN How now! Who's there?

EDGAR 25  
*[Aside]* O gods! Who is't can say 'I am at the worst'?  
 I am worse than e'er I was.

OLD MAN 'Tis poor mad Tom.

EDGAR 25  
*[Aside]* And worse I may be yet. The worst is not  
 So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'

OLD MAN  
 Fellow, where goest?

GLOUCESTER Is it a beggar-man?

OLD MAN 30  
 Madman and beggar too.

GLOUCESTER  
 He has some reason, else he could not beg.  
 I' the last night's storm I such a fellow saw  
 Which made me think a man a worm. My son  
 Came then into my mind; and yet my mind  
 Was then scarce friends with him. I have heard more since. 35  
 As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods.  
 They kill us for their sport.

EDGAR *[Aside]* How should this be?

Bad is the trade that must play fool to sorrow,  
 Angering itself and others. *[Aloud]* Bless thee, master!

GLOUCESTER  
 Is that the naked fellow?

OLD MAN 40  
 Ay, my Lord.

GLOUCESTER  
 Then, prithee, get thee away. If, for my sake,  
 Thou wilt o'ertake us, hence a mile or twain,  
 I' the way toward Dover, do it for ancient love,  
 And bring some covering for this naked soul,  
 Which I'll entreat to lead me.

OLD MAN 45  
 Alack, Sir, he is mad.

GLOUCESTER  
 'Tis the times' plague, when madmen lead the blind.  
 Do as I bid thee, or rather do thy pleasure.



**20–21 Our means secure us ... Prove our commodities:** Our wealth ('means') gives us a false sense of security, whereas our lack of means ('defects') can turn to our advantage ('commodities'). Gloucester is indicating that his blindness may actually be a help rather than a hindrance.

**23 To see thee in my touch:** To 'see' you by touching you.

**27–28 The worst is not ... 'This is the worst':** As long as we can utter the words 'this is the worst', then in fact things can get even worse. The worst condition, Edgar is saying, is unspeakably awful. Alternatively he might be saying that while we are alive our situations can always get worse.

**38 Bad is the trade that must play fool to sorrow:** It is awful, in the face of sorrow, to have to act the fool.





QUESTIONS

- 1 Why does Gloucester order the servant away?
- 2 Copy and complete the table below, using quotations from this scene that exemplify the following ideas or feelings.

Idea or feeling	Quotation
Edgar is struggling to maintain his deception	
Gloucester is despairing	
Gloucester regrets his treatment of his son Edgar	
The universe is cruel and malicious	
The desire for the poor to be better provided for	

- 3 What do you think Edgar means by his lament 'World, world, O world!' (line 10)?
- 4 How has Gloucester changed since Act 1?



EXTEND

- 1 Briefly summarise Edgar's soliloquy (lines 1–12). Why do you think Shakespeare chose to open the scene with this speech?
- 2 Write a short paragraph about the repetition that occurs in this scene and assess the effect of this device.
- 3 Write a short paragraph about the animal or bestial imagery in this scene and assess its impact.
- 4 The dialogue in this scene expresses despair at the nature of the universe. In what ways does the scene also contain glimpses of humanity?



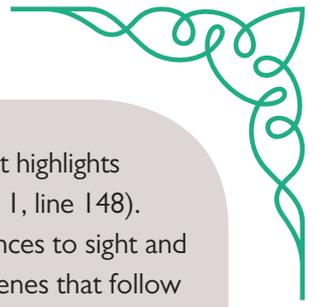
DISCUSS

Why do you think Edgar does not reveal his true identity to Gloucester? What do you think might be Shakespeare's purpose in constructing the scene this way?

## A look at the imagery of eyesight and blindness

*King Lear* is replete with imagery referring to eyes, eyesight and blindness. Gonerill introduces this imagery in her initial speech, when she claims that her love for the King is 'Dearer than eyesight' (Act 1 Scene 1, line 46). Lear banishes Kent with the phrase 'Out of my sight' (Act 1 Scene 1, line 147) and, when he rejects Cordelia, laments that he will never 'see / That face of hers again' (Act 1 Scene 1, lines 253–54).

The play balances these references to literal sight with the concept of moral insight. It is telling that Gonerill's protestations of love turn out to be deceptive, and Lear's judgement

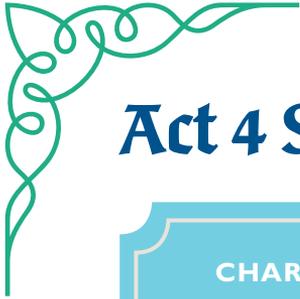


of Cordelia proves rash and shallow. In the opening scene of the play, Kent highlights Lear's lack of moral insight when he asks Lear to 'see better' (Act I Scene I, line 148).

In addition to foreshadowing Gloucester's horrific blinding, the references to sight and eyes persistently draw attention to the theme of moral blindness. The scenes that follow are replete with references to eyes and eyesight. These references are complemented by the fact that much of the play takes place at night, with characters struggling to recognise one another. Metaphorically this lack of recognition, or moral blindness, is a failing Lear and Gloucester share.

It is ironic that after his blinding Gloucester sees things as they really are for the first time. He draws particular attention to his moral blindness when he says: 'I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; / I stumbled when I saw' (Act 4 Scene I, lines 18–19). Gloucester's physical blinding brings moral insight, teaching him to see 'feelingly'. This is reinforced when he says, in the same scene, when referring to Edgar: 'might I but live to see thee in my touch / I'd say I had eyes again' (lines 23–24). This is just before Edgar enters and takes him by the arm. Gloucester does not know it is Edgar, and yet through Edgar's help he does eventually 'see' that it was morally wrong to attempt suicide. Edgar becomes Gloucester's moral 'eyes', in this case.

The symbolic connection between physical blindness and moral insight was also made by the ancient Greeks. In Sophocles' famous play *Oedipus Rex*, Tiresias, the prophet of Thebes, is blind. Tiresias 'sees' the truth of what Oedipus has unwittingly done: killed his father and married his mother. When Oedipus comes to realise the truth of Tiresias's claim, he blinds himself because he cannot bear to look upon the children he has fathered with his own mother. In this case, his insight – his realisation of what he has done – expresses itself in outward blindness. Shakespeare reverses the dynamic in *King Lear*. Gloucester's blindness does not come as a result of insight, but instead *leads* to insight, as his inability to see physically forces him to look inward.



# Act 4 Scene 2

## CHARACTERS

Gonerill  
Albany  
Messenger  
Oswald  
Edmund

## IN A NUTSHELL



Oswald reports to Gonerill that her husband, Albany, is indifferent to her cause and that his sympathy is with Lear. Gonerill interprets this attitude as cowardice and states her intention to take command of Albany's army herself. She orders Edmund to go and muster Cornwall's forces, making clear her attraction for Edmund and dismissing him with a kiss. When Albany enters, Gonerill criticises him for not welcoming her, but Albany responds with contempt. In a heated exchange, Albany accuses his wife of practising evil and Gonerill accuses her husband of cowardice. A messenger enters with news of Gloucester's blinding and the death of Cornwall. This shocks Albany and he vows to take revenge. The messenger gives Gonerill a letter from her sister and, in an aside, Gonerill stresses her fear that Regan is now available to marry Edmund.

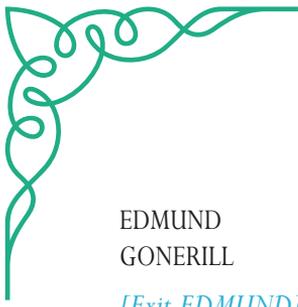
## Before you read

- In staging this scene, a director has to consider the nature of the kiss and Edmund's response. Edmund's only line, 'Yours in the ranks of death' (line 26), suggests that, outwardly at least, he is receptive to Gonerill's advances. It is interesting to note that Oswald witnesses the kiss and Gonerill's thinly veiled disloyalty to her husband. The director must decide what Oswald's reaction to Gonerill's speech and the kiss should be. Will he be surprised or does he know his mistress better than that? It certainly suggests Oswald is privy to some of Gonerill's darker machinations, and this scene seems to support Edgar's later description of Oswald as a 'serviceable villain, / As duteous to the vices of [his] mistress / As badness would desire' (Act 4 Scene 5, lines 242–44).



**Musters:** Soldiers  
**Conceive:** Understand  
**Usurps:** Takes over or takes wrongful possession of





Decline your head: this kiss, if it durst speak,  
 Would stretch thy spirits up into the air.  
 Conceive, and fare thee well. 25  
 Yours in the ranks of death.

EDMUND  
 GONERILL My most dear Gloucester!

*[Exit EDMUND]*

O, the difference of man and man!  
 To thee a woman's services are due.  
 A fool usurps my bed.

OSWALD Madam, here comes my Lord.

*[Exit OSWALD]*

*[Enter ALBANY]*

GONERILL I have been worth the whistling.  
 ALBANY O Gonerill! 30  
 You are not worth the dust which the rude wind  
 Blows in your face.

GONERILL Milk-livered man!  
 That bear'st a cheek for blows, a head for wrongs!  
 Who hast not in thy brows an eye discerning  
 Thine honour from thy suffering.

ALBANY See thyself, devil! 35  
 Proper deformity seems not in the fiend  
 So horrid as in woman.

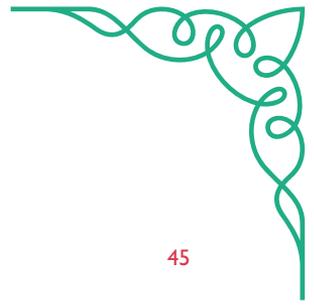
GONERILL O vain fool!

*[Enter a MESSENGER]*

ALBANY What news?  
 MESSENGER O, my good Lord, the Duke of Cornwall's dead,  
 Slain by his servant, going to put out 40  
 The other eye of Gloucester.



- 
- 25 **Conceive:** Think about this.
  - 26 **Yours in the ranks of death:** I will be yours even among the dead.
  - 29 **A fool usurps my bed:** My idiot husband wrongly occupies my bed.
  - 30 **I have been worth the whistling:** The old proverb states: 'It is a poor dog that is not worth the whistling.' Gonerill's point is that once upon a time her husband would have called for her upon her return home, whereas now he treats her like the proverbial poor dog, ignoring her.
  - 32 **Milk-livered:** Cowardly.
  - 33 **That bear'st a cheek for blows:** See **Thinking about contrast and antithesis**, page 151.
  - 34–35 **Who has not in thy brows ... from thy suffering:** Gonerill is saying to Albany that he cannot see the difference between that which offends his honour (and demands vengeance) and the inevitable suffering of life, which must be endured.
  - 36–37 **Proper deformity ... So horrid as in woman:** Albany is saying that true evil ('proper deformity') is more horrid in a woman than in the Devil, 'the fiend' (since we expect it in the Devil but not in a woman).



ALBANY Gloucester's eyes?  
 MESSENGER A servant that he bred, thrilled with remorse,  
 Opposed against the act, bending his sword  
 To his great master; who, thereat enraged,  
 Flew on him, and amongst them felled him dead,  
 But not without that harmful stroke which since  
 Hath plucked him after. 45

ALBANY This shows you are above,  
 You justicers, that these our nether crimes  
 So speedily can venge! But, O poor Gloucester!  
 Lost he his other eye?

MESSENGER Both, both, my Lord. 50  
 This letter, Madam, craves a speedy answer;  
 'Tis from your sister.

GONERILL *[Aside]* One way I like this well.  
 But being widow, and my Gloucester with her,  
 May all the building in my fancy pluck  
 Upon my hateful life. Another way, 55  
 The news is not so tart. — *[Aloud]* I'll read and answer.

*[Exit]*

ALBANY Where was his son when they did take his eyes?

MESSENGER Come with my Lady hither.

ALBANY He is not here.

MESSENGER No, my good Lord; I met him back again.

ALBANY Knows he the wickedness? 60

MESSENGER Ay, my good Lord. 'Twas he informed against him,  
 And quit the house on purpose, that their punishment  
 Might have the freer course.

ALBANY Gloucester, I live  
 To thank thee for the love thou show'dst the King  
 And to revenge thine eyes. Come hither, friend; 65  
 Tell me what more thou knowest.

*[Exit]*



42 **A servant that he bred, thrilled with remorse:** A servant that he raised, overcome with compassion.

47 **Hath plucked him after:** Has later killed him.

48 **Nether crimes:** Most evil crimes (perhaps originating in the netherworld, i.e. Hell).

52 **One way I like this well:** In one way, I'm glad he's dead.

53 **But being widow:** But Regan being a widow.

54–55 **May all the building ... hateful life:** May pull all my fantasies (like buildings) down, so that they fall 'upon my hateful life' and destroy me and my plans for the future.

56 **Tart:** Bitter.

59 **Met him back again:** I met him again as he was on his way back from here.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What is Gonerill's attitude towards her husband? What are her complaints against him?
- 2 What is Albany's attitude towards his wife? What are his complaints against her?
- 3 What are Albany's feelings about the news the messenger brings?



EXTEND

- 1 When Albany hears of Cornwall's death he remarks, 'This shows you are above, / You justicers' (lines 47–48). Do you think the news the servant brings warrants this response? Explain your answer in two or three sentences.
- 2 When Gonerill hears of Cornwall's death she remarks 'One way I like this well' and 'another way, / The news is not so tart [bitter]' (lines 52–56). In what way might the news of Cornwall's death be good for Gonerill?



DISCUSS

Read **Before you read** on page 146. How would you stage the first 30 lines of this scene if you were a director?

### Trevor Nunn: DVD Act 4 Scene 2



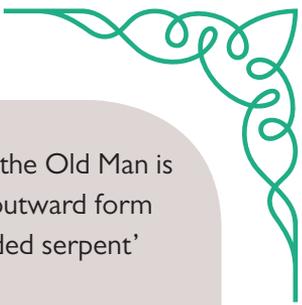
PRESS PLAY

- 1 How does Nunn suggest sexual desire between Edmund and Gonerill?
- 2 What is Oswald's reaction to Edmund and Gonerill's intimacy?
- 3 How does Frances Barber (the actor playing Gonerill) express disdain and condescension towards Albany?

## Thinking about contrast and antithesis

Like most of Shakespeare's plays, *King Lear* is a study of contrasts. At the level of the sentence, Shakespeare's work is replete with **antithesis** (a balancing of contrasting or opposing statements). We see this, for example, in Edmund's opening speech in Act 1 Scene 2, where he contrasts terms like 'legitimate' and 'honest' with terms such as 'bastard' and 'base'. Such contrasts are also evident in the wider dialogue of the play; for example, Edmund's soliloquies contrast sharply with his dialogue with other characters. Likewise, Cordelia's simple, curt answers in the love-test are contrasted with Gonerill and Regan's verbose (or longwinded) declarations of love.

Act 4 is full of contrasting actions. At the beginning of Scene 1 we see the touching interactions between Gloucester and his loyal tenant (the Old Man), and then the entrance of Edgar, who takes his father by the arm, purportedly with the aim of assisting his suicide, but actually with the aim of preventing it. By contrast, in Scene 2 we see Gonerill in the act of betraying her husband, by kissing Edmund. Her 'trustworthy servant',



Oswald, also stands in stark contrast to Gloucester's loyal tenant. While the Old Man is kind and gentle, Oswald is scheming and treacherous. Whereas Edgar's outward form as Tom o' Bedlam disguises his inner goodness, Gonerill is in reality a 'gilded serpent' (Act 5 Scene 3, line 78).

Such contrasts in character run throughout *King Lear*. In the play's opening scene we witness France's selfless and romantic declaration of love for Cordelia and Burgundy's business-minded rejection of her. Edmund's deceiving of Gloucester for the sake of personal gain is later contrasted with Edgar's deception employed for the sake of helping his father. Edgar is loyal and devoted, while Edmund is treacherous. In the case of the half-brothers, the contrast is reinforced by the fact that they have different mothers. Other less-central characters are also contrasted. Most obviously, Albany is contrasted with Cornwall. Albany, although implicated by association in the initial treachery, comes to the realisation that an evil has been committed. Growing increasingly disillusioned with his wife, Albany stands for justice and truth and, in the end, sides with Edgar. Cornwall on the other hand descends to further evil, and is killed after blinding Gloucester.

In Act 4 Scene 3, Cordelia enters the action of the play for the first time since the opening scene. Cordelia is obviously contrasted with her sisters, so much so that the play gives us extreme visions of the feminine, allowing no middle ground: completely pure, loyal and honest on the one hand; completely immoral, treacherous and deceitful on the other. This contrast is reinforced through biblical allusion. Where Gonerill mocks her husband in Act 4 Scene 2 as 'that bear'st a cheek for blows' (line 33) – alluding to Christ's teachings about 'turning the other cheek' (Matthew 5:39; Luke 6:29) – Cordelia, in Act 4 Scene 3 (lines 23–24), echoes Christ's words (Luke 2:49) when she states: 'O dear father / It is thy business that I go about'.

## Act 4 Scene 3

### CHARACTERS

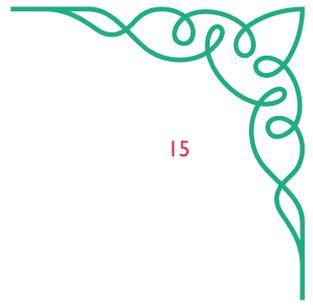
Cordelia  
Doctor  
Messenger



### IN A NUTSHELL

*Cordelia describes Lear's mad condition and sends an officer to find him. When she asks how her father might be restored to health, the doctor recommends rest. A messenger brings news that Britain's army, loyal to Gonerill and Regan, is approaching, but Cordelia is unfazed by this news, asserting that she is in Britain for love of her father.*





CORDELIA Will close the eye of anguish. All blest secrets, 15  
 All you unpublished virtues of the earth,  
 Spring with my tears! Be aidant and remediate  
 In the good man's distress! Seek, seek for him,  
 Lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life  
 That wants the means to lead it.

[Enter a MESSENGER]

MESSENGER News, Madam: 20

CORDELIA The British powers are marching hitherward.  
 'Tis known before. Our preparation stands  
 In expectation of them. O dear father,  
 It is thy business that I go about.

Therefore great France 25  
 My mourning and importuned tears hath pitied.  
 No blown ambition doth our arms incite  
 But love, dear love, and our aged father's right.  
 Soon may I hear and see him!

[Exit]



- 16 **Unpublished virtues:** Unknown plants with secret medicinal powers.
- 17 **Aidant and remediate:** Helpful and healing.
- 20 **Wants the means to lead it:** Lacks the reason or ability to take control of it.
- 21 **British powers:** British armies.
- 22 **Our preparation:** Our prepared army; i.e. ready for battle.
- 23–24 **O dear father ... business that I go about:** The line evokes Christ's words in the Bible (Luke 2:49): 'Knew you not that I must be about my father's business?'
- 27–28 **No blown ambition doth our arms incite / But love:** Cordelia is saying that they are not waging war in order to satisfy inflated ('blown') ambition, but because of love.



QUESTIONS

- 1 In what ways does Shakespeare portray Cordelia as an active, energetic character in this scene?
- 2 The phrase 'O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about' (lines 23–24) alludes to Jesus' words in Luke's gospel (see text note above). How does this influence the audience's view of Cordelia?



EXTEND

Construct a table to outline how Cordelia's dialogue contrasts with that of her sisters.







If you do find him, pray you, give him this;  
 And when your mistress hears thus much from you,  
 I pray, desire her call her wisdom to her.  
 So, fare you well.

35

If you do chance to hear of that blind traitor,  
 Preferment falls on him that cuts him off.

OSWALD

Would I could meet him, Madam! I should show  
 What party I do follow.

REGAN

Fare thee well.

40

[Exit]



33 **Give him this:** Probably referring to a letter.

34 **Hears thus much:** Hears what I've told you.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What does Regan fear?
- 2 What does Regan advise Oswald to do if he happens to meet Gloucester?
- 3 What does this short scene suggest about the unity of the British alliance (the alliance between Regan and Gonerill)?



EXTEND

- 1 How does Shakespeare portray Regan as manipulative in this scene?
- 2 How does this scene further develop your understanding of Oswald's character?

## Allusions to *King Lear* in contemporary culture

You may remember that an allusion is an indirect reference to another event, place, person or work of literature that adds a layer of meaning to what is being said.

Shakespeare makes rich use of allusion, especially to the Bible and classical texts of ancient Greece and Rome; in turn, writers since Shakespeare's time have alluded to his works in various ways.

Many modern writers allude to *King Lear* in their work. Jane Smiley sets the action of *King Lear* in modern-day Iowa in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*. When the Lear-like father, Larry, decides to sign his thousand-acre property over to his daughters for tax purposes, the one objection comes from his youngest daughter, Caroline. For this she is disinherited. The two remaining daughters turn against their father as dark family secrets emerge. Smiley gives a nod to Shakespeare's play through the initial letter of the names she chooses for the central characters (Larry = Lear; Ginny = Gonerill; Rose = Regan; Caroline = Cordelia).



The film *Ran*, directed by Akira Kurosawa and set on the largest of Japan's southern islands in the sixteenth century, is an amalgam of *King Lear* and a Japanese legend. In *Ran*, Lear's daughters are represented as the sons of the warlord Hidetora. In contrast to Lear, Hidetora's downfall is presented as a consequence of the bloody suppression of his rivals. The title *Ran* means 'chaos' or 'desolation of soul' and this is fitting for a film that is more bloody than *King Lear*.

The desolation of the final scene of *King Lear* has proven fertile ground for modern poets. Lear's despair as he carries the lifeless body of Cordelia onto the stage is captured in the lines: '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' (Act 5 Scene 3, lines 230–32). It is fitting that Allen Ginsberg's famous poem, which among other things laments the effects of madness, early death and lost potential, should be entitled *Howl*. We may recall the 'men of stone' of Shakespeare's play when Ginsberg reflects on the indifference of society and we may hear in the emphatic rhythms of his poem a desire to crack 'heaven's vault'. Kent following Lear with 'sad steps' is alluded to in the title of a Philip Larkin poem from the collection *High Windows*: for a poem that reflects on mortality and laments lost opportunity, the title 'Sad Steps' seems the perfect starting point.

The dialogue that precedes and follows Oswald's death (Act 4 Scene 5, lines 237–45) was used for the long fade out in the Beatles song 'I am the Walrus' – a famous early use of sampling. While the sample undoubtedly adds to the strangeness of the song's resolution, it also complements the absurdist lyrics of this song in a period when critics and directors were favouring absurdist interpretations of *King Lear*.

## Act 4 Scene 5

### CHARACTERS

Lear  
Edgar  
Gloucester  
Oswald  
Gentleman



### IN A NUTSHELL

Edgar leads his father, Gloucester, to a place where the old man believes he can commit suicide. Although Gloucester thinks Edgar's voice has altered, Edgar manages to maintain his deception and convinces Gloucester that they are really walking towards the cliff. When Gloucester is convinced he has reached the edge of the cliff he jumps but, because of Edgar's deception, only falls to the ground in front of him.





*Assuming a different personality, Edgar pretends to have witnessed Gloucester falling from a great height and provides a fantastic description of a demon that led Gloucester to the cliff's edge. Edgar proclaims Gloucester's life to be a miracle, prompting Gloucester to reflect that he should bear his sufferings with greater patience.*

*King Lear enters, dressed in flowers, and although his speech is fragmented and often nonsensical, he elaborates on the relevant themes of authority, injustice, hypocrisy and base desires. Some gentlemen sent by Cordelia enter, and, recognising Lear as King, pledge their allegiance. In response, Lear runs offstage and the gentlemen exit in pursuit.*

*Just as Edgar is leading his father to safety, Oswald enters and attempts to execute Gloucester. Edgar defends his father and, after a scuffle, kills Oswald. In his final words, Oswald reveals that he is carrying important letters and, consequently, Edgar learns of Gonerill's plot to be rid of her husband and marry Edmund. Edgar hurries his father offstage, to avoid the approaching army.*

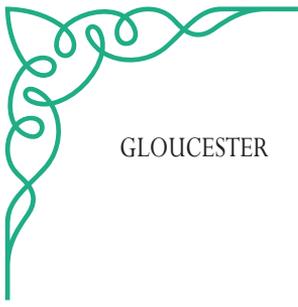
## Before you read

- This scene is fascinating in terms of stagecraft. It is important to remember that the Shakespearean stage was mostly bare, and that a minimum of props was used. Landscapes were conjured up through words rather than backdrops. In the next scene, Edgar creates a landscape through dialogue in much the same way landscapes are created in Shakespeare's other plays. However the landscape in this scene has a further degree of fiction because it is false within the world of the play: what Gloucester is led to believe is the sheer edge of a high cliff, in fact turns out to be flat ground.
- Though Lear's speeches in this scene are fragmented and often difficult, they do revisit some of the play's major themes: justice, adultery, mortality, kingship, authority and the deceptive nature of appearances. It is ironic that the wisdom Lear speaks in his madness contrasts with the foolish judgements he made earlier in the play.



<b>Choughs:</b>	Jackdaws
<b>Gross:</b>	Large
<b>Trifle:</b>	Play with
<b>Conceit:</b>	Imagination (can also mean 'thought' or 'understanding')
<b>Aught:</b>	Anything
<b>Gossamer:</b>	The thread of a spider's web
<b>Ague:</b>	Fever
<b>Centaurs:</b>	Mythological creatures, half-man and half-horse, known for their promiscuity
<b>Girdle:</b>	Waist
<b>Beadle:</b>	Punisher





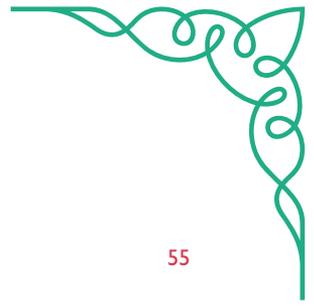
Would I not leap upright.  
 GLOUCESTER Let go my hand.  
 Here, friend, 's another purse; in it a jewel  
 Well worth a poor man's taking. Fairies and gods  
 Prosper it with thee! Go thou farther off. 30  
 Bid me farewell, and let me hear thee going.  
 EDGAR Now fare you well, good Sir.  
 GLOUCESTER With all my heart.  
 EDGAR *[Aside]* Why I do trifle thus with his despair  
 Is done to cure it.  
 GLOUCESTER *[Kneeling]* O you mighty gods!  
 This world I do renounce, and, in your sights 35  
 Shake patiently my great affliction off.  
 If I could bear it longer and not fall  
 To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,  
 My snuff and loathèd part of nature should  
 Burn itself out. If Edgar live, O, bless him! 40  
 Now, fellow, fare thee well.  
 EDGAR Gone, Sir. Farewell. –

*[GLOUCESTER falls forward]*

And yet I know not how conceit may rob  
 The treasury of life, when life itself  
 Yields to the theft. Had he been where he thought,  
 By this had thought been past. – Alive or dead? 45  
 Ho, you, Sir! Friend! Hear you, Sir? Speak! –  
 Thus might he pass indeed. Yet he revives –  
 What are you, Sir?  
 GLOUCESTER Away, and let me die.  
 EDGAR Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air,  
 So many fathom down precipitating, 50



- 
- 27 **Would I not leap upright:** I would not even jump straight up into the air (let alone out over the cliff's edge).
  - 30 **Prosper it:** Make it (the value of the jewel) increase.
  - 33–34 **Why I do trifle thus ... to cure it:** Edgar is telling the audience that he toys with Gloucester's despair only to cure him of it.
  - 38 **To quarrel with:** Go into battle with.
  - 39 **My snuff and loathèd part of nature:** My life's end (like the 'snuff' or wick of the candle), which is a hated part of nature.
  - 42–44 **And yet I know not how conceit ... yields to the theft:** And yet I don't know whether this deception may take life after all, when that life desires to be taken ('Yields to the theft'). Edgar fears that Gloucester may die anyway, thinking he has fallen, given that he wants to die.
  - 49 **Hadst thou been aught but ... air:** Had you been anything but gossamer, feathers, air.
  - 50 **So many fathom down precipitating:** Falling ('precipitating') down so many fathoms. (A fathom is 6 feet, or about 1.8 metres.)



Thou'dst shivered like an egg; but thou dost breathe,  
 Hast heavy substance; bleed'st not, speak'st, art sound.  
 Ten masts at each make not the altitude  
 Which thou hast perpendicularly fell.  
 Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again. 55

GLOUCESTER But have I fallen, or no?  
 EDGAR From the dread summit of this chalky bourn.  
 Look up a-height. The shrill-gorged lark so far  
 Cannot be seen or heard. Do but look up.

GLOUCESTER Alack, I have no eyes. 60  
 Is wretchedness deprived that benefit  
 To end itself by death? 'Twas yet some comfort  
 When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage  
 And frustrate his proud will.

EDGAR Give me your arm.  
 Up – so. How is't? Feel you your legs? You stand. 65  
 GLOUCESTER Too well, too well.  
 EDGAR This is above all strangeness.  
 Upon the crown o' the cliff what thing was that  
 Which parted from you?

GLOUCESTER A poor unfortunate beggar.  
 EDGAR As I stood here below methought his eyes  
 Were two full moons; he had a thousand noses,  
 Horns whelked and waved like the enraged sea. 70  
 It was some fiend. Therefore, thou happy father,  
 Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours  
 Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.

GLOUCESTER I do remember now. Henceforth I'll bear 75  
 Affliction till it do cry out itself  
 'Enough, enough,' and die. That thing you speak of,  
 I took it for a man; often 'twould say  
 'The fiend, the fiend'; he led me to that place.

EDGAR Bear free and patient thoughts. But who comes here? 80

*[Enter KING LEAR, dressed with wild flowers]*



- 51 **Thou'dst shivered like an egg:** You would have shattered like an egg.
- 53 **Ten masts at each:** Ten masts placed end to end.
- 57 **Chalky bourn:** The white (chalk) cliffs of Dover.
- 58 **Shrill-gorged:** Shrill-throated; shrill-voiced.
- 63 **Beguile:** Deceive.
- 71 **Horns whelked:** Twisted horns.
- 73–74 **Who make them honours ... impossibilities:** Who glorify themselves by doing what seems impossible for men to do.



The safer sense will ne'er accommodate  
His master thus.

KING LEAR No, they cannot touch me for coining. I am the King himself.

EDGAR O thou side-piercing sight!

KING LEAR Nature's above art in that respect. There's your press-money. That 85  
fellow handles his bow like a crow-keeper. – Draw me a clothier's yard.  
– Look, look, a mouse! – Peace, peace! This piece of toasted cheese will  
do't. – There's my gauntlet; I'll prove it on a giant. – Bring up the  
brown bills. – O, well flown, bird! I' the clout, i' the clout! Hewgh! –  
Give the word. 90

EDGAR Sweet marjoram.

KING LEAR Pass.

GLOUCESTER I know that voice.

KING LEAR Ha! Gonerill with a white beard! They flattered me like a dog and told  
me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say 95  
'ay' and 'no' to every thing that I said! 'Ay' and 'no' too was no good  
divinity. When the rain came to wet me once and the wind to make  
me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I  
found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words.  
They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie: I am not ague-proof. 100

GLOUCESTER The trick of that voice I do well remember.  
Is't not the King?



- 
- 81–82 **The safer sense will ne'er accommodate / His master thus:** Reason ('the safer sense') would never dress its owner ('His master') in this manner (therefore Lear is mad).
- 83 **They cannot touch me for coining ... the King himself:** They cannot punish me for counterfeiting money, since as the King I am in charge of minting coins.
- 86 **Crow-keeper:** A scarecrow.
- 86 **Draw me a clothier's yard:** Draw the bow full length. A 'clothier's yard' (37 inches, about 94 cm) is actually longer than a yard (36 inches), in the same way 'a baker's dozen' is 13 rather than 12.
- 87–88 **Will do't:** Will catch the mouse.
- 88 **There's my gauntlet; I'll prove it on a giant:** Lear is laying down the gauntlet (his glove), a colloquial expression that means to challenge someone to a fight. He claims he would prove his superior strength even against a giant.
- 89 **Brown bills:** Brown painted targets (to shoot at); **Well flown, bird:** Lear is referring to the imaginary arrow; **I' the clout:** The bull's eye.
- 91 **Marjoram:** A plant used to cure insanity.
- 96 **'Ay' and 'no' too was no good divinity:** Saying both 'yes' and 'no' (at the same time) is poor theology. The reference is to Christ's command in Matthew 5:37: 'Let your speech be yes, yes; no, no: for whatsoever is more than these is of the evil one.' Gonerill and Regan clearly failed to follow this injunction in the love-test at the start of the play.
- 97–99 **When the rain came to wet me ... there I smelt 'em out:** Lear suggests that it was in the storm that he discovered the truth ('found 'em ... smelt 'em out') about Gonerill and Regan.
- 101 **The trick:** The accent; the quality.

KING LEAR

Ay, every inch a king.

When I do stare see how the subject quakes.

I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause? Adultery?

Thou shalt not die. Die for adultery! No.

The wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly

Does lecher in my sight.

Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son

Was kinder to his father than my daughters

Got 'tween the lawful sheets.

To't, luxury, pell-mell, for I lack soldiers.

Behold yond simpering dame,

Whose face between her forks presages snow,

That minces virtue and does shake the head

To hear of pleasure's name –

The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't

With a more riotous appetite.

Down from the waist they are centaurs,

Though women all above;

But to the girdle do the gods inherit,

Beneath is all the fiend's.

There's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit: burning, scalding, stench, consumption! Fie, fie, fie! Pah, pah! Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary, to sweeten my imagination. There's money for thee.

GLOUCESTER

O, let me kiss that hand!

KING LEAR

Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality.

GLOUCESTER

O ruined piece of nature! This great world

Shall so wear out to naught. Dost thou know me?

105

110

115

120

125

110 **Got 'tween the lawful sheets:** Conceived in wedlock.

111 **To't, luxury, pell-mell:** Get to it, lust ('luxury'), uninhibited.

113 **Whose face between her forks presages snow:** Whose face between her legs ('forks') suggests the coming of snow. The point of the image is that her face is cold like snow.

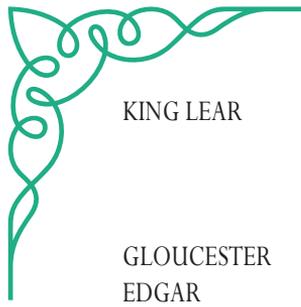
114 **Minces virtue:** Affects a coy attitude.

114–15 **Does shake the head ... name:** Shakes her head in disgust when she hears sex mentioned by name.

116 **Fitchew:** A breed of cat (slang for prostitute); **Soiled:** Well fed with grass.

120–21 **But to the girdle do the gods ... Beneath is all the fiend's:** Lear is suggesting that the gods control everything above the waist (girdle), while the Devil controls everything below the waist. Sexuality is therefore presented as something demonic.

124 **Civet:** Perfume made using the glands of the civet cat; **Good apothecary:** Good chemist.



KING LEAR I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squiny 130  
at me? No, do thy worst, blind Cupid! I'll not  
love. Read thou this challenge; mark but the  
penning of it.

GLOUCESTER Were all the letters suns, I could not see.  
EDGAR I would not take this from report. It is, 135  
And my heart breaks at it.

KING LEAR Read.

GLOUCESTER What, with the case of eyes?

KING LEAR O, ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head, nor no money 140  
in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light;  
yet you see how this world goes.

GLOUCESTER I see it feelingly.

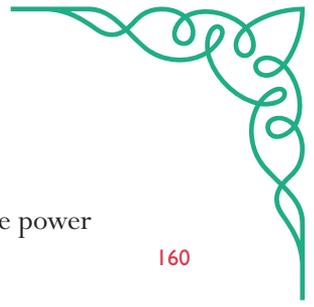
KING LEAR What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look  
with thine ears. See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark  
in thine ear – change places and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, 145  
which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

GLOUCESTER Ay, Sir.

KING LEAR And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great  
image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office.  
Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand. 150  
Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back.  
Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind  
For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.  
Through tattered clothes great vices do appear;  
Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold, 155



- 
- 130 **Squiny:** Squint.
- 131 **Blind Cupid:** In the popular myth, Cupid was believed to shoot his arrows blindly and randomly. His arrows were symbols of the love he inspired in people's hearts.
- 135 **I would not take this from report:** I would not believe this only from hearing about it (from another). Edgar is saying, in other words, this pitiful scene has to be seen to be believed.
- 145–46 **Handy-dandy ... is the thief:** Lear is saying that justice and injustice (represented by the thief) are indistinguishable and cannot be told apart.
- 148 **The creature:** The beggar.
- 150 **Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand:** Lear is urging the punisher to restrain himself from carrying out the punishment ('hold thy bloody hand').
- 152–53 **Thou hotly lusts ... thou whipp'st her:** You actually desire to commit with her the sin (fornication) for which you are whipping her.
- 153 **The usurer hangs the cozener:** The money-lender ('usurer') hangs the con artist ('cozener'). Usury, the charging of unfair interest on loans, was regarded as one of the worst sins in the Middle Ages. It was seen as a far more serious sin than petty swindling by con artists. Lear's point is that often those with the authority to condemn someone to death are worse sinners than those they are condemning.
- 154–55 **Through tattered clothes ... hide all:** The tattered clothes (of the poor) often reveal small sins, whereas the robes and gowns (of the rich and powerful) hide all the sins of those who wear them. Lear is saying that we are inclined to notice the sins of the poor while ignoring the sins of the rich and powerful.



And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;  
 Arm it in rags, a pygmy's straw does pierce it.  
 None does offend, none, I say, none; I'll able 'em:  
 Take that of me, my friend, [*Giving flowers*] who have the power  
 To seal the accuser's lips. Get thee glass eyes,  
 And like a scurvy politician seem  
 To see the things thou dost not. Now, now, now, now!  
 Pull off my boots. Harder, harder – so.

160

EDGAR [*Aside*] O matter and impertinency mixed,  
 Reason in madness!

165

KING LEAR If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.  
 I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester.  
 Thou must be patient; we came crying hither.  
 Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air  
 We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee – Mark!

170

[*He takes off his coronet of flowers*]

GLOUCESTER Alack, alack the day!

KING LEAR When we are born, we cry that we are come  
 To this great stage of fools. – This is a good block.  
 It were a delicate stratagem to shoe  
 A troop of horse with felt. I'll put't in proof;  
 And when I have stolen upon these sons-in-law,  
 Then, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!

175

[*He throws down his flowers and stamps on them*]

[*Enter a GENTLEMAN with Attendants*]

GENTLEMAN O, here he is. Lay hand upon him. – Sir,  
 Your most dear daughter –

KING LEAR No rescue? What, a prisoner? I am even  
 The natural fool of fortune. Use me well;

180



**155–56 Plate sin with gold / And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks:** Cover up sin with gold-plated armour and the sword of justice will harmlessly break when it tries to punish it.

**158 I'll able 'em:** I'll defend them.

**159 Take that of me ... who have the power:** Receive my pardon (kings had authority to pardon criminals).

**161 A scurvy politician:** A disgusting politician.

**173 Block:** Blocks were used to keep a hat's shape when it was taken off, much in the way a barrister or judge will place their wig onto a head-shaped stand when not wearing it. Preachers removed their hats before sermons. Lear is perhaps pretending to do so here.

**174–75 Delicate stratagem to shoe / A troop of horse with felt:** A clever plan to put felt (rather than iron) shoes on the horses of the cavalry (with the aim of muffling the sound of their approach).

**175 I'll put't in proof:** I'll put it to the test.



You shall have ransom. Let me have surgeons;  
I am cut to the brains.

GENTLEMAN You shall have any thing.

KING LEAR No seconds? All myself?  
Why, this would make a man a man of salt,  
To use his eyes for garden water-pots,  
Ay, and laying autumn's dust.

185

GENTLEMAN Good sir, –  
KING LEAR I will die bravely, like a bridegroom. What!  
I will be jovial. Come, come. I am a king,  
My masters, know you that?

190

GENTLEMAN You are a royal one, and we obey you.  
KING LEAR Then there's life in't. Come, and you get it, you  
shall get it by running. Sa, sa, sa, sa.

*[Exit running; Attendants follow]*

GENTLEMAN A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch,  
Past speaking of in a king! Thou hast one daughter  
Who redeems nature from the general curse  
Which twain have brought her to.

195

EDGAR Hail, gentle sir.

GENTLEMAN Sir, speed you; what's your will?

EDGAR Do you hear aught, sir, of a battle toward?

200

GENTLEMAN Most sure and vulgar. Everyone hears that  
Which can distinguish sound.

EDGAR But, by your favour,  
How near's the other army?

GENTLEMAN Near and on speedy foot. The main descry  
Stands on the hourly thought.

EDGAR I thank you, sir; that's all.

205

184 **No seconds? All myself:** No supporters? All by myself?

185 **A man of salt:** A man of tears.

187 **Laying autumn's dust:** Settling autumn's dust.

194 **Sa, sa, sa, sa:** 'There, there, there, there'. The cry was used to rouse dogs to the chase when hunting.

196–97 **Thou hast one daughter ... general curse:** Some scholars suggest this alludes to Christ's sacrificial redemption of humankind. Others argue it more specifically alludes to the Virgin Mary. The mother of Jesus was increasingly revered during the Middle Ages as the 'one daughter' of the human race free from the 'general curse' of Original Sin.

198 **Twain have brought her to:** 'Twain', meaning 'two', refers literally to Gonerill and Regan and allegorically to Adam and Eve who brought about humanity's fall.

199 **Sir, speed you:** Sir, godspeed; I wish you success.

200 **A battle toward:** An impending battle.

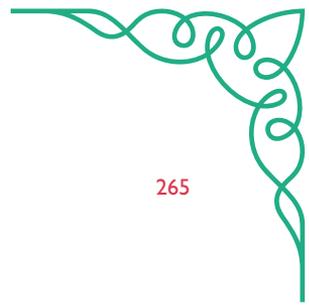
201 **Most sure and vulgar:** It is certainly and commonly known.

204–05 **The main descry ... hourly thought:** The army is expected at any moment.









Of murderous lechers; and in the mature time  
 With this ungracious paper strike the sight  
 Of the death-practised Duke. For him 'tis well  
 That of thy death and business I can tell.

265

GLOUCESTER

The King is mad; how stiff is my vile sense,  
 That I stand up, and have ingenious feeling  
 Of my huge sorrows! Better I were distract;  
 So should my thoughts be severed from my griefs,  
 And woes by wrong imaginations lose  
 The knowledge of themselves.

270

EDGAR

Give me your hand.

*[Drum afar off]*

Far off, methinks, I hear the beaten drum.  
 Come, father, I'll bestow you with a friend.

*[Exit]*



**263 In the mature time:** At the right time.

**265 Death-practised Duke:** The Duke (Albany) whose death has been plotted.

**267 How stiff is my vile sense:** How upright and unbending is my sense of reason.

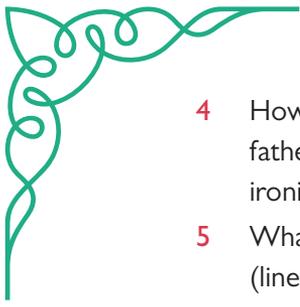
**269 Better I were distract:** It would be better if I were mad.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What does Edgar's purpose in deceiving his father seem to be?
- 2 Read the stage direction that accompanies Lear's entry (after line 80). What do you think Shakespeare is aiming to convey through his costume? How will Lear's appearance affect our interpretation of his lines?
- 3 Copy and complete the table below to demonstrate how Lear's dialogue revisits many of the major themes of the play.

Theme	Quotation or paraphrase	Explanation of what this suggests about the theme
Authority		
Kingship		
Madness		
Justice		
Deceptive appearances		
Adultery		
Mortality		



- 4 How is Lear's statement that 'Gloucester's bastard son / Was kinder to his father than my [his] daughters / Got 'tween the lawful sheets' (lines 108–10) ironic?
- 5 What do you think Lear is suggesting when he says, 'a dog's obeyed in office' (line 149)?
- 6 What evidence is there that Lear has learned patience and humility?
- 7 How do Oswald's opening lines (217–21) make his motives clear?
- 8 What is Edgar's attitude to the following events?
  - a Oswald's death
  - b Gonerill's letter to Edmund
- 9 What does Gloucester conclude when he compares his suffering to Lear's?



EXTEND

- 1 Construct a table to show how Edgar describes a seascape seen from the sheer height of a cliff, through language devices.
- 2 *King Lear*, and Gloucester's character in particular, raises questions concerning free will (that is, how much personal freedom human beings really have). What does Gloucester's failed suicide contribute to this topic?
- 3 Although Lear lacks the robes of a king, he claims he is nevertheless a king by birth, stating 'Nature's above art in that respect' (line 85). How might a modern audience's reception to this line differ from that of a Jacobean audience?
- 4 In what way does the use of bestial imagery contribute to the tone of Lear's speeches?
- 5 In this scene, we see Lear removing his boots. How does this connect with other examples in the play of characters disrobing or changing their clothes?
- 6 What does the Gentleman say about Cordelia? How does this give the audience cause for hope?
- 7 Edgar's change in speech would make Oswald think he is fighting a commoner, someone of lower status. What does this remind us about Oswald's personality?



DISCUSS

What do you think seems to be Edgar's purpose in deceiving his father about his attempted suicide?

# Act 4 Scene 6

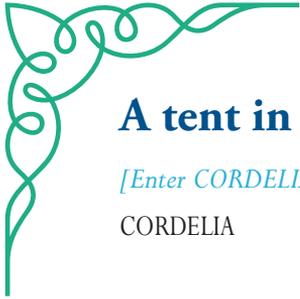


CHARACTERS	IN A NUTSHELL
Cordelia Lear Doctor Gentleman Kent	<i>Cordelia discusses the King's health with a doctor and a gentleman and thanks Kent for his ongoing loyalty to Lear. She encourages him to exchange the lowly clothes he is wearing for clothes more in keeping with his status but Kent states a desire to keep his true identity a secret until a more appropriate time. Some servants enter, carrying the sleeping King Lear on a chair. Upon seeing the King, Cordelia laments the hardships Lear has endured. The gentleman suggests that they wake the King, as he has 'slept long'. Initially Lear believes Cordelia to be a spirit and he, himself, to be dead. As he becomes orientated to his surroundings, he apologises to Cordelia for his treatment of her and confesses his foolishness. Cordelia graciously accepts his apologies.</i>

## Before you read

- This scene contrasts strikingly with the action and violence of the previous scene. Consider how Shakespeare achieves a calmness and peace here. You may like to revisit **Thinking about contrast and antithesis** (page 150) before reading further.

<b>V</b>	<b>Weeds:</b>	Clothes
	<b>Boon:</b>	Request
	<b>Meet:</b>	Appropriate
	<b>Breach:</b>	Wound
	<b>Temperance:</b>	Self-control
	<b>Benediction:</b>	Blessing



## A tent in the French camp.

[Enter CORDELIA, KENT and DOCTOR]

CORDELIA O thou good Kent, how shall I live and work  
To match thy goodness? My life will be too short,  
And every measure fail me.

KENT To be acknowledged, Madam, is o'erpaid.  
All my reports go with the modest truth,  
Nor more, nor clipped, but so. 5

CORDELIA Be better suited.  
These weeds are memories of those worsèr hours.  
I prithee put them off.

KENT Pardon, dear Madam,  
Yet to be known shortens my made intent.  
My boon I make it that you know me not  
Till time and I think meet. 10

CORDELIA Then be't so, my good Lord.  
[To the DOCTOR] How does the King?

DOCTOR Madam, sleeps still.

CORDELIA O you kind gods,  
Cure this great breach in his abusèd nature!  
The untuned and jarring senses O wind up  
Of this child-changèd father! 15

DOCTOR So please your Majesty  
That we may wake the King. He hath slept long.

CORDELIA Be governed by your knowledge and proceed  
I' the sway of your own will. Is he arrayed? 20

[Enter LEAR asleep on a chair carried by Servants]

GENTLEMAN Ay, Madam; in the heaviness of sleep  
We put fresh garments on him.

DOCTOR Be by, good Madam, when we do awake him;  
I doubt not of his temperance.

CORDELIA O my dear father! Restoration hang  
Thy medicine on my lips; and let this kiss  
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters  
Have in thy reverence made. 25

KENT Kind and dear Princess!

---

5 **Go with the modest truth:** Are in accord with the simple truth.

6 **Nor more, nor clipped:** Neither more nor less.

6 **Be better suited:** Change into better clothes.

9 **Shortens my made intent:** Interrupts my plans.

17 **Child-changèd father:** Father changed into a child.







CORDELIA  
KING LEAR

And so I am, I am.  
Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not.  
If you have poison for me I will drink it.  
I know you do not love me, for your sisters  
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.  
You have some cause; they have not.

70

CORDELIA  
KING LEAR

No cause, no cause.  
Am I in France?

KENT

In your own kingdom, Sir.

KING LEAR

Do not abuse me.

DOCTOR

Be comforted, good Madam. The great rage,  
You see, is killed in him.  
Desire him to go in; trouble him no more  
Till further settling.

75

CORDELIA  
KING LEAR

Will't please your Highness walk?  
You must bear with me. Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old  
and foolish.

[Exit]

KENT

My point and period will be thoroughly wrought,  
Or well or ill, as this day's battle's fought.

80

[Exit]



80 **My point and period ... thoroughly wrought:** The purpose and end (of my life) will be thoroughly completed.

81 **Or:** Either.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What is Cordelia's attitude towards her father?
- 2 What is King Lear's state of mind in this scene? How does this contrast with his condition in earlier scenes?
- 3 What effect do you think is achieved by Cordelia's repetition of certain phrases in her conversation with her father? (See lines 40, 66 and 71.)
- 4 Which elements of the two previous scenes appear to foreshadow a happy (or comic) ending?



EXTEND

- 1 Construct and complete a table to demonstrate how Shakespeare creates a calm tone, in contrast with the previous scene. Consider language and details from the plot.
- 2 What might be the symbolic significance of the Doctor's lines: 'in the heaviness of sleep / We put fresh garments on him' (lines 21–22)? How does this connect with Lear's earlier disrobing in the play?

- 3 Lear's dialogue in this scene generally contrasts to that in the previous one. It seems that his sanity has been restored. Copy and complete the table below to illustrate this contrast.

Lear in the previous scene	Lear in this scene
Hectic dialogue, rapidly digressing from subject to subject	
Harsh insulting language	Polite language, e.g.
Fragmented prose and poetry	
Harsh consonants, e.g.	Soothing and gentle consonants and vowel sounds

- 4 In what ways is Cordelia depicted as saintly? How do her actions contribute to our sense of her goodness?



DISCUSS

Imagine you are making a radio production of *King Lear*. How would you instruct the actor playing Cordelia to deliver her lines? Why? What kind of music, if any, would you employ? Why would you include it?

### Trevor Nunn: DVD Act 4 Scene 7 (note: this is Scene 6 in this text)



PRESS PLAY

- 1 Nunn's portrait of Cordelia in the opening scene seems to challenge the notion of her as a suffering innocent. Is his depiction of her character in this scene more conventional?
- 2 What elements emphasise Lear's fragility and vulnerability in this scene?
- 3 How does Nunn make the reconciliation of Lear and Cordelia emotive or moving?

## Thinking about the problem of justice

If one problem can be said to characterise *King Lear* above all others it is that of justice. There are numerous injustices throughout the play, and it is difficult to find a consistent pattern or logic in the way justice is finally dispensed to the various characters.

### The catalogue of injustices

The play opens with a series of gross injustices, as Cordelia is disinherited for speaking the truth, Kent is banished for defending her and her dishonest sisters receive her share of the kingdom. When France learns that Cordelia has been disinherited, he concludes that it must be on account of some terrible crime:





Sure her offence  
Must be of such unnatural degree  
That monsters it.

(Act 1 Scene 1, lines 208–10)

France believes that only an ‘offence’ equal to this could warrant such punishment. He soon realises that Cordelia is innocent of misdemeanour, which leads to the dramatic conclusion that Lear, not Cordelia, is the one who has offended against justice. This leads to great confusion, as can be seen in Gloucester’s disbelieving questions: ‘Kent banished thus? And France in choler parted?’ (Act 1 Scene 2, line 23)

The King’s unjust actions at the start of the play, we soon realise, have implications not only for his household, but for the court, the kingdom and the universe itself – symbolised by the storm (see **A word about pathetic fallacy and foreshadowing** on page 102). In the court, the injustice against Edgar parallels that against Cordelia, as Edmund plays on the weak-mindedness of Gloucester, convincing him that his legitimate son seeks to assassinate him. The good son, Edgar, suffers, while the wicked son, Edmund, begins to ‘grow’ and ‘prosper’ (Act 1 Scene 2, line 21).

### Righting wrongs?

Although the universe is in turmoil in *King Lear*, our expectation is that somehow justice will right the many wrongs catalogued in the play. Albany in particular reinforces this expectation. When he learns that the Duke of Cornwall died soon after blinding Gloucester, he declares:

This shows you are above,  
You justicers, that these our nether crimes  
So speedily can venge!

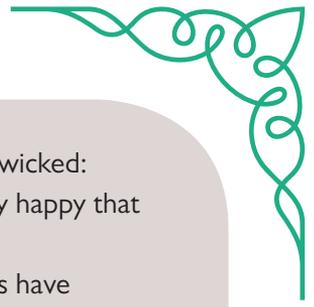
(Act 4 Scene 2, lines 47–49)

In Albany’s view, it is precisely the speed with which Cornwall’s evil act seems to be avenged by the gods that inclines him to affirm the existence of the ‘justicers’ and, therefore, the existence of justice.

Despite Albany’s many virtues, there is something slightly troubling and certainly inadequate about his view of justice. It might seem to be borne out by the demise of Gonerill, Regan and Edmund, or even by Gloucester’s suffering, but how does it account for the imprisonment and murder of Cordelia? Granted, Cordelia’s hangman is in turn killed by Lear, but this hardly seems to satisfy our sense of justice. In fact, it seems only to make us feel more acutely the impossibility of finding justice, since nothing seems able to make up for Cordelia’s death.

### Justice and suffering

The text of *King Lear* explores the problem of justice in ways that sometimes echo passages in the Old Testament of the Bible. Prophets such as Jeremiah try to come to



terms with the sufferings of the just and the apparent prospering of the wicked: 'Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?' (Jeremiah 12:1).

In various ways, *King Lear* asks similar questions and, as many scholars have demonstrated, it seems likely that Shakespeare had such examples from the Old Testament in mind as he was writing the play. While Albany's view seems to reflect 'an eye for an eye' view of justice, Edgar's seems more identifiably Christian. In Edgar's mind:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices  
Make instruments to plague us. (Act 5 Scene 3, lines 160–61)

Here the emphasis is not on how our enemies will be punished, but on why we ourselves are punished. Edgar's opinion is that we are punished for our sins ('pleasant vices'), and ultimately for our own good. Punishment, in this view, is redemptive. Thus Gloucester's blindness and Lear's madness both come as a consequence of their imprudence and pride respectively, yet both in turn lead to enlightenment: Gloucester sees his error in suspecting Edgar, and Lear his error in rejecting Cordelia. Both, in turn, are reconciled with the children they wronged. Lear also learns to sympathise with the poor by 'feel[ing] what wretches feel', in order to 'show the heavens more just' (Act 3 Scene 4, lines 34–36).

Even this view of justice, however, does not make complete sense of Cordelia's death. Some critics see Cordelia as Christ-like (an innocent victim who dies for the crimes of others), but this interpretation points to a reality beyond this life, a reality not made fully present in the play's final moments. Many recent critics have been far bleaker in their interpretations of what *King Lear* suggests about the question of justice. In the final analysis, the play seems to offer only two possible solutions to the problem of justice. Either it is found in the next life, or it does not exist.

# Act 5

## Act 5 Scene 1

### CHARACTERS

Edmund  
Edgar  
Albany  
Regan  
Gonerill

### IN A NUTSHELL

*Edmund and Regan fear that they cannot rely on Albany's allegiance. Regan questions Edmund about his feelings for Gonerill and then states her intention to marry him. When Albany enters with his wife, Gonerill, he complains that the sisters' mistreatment of the King and others is turning public opinion against them. Edgar enters in the guise of a poor man and gives Albany a letter to open before the battle, claiming that he can produce a champion to prove its contents. Alone onstage, Edmund muses about his romantic prospects and reveals his plan to execute Lear and Cordelia once they are captured.*

### Before you read

- Edgar claims that he can produce a champion (or defender) when Albany gives the signal of a trumpet-call. This sets things in place for the fight (or 'trial by combat') between Edmund and Edgar in the final scene. Trial by combat originated among the pre-Christian Germanic peoples and persisted throughout the Middle Ages; the last instance of trial by combat under an English monarch was fought when Shakespeare was still a teenager. This crude method of attaining justice (more common among the upper classes) saw two combatants duelling with swords; the victor was declared to be in the right.

V

**Aught:** Anything  
**Doubt:** Fear  
**Self-reproving:** Self-criticism  
**Ancient of war:** Senior officers  
**Fail:** Come to harm

# The British camp, near Dover.

[Enter, with drum and colours, EDMUND, REGAN, Officers and Soldiers]

EDMUND [To Officer] Know of the Duke if his last purpose hold  
Or whether since he is advised by aught  
To change the course. [To REGAN] He's full of alteration  
And self-reproving. [To Officer] Bring his constant pleasure.

[Exit Officer]

REGAN Our sister's man is certainly miscarried. 5

EDMUND 'Tis to be doubted, Madam.

REGAN Now, sweet Lord,  
You know the goodness I intend upon you.  
Tell me but truly, but then speak the truth,  
Do you not love my sister?

EDMUND In honoured love.

REGAN But have you never found my brother's way 10  
To the forfended place?

EDMUND No, by mine honour, Madam.

REGAN I never shall endure her. Dear my Lord,  
Be not familiar with her.

EDMUND Fear not.

She and the Duke her husband! –

[Enter, with drum and colours, ALBANY, GONERILL and Soldiers]

GONERILL [Aside] I had rather lose the battle than that sister 15  
Should loosen him and me.

ALBANY Our very loving sister, well be-met.  
Sir, this I heard: the King is come to his daughter,  
With others whom the rigour of our state  
Forced to cry out.

REGAN Why is this reasoned? 20

GONERILL Combine together 'gainst the enemy.  
For these domestic and particular broils  
Are not the question here.



1 **Know of the duke ... last purpose hold:** Find out from the Duke if it is still his intention (to wage war).

3 **Alteration:** Indecision.

4 **Constant pleasure:** Final decision.

11 **Forfended place:** Forbidden place (because she is married), referring to the marriage bed.

13 **Familiar:** Intimate.

13 **Fear not:** Do not doubt me.

16 **Should loosen him and me:** Should come between Edmund and me.

22 **Particular broils:** Small quarrels.



Exasperates, makes mad her sister Gonerill,  
And hardly shall I carry out my side,  
Her husband being alive. Now then, we'll use  
His countenance for the battle, which being done,  
Let her who would be rid of him devise  
His speedy taking off. As for the mercy  
Which he intends to Lear and to Cordelia,  
The battle done, and they within our power,  
Shall never see his pardon; for my state  
Stands on me to defend, not to debate.

55

60

[Exit]



60–61 **My state / Stands on me to defend:** My nature forces me to defend (my own interest).



QUESTIONS

- 1 Is Edmund entirely truthful in his conversation with Regan?
- 2 How is Albany addressing Regan as 'our very loving sister' (line 17) ironic?
- 3 What does Edmund propose to do with Lear and Cordelia if his side defeats them in the battle?
- 4 What evidence can you find that the sisters distrust each other?
- 5 How does Edmund use bestial imagery in his portrayal of Gonerill and Regan? How appropriate is this specific animal and its connotations?



EXTEND

- 1 Albany describes those flocking to join the King as people who 'the rigour of our state / Forced to cry out' (lines 19–20). How does his choice of words make his sympathies clear?
- 2 Is the battle Gonerill and Regan's primary concern? What might Shakespeare be suggesting about their fitness to govern the kingdom?
- 3 Both Edgar and his brother Edmund feature in this scene but they never appear onstage at the same time. Why do you think Shakespeare made this dramatic decision?
- 4 At the end of this scene Edmund appears to have a plausible plan to be ruler of the kingdom. Draw a diagram outlining the plan of action he seems to suggest in the speech that ends this scene.



DISCUSS

Do you think Edmund shows any genuine feeling for either of Lear's daughters or is he being purely opportunistic? How does it suit Shakespeare's dramatic purposes that Edmund shows equal affection towards both sisters?



EDGAR

What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:  
Ripeness is all: come on.

10

GLOUCESTER

And that's true too.

[Exit]



- 11 **Ripeness is all:** Edgar means on one level that we should die only at our appointed time, as fruit drops from a tree only when ripe. He is therefore again condemning suicide. On another, related level, he means readiness (for death) 'is all' – that is, we should be spiritually ready for death. In the final act of *Hamlet*, Prince Hamlet expresses similar thoughts on death with the phrase 'the readiness is all'.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What is the outcome of the battle? What are its consequences?
- 2 How does this scene develop the action, or move the plot along? Why would Shakespeare have placed such a short scene here?



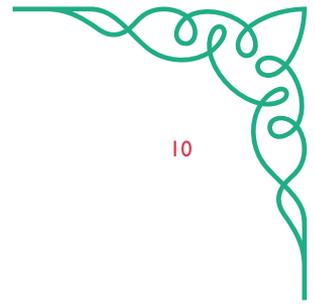
EXTEND

- 1 This scene contains Gloucester's final lines. What final impression of him does this scene convey to the audience?
- 2 While Edgar requests that his father 'pray that the right may thrive' (line 2), we don't have a stage direction to indicate Gloucester's actions.
  - a Considering his later dialogue in this scene, do you think Gloucester follows Edgar's advice to pray?
  - b What are the implications if he does?
- 3 Do you think Gloucester's final line negates or confirms Edgar's assertion (in lines 9–11)?



DISCUSS

How would you convey the passing of time if you were a director of this play?





The weight of this sad time ...

## King Lear as tragedy

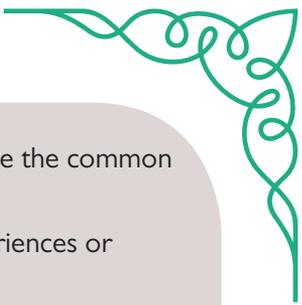
What we now call the First Folio was published in 1623, a thick book entitled *Mr William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies*. *King Lear* was included in the section marked 'Tragedies', along with such famous plays as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. The book did not offer a definition of tragedy; many of its histories include tragic elements, many of the tragedies include plenty of historical detail, and all of Shakespeare's plays include some comic elements. So, what did the editors mean by tragedy?

The term tragedy generally suggests an unhappy ending; comedy suggests a happy one. While it could be argued that some Shakespearean tragedies, such as *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, are not entirely tragic (as the respective kingdoms of Scotland and Denmark are each liberated from the rule of a usurping tyrant), *King Lear* is widely considered to be Shakespeare's bleakest tragedy. The most famous Shakespeare critic, Samuel Johnson, writing in the eighteenth century, found the play's conclusion unbearable to read. From the late seventeenth century, a version of the play by Nahum Tate was performed on the English stage. In this version Cordelia survives to marry Edgar and together they rule Britain. It was not until the first half of the nineteenth century that the original tragic ending of the text was restored.

The term tragedy was first used in ancient Greece. The Greek philosopher Aristotle made the following assertions about tragedy in his text, *Poetics*:

- 1 It should be serious and dignified and written in a language more elevated than everyday speech.
- 2 It should focus on a hero, or heroes, usually distinguished by rank or ability.
- 3 The tragic hero should make some error in action, causing suffering for himself and those around him.
- 4 The tragic hero should arrive at some sort of profound moment of recognition, called *anagnorisis*.
- 5 The audience should feel sympathy for this tragic hero.
- 6 Tragedy should evoke feelings of pity and fear in the audience, challenging their assumptions about human experience and finally bringing about a release from tension (*catharsis*).
- 7 The plot should involve dramatic reversals or ironies.

In Shakespeare's day the term 'tragedy' was used more loosely, but the majority of his tragedies have some elements in common with those outlined by Aristotle.

- 
- 1 Shakespeare's tragic heroes (generally men) tend to be elevated above the common person by rank or ability.
  - 2 The tragic hero is generally alienated from society through their experiences or through the choices that they have made.
  - 3 The fall of the hero tends to affect the whole community.
  - 4 The tragic hero comes to recognise their problematic choices, or to understand the consequences of their destructive actions, and from this comprehension draws some meaning of potentially universal significance.
- Q To what extent does *King Lear* adhere to Aristotle's model for tragedy?
- Q To what extent does *King Lear* adhere to the Shakespearean model for tragedy?
- Q Do you think Lear recognises his destructive actions for what they are? Does he draw from them any meaning of universal significance?

## Act 5 Scene 3

### CHARACTERS

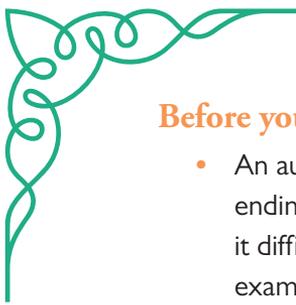
Lear  
 Albany  
 Edgar  
 Edmund  
 Gonerill  
 Kent  
 Regan  
 Herald  
 Cordelia  
 Gentleman  
 Captain  
 Officer  
 Messenger

### IN A NUTSHELL

Although he and Cordelia are taken prisoner, Lear remains overjoyed at being reunited with his daughter. After they exit, Edmund persuades a captain to execute them, but Albany arrives with Gonerill and Regan, and demands that Edmund hand over the prisoners. An argument ensues. Regan states her intention to marry Edmund, but Albany accuses Edmund and Gonerill of treason then challenges Edmund to a duel. In the meantime Regan, who has been poisoned by Gonerill, becomes sick and exits to die.

As a declaration is read out and the trumpet is sounded, Edgar enters but does not reveal his identity. The brothers fight and Edmund is mortally wounded. Albany produces the letter that outlines Gonerill's

betrayal, and she runs offstage to commit suicide. Edgar reveals his identity, exchanges forgiveness with his brother and tells the story of their father's death. Edmund gives hasty instructions to undo his sentence upon Lear and Cordelia, but the grief-stricken Lear enters carrying Cordelia's body and, after lamenting her death, dies. Albany resigns his power to Kent and Edgar, but Kent expresses his wish to retire and die. Edgar closes the play by reflecting that these events should be seen as tragic and thus not diminished by hollow words of comfort.



## Before you read

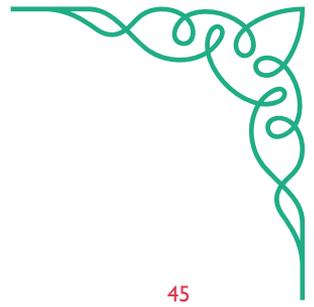
- An audience viewing *King Lear* for the first time might hope for a happy ending – but the final scene challenges the audience’s expectations, making it difficult to draw an easy moral conclusion. An audience might expect, for example, that the information Edmund conveys in his dying lines would save Cordelia. What could have been simply a tragic conclusion becomes utterly devastating. It is fitting that Edgar resists easy closure or moralising in his final speech, advocating that the surviving characters should ‘Speak what [they] feel, not what [they] ought to say’ (line 297).
- The depiction of Lear holding Cordelia in his arms has reminded some readers and critics of the image commonly known as the Pietà. The Pietà is a representation of the Virgin Mary holding the dead Christ in her arms (the most famous example is Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, a sculpture housed in St Peter’s Basilica in Rome). The image is paradoxically one of both desolation and redemption. It is an image of desolation since it depicts a mother’s grief for her son; however, it is an image of redemption because Christians believe that Christ’s sufferings have redeemed the world.
- Critical opinion is divided as to the meaning of Lear’s final lines: ‘Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips! / Look there! Look there!’ (lines 283–84). While these lines are not present in the oldest version of the play (the Quarto version) they do appear in what was probably Shakespeare’s final edit (the First Folio). It seems that Lear dies believing Cordelia to be alive. The famous critic AC Bradley, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, stated that Lear’s enigmatic final line ‘Look there! Look there!’ would have been delivered in ecstasy, conveying a sense of ‘unbearable joy’. Some modern directors have Lear speak the line in a tone akin to horror. Does this line suggest a note of hope or of cruel delusion – or something else?



<b>Censure:</b>	Judge
<b>Retention:</b>	Imprisonment, detention
<b>Asquint:</b>	In a distorted manner
<b>Treason:</b>	Betrayal or extreme disloyalty
<b>Banns:</b>	Notice given of intention to marry
<b>Cozened:</b>	Tricked
<b>Bootless:</b>	Useless







That were the opposites of this day's strife:  
 We do require them of you, so to use them  
 As we shall find their merits and our safety  
 May equally determine.

EDMUND

Sir, I thought it fit

To send the old and miserable King  
 To some retention and appointed guard;  
 Whose age has charms in it, whose title more,  
 To pluck the common bosom on his side,  
 And turn our impressed lances in our eyes  
 Which do command them. With him I sent the Queen,  
 My reason all the same; and they are ready  
 Tomorrow or at further space to appear  
 Where you shall hold your session.

45

50

ALBANY

Sir, by your patience,

I hold you but a subject of this war,  
 Not as a brother.

REGAN

That's as we list to grace him.

Methinks our pleasure might have been demanded,  
 Ere you had spoke so far. He led our powers,  
 Bore the commission of my place and person,  
 The which immediacy may well stand up  
 And call itself your brother.

55

GONERILL

Not so hot!

In his own grace he doth exalt himself  
 More than in your addition.

60

REGAN

In my rights,

By me invested, he compeers the best.

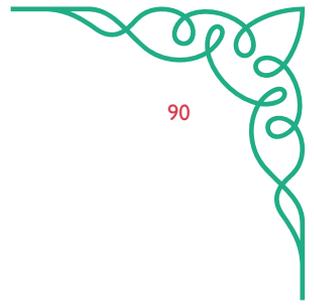
GONERILL

That were the most if he should husband you.



- 
- 41 **That were the opposites:** That were the opponents.
  - 42 **Use them:** Treat them.
  - 48 **To pluck the common bosom on his side:** To stir up pity for his side from the hearts of the common people.
  - 49 **And turn our impressed lances in our eyes:** Edmund fears that out of sympathy with Lear, their own soldiers will turn against them.
  - 55 **That's as we list to grace him:** That's how we wish to honour him (as a brother).
  - 56 **Methinks our pleasure might have been demanded:** I would have thought you might have asked what I desired.
  - 59 **Immediacy:** Intimacy.
  - 60 **Not so hot:** Cool down.
  - 61–62 **In his own grace ... More than in your addition:** He exalts himself with his own talents more than with any titles you have conferred upon him.
  - 63 **Compeers the best:** He compares to the best.
  - 64 **That were the most ... husband you:** Gonerill is saying that, as far as Regan is concerned, the best honour she could invest Edmund with would be to have him become her husband.





GONERILL *[Aside]* If not, I'll ne'er trust medicine. 90  
 EDMUND There's my exchange.  
*[Throwing down a glove]*  
 What in the world he is  
 That names me traitor, villain-like he lies.  
 Call by thy trumpet. He that dares approach,  
 On him, on you, who not? I will maintain  
 My truth and honour firmly.

ALBANY A herald, ho! 95

*[Enter a HERALD]*

Trust to thy single virtue; for thy soldiers,  
 All levied in my name, have in my name  
 Took their discharge.

REGAN My sickness grows upon me.

ALBANY She is not well. Convey her to my tent.

*[Exit REGAN, led by an Officer]*

Come hither, herald, – Let the trumpet sound, 100  
 And read out this.

*[A trumpet sounds]*

HERALD *[Reads]* 'If any man of quality or degree within the lists of the 105  
 army will maintain upon Edmund, supposed Earl of Gloucester,  
 that he is a manifold traitor, let him appear by the third sound of  
 the trumpet. He is bold in his defence.'

*[First trumpet]*

Again!

*[Second trumpet]*

Again!

*[Third trumpet]*

*[Trumpet answers within. Enter EDGAR, armed]*

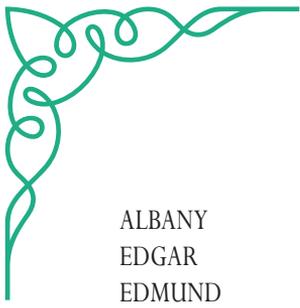
ALBANY Ask him his purposes, why he appears  
 Upon this call o' the trumpet.

HERALD What are you?  
 Your name, your quality, and why you answer 110  
 This present summons?

EDGAR Know, my name is lost;



- 
- 90 **I'll ne'er trust medicine:** I'll never trust poison.
  - 96 **Single virtue:** Unassisted strength.
  - 105 **He is bold in his defence:** He (Edmund) defends himself boldly.
  - 110 **Your quality:** Your rank.



By treason's tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit:  
 Yet am I noble as the adversary  
 I come to cope.

ALBANY  
 EDGAR  
 EDMUND  
 EDGAR

Which is that adversary?  
 What's he that speaks for Edmund Earl of Gloucester?  
 Himself. What sayest thou to him? 115

Draw thy sword,  
 That if my speech offend a noble heart  
 Thy arm may do thee justice. Here is mine.

*[Drawing his sword]*  
 Behold, it is the privilege of mine honours,  
 My oath, and my profession. I protest, 120

Maugre thy strength, youth, place, and eminence,  
 Despite thy victor sword and fire-new fortune,  
 Thy valour and thy heart, thou art a traitor,

False to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father,  
 Conspirant 'gainst this high-illustrious prince, 125  
 And, from the extremest upward of thy head

To the descent and dust below thy foot,  
 A most toad-spotted traitor. Say thou 'No',  
 This sword, this arm, and my best spirits are bent

To prove upon thy heart, whereto I speak, 130  
 Thou liest.

EDMUND

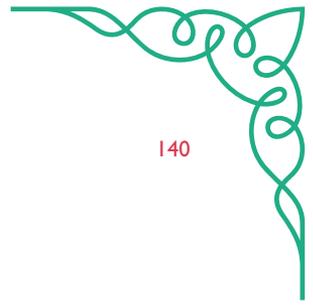
In wisdom I should ask thy name;  
 But since thy outside looks so fair and warlike  
 And that thy tongue some say of breeding breathes,  
 What safe and nicely I might well delay

By rule of knighthood, I disdain and spurn. 135  
 Back do I toss these treasons to thy head,  
 With the hell-hated lie o'erwhelm thy heart,

Which, for they yet glance by and scarcely bruise,



- 
- 112 **Bare-gnawn and canker-bit:** Gnawed bare and worm-eaten.
  - 116–18 **Draw thy sword ... do thee justice:** So that if what I say offends you because you are indeed noble, justice will ensure that you kill me with your sword.
  - 121 **Maugre thy strength:** In spite of your strength.
  - 122 **Fire-new fortune:** Fortune newly forged.
  - 123 **Thy heart:** Your courage.
  - 126–27 **From the extremest upward ... dust below thy foot:** From the very top of your head to the dust beneath your foot.
  - 134–35 **Safe and nicely ... By rule of knighthood:** Knights followed a code of honour. Edmund is saying he hates and rejects ('disdain and spurn') the niceties of the code and won't delay in killing Edgar.
  - 138 **For they yet glance by and scarcely bruise:** Since they only barely touch ('glance') and hardly bruise the heart.



This sword of mine shall give them instant way  
Where they shall rest for ever. Trumpets, speak!

140

*[Alarums. They fight. EDMUND falls]*

ALBANY *[To EDGAR, as he goes to kill EDMUND]*  
Save him, save him!

GONERILL This is practice, Gloucester.  
By the law of war thou wast not bound to answer  
An unknown opposite. Thou art not vanquished,  
But cozened and beguiled.

ALBANY Shut your mouth, dame,  
Or with this paper shall I stop it – Hold, sir –  
*[To GONERILL]* Thou worse than any name, read thine own evil.  
No tearing, lady! I perceive you know it.

145

GONERILL Say, if I do, the laws are mine, not thine.  
Who can arraign me for't?

*[Exit GONERILL]*

ALBANY Most monstrous! O!  
*[To EDMUND]*  
Know'st thou this paper?

EDMUND Ask me not what I know.  
ALBANY Go after her. She's desperate. Govern her.

150

*[Exit Officer]*

EDMUND What you have charged me with, that have I done,  
And more, much more; the time will bring it out.  
'Tis past, and so am I. But what art thou  
That hast this fortune on me? If thou'rt noble,  
I do forgive thee.

155

EDGAR Let's exchange charity.  
I am no less in blood than thou art, Edmund;  
If more, the more thou hast wronged me.  
My name is Edgar, and thy father's son.  
The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices  
Make instruments to plague us:  
The dark and vicious place where thee he got  
Cost him his eyes.

160

EDMUND Thou hast spoken right. 'Tis true.

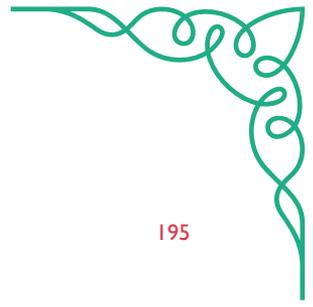


139 **Give them instant way:** Give them instance access (to the heart).

144 **Cozened and beguiled:** Cheated and tricked.

162–63 **The dark and vicious place ... Cost him his eyes:** Edgar is saying that Gloucester was divinely punished, by being blinded, for his adulterous union with Edmund's mother, by means of which Edmund was conceived ('got'). The 'dark and vicious place' is yet another reference to the female sexual organs.





*[Enter a GENTLEMAN, with a bloody knife]*

GENTLEMAN Help, help, O, help!

EDGAR What kind of help?

ALBANY Speak, man. 195

EDGAR What means that bloody knife?

GENTLEMAN 'Tis hot; it smokes!

It came even from the heart of – O, she's dead!

ALBANY Who dead? Speak, man.

GENTLEMAN Your lady, Sir, your lady! And her sister  
By her is poisoned; she hath confessed it. 200

EDMUND I was contracted to them both. All three  
Now marry in an instant.

EDGAR Here comes Kent.

ALBANY Produce their bodies, be they alive or dead.  
This judgement of the heavens, that makes us tremble  
Touches us not with pity.

*[Exit GENTLEMAN and Enter KENT]*

O, is this he? 205

The time will not allow the compliment  
Which very manners urges.

KENT I am come

To bid my King and master aye good night.  
Is he not here?

ALBANY Great thing of us forgot!

Speak, Edmund, where's the King? And where's Cordelia?  
Seest thou this object, Kent? 210

*[The bodies of GONERILL and REGAN are brought in]*

KENT Alack, why thus?

EDMUND Yet Edmund was beloved:

The one the other poisoned for my sake,  
And after slew herself.

ALBANY Even so. Cover their faces. 215

EDMUND I pant for life; some good I mean to do,  
Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send –  
Be brief in it – to the castle, for my writ  
Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia.  
Nay, send in time.

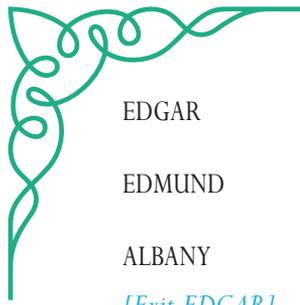
ALBANY Run, run, O run! 220



**201–02 All three / Now marry in an instant:** The three of us are now joined in death.

**206–07 The compliment / Which very manners urges:** The courtesy which good manners requires.

**208 To bid my King and master aye good night:** To wish the King good night (perhaps forever).



EDGAR To who, my Lord? Who hath the office? Send  
Thy token of reprieve.

EDMUND Well thought on. Take my sword,  
Give it the captain.

ALBANY Haste thee for thy life.

*[Exit EDGAR]*

EDMUND He hath commission from thy wife and me 225  
To hang Cordelia in the prison, and  
To lay the blame upon her own despair,  
That she fordid herself.

ALBANY The gods defend her!  
Bear him hence awhile.

*[EDMUND is borne off]*

*[Enter KING LEAR with CORDELIA dead in his arms, and an Officer following]*

KING LEAR Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones! 230  
Had I your tongues and eyes I'd use them so  
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.  
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;  
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;  
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, 235  
Why, then she lives.

KENT Is this the promised end?

EDGAR Or image of that horror?

ALBANY Fall and cease!

KING LEAR This feather stirs, she lives! If it be so,  
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows  
That ever I have felt.

KENT *[Kneeling]* O my good master! 240

KING LEAR Prithee, away.

EDGAR 'Tis noble Kent, your friend.

KING LEAR A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!  
I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever! –  
Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little. Ha!  
What is't thou sayest? – Her voice was ever soft, 245  
Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.  
I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee.

CAPTAIN 'Tis true, my Lords, he did.

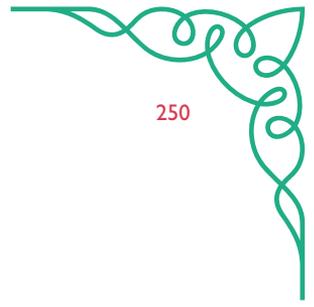
KING LEAR Did I not, fellow?  
I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion



**235 Will mist or stain the stone:** Will mist or stain the mirror ('the stone' polished so that it gleams like a mirror).

**237 Fall and cease:** Let the world fall down and end.

**249 With my good biting falchion:** With my good sword.



I would have made them skip. I am old now  
 And these same crosses spoil me. – Who are you?  
 Mine eyes are not o’ the best, I’ll tell you straight.  
 KENT If Fortune brag of two she loved and hated  
 One of them we behold. 250

KING LEAR This is a dull sight. Are you not Kent?  
 KENT The same, 255  
 Your servant Kent. Where is your servant Caius?  
 KING LEAR He’s a good fellow, I can tell you that;  
 He’ll strike, and quickly too. He’s dead and rotten.  
 KENT No, my good Lord; I am the very man –  
 KING LEAR I’ll see that straight. 260  
 KENT That from your first of difference and decay,  
 Have followed your sad steps –  
 KING LEAR You are welcome hither.  
 KENT Nor no man else. All’s cheerless, dark, and deadly.  
 Your eldest daughters have fordone themselves,  
 And desperately are dead.  
 KING LEAR Ay, so I think. 265  
 ALBANY He knows not what he sees, and vain it is  
 That we present us to him.  
 EDGAR Very bootless.

*[Enter a CAPTAIN]*

CAPTAIN Edmund is dead, my Lord.  
 ALBANY That’s but a trifle here.  
 You lords and noble friends, know our intent:  
 What comfort to this great decay may come 270  
 Shall be applied. For us, we will resign  
 During the life of this old Majesty  
 To him our absolute power.

*[To EDGAR and KENT]*

You, to your rights



- 
- 251 **These same crosses spoil me:** My sufferings have weakened me. Christians refer to their sufferings as their crosses.
  - 252 **I’ll tell you straight:** I’ll be able to see you properly soon.
  - 253–54 **If Fortune brag of two she loved and hated ... behold:** The meaning of these lines is disputed. The ‘two’ Fortune has loved and hated are possibly Lear and Kent. The idea seems to suggest that suffering (which might seem to indicate that Fortune ‘hates’ or is against us) can actually be beneficial (indicating that Fortune ‘loves’ us), bringing about a greater good.
  - 261 **From your first of difference and decay:** From the moment you began to alter and decline (i.e. from the start of the play).
  - 263 **Nor no man else:** No, neither I nor anyone else would find this a welcome sight.
  - 267 **Very bootless:** Absolutely useless.





QUESTIONS

1 Copy and complete the table below to demonstrate your understanding of the following lines.

Speaker	Line	Paraphrase or give the meaning in context
Edmund	... men / Are as the time is; to be tender-minded / Does not become a sword ... (lines 31–33)	
Lear	We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage ... (line 9)	We will be happy together in prison.
	Jesters do oft prove prophets. (line 65)	
	The wheel is come full circle ... (line 164)	
	This judgement of the heavens, that makes us tremble / Touches us not with pity. (lines 204–05)	
	All's cheerless, dark, and deadly. (line 263)	
	All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue, and all foes / The cup of their deservings. (lines 275–77)	
	He hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer. (lines 286–88)	

- To what extent does Lear's dialogue at the beginning of this scene present him as a transformed character? Which elements of his character have remained from Act 1?
- What seems to be promised to the Officer for carrying out the murders of Lear and Cordelia? What do we know of the Officer's fate?
- What is Gonerill's attitude towards Albany and his ideas of justice?
- Why do you think Shakespeare chooses to conceal Edgar's identity from the other characters until he has defeated Edmund?
- According to Edgar, what is Gloucester's emotional state at his death?
- What seems to be Edgar's attitude towards his father, based on his summary of their final exchange (lines 171–89)?
- Copy and complete the table on the next page, to demonstrate how Shakespeare emphasises Lear's grief.





Technique / stylistic feature	Quotation(s) / examples	How this conveys the extent of Lear's grief
Repetition		
Violent language / vocabulary		
Distraction / digression in his speech		
Bestial imagery		

- 9 How would you describe the following characters' responses to Cordelia's death? Discuss similarities and differences.
- a Edgar
  - b Albany
  - c Kent
- 10 In what way is Lear deluded at the end of the play?
- 11 Copy and complete the table below to describe the characters' fates and whether their ends contribute to a sense of justice or injustice.

Character	Fate	Just or unjust (explain your answer)
Gloucester	Dies of joy and grief, reunited with his son	
Captain		
Regan		
Gonerill		
Edmund		
Cordelia		
Edgar		
Kent		
Lear		

- 12 In what ways does Lear's final speech (lines 278–84) show the extent to which he has changed since Act 1?



- 1 Read Lear's speeches on lines 8–26 and answer the questions below.
- a Copy and complete the table below to demonstrate how Lear idealises his hopes for his time in prison with Cordelia.

Technique / stylistic feature	Examples	Effect
Positive verbs	pray, and sing ... (line 12)	
Repetition		
Imagery		
Contrast		

- b How do Lear's lines show humility?
- c How does Lear's speech suggest that there are some aspects of his personality that have not changed since the beginning of the play?
- 2 Analyse Edgar's speech about his father's death (lines 171–89) and answer the following questions.
- a In this speech, how does Edgar's language exemplify 'joy and grief', the two extremes of passion to which he refers?
- b What is the effect of the repetition of 'burst' in these lines?
- c Of what event in Act 4 does line 185, 'I asked his blessing', remind you? How does this line connect Edgar with Cordelia?
- d Why do you think Edgar regards it as a 'fault' that he took so long to reveal himself to his father?
- 3 Edgar says to Edmund of his father's blinding: 'The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes' (lines 162–63).
- a Do you feel Edgar is harsh in this judgement?
- b Could Edgar's judgement have been influenced by his experience of Edmund's character?
- c Do you think a Jacobean audience would be more sympathetic to Edgar's judgement than would a contemporary audience? Why do you think this?
- 4 How does Shakespeare play with our expectations in this scene? Consider, for example, the effect on the reader or audience of Edmund's call for Cordelia and Lear to be saved.
- 5 *King Lear* ends with a series of rhyming couplets. Do you think this is appropriate considering the sombre mood of the play's conclusion? Explain your answer.

- 6 Construct and complete a table like the one below to demonstrate your understanding of tragic and comic elements.

Element	Why is this a comic or tragic element?
e.g. Lear's change of character	
e.g. Cordelia's death	



DISCUSS

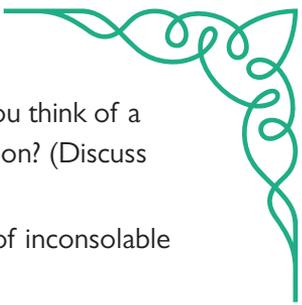
- 1 Can you explain why it is that Cordelia, who has so few lines in the play, looms so large in considerations of the play's ultimate meaning?
- 2 Do you think Edgar too readily forgives his brother after their combat?
- 3 Do you consider the ending of *King Lear* to be devoid of hope?
- 4 If you were directing a production of *King Lear*, what emphasis would you give to the final scene? How would you achieve this?

### Trevor Nunn: DVD Act 5 Scene 3



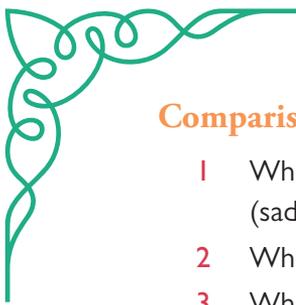
PRESS PLAY

- 1 In what tone does Cordelia deliver the line about her sisters?
- 2 What technical features or devices does Nunn employ to suggest a sense of intimacy between Lear and Cordelia?
- 3 Do you agree with Nunn's decision to present the poisoning on screen in this scene, or would it be better assumed in the offstage action (as in Shakespeare's text)?
- 4 Does Edmund's body language seem to show any sympathy for the dying Regan?
- 5 Comment on Edmund's attitude to the duel and to his opponent.
- 6 What does Edgar's costume emphasise about his situation? Why do you think Nunn made this choice of costume?
- 7 What attitude does Nunn suggest Gonerill has towards Edmund before, and then after, the duel? How does this correspond with your reading of the text?
- 8 What seems to be Edgar's attitude towards his brother after the duel? Do you find this attitude consistent with Shakespeare's text, or do you think this reading goes against the grain of the text?
- 9 How does Nunn bring sharply into focus Albany's hope or prayer going unanswered?
- 10 How does Nunn emphasise the brutality of Cordelia's murder?

- 
- 11 Nunn has Cordelia and Lear wearing similar costumes. Can you think of a reason that Nunn might have for making this directional decision? (Discuss the costumes themselves and why they are similar.)
  - 12 What strategies does Ian McKellen employ to create a sense of inconsolable grief?
  - 13 What elements does Nunn employ to create a sense of utter desolation at the end of this scene? Consider in particular characters' actions and digetic or non-digetic sound.

### Peter Brook: DVD Chapters 15 and 16 (Act 5 Scenes 2 and 3)

- 1 What sort of shots does Brook employ to portray Gloucester throughout the battle? Why do you think Brook chose to portray the battle in this way?
- 2 What does Edgar having to drag his father away from the battlefield suggest about Gloucester?
- 3 How does the abruptness of Cordelia's hanging complement the tone of the final scene and the philosophy informing it?
- 4 How does Brook create unease, and possibly foreshadow Cordelia's tragic fate, during Lear's optimistic 'Let's away to prison' speech?
- 5 In Shakespeare's play, Cordelia's death occurs offstage. Do you agree with Brook's decision to portray her hanging on screen? Why or why not?
- 6 Which elements or devices present Edgar as menacing, before his combat with Edmund?
- 7 Brook presents the combat between Edmund and Edgar as brief and brutal. How does this affect your interpretation of the final events of the play?
- 8 Does Brook present Edgar as heroic, or otherwise, in the final scene?
- 9 What elements of this scene suggest evil, or moral compromise?
- 10 How is Brook's ending (the final few minutes) particularly unsettling? Analyse the elements that create this tone.
- 11 The deaths of the three sisters are shown in quick succession through a series of close-ups. What do you think Brook might be suggesting by this?
- 12 Brook's film goes beyond mere interpretation: he changes some elements of the action and omits some of Shakespeare's original text. Construct a table of the elements Brook changes, adds or omits, to show how these decisions change the nature of the final scene and whether you agree with his directorial decisions.



## Comparison questions

- 1 Which director presents Lear's emotional agony with greater pathos (sadness)? Why do you think this?
- 2 Which ending seems bleaker or more devoid of comfort? Why?
- 3 Which ending is more consistent with your interpretation of the final scene? Why?
- 4 Which ending did you prefer? Why?

## Thinking about the gods

Of all the major themes in *King Lear*, the one which has been the most hotly debated among readers, audiences and scholars is the role of the gods. How are we to understand them? Do they care about, or are they indifferent to, the affairs of human beings? What is their relationship to Fortune, Nature, and the stars? Most importantly, what is their relationship to the problems of suffering, justice and redemption?

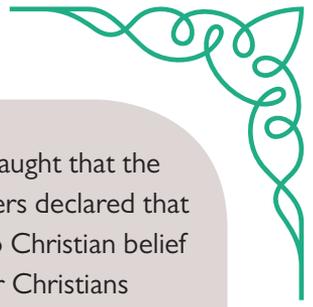
Within the play, we are given competing views of the gods. Whereas Kent prays that the gods take Cordelia 'to their dear shelter' (Act I Scene I, line 172), France refers to the gods' 'cold'st neglect' (Act I Scene I, line 244). Albany and Edgar declare that the gods are just, but Gloucester suggests that to the gods we are like flies to 'wanton boys' (Act 4 Scene I, line 36). Later, though, he calls the gods 'ever-gentle' (Act 4 Scene 5, line 208). These conflicting views are confusing enough, but the debate about the role of the gods in the play is even more complex for a variety of historical reasons.

### Context and setting

*King Lear* was written and performed for a Christian audience, yet it is set in the pre-Christian (or pagan) past. It is therefore difficult to determine whether Shakespeare wanted his audience to see the world of *King Lear* as similar to or radically different from his own. Were the gods in the play meant to stand for the Christian God the audience believed in, or were they meant to recall the very system of beliefs that Christians believed Christ had come to overthrow? Was Kent's belief in Fortune like, or unlike, the Christian belief in providence (God's careful guidance of the universe)? Such questions are complicated by Lear's reference to God (with a capital 'G' and in the singular) in Act 5 (Scene 3, line 17), the only such reference in the play.

### The role of pagan literature

In Shakespeare's own day, how to understand the pagan past was a controversial question. Following the recovery of many classical works during the Renaissance, Christian scholars became increasingly engaged with the issues arising from various



pagan philosophies. Some of these philosophies, such as Epicureanism, taught that the maker of the universe had no concern for the affairs of humankind; others declared that we are ruled by Fortune. For some people, these ideas were contrary to Christian belief and amounted to atheism; those who held this view questioned whether Christians should read such works at all. For others, the texts were a rich treasury of learning from which Christians were free to draw, and with which they were free to harmonise their own beliefs. When Edmund describes Gloucester's superstitious beliefs as 'foppery' (Act 1 Scene 2, line 100), he is echoing the sentiments of some (though by no means all) Christian preachers in Shakespeare's time. Similarly when Shakespeare has Kent ask Fortune to 'smile once more' (Act 2 Scene 2, line 157), and when he has the Fool call Fortune 'an arrant whore' (Act 2 Scene 4, line 50), he is engaging with contemporary debates as much as he is reflecting on the pagan past.

### **Different interpretations**

Inspired by debates about the role of the gods in the play, many interpretations of the play's ultimate meaning have been offered in our time. Some have seen the play as 'absurdist', representing a cold, cruel universe in which humans suffer and die in wretchedness, without meaning. The gods, in this reading, are indifferent to humanity, if they exist at all. The critic Harold Bloom, who largely follows this line of nihilistic interpretation, describes *King Lear* as Shakespeare's least Christian play. He asserts that Lear's suffering is neither 'redeemable nor redeemed' and that faith is 'absurd or irrelevant in regard to this dark vision of reality' (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p.493).

Others have regarded the play as reinforcing Christian conceptions of the redemptive value of suffering and forgiveness, especially since Lear and Cordelia are reconciled before their deaths, and Edmund seeks to rectify his evil life through a final act of goodness. These critics typically point to the overtly biblical aspects of the play, such as Cordelia's use of the words of Christ ('O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about' in Act 4 Scene 3, lines 23–24) and the Christian sentiments expressed by Lear and Cordelia as they go to prison as 'God's spies'. Such interpretations usually agree that the ending leaves an audience with a feeling of desolation but that it points to, or reinforces, a need for a hope beyond death (in which the Jacobean society fervently believed).

Interpretations usually say as much about the beliefs that readers bring to the play, as about those that they take from it. However the play is interpreted, whether as Christian, absurdist or otherwise, most agree that it unsettles many of the certainties of the believer and unbeliever alike.



# General activities

## Oral presentations / performance

- 1 Make your own CD soundtrack for a film version of *King Lear*. Choose at least eight songs that you feel are appropriate for different scenes (or excerpts from scenes) in the film. Specify which eight scenes you have chosen and write at least 50 words on each song to say why it is appropriate for the particular scene you have chosen. Include at least four of the following scenes.
  - Act 1 Scene 1 (The tension between Cordelia and Lear)
  - Act 1 Scene 2 (Edmund's soliloquy)
  - Act 2 Scene 3 (Tom o' Bedlam)
  - Act 2 Scene 4 (Lear's rage at his daughters)
  - Act 3 Scene 2 (The storm)
  - Act 3 Scene 7 (Gloucester's blinding)
  - Act 4 Scene 6 (Lear and Cordelia reunited)
  - Act 5 Scene 3 (The duel between Edmund and Edgar)
  - Act 5 Scene 3 ('The weight of this sad time ...')

You may choose to perform this as an oral presentation, playing short excerpts from each song and explaining your choices.

- 2 Explain what your emphasis would be if you were given the opportunity to direct your own version of *King Lear*. Cover in particular your choice of costume for six of the main characters. Explain what sort of atmosphere you would aim to create through your set design.
- 3 Imagine that you are directing a film version of the play and that the producers ask you to change the period and/or place in which the play is set. When and where would you set it? What issues would you need to consider in reaching your decision? What might you lose in making such changes? What might you gain?
- 3 Record a scene (or an excerpt from a scene) from the play as part of a radio play.
- 4 Perform a scene from the play as a group; or perform one of the soliloquies or monologues on your own.
- 5 Produce a one-minute trailer advertising your film version of *King Lear*. Make sure you consider music, sound effects and voice-over.



- 6 Set up a chat-show style interview with one or more of the characters listed below in which you discuss what happened to this particular character.
- Lear
  - Gloucester
  - Cordelia
  - Edgar
  - Gonerill
  - Kent
  - Regan
  - Oswald
  - Edmund
  - Albany

Make sure you stay in character for the entire length of the interview.

- 7 Cover one of the following scenes as a news report (minimum length of two minutes):
- Lear plans to divide his kingdom (before Act 1 Scene 1)
  - Cordelia disinherited to the benefit of her sisters (Act 1 Scene 1)
  - Edmund 'discovers' a plot on Gloucester's life (Act 1 Scene 2)
  - Kent causes a public disturbance (Act 2 Scene 2)
  - Former King on the heath (based on events in Act 3)
  - Rumours of torture (Act 3 Scene 7)
  - King Lear and his daughter reconciled (Act 4 Scene 6)
  - Edmund emerges as Britain's hero (based on Act 5 Scenes 1 and 2)
  - Albany and Edgar left to rebuild a desolate Kingdom (Act 5 Scene 3)

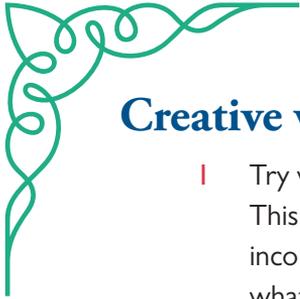
This can take the form of either a video or a radio news story. Make sure you capture and maintain your audience's attention and include some interviews.

- 8 Present a talk to your classmates entitled: 'What's so great about Shakespeare?' In your presentation, you might like to discuss elements of *King Lear* such as the characters, themes and language features.

## Questions for debate

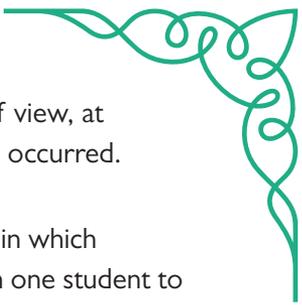
Debate one of the following propositions. The Affirmative Team will agree with the statement, while the Negative Team will disagree. Both teams should consist of three members, each of whom speak for two minutes.

- 1 *King Lear* is a nihilistic play.
- 2 Lear truly is a man 'more sinned against than sinning'.
- 3 Cordelia should have played along with the love-test.
- 4 Shakespeare should have let Lear and Cordelia live.



## Creative writing

- 1 Try writing part of one of the scenes as a chapter from a modern novel. This will mean that you will have to fill in some of the details of the setting, incorporate dialogue into the flow of your writing and give some idea of what the characters are thinking – even in places where they do not use a soliloquy. Make sure you use modern language, and that you keep elements such as narrative voice and verb tense consistent.
- 2 Write a letter in modern prose from Gonerill to Edmund based on her feelings in Act 4. Make sure you use correct letter-writing conventions; you can use Shakespearean language or modern English.
- 3 Write a 300–500-word newspaper article on one of the suggested stories for Question 7 in **Oral presentations / performance** on page 207. Make sure your headline and your opening sentence grab the reader’s attention. Also, include some quotations from the actual play or fictitious interviews with characters. You might like to present this using ICT (PowerPoint or Flash) or create a website.
- 4 Keep a diary for Edmund in modern English. Include a minimum of four entries (600–1000 words).
- 5 Write an email from a modern-day Kent to Cordelia, at the beginning of Act 4, explaining the recent disturbing developments. Make sure you use current email conventions; you can use Shakespearean language or Modern English.
- 6 Write a 400-word psychiatric report for Edmund at the conclusion of Act 4. Use modern language to write your report.
- 7 Script an additional conversation between Cordelia and either or both of her sisters before the play commences. Use the same conventions you have observed Shakespeare using throughout the play. Make sure, for example, that you begin a new line each time a different character speaks, and try to write in character.
- 8 Think of three alternative titles for *King Lear* and write a few sentences (80–100 words on each) on why these titles would effectively market the play or film to a modern audience.
- 9 Script an additional conversation between Gonerill and Regan, to take place between Act 5 Scene 1 and Act 5 Scene 3, where, somewhere during the conversation, Gonerill tricks Regan into drinking poison. Use the same conventions you have observed Shakespeare using throughout the play. Make sure, for example, that you begin a new line each time a different character speaks, and try to write in character.
- 10 Give Gloucester a dying speech or monologue (10–20 lines in length). Make sure you employ Shakespearean language and try to write in character.

- 
- 11 Create a blog with some entries from one character's point of view, at different stages in the play, responding to the events that have occurred. Add other characters' comments to your character's blog.
  - 12 Imagine that Cordelia, Lear and Edmund survive. Set up a trial in which Edmund is charged for his crimes and then pleads guilty. Assign one student to the part of Edmund's defence lawyer, another to the part of the prosecuting lawyer, and three students to the parts of jurors. Lear is the chief judge, Cordelia and Edgar the 'star' witnesses. What arguments would be presented and considered, what conclusions would be reached and why? How would Edmund be punished, if at all?

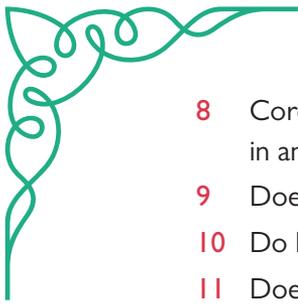
## Illustration

- 1 Design a poster for your own film or stage version of *King Lear*. Include quotations, some phrases that will catch the viewer's attention and a cast list.
- 2 Present one of the scenes from *King Lear* as a comic book or comic strip (e.g. manga).
- 3 Create a PowerPoint or Flash presentation of five characters in the play, using key quotations, a background that you feel is representative of each character, an appropriate symbol for him or her and some background music. Write 50–100 words on each character, explaining why you made these creative choices.
- 4 Create a Facebook page for one of the characters in *King Lear*. Make sure you include your character's interests, their interpretation of some of the events of the play, comments from friends and so on. See if you can include some links to appropriate music.

## Questions for discussion

Discuss the following questions in a group or as a class.

- 1 Does Shakespeare portray Lear sympathetically?
- 2 Can Cordelia be considered wholly innocent? Does she in any way contribute to her own destruction?
- 3 To what extent are the characters in *King Lear* victims of sheer bad luck?
- 4 In what ways does *King Lear* present positive aspects of humanity?
- 5 Is Edgar the hero of *King Lear*?
- 6 The famous critic Dr Johnson found the ending of *King Lear* unbearable. Would it be better with a happy ending?
- 7 Why do you think Edmund is so successful in his schemes?



- 8 Cordelia fails to reconquer Britain, but is her contribution to Acts 4 and 5 in any way greater than her failure?
- 9 Does Edmund's final act of charity mean anything?
- 10 Do Lear and Gloucester die better men? Does their suffering transform them?
- 11 Does the ending of *King Lear* suggest that the kingdom of Britain will be better governed in the future?
- 12 What do you think of the opinion of the Romantic critic Charles Lamb that Lear is too great a character for the stage and that the play is better read than performed?
- 13 Can a modern-day audience learn anything from *King Lear*?

## Essay questions

- 1 How does imagery reinforce or emphasise the main themes of *King Lear*?
- 2 How does Shakespeare use language to define character and heighten the drama of certain situations in *King Lear*?
- 3 '*King Lear* is a play of contrasts.' Discuss.
- 4 Who or what is to blame for the tragedy of *King Lear*?
- 5 To what extent does *King Lear* fit Aristotle's model of tragedy?
- 6 Show how Shakespeare uses one or more of the following techniques to present his main ideas in *King Lear*.
  - Parallel plots
  - Foreshadowing
  - Repetition
  - Setting
  - Dramatic irony
- 7 'All's cheerless, dark, and deadly.' To what extent are Kent's words an accurate summary of *King Lear*?
- 8 To what extent does *King Lear* show that evil can never triumph over good?
- 9 Discuss the role of suffering in *King Lear*.
- 10 'In *King Lear*, female characters are either unbelievably virtuous, unbelievably evil or unbelievably absent.' Is this a fair assessment? Does *King Lear* offer a fair representation of women?
- 11 What does the story of Gloucester and his sons contribute to the meaning of the play? Would the play be significantly impoverished if their story were excluded?
- 12 To what extent is Lear the cause of his tragedy? To what extent is he a victim of forces beyond his control?
- 13 Discuss how Shakespeare presents the theme of justice in *King Lear*.
- 14 Choose a film adaptation of *King Lear* and discuss the director's emphasis.

# APPENDIX 1



## To the teacher

It will not be possible for your students to attempt every activity in this book, but we have given you a wide range of activities and questions so that you can determine what best suits the particular needs of your class. Listed below are some of the features of this edition of *King Lear* and a brief explanation of how they might be useful in your lessons. We have used a range of icons to help you and your students identify different parts of the text.

### 1. Understanding the narrative

Before you begin reading the text, it is important that your students have a sound grasp of the story. It is a good idea for the class to read through the **Act summaries** on pages 19–20 and complete the **Quick questions** and **Freeze-frames** activity on pages 21–22.

At the beginning of each scene we have given an outline of what happens, called **In a nutshell**.

### 2. Reading the text

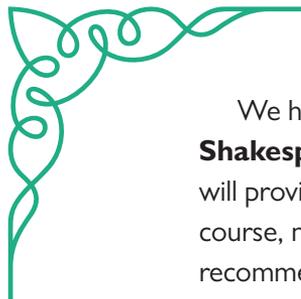
While it is likely you will read most of the play as a class, you should also read some scenes in smaller groups, and you might like to perform some as well.

At the beginning of each scene we have listed the characters in order of importance. It is advisable that, as the teacher, you take a major role and delegate the other major parts to your most confident readers. It is also helpful if one student reads the stage directions for some scenes.

Where possible, try to allocate parts the day before you perform a scene so that students have an opportunity to look over and perhaps practise their parts. Encourage students to read loudly and clearly, and be forthcoming with your praise where you can.

**Shakespeare's language** (see pages 9–17) provides some basic reading tips and explanations of key language features. We recommend that you look at the reading tips before you begin reading, and explain them to your class. This section also includes a list of key words that recur frequently throughout the play. You might like to familiarise your students with this before you begin reading the play.

It is important that you do not overwhelm your students with too many concepts in a short period of time. Introduce concepts such as iambic pentameter after your students have begun to gain an intuitive sense for the language.



We have also provided general introductions on **Jacobean England**, **Shakespeare** himself, and the **Dates, sources and setting** for *King Lear*. These will provide some background and a context in which to read the play. There is, of course, no substitute for seeing the text performed as a live production, and we recommend you have actors or performance companies visit your school.

### 3. Understanding the text



We have included a short **Vocabulary** list at the beginning of each scene. All of these words, plus some others from the text and the text notes, are included in the vocabulary list at the back of the book so you can find a word without having to remember where it was first introduced.

The **Before you read** section at the beginning of each scene provides reading tips and anticipates problems students may have. Phrases and words that are more secondary to the understanding of a scene are printed as **Text notes** beneath the play text on each page.



The **History boxes** contain useful historical information on Jacobean England. Most of these boxes provide a historical context for specific scenes; other information has been included to fire the students' curiosity.

We have provided a **Shakespeare reading list** on page 214 in case you wish to read more on Shakespeare and Elizabethan or Jacobean England.

### 4. Analysing the text



QUESTIONS

In ordering the **Questions**, we have attempted to balance chronology against degree of difficulty. For some scenes you might look to save time by dividing the questions among different groups in the class, or you may simply use them as a springboard for discussion. No teacher should try to use every question in the book.



EXTEND

We have also included more challenging **Extend** questions that will allow some students, or the entire class, to analyse a scene in greater depth. It is important that all students engage with the technical aspects of the play, and, for this reason, we have also included questions relating to technique among the general questions.



DISCUSS

Finally, some questions have been designed for general discussion of personal responses to the text, as well as possible interpretations for performance. These are indicated by the **Discuss** icon.

A word about ...

Shakespeare's **Themes and techniques** highlight particular ideas and devices used by Shakespeare throughout this play. We recommend that students first read these boxes themselves and that you then explain the concept using the examples.



## 5. The films (Press play)



While both are harrowingly bleak interpretations, we judge Peter Brook's 1971 production, starring Paul Scofield, and the Trevor Nunn 2008 production, starring Ian McKellen, to be the most accessible and exciting film versions of the play to use in the classroom. Note that Brook's film is heavily abridged and does take liberties with chronology and some other features of the plot. It is useful to show excerpts from the films as you study the play to reinforce your students' understanding of key scenes, and it may serve as an alternative to reading some scenes. The **Press play** activities provide opportunities for further analysis and discussion.

## 6. General activities

There is deliberate overlap between the **Questions for debate**, **Questions for discussion** and **Essay questions** (pages 206–10). How you use these will depend largely on the type of class you have. We have generally found that it is better to read through the play in its entirety before beginning debates, essays or creative activities. However, you might like to break up your reading of the play with one of the **Oral presentations / performance** or **Creative writing** activities (pages 207–09) after Act 2 or Act 3.

## 7. A note about the text

We have based this edition of *King Lear* on the First Folio text. In some places we have also included a number of famous lines from the Quarto that are missing from the First Folio but are usually performed or referred to in critical discussions. Some of the stage directions and the spellings have been modernised, in line with standard editorial practices for preparing editions of Shakespeare's plays. Modern punctuation conventions are followed, with the exception of the dash (–), which we have used to indicate an interruption in the flow or the direction of the conversation; see pages 10–11 for a detailed explanation.

## 8. Finally ...

No-one could reasonably expect to understand every phrase or allusion in Shakespeare's plays and your students should not expect to either. Making this clear from the outset will foster the confidence in students to talk about what they do understand and what they do know: to see the text as a glass half full, rather than a glass half empty. Moreover, this will encourage students to appreciate the subtleties and resonances of the language and to truly understand that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our pedagogy.

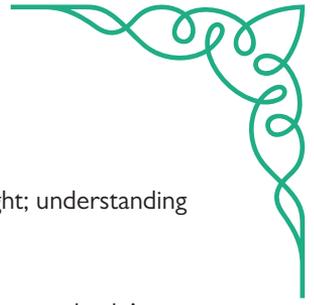


## APPENDIX 3

# A Shakespeare reading list

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# Vocabulary list



**Abjure:** Give up, reject or abstain from

**Abroad:** Around the place

**Affliction:** Something that causes suffering

**Ague:** Fever

**Alack:** An expression of grief

**Amity:** Friendship

**Anon:** Soon

**Apprehension:** Arrest

**Aroint:** Be gone

**Arraign:** Prosecute or accuse

**Arrant:** Base; absolute

**Aught:** Anything

**Avaunt:** Be gone

**Ay:** Yes

**Banns:** Notice given of intention to marry

**Bans:** Curses

**Base:** Low; common; unworthy

**Beadle:** Punisher

**Beguile:** Deceive or charm

**Belike:** Probably; perhaps

**Benediction:** Blessing

**Benison:** Blessing

**Beseech:** Request

**Boon:** Request

**Bootless:** Useless

**Breach:** Wound

**Burdocks:** A common weed

**Caitiff:** Wretch

**Casement:** Window

**Censure:** Judge; criticise

**Centaur:** Mythological creatures, half-man, half-horse, known for their promiscuity

**Century:** Soldier

**Chide / chid:** Criticise or tell someone off

**Choler:** Anger

**Choughs:** Jackdaws

**Clamour:** Noise or outcry

**Closet:** Private room

**Conceit:** Imagination; thought; understanding

**Conceive:** Understand

**Confederacy:** Conspiracy

**Countenance:** Appearance; somebody's face or facial expression

**Courtesan:** Expensive prostitute

**Cowish:** Cowardly

**Coxcomb:** Jester's cap

**Cozened:** Tricked

**Curs:** Mongrel dogs

**Defuse:** Confuse

**Descry:** Make out or catch sight of

**Diligence:** Care and attention

**Disposition:** State of mind or mood

**Dolour:** Sorrow; grief

**Dotage:** Feebleness of mind; infatuation

**Dower / Dowry:** Property or wealth given away by a father with a daughter when she marries

**Dullard:** An idiot

**Elements:** The weather

**Enmity:** Hatred or a state of being enemies

**Entreat:** Beg or request forcefully (beseech)

**Ere:** Before

**Esperance:** Hope

**Fain:** Gladly

**Fathom:** A measurement of length, roughly 1.8 metres

**Felicitate:** Made happy or joyful

**Fell:** Cruel

**Festinate:** Speedy

**Fetches:** Untrustworthy excuses; tricks

**Fi:** Expression of annoyance, disapproval or disgust

**Filial:** The relationship between parent and child



**Fond:** Foolish  
**Footed:** Landed  
**Fops:** Fools  
**Forbear:** Cease or leave alone  
**Fumiter:** A bitter herb

**Gait:** (The manner of someone's) walk  
**Gall:** Bile (a bitter liquid produced by the gall bladder)  
**Gallow:** Terrify  
**Garb:** Clothing  
**Gasted:** Frightened  
**Girdle:** Waist  
**Gossamer:** The thread of a spider's web  
**Grace:** Success or divine favour  
**Gross:** Large

**Hand:** Handwriting  
**Heath:** Barren land  
**Hence:** From here  
**Heretics:** People who deviate from the true faith  
**Hither:** Here; to this place  
**Hovel:** A hole used as a house or a severely impoverished house

**Import:** Mean or suggest; of importance  
**Importuned:** Considerate  
**Ingratitude:** Lack of thanks or appreciation  
**Issue:** Offspring

**Judicious:** Wise  
**Juno:** Wife of Jupiter; Queen of Mount Olympus in Roman mythology  
**Jupiter:** A Roman god; King of Mount Olympus

**Kibes:** Chilblains (blisters caused by cold and damp)  
**Kin:** Relation  
**Knave:** Rascal or servant (Lear uses the term affectionately in addressing the Fool)

**Lecherous:** Lewd or lustful  
**Liege:** A lord or sovereign such as a king  
**Litter:** A type of wheeled vehicle  
**Low:** Humble

**Malady:** A disease or disorder  
**Manifold:** Of many different kinds or parts  
**Marry:** By the Virgin Mary (an expression of surprise or frustration)  
**Meet:** Appropriate  
**Meiny:** Men, retinue  
**Miscreant:** Unbeliever  
**Moiety:** Part or portion  
**Musters:** Soldiers

**Naught:** Nothing  
**Naughty:** Vile or evil  
**Negligence:** Carelessness  
**Nuncle:** (A contraction of) my uncle

**Oeilliads:** Loving or passionate glances  
**Overture:** Revelation

**Packings:** Plots  
**Parricide:** Someone who murders a parent; the act of murdering a parent

**Penury:** Poverty  
**Perchance:** Maybe  
**Perdy:** By God (from the French *par Dieu*)  
**Perforce:** By force

**Pernicious:** Destructive or harmful  
**Persever:** Persist or persevere

**Peruse:** Read carefully  
**Physic:** Medical treatment

**Pinion:** Bind or tie up

**Pomp:** Luxury and splendour; a person used to these things

**Posts:** Messengers

**Prithee:** A polite term when asking for something (equivalent to 'please')

**Privily:** Secretly

**Propinquity:** Blood relationship

**Redress:** Make amends for, fix up  
**Retention:** Imprisonment; detention  
**Ruffle:** Manhandle or treat roughly

**Salutations:** Greetings  
**Sapient:** Wise  
**Saucy:** Cheeky or rude  
**Sirrah:** Equivalent to 'sir' but used to address someone of a lower rank  
**Slipshod:** Wearing slippers  
**Snuffs:** Hatreds or resentments  
**Sojourn:** Stopover or stay for a time  
**Sot:** Fool  
**Subscription:** Allegiance  
**Sue:** Request  
**Superflux:** Surplus of possessions

**Tarry:** Remain; wait  
**Temperance:** Self-control  
**Tempest:** Storm  
**Tenant:** Someone who rents land  
**Thine:** Yours (something belonging to you)  
**Thou:** You  
**Thy:** Your  
**Treason:** Betrayal or extreme disloyalty

**Trifle:** Trivial thing; play with  
**'Twixt:** Between (a contraction of betwixt)

**Upbraids:** Reproaches or criticises  
**Usurps:** Takes over or takes wrongful possession of

**Valour:** Bravery or courage  
**Vassal:** Villain  
**Verity:** Truth  
**Vexed:** Troubled  
**Vices:** Bad qualities  
**Villain:** Peasant; wicked person  
**Virtuous:** Good

**Warrant:** Permit or give permission  
**Weeds:** Clothes; herbs and wild flowers  
**Whence:** From what place, cause or origin  
**Wherefore:** Why  
**Whiles:** Until  
**Wit:** Intelligence; wisdom; reasoning  
**Withal:** In addition; nevertheless; with  
**Wrought:** Worked; completed

**Yeoman:** A land-holding farmer  
**Yond:** Over there

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