

English 30-1
King Lear by William Shakespeare



Act I, Scene i

A stateroom in King Lear's palace

Enter KENT, GLOUCESTER, and EDMUND

"had more affected" = *had more regard for; was fonder of*

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 equalities are so weigh'd that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety.

"us" – Gloucester uses the "royal we," also called the "imperial plural." Monarchs and other highly placed persons (Gloucester, for instance, is an earl) sometimes use plural personal pronouns (i.e. *we, our, us*) rather than singulars (i.e. *I, me, mine*), because it is understood that they speak not only for themselves but for their followers as well.

"equalities are so weigh'd" = *shares are so balanced*

"that curiosity ... either's moiety" = *that the most careful scrutiny of each share could not cause either of the dukes to prefer the other duke's portion to his own ("moiety" = share, not necessarily half)*

KENT

Is not this your son, my lord?

GLOUCESTER

His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blush'd to acknowledge him that now I am braz'd to it.

"His breeding ... my charge" = *It is said that I am his father OR I've paid for his upbringing*

"I have ... braz'd to it" = *I've so often been embarrassed to admit that this bastard son is mine that I'm now hardened to it (i.e. it doesn't bother Gloucester anymore)*

"braz'd" = *made insensible; hardened (literally "plated with brass")*

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?

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

"conceive" – Kent uses the word in the sense of "understand." In his reply to Kent, Gloucester puns on the word, with the sense of "conceive" as *become pregnant*.

"ere" = *before*

"Do you smell a fault?" = *Would you say I've sinned?*

"I cannot ... so proper" = (If you've erred) *I can't say the error should be reversed, because the outcome (your son) looks like a fine young man*

GLOUCESTER
But I have, sir, a son 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 acknowledg'd. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund?

EDMUND
No, my lord.

GLOUCESTER
My lord of Kent. Remember him hereafter as my honorable friend.

EDMUND
My services to your lordship.

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

"But I have ... than this" = *But I do have a legitimate son too (i.e. a son delivered by the woman to whom Gloucester was legally wed) and this other son is about one year older (than the bastard son)*

We are to understand, then, that Edmund's mother was probably a prostitute. We should note at this point, too, that this older son would have privileges that the bastard son is not entitled to—one, because the elder son was born in wedlock (which automatically makes him more respectable than the bastard son); and two, simply because he is the first-born son (first-borns traditionally being favored over children following in the birth order).

"knave" – A knave is a rogue, a scoundrel, a man of questionable morals and careless or selfish behavior. But the word is often used as an endearment too—that is, with a sense of affectionate teasing pointed at one who is in fact loved.

Consider here how the young man, Edmund, must feel at this moment, hearing his father speak of his origins in such vulgar (one might say "locker room") terms. Isn't it likely that he would feel quite undervalued by a father who speaks of him, however affectionately, as the son of a whore?

"My services to your lordship" = *I am at your service, sir*

"sue" = *do what I can*

EDMUND

Sir, I shall study deserving.

"I shall ... deserving" = *I will try to be worthy of your respect*

"out" – i.e. out of the country or the region

GLOUCESTER

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

sennet – a particular set of notes sounded on a trumpet to announce the arrival of a royal party

coronet – a monarch's crown

Sennet. Enter one bearing a coronet, LEAR, CORNWALL, ALBANY, GONERIL, REGAN, CORDELIA, and attendants

LEAR

Attend the lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester.

"Attend" = *wait on and/or usher into our presence*. (The King of France and the Duke of Burgundy are guests in Lear's court. But we do not yet know why they are here.)

GLOUCESTER

I shall, my liege.

Exeunt GLOUCESTER and EDMUND

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
Unburden'd crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall,
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,
Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,
Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn
And here are to be answer'd. Tell me, my daughters—
Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state—
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge? Goneril,
Our eldest-born, speak first.

"our darker purpose" = *my more secret intention* (i.e. the plan to divide the kingdom and give the best share to the daughter who loves him most, which, as we shall see, Lear has already determined is to be Cordelia).

To this point, the councilors, the Earl of Kent and the Earl of Gloucester, know only of the shares intended for the two eldest (and married) daughters Goneril and Regan.

"our fast intent" = *my firm intention*

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. the importance, according to Elizabethan ideals, of integrity (wholeness, unity) and natural order
2. the king-becoming grace of *perseverance* and the suggestion that Lear is not exhibiting this virtue
3. the both positive and negative connotations inherent in the image of one's crawling unburdened toward death

"son of Cornwall ... son of Albany" – i.e. sons-in-law

"We have ... prevented now" = *At this moment, I have a fixed desire to formally assign portions of my kingdom* (in the form of dowries for the daughters Goneril and Regan) *to you in order to ensure that there will be no war between the two of you later over the land*

"amorous sojourn" = *journey of love* – i.e. the process of courtship. (The King of France and the Duke of Burgundy have been vying for Cordelia's hand in marriage and "here are to be answer'd"—that is, they are to learn now which of them has been successful.)

DISCUSSION POINTS: We come now to the famous "love test" in *King Lear*.

1. What is suggested about the character of a father who would put his children to such a contest?
2. How would you, as a child in such a situation, react to this sort of demand by a parent?

GONERIL

Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter,
Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;
Beyond what can be valu'd, rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;
As much as child e'er lov'd or father found;
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable.
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

"wield" = *handle; carry*

CORDELIA

[*Aside*] What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.

From Cordelia's first line, a private thought, we see that she is reluctant to play Lear's tedious, ill-conceived game. She loves her father and plans to continue in that course, but she knows "there's beggary in the love that can be reckon'd" (this line is quoted from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*)—that is, that love cannot be quantified and portioned out in the way that, say, a kingdom can. Indeed, such love is not really love at all.

LEAR

Of all these bounds, even from this line to this,
With shadowy forests and with champains rich'd,
With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads,
We make thee lady. To thine and Albany's issue
Be this perpetual. What says our second daughter,
Our dearest Regan, wife to Cornwall? Speak.

"Of all ... to this" – Here, Lear indicates the map of Britain in order to show Goneril what portion is to be hers and Albany's.

"shadowy" = *shady* (because there are many trees in the region that Lear indicates)

"champains rich'd" = *enriched (fertile) fields*

"wide-skirted meads" = *extensive meadows*

"issue" = *children* (and children to follow in their line)

REGAN

I am made of that self metal as my sister,
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
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
In your dear highness' love.

"And prize ... deed of love" = *And estimate myself her equal in the amount of affection I feel for you, and I truly believe she describes the very quality of my love too*

"comes too short" = *does not go far enough*

"most precious square of sense" = *sense absolute; sense in its perfection* (to be "square" is to be perfectly fitting, harmonious in every way)

"And find ... highness' love" = *and see that the only thing that makes me happy is knowing that I love you* ("felicitate" = *happy*)

CORDELIA

[*Aside*] Then poor Cordelia!
And yet not so, since I am sure my love's
More ponderous than my tongue.

"Then poor ... my tongue" = *Poor me! But then again, I'm not poor at all, for I do have a genuine love—a love far more valuable than any words there are to describe that love* ("ponderous" = *weighty*)

LEAR
To thee and thine, hereditary ever,
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,
No less in space, validity, and pleasure
Than that confer'd on Goneril. Now, our joy—
Although our last and least—to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interest'd, what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters'? Speak.

"our last and least" – Cordelia is the youngest ("last") daughter and the smallest ("least").

"vines" = *vineyards*

"milk" = *pasturelands* (i.e. for grazing dairy herds)

"interest'd" = *closely connected; concerned*

"opulent" = *lavish*

Note that, with reference to "a third [portion of land] more opulent than [her] sisters'," Lear reveals that he has intended all along that Cordelia shall be the winner of this contest.

CORDELIA
Nothing, my lord.

In this terse four-line exchange between Cordelia and Lear, the word "nothing" looms large. It is uttered five times. And as we will see, the idea of *nothing*—of the zero sum—of reduction to the level of the *least*—is a key motif in the play. Be alert to uses of the concept—in action, dialogue, and imagery—to follow throughout the text.

LEAR
Nothing?

CORDELIA
Nothing.

LEAR
Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

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.

Professor Noble notes an allusion here to the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes: "The heart of fools is in their mouth, but the mouth of the wise is in their heart."

"bond" = *filial obligation*—i.e. the duty of a child to a parent

LEAR
How, how, Cordelia! mend your speech a little,
Lest you may mar your fortunes.

"mar" = *ruin*

CORDELIA
Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me. I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
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.

"bred" = *fathered*

"right fit" = *in the proper proportions*

"Haply, when I shall wed" = *When it happens that I marry*

"plight" = *pledge of marriage*

"all" = *with all my heart*

Cordelia observes that, according to strictly mathematical logic, there is something questionable about her sisters' declarations of love for their father. If they love him completely, as they say they do, then what love would they have left over for their husbands, whom they are duty-bound to love also?

LEAR
But goes thy heart with this?

"But goes thy heart with this?" = *Do you really mean what you say?*

CORDELIA

Ay, my good lord.

LEAR
So young and so untender?

CORDELIA
So young, my lord, and true.

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,
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
Hold thee from this forever. The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbor'd, pitied, and reliev'd,
As thou my sometime daughter.

"Thy truth ... thy dower" = *You can take this truth for your (only) dowry*

"mysteries" = *secret ceremonies*

Hecate – In classical mythology, Hecate was a goddess of the underworld and of witchcraft.

"operation of ... to be" = *influence of the planets, which affect our lives and deaths*

"propinquity and property of blood" = *obligations of kinship*
("propinquity" = *nearness*) and *blood relationship*

"from this" = *from this time forward*

"barbarous Scythian" – The inhabitants of Scythia (i.e. modern Russia) were traditionally thought to be savages.

"makes ... messes" = *chops his own parents or children up into portions of food* ("messes")

"To gorge his appetite" – i.e. to satisfy his appetite out of mere gluttony, not even out of hunger

"sometime" = *former* (because Lear disowns Cordelia)

KENT
Good my liege—

LEAR
 Peace, Kent!
 Come not between the dragon and his wrath.
 I lov'd her most and thought to set my rest
 On her kind nursery. 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. Ourself, by monthly course,
 With reservation of an hundred knights
 By you to be sustain'd, shall our abode
 Make with you by due turns. Only we shall retain
 The name and all th' addition to a king.
 The sway, revenue, execution of the rest,
 Beloved sons, be yours, which to confirm,
 This coronet part betwixt you.

"Peace" = *silence*. (Often in Shakespeare, the word *peace* is uttered as a command for silence and is frequently delivered in a scolding tone.)

"dragon" – Lear personifies himself as the dragon, the symbolic beast of Wales, a red lion rampant, which is shown on the arms of all British monarchs.

"wrath" – i.e. the *object* of his wrath

"set my rest" = *settle everything I have*. (Lear uses a gambler's phrase.)

"kind nursery" = *tender care*

"Hence" = *go away*

"be my grave my peace" = *may I find peace only in the grave*. (The word "peace" is not used here in the same sense that it has in the command "Peace, Kent.")

"Who stirs?" = *Is someone not doing my bidding at this very instant?*

"digest" = *incorporate* (i.e. the third portion of Britain that was to have been bequeathed to Cordelia)

Note that, earlier in the scene, Lear's expressed intention is to prevent "future strife" between Cornwall and Albany over the land of the kingdom. Now, in hastily telling them to divvy up the spare portion between themselves, he is creating the real possibility of strife even now.

"Let pride ... marry her" = *Let her pride, which she would say is honesty, be her dowry and find a husband for her*

"Pre-eminence" = *first position*

"all the large effects" = *the magnificent accompaniments*

"troop with majesty" = *are associated with kingship*

"monthly course" = *month by month*

"With reservation" = *a legal term* (Lear will give up everything *except* the hundred knights.)

"sustain'd" = *supported*

"our abode ... due turns" = *stay with each of you in turn*

"name and all th' addition to a king" = *title and proper ceremonious treatment appropriate to a king*

"sway, revenue, execution" = *authority, wealth, decisions/actions*

"This coronet part betwixt you" = *Split the kingship between yourselves*

KENT
 Royal Lear,
 Whom I have ever honor'd as my king,
 Lov'd as my father, as my master follow'd,
 As my great patron thought on in my prayers—

LEAR
 The bow is bent and drawn. Make from
 the shaft.

"Make from the shaft" = *Get out of the way of the arrow* (i.e. the arrow of anger and harsh judgment) *that is ready to be shot from the bow*

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 honor's
 bound,
 When majesty falls to folly. Reserve thy state,
 And in thy best consideration check
 This hideous rashness. Answer my life my judgment,
 Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,
 Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds
 Reverb no hollowness.

"Be Kent unmannerly / When Lear is mad" = *I will speak bluntly when Lear behaves like a fool*

In this speech is established a key trait in Kent's character—namely his ability to speak plainly and honestly and to do so even if it will cause his hearers to be angry with him. Kent is one who rejects as sinful all flattery and otherwise deceptive speech. Note in the course of the play that this motif of "plain speaking" will be reinforced not only in the character of Kent, but expressed through other characters as well.

"Think'st thou ... flattery bows" = *Do you think that a loyal subject would fear to speak honestly to his king when his king falls for the lies of flatterers?* (Kent refers, of course, to Goneril and Regan.)

"To plainness ... to folly" = *An honorable subject is duty bound to speak plainly when the king is brought down by his own foolishness*

"Reserve thy state" = *Keep your kingship and all that is yours*

"in thy best consideration" = *when you've thought things over carefully*

"Answer my life my judgment" = *I'll stake my life on this opinion*

"Nor are those ... reverb no hollowness" = *Those whose voices do not sound like echoes in empty chambers are people with hearts* (therefore no echoing is heard in them). (Kent's implication is that Goneril and Regan are indeed empty-hearted.)

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 motive.

"My life ... being motive" = *I never considered my life anything but an expendable tool to use against those who would hurt you, nor was I ever afraid to die when your wellbeing was my concern*

LEAR
 Out of my sight!

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

"See better, Lear" – This simple command might be taken as the principle imperative for Lear to pursue throughout the course of the play. He is a man who begins, in effect, a blind fool and must—as any tragic hero worth his suffering must—learn to "see better." A good point of study for us is to mark the moments from this point onward that stand as the incremental improvements in Lear's vision.

"let me ... thine eye" = *Let me yet continue to stand as your constant target – i.e. of trust and love.* (The "blank" that Kent mentions is a reference to the white center-point of an archer's target. This short speech, then, is an extension of the bow-and-arrow metaphor established in Lear's caution "The bow is bent and drawn. Make from the shaft.")

LEAR
 Now, by Apollo—

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

"Thou swear'st thy gods in vain" – That Lear should swear by Apollo strikes Kent as bitterly ironic, for he knows (presumably) that Apollo, the Greek god of healing and sunlight, is also associated with reason and logic, with clarity of thought and so of clear eyesight. For a blind fool to call on Apollo as his patron is tantamount to a blasphemy.

LEAR
 O vassal! Miscreant!

"vassal" = *slave* (an insult to Kent, considering that he is in fact an earl)

"miscreant" = *misbeliever; blasphemer* (for Kent has denied Lear's god)

Laying his hand on his sword

ALBANY and CORNWALL

Dear sir, forbear.

"forbear" = *be patient* (especially under provocation)

KENT

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

"revoke" = *un-speak; take back*

"vent clamor" = *utter protest*

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 strain'd pride
To come betwixt our sentence and our power,
Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,
Our potency made good, take thy reward.
Five days we do allot thee for provision
To shield thee from diseases of the world,
And on the sixth to turn thy hated back
Upon our kingdom. If on the tenth day following
Thy banish'd trunk be found in our dominions,
The moment is thy death. Away! By Jupiter,
This shall not be revok'd.

"recreant" = *traitor*

"on thine allegiance" = *remembering your solemn promise of loyalty*

"durst never yet" = *have never yet dared to do*

"strain'd" = *unnatural*

"To come ... our power" = *to interfere between the sentence I have pronounced and its execution*

"nor our nature nor our place" – In modern usage, the conventional construction would be "[neither] our nature nor our place." The *tandem-nor* in constructions of this sort is common in Shakespeare.

"Our potency made good" = *Since my power is still confirmed*

"for provision" = *to gather together all that you need*

"trunk" = *body*

"The moment is thy death" = *You will die immediately*

"Jupiter" – The king of the Roman gods was also, in ancient times, worshipped in Britain. Lear's oath (as well as his earlier swearing by Apollo) helps to establish the pagan (pre-Christian) setting of the play.

As for the play's time setting, however, we must note that Shakespeare's establishment of a pagan world for his characters is merely nominal. Shakespeare writes, after all, out of Christian culture and from a Christian point of view, and throughout the play are several allusions to the Bible and Christian theology.

KENT

Fare thee well, king. Sith thus thou wilt appear,
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 GONERIL] And your large speeches
may your deeds approve,
That good effects may spring from words of love.
Thus Kent, O princes, bids you all adieu.
He'll shape his old course in a country new.

"Sith" = *since*

"And your ... deeds approve" = *And I hope that your grand expressions of love may actually prove true in your actions*

Exit KENT

*Flourish. Re-enter GLOUCESTER with FRANCE,
BURGUNDY, and attendants*

flourish – Like a sennet, a flourish is a trumpet fanfare that announces the arrival or departure of a royal party.

GLOUCESTER

Here's France and Burgundy, my noble lord.

LEAR

My lord of Burgundy.
We first address toward you, who with this king
Hath rival'd for our daughter. What, in the least,
Will you require in present dower with her
Or cease your quest of love?

"present dower with her" = *for her immediate dowry*

BURGUNDY

Most royal majesty,

I crave no more than hath your highness offer'd,
Nor will you tender less.

"When she ... her so" – Lear plays on two uses of the word "dear." The adjective *dear* can mean *beloved* (therefore, *When I loved her, I did hold her so*). And *dear* can mean *expensive*. He is saying, then, *When I loved her I considered her ("did hold her") valuable indeed*.

LEAR

Right noble Burgundy,
When she was dear to us we did hold her so.
But now her price is fall'n. Sir, there she stands.
If aught within that little seeming substance,
Or all of it, with our displeasure piec'd,
And nothing more, may fitly like your grace,
She's there, and she is yours.

"If aught ... she is yours" = *If anything ("aught") in that girl, who merely appears to have value, or she entirely—along with my contempt added to her, but no more than that (i.e. no dowry)—appeals to you, then take her now*

BURGUNDY

I know no answer.

LEAR

Will you, with those infirmities she owes,
Unfriended, new-adopted to our hate,
Dower'd with our curse, and stranger'd with our oath,
Take her or leave her?

"infirmities" = *faults*

"owes" = *owns*

"new-adopted to our hate" = *whom I have just begun to hate*

"Dower'd with our curse" = *with my curse for her only dowry*

"stranger'd" = *made a stranger* (because she has been disowned and disinherited)

BURGUNDY

Pardon me, royal sir,

Election makes not up in such conditions.

"Election makes ... such conditions" = *Making a choice on the terms you offer is impossible*

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
T' avert your liking a more worthier way
Than on a wretch whom nature is asham'd
Almost to acknowledge hers.

"make such a stray" = *stray so far*

"beseech you ... worthier way" = *request you to direct your affections toward someone who is more worthy of your love*

"more worthier" – In modern usage, this sort of double comparative is considered ungrammatical. We, of course, would say *more worthy* or simply *worthier*. But the double comparative is common in the plays of Shakespeare.

"a wretch whom nature is asham'd / Almost to acknowledge hers" – Note throughout the play how often the perceived misbehaviors of children (examples of "filial ingratitude") are spoken of as unnatural or are compared to monsters or predatory animals. You will see it even in the next speech delivered by the king of France.



FRANCE

This is most strange,
That she—who 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 favor. Sure, her offence
Must be of such unnatural degree
That monsters it, or your fore-vouch'd affection
Fall'n into taint, which to believe of her
Must be a faith that reason without miracle
Could never plant in me.

"even but now" = *until just a moment ago*

"best object" = *favorite*

"argument" = *subject*

"balm" = *comfort; a soothing ointment*

"trice" = *instant*

"dismantle / So many folds of favor" = *strip off so many layers of affection. Here too is another key motif to watch for—that is, the idea of stripping off or stripping down (especially of clothing). And it is a motif that complements the motif of nothingness (cited above in the exchange between Cordelia and Lear).*

"such unnatural degree / That monsters it" = *so unnatural as to be monstrous*

"your fore-vouch'd affection / Fall'n into taint" = *your formerly professed love proven false*

"Must be ... believe this" = *would take a miracle to make me believe*

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 do't before I speak—that you make known
It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness,
No unchaste action or dishonor'd step,
That hath depriv'd me of your grace and favor,
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.

"If for" = *even though*

"want" = *lack*

"glib" = *smooth-talking*

"oily" = *The word oily (used as a metaphor) is commonly applied to the speech of flatterers and other con artists.*

"and purpose not" = *without meaning to keep promises*

"vicious blot" = *moral stain*

"unchaste" = *unclean*

"dishonor'd" = *dishonorable*

"But even ... am richer" = *but because that which I lack is that which makes me richer. Note here Cordelia's use of paradox, and watch for an extension of it in a speech by the king of France coming up shortly.*

"still-soliciting" = *opportunistic; constantly seeking for gain*

"lost" = *ruined*

LEAR

Better thou
Hadst not been born than not t' have pleas'd me better.

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 mingl'd with regards that stand
Aloof from th' entire point. Will you have her?
She is herself a dowry.

"but" = *no more than*

"tardiness in nature" = *natural reluctance*

"That" = *that which*

"leaves the history unspoke" = *does not talk about*

"What say you to the lady?" = *Will you have her?*

"regards that stand / Aloof from th' entire point" = *considerations that have nothing to do with the real issue*

"She is herself a dowry" = *She is a treasure alone (and needs no extra wealth to make her valuable)*

BURGUNDY

Royal Lear,

Give but that portion which yourself propos'd,
And here I take Cordelia by the hand,
Duchess of Burgundy.

"Nothing!" – The actor playing Lear will often play this "Nothing!" with a sense of vicious sarcasm, pointing it not so much at Burgundy as at Cordelia, as though to say *Let's see how you like it when I use that word.*

LEAR

Nothing! I have sworn. I am firm.

BURGUNDY

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

"that respect ... his love" = *what he really cares about is achieving status and wealth*

CORDELIA

Peace be with Burgundy!

Since that respect and fortunes are his love,
I shall not be his wife.

"that art ... lov'd, despis'd" = *who are rich (in your nature) though you have been stripped of wealth, desirable though cast off (by your father), and loved (by me) though hated (by your father). Note how France's series of paradoxes all extend Cordelia's earlier line "But even for want of that for which I am richer."*

"be it" = *if it is*

FRANCE

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor;
Most choice, forsaken; and most lov'd, despis'd,
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 inflam'd respect.
Thy dowerless daughter, king, thrown to my chance,
Is queen of us, of ours, and our fair France.
Not all the dukes of wat'rish Burgundy
Can buy this unpriz'd precious maid of me.
Bid them farewell, Cordelia, though unkind.
Thou lovest here, a better where to find.

"'Tis strange that from their cold'st neglect / My love should kindle to such inflam'd respect" – Here is an early example of a motif that runs strongly throughout *King Lear*—which is that of the *inversion of conditions or quantities*. France's image of fire being kindled out of coldness is consistent with several other images and actions in the play that involve things being turned inside-out or upside-down—in particular, where somethings are made nothings and nothings are made somethings.

"thrown to my chance" = *offered to me by good fortune*

"wat'rish Burgundy" – Burgundy is a land of many streams and rivers, but France's adjective here may be read as a subtle dig at the Duke of Burgundy, for in it he seems to suggest that Burgundy is morally weak—that he has a "watery" nature.

"unpriz'd" = *unappreciated (by Lear)*

"Bid them ... to find" = *Say goodbye to your former family, Cordelia, even though they've behaved unnaturally, for you are losing this home in order to find a better one elsewhere*

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 be gone
Without our grace, our love, our benison.
Come, noble Burgundy.

"benison" = *blessing*

*Flourish. Exeunt all but FRANCE, GONERIL,
REGAN, and CORDELIA*

FRANCE

Bid farewell to your sisters.

CORDELIA

The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes
Cordelia leaves you. I know you what you are,
And like a sister am most loth to call
Your faults as they are nam'd. Love well our father.
To your profess'd 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.

"The jewels ... leaves you" = *You, who are valued by our father, I now leave, with my eyes full of tears.* (Alternately, "wash'd eyes" may be intended as Cordelia's suggestion that her vision is purified and that she is able therefore to "see better" than her father currently does.)

"loth" = *reluctant.* (Cordelia says that she hates even to say aloud what the crimes of her sisters are—i.e. their deceptiveness and greed.)

"profess'd bosoms" = *hearts that you claim are filled with love*

"stood I within his grace" = *if I were in favor with him*

"prefer" = *recommend*

REGAN

Prescribe not us our duties.

"Prescribe not us our duties" = *Don't tell us how to behave properly*

GONERIL

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

"Let your ... fortune's alms" = *Concern yourself with learning how to please your new husband, who has taken you as a charitable donation*

"obedience scanted" = *failed in your duty (as a daughter)*

"And well ... have wanted" = *and deserve to be shown the same lack of affection (by your husband) that you have shown (to our father)*

CORDELIA

Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides,
Who covers faults, at last with shame derides.
Well may you prosper!

"Time shall ... cunning hides" = *Eventually your deception will be revealed ("plighted" = folded up; concealed)*

FRANCE

Come, my fair Cordelia.

"Who" – i.e. time (therefore: *Though a person in early time may successfully deceive others, that person will in later time be shamed*)

Exeunt FRANCE and CORDELIA

"Well may you prosper!" – Note that the actress playing Cordelia is likely to play this line with as much sarcasm directed at her sisters as Lear used in his "Nothing!" directed at Cordelia.

Note at this point that the dialogue switches from blank verse to prose. (It had also switched from prose to blank verse early in the scene, when Lear entered the action.) You may need to review the term *blank verse* (maybe *prose* too). Then go on-line to see what you can see about why and when Shakespeare uses prose in place of the more usual blank verse that informs his plays.

GONERIL

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

"it is not ... hence tonight" = *I have much to say about matters especially relevant ("what most nearly appertains") to both of us. I believe our father will leave here (go "hence") tonight*

REGAN

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

GONERIL

You see how full of changes his age is. The observation we have made of it hath not been little. He always lov'd our sister most. And with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.

"how full ... age is" = *how unpredictable his behavior has become as he has grown old*

"The observation ... been little" = *We have seen ample evidence of it*

"grossly" = *obviously*

REGAN

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

"'Tis the infirmity of his age" – Regan observes that such flawed behavior is to be expected in one so old. But even considering that, she adds, her father is a man who has never known himself more than slightly ("slenderly").

With this comment, Regan introduces a crucial idea regarding our understanding of Lear, which is that he begins his journey in the form of a *fool*. He is therefore a man whose task shall be to come to know his true nature—and, as it happens, the true nature of the world. We might say, too, that this is the essential task of most tragic heroes: to achieve deep self-awareness and a knowledge of their place in an order far larger than themselves.

GONERIL

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

"The best ... but rash" = *Even in his prime he was prone to be hot-headed ("rash")*

"Then must ... with them" = *Therefore we can expect, now that he is old, to be the targets not only of faults that he has held for many years ("imperfections of long-engraff'd condition") but also the chaotic impulses that old age's weakness and irritability will add to him*

REGAN

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

"unconstant starts" = *sudden impulses*

GONERIL

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

"compliment" = *formality*

"hit together" = *agree with each other*

"If our ... offend us" = *If he continues to act with such authority, this power he has just given up to us will actually become a problem for us*

REGAN

We shall further think on't.

"do" – i.e. We must *do* something, not just "*think* on it"

GONERIL

We must do something, and i' the heat.

"i' th' heat" = *in the heat of the moment; right now*

Exeunt