

Act I, Scene ii

The Earl of Gloucester's castle

Enter EDMUND with a letter

EDMUND

Thou, Nature, art my goddess. To thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous and my shape as true
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? With baseness? Bastardy? Base, base?
Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tir'd bed,
Go to th' creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to th' legitimate. Fine word, *legitimate*!
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top th' legitimate. I grow. I prosper.
Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

"Thou, Nature ... my goddess" – In his address to nature as an entity who might hear and reply to him, Edmund seems to be cutting himself off from all customs of, and ties to, proper civilization. **The word *nature* appears often in the play but is not used every time in the same sense. For a discussion of the different meanings suggested in the word (as well as the words *nothing* and *fool*) see an essay by Northrop Frye on *King Lear*. You can find it among the other *Lear* files on-line.**

"Wherefore should ... of custom" = *Why should I be affected (as if by an illness) by these polluted conditions?*

"The curiosity of nations" = *fine distinctions made by national laws (especially laws regarding inheritance)*

"For that ... a brother" = *simply because I am a mere twelve or fourteen months ("moonshines") younger than ("lag of" = behind) my brother (strictly speaking, a half-brother)*

"base" – Bastards were sometimes called "base-borns."

"dimensions are as well compact" = *proportions are as properly put together*

"generous" = *gallant; high-spirited; courageous; befitting a person of noble birth*

"my shape as true" = *my appearance as much like my father's*

"honest madam's issue" – i.e. Edgar, the child of Gloucester's lawful wife

"lusty" = both *lustful* and *lusty* (where *lusty* means *full of energy and strength*)

"stealth of nature" = *natural pleasures taken in secret (i.e. stolen moments involving sexual encounters)*

"more composition" = *a fuller mixture of different qualities*

"fierce quality" = *intense energy*

"dull, stale, tir'd bed" – i.e. as the result of a long, loveless marriage

"Go to ... of fops" = *devoted to the producing of a litter of weaklings ("fops")*

"Got" = *begotten* (conceived and born)

"Well then, / Legitimate Edgar" – Edmund speaks to Edgar in apostrophe—which is to say, as if he were present and could respond to Edmund.

"Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund / As to th' legitimate" = *His love will be for me what, for the present, it is for Edgar.* (Edmund believes that he will be able to hijack the inheritance that Gloucester would otherwise pass on to Edgar.)

"if this ... invention thrive" = *if this (forged) letter prospers and my lies ("invention") prove successful*

"top" = *surpass*. **Note that Edmund's line "Edmund the base / Shall top the legitimate" is an example of the inversion motif—in this case, of the bottom ("base") switching places with the top.**

"stand up for bastards" = *favor us, the bastards of the world*

Enter GLOUCESTER

GLOUCESTER

Kent banish'd thus! And France in choler parted!
And the king gone tonight! Prescrib'd his power!
Confin'd to exhibition! All this done
Upon the gad! —Edmund, how now? What news?

Gloucester's opening lines on entering this scene are comprised of his mutterings about the strange events that have just transpired at Lear's court: the regrettable matters of the Earl of Kent's banishment and of a foreign dignitary's having left the British court in anger ("choler"), as well of Lear's having been "prescrib'd his power" (being told just what he can do) and "confin'd to exhibition" (restricted to a small allowance), and "All this done / Upon the gad" (suddenly, as though pricked by a goad). It is not until after this line that he actually sees Edmund in the room and addresses the young man.

EDMUND

So please your lordship, none.

Putting up the letter

"Putting up" actually indicates putting *away* and is a verb normally associated with swordplay. To put up one's sword is to replace it in its sheath. Edmund is, then, slipping the forged letter into a pocket. The importance of this action, however, is that he is not actually being secretive. Rather, he *wants* Gloucester to see him putting the letter away.

GLOUCESTER

Why so earnestly seek you to put up that letter?

EDMUND

I know no news, my lord.

GLOUCESTER

What paper were you reading?

EDMUND

Nothing, my lord.

Again, a *nothing that really is something*.

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.

"dispatch" = *transference from one place to another*

"The quality ... hide itself" = *The nature of a "nothing" is not that it needs to hide itself (because, of course, there is nothing to hide)*

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 perus'd, I find it not fit for your o'er-looking.

"perus'd" = *examined*

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.

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.

"my brother's justification" = *for the sake of justifying (proving honorable) my brother, Edgar*

"essay or taste of my virtue" = *trial or test of my loyalty*

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 suffer'd. Come to me, that of this I may speak more. If our father would sleep till I wak'd him, you should enjoy half his revenue for ever, and live the beloved of your brother. Edgar." —Hum! Conspiracy! "Sleep till I wak'd 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?

"This policy and reverence of age" = *this standard idea that we must respect our elders*

"makes the ... our times" = *causes life to be unpleasant in what should be the best years of our lives*

"relish" = *enjoy*

"to find ... aged tyranny" = *to think it is futile ("idle") and foolish ("fond") for us to put up with the rule of an old tyrant (i.e. Gloucester)*

"who sways ... is suffer'd" = *a man that exercises authority not because he has any real power but because we allow him that authority ("suffer'd" = endured)*

"If our father ... wak'd him" = *if the old man can be kept ignorant (i.e. asleep) until I've seized his power (i.e. by killing him, thereby having "wak'd him"—made him painfully aware of the truth that his tyrant days are done). Note here the example of the inversion motif in this idea of being woken as being put to sleep—for good!*

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.

"There's the cunning ... my closet" = *That's the fiendish cleverness of the business, the letter having been pushed through the window ("casement") of my study ("closet")*

GLOUCESTER

You know the character to be your brother's?

"character" = *handwriting*

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.

"If the ... were not" = *If the content could be considered honorable, I would dare to think it is his handwriting, but considering the letter as it stands I would rather ("fain") think it is not*

GLOUCESTER

It is his.

"his heart ... the contents" = *does not believe what he seems to say*

EDMUND

It is his hand, my lord. But I hope his heart is not in the contents.

GLOUCESTER

Hath he never before sounded you in this business?

"Hath he ... this business" = *Has he never sought your opinion about this matter before?*

EDMUND

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

"sons at ... fathers declin'd" = *when sons have grown to maturity and fathers have become old*

"the father ... his revenue" = *the father should be taken care of by the son, and the son should handle his financial affairs*

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?

"brutish" = *beastly*

"sirrah" = *a common form of address to young men made by their elders or social superiors*

"abominable" = *loathsome; despised by God*

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 honor, and shake in pieces the
heart of his obedience. I dare pawn down my life for
him that he hath writ this to feel my affection to your
honor and to no further pretence of danger.

"If it ... your indignation" = *If you can be patient enough to put on hold your sense of outrage*

"derive from him better testimony" = *get from him a truer understanding*

"run a certain course" = *take the safe way*

"where" = *whereas*

"gap" = *breach; disruption*

"pawn down" = *stake*

"hath writ" = *has written*

"feel my affection" = *test my love*

"to no further pretence of danger" = *with no more dangerous intention*

Note the shrewdness of Edmund's strategy. By giving the impression of his being fair minded toward his brother and urging his father to be patient, he suggests that he is wise and virtuous, not the kind of man who would plot against anyone.

GLOUCESTER
Think you so?

"meet" = *fitting; appropriate*

EDMUND
If your honor 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.

"place you ... auricular assurance" = *put you in a place (i.e. hidden from view) where you can hear us in conversation and by hearing for yourself (gaining an "auricular assurance")*

GLOUCESTER
He cannot be such a monster—

EDMUND
Nor is not, sure.

"wind me into him" = *for my sake, worm your way into his confidence*

"Frame the business after own wisdom" = *Arrange the matter as you see fit*

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.

"I would unstate ... due resolution" = *I would give anything (i.e. give up my own "state," my social position) to have this situation properly resolved. Note that this line includes a dark foreshadowing.*

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

"presently" = *immediately*

"convey" = *handle*

"as I shall find means" = *as well as I can*

"acquaint you withal" = *inform you of everything*

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 scourg'd by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason. And the bond crack'd '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 banish'd! His offence, honesty! 'Tis strange.

Exit

"late" = *recent*. (Shakespeare's first audiences might remember actual eclipses of the sun and the moon in 1605.)

"portend" = *foretell*. (Gloucester, like many Elizabethans—though not all—believes that there is a close correlation between the natural world [including the stars and planets] and the world of humans, and that disturbances in the natural world indicate trouble to come in society. For fuller commentary on Elizabethan conceptions of universal order and beliefs about cosmic revelations, see the website file "Elizabethan Age – Two Readings.")

"the wisdom of nature" = *those who know much about such natural phenomena*

"thus and thus" = *in different ways*

"yet nature ... sequent effects" = *always ("yet") the natural world of man is afflicted ("scourg'd") by events that come afterward ("sequent effects")*

"falls off" = *declines; revolts*

"mutinies" = *riots*

"This villain of mine" – Gloucester's description of Edgar seems to include two senses of "villain"—both evildoer and base-born peasant.

"the prediction" – i.e. the prediction made by "these late eclipses"

"falls from bias of nature" = *goes against nature*

"We have seen the best of our time" = *Our good days are over*

"machinations" = *plots*

"hollowness" = *emptiness; falseness; treachery*

"ruinous" = *destructive*

"disquietly" = *disturbingly*

"It shall lose thee nothing" = *It won't be to your disadvantage. Note again the foreshadowing of trouble to come.*

EDMUND

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeits of our own behavior—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars, as if we were villains on 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 we are evil in by a divine thrusting on.

"excellent foppery" = *marvelous stupidity or weak-mindedness*. (Note that Edgar is not saying that stupidity is actually a good thing, only that other people's stupidity works to his advantage.)

"sick in fortune" = *have bad luck*

"often the surfeits of our own behavior" = *often being the results of our own over-indulgences ("surfeits")—i.e. not the consequence of cosmic fate supposedly indicated by strange occurrences in the stars and planets*

"guilty of" = *responsible for*. (This is a case of syntactical inversion. The more usual phrasing would be *We make the sun, the moon, and the stars responsible for our disasters*.)

"villains on necessity" = *villains by necessity* (i.e. forced by the heavens to be villainous)

"by heavenly compulsion" = *because the stars have forced us to be that way*

"by spherical predominance" = *according to the ruling planets*

"and all ... thrusting on" = *and all of our sinfulness caused by supernatural power over us*

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 and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkl'd on my bastardizing. —Edgar!

Enter EDGAR

And pat he comes like the catastrophe of the old comedy. My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o' Bedlam. —O these eclipses do portend these divisions! *Fa, sol, la, mi.*

"An admirable evasion" = *a brilliant way of evading responsibility*

"whoremaster" – i.e. one who is lecherous or sexually over-indulgent

"goatish disposition" = *lustful nature*. (The goat is a classical symbol of lust.)

"to lay ... a star" = *to make a star take the blame for his lustful behavior*

"compounded" = *mated*

"the Dragon's Tail" – a certain constellation that was regarded as wicked

"my nativity" = *my birth*

Ursa Major – the Great Bear (also called the Big Dipper), the constellation in which Mars is predominant but shares influence with Venus, thus producing temperaments that are both warlike and lustful

"Fut!" = *by God's foot* (a mild form of swearing)—i.e. *What rubbish!* (By this oath, Edmund says that for people to think that his nature results from the constellations present at the time of his conception and birth is pure nonsense.)

"I should ... my bastardizing" = *I would have become what I am even if the most chaste (purely virginal) star shone while I was made a bastard*

"pat" = *just like that; instantly*

"like the catastrophe of the old comedy" = *in the style of the ending of old-fashioned plays* (Edmund recognizes the theatricality of the situation.)

"My cue is villainous melancholy" – Edmund continues his theatrical metaphor, putting on, to impress his brother, the character of a man who is especially worried. The adjective "villainous" is an intensifier (such as *very*), but it has an obvious irony here inasmuch as Edmund is a true villain.

"Tom o' Bedlam" – The reference is to the generic figure of Tom the mad beggar, which is the name given to lunatics discharged from the Bethlehem Hospital for the insane (see Act II, Scene iii).

EDGAR

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

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?

Here Edmund pretends to hold the belief of his father—that is, one who is convinced that the recent oddities in the heavens are sure signs of trouble in the world.

Edgar's response suggests that he shares Edmund's point of view regarding so-called cosmic signs—that a belief in them is superstitious nonsense.

EDMUND

I promise you, the effects he writes of succeed unhappily, as of unnaturalness between the child and the parent; death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities; divisions in state, menaces and maledictions against king and nobles; needless diffidences, banishment of friends, dissipation of cohorts, nuptial breaches, and I know not what.

"succeed unhappily" = *happen by unfortunate chance*

"dearth" = *poverty; loss*

"dissolutions of ancient amities" = *breakdowns of long-standing friendships*

"maledictions" = *expressions of ill will, of hatred*

"needless diffidences" = *groundless suspicions*

"dissipation of cohorts" = *disintegration of armies*

"nuptial breaches" = *broken marriages*

EDGAR
How long have you been a sectary astronomical?

"sectary astronomical" = *believer in astrology*

EDMUND
When saw you my father last?

EDGAR
The night gone by.

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?

"countenance" = *facial expression; body language*

EDGAR
None at all.

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.

"Bethink yourself ... offended him" = *Think carefully about what you may have done to upset him*

"at my entreaty forbear his presence" = *at my request keep away from him*

"qualified" = *moderated; de-intensified*

"with the mischief ... scarcely allay" = *it would hardly be satisfied by doing physical harm to you*

EDGAR
Some villain hath done me wrong.

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 arm'd.

Note the verbal irony of Edmund's saying "That's my fear" in response to Edgar's correct speculation that "some villain hath done [him] wrong."

"have a continent forbearance" = *keep your feelings under control and keep away from him*

"fitly" = *at a good time*

"abroad" = *outside*

EDGAR
Arm'd, brother!

EDMUND
Brother, I advise you to the best. 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.

"I am no ... towards you" = *I would be a liar if I allowed you to think that our father has any good intention toward you*

"but faintly" = *with only a hint of it*

"image and horror of it" = *real, horrible truth*

EDGAR
Shall I hear from you anon?

"anon" = *soon*

EDMUND

I do serve you in this business.

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.

Exit

"credulous" = *gullible*

"brother noble" – i.e. a noble brother—one who is honest and good

"so far ... suspects none" = *so kind and good that he doesn't even suspect that others could be capable of "doing harms"*

"practices ride easy" = *deceptions work well*

"the business" = *how things will work out*

"wit" = *cleverness*

"All with ... fashion fit" = *Any action is appropriate to me if I can use it to suit my purposes. Edmund's exit line is a version of a famous expression: **The end justifies the means**. It is an adage commonly associated with the Machiavellian (or the Machiavel). For some background, go to this link:*

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Machiavellianism>

Some knowledge of Niccolò Machiavelli and the ideas associated with him are relevant not just to our understanding of *King Lear* but also to our later study of the modern play *A Man for All Seasons*.