

Act I, Scene iv

A hall in the same

Enter KENT disguised

KENT

If but as well I other accents borrow
That can my speech defuse, my good intent
May carry through itself to that full issue
For which I raz'd my likeness. Now, banish'd Kent,
If thou canst serve where thou dost stand condemn'd,
So may it come, thy master, whom thou lov'st,
Shall find thee full of labors.

Horns within. Enter LEAR, knights, and attendants

Being the soul of loyalty, Kent has returned to Lear's company to serve the man he still regards as his king, even though there is no material advantage for him in doing so. He is here because he loves his sometimes-foolish master. This motivation in Kent—to be loyal—must be noted as a second key trait in the man. The first, as noted in Act I, Scene i, is his penchant for plain speech. As we will see, these two qualities will fit him as a mentor to Lear. As well, we will see that Kent is but one of three mentors to Lear.

"other accents ... speech defuse" = *put on an accent that will disguise ("defuse") my native one* (i.e. so that Lear will not recognize him as Kent)

"intent" = *intention*

"raz'd my likeness" = *shaved off ("raz'd") my beard* (a feature by which he is recognized as himself—part of his "likeness"). Note that Kent's shaving is an expression of the stripping-down motif—the idea of being brought down to nothing. It is, for that matter, consistent with the inversion motif too. For Kent's approach to disguising himself is the opposite of the more usual method of disguise, which is to put on a covering, not to take one off.

"So may it come" = *with luck it will happen that*

"full of labors" = *hard working* (therefore useful to Lear)

Kent's coming to Lear in disguise bespeaks one of those grey matters mentioned in a text box in Act I, Scene iii. For if, as we have observed, Kent values honesty, then we must wonder if he is not being hypocritical by deceiving Lear in this way. But Kent is put in the position of having to weigh one value against another, the other value being that of loyalty to his king and friend. So, if he is fooling the old fool, the sin might be forgiven by saying that he acts with "good intent"—which he also does in the first scene when he "[speaks] what he feels, not what [he] ought to say" (this line is quoted from the final scene of the play), acting in defiance of Lear's behavior.

LEAR

Let me not stay a jot for dinner! Go, get it ready.

Exit an attendant

How now! What art thou?

KENT

A man, sir.

"Let me not stay a jot" = *Don't keep me waiting for one moment.* (Lear is obviously not an easy guest to entertain.)

Note that Kent's answer is to the question "What art thou?" is a statement of nothing if not the obvious. And it is, perhaps, the first and most important descriptive statement that every man must make of himself. For before he is anything else—his office or his rank in society or his relationship to others in his family or his temperament or his quirks of personality—he is a man—which, as Shakespeare suggests, is at once nothing and everything. The resolving of this paradox should be an important point of study for you as you continue to wade through the (as Northrop Frye calls it) "mammoth structure" of *King Lear*.

LEAR
What dost thou profess? What wouldst thou with us?

"What dost thou profess?" = *What is your profession?*

"What wouldst thou with us?" = *What do you want from me?*

KENT
I do profess to be no less than I seem, to serve him truly that will put me in trust, to love him that is honest, to converse with him that is wise and says little, to fear judgment, to fight when I cannot choose, and to eat no fish.

"to fear judgment" – i.e. the final judgment on his life, made by some divine judge

"to fight when I cannot choose" = *to fight* (i.e. to defend myself or my cause) *when there is no other option*

"to eat no fish" – This seems to be intended as a joke, but its meaning is obscure. It may have been meant as an anti-Catholic jab, considering that Catholics were eaters of fish on Fridays. (Under Elizabeth I, England was not a Roman Catholic nation.)

LEAR
What art thou?

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

"as poor as the king" – Kent is risking Lear's displeasure with this joke, but Lear receives it with good humor. **Note, though, that the condition of poverty—of having (again) *nothing*—will become an important recurring reference throughout the play.**

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

KENT
Service.

LEAR
Who wouldst thou serve?

KENT
You.

LEAR
Dost thou know me, fellow?

KENT
No, sir, but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master.

"you have ... call master" = *you have in your face and manner ("countenance") a quality that makes me prefer ("fain") to call you my master*

LEAR
What's that?

KENT
Authority.

"Authority" – The word "countenance," in Kent's foregoing line, is used to mean facial expression, but the word can also be used to mean *authority*.

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.

"honest counsel" = *an honorable secret*

"mar a curious tale" = *ruin* ("mar") *a complicated story*. (Kent seems to say that he cannot tell fanciful stories—that his real skill is in speaking the plain truth plainly.)

"the best of me is diligence" = *my greatest quality is that I'm hard working*

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.

"Not so young ... for anything" – Kent's way of saying he is middle aged is to declare that he is not young enough to fall for an enchanting young woman nor old enough to need a nurse (i.e. a woman to depend ["dote"] on).

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.

"hither" = *here* (as opposed to *thither*, which means *there*)

Exit an attendant

Enter OSWALD

You, you, sirrah, where's my daughter?

OSWALD
So please you—

Exit

"So please you—" – Oswald's deliberately unfinished response to Lear is the equivalent of our carelessly saying "Yeah, whatever" to someone for whom we would ordinarily show proper respect. Here Oswald is behaving according to his lady's instruction to "put on what weary negligence" he wishes toward Lear and his knights.

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

Exit a night

"clotpoll" = *blockhead*

Where's my fool? Ho! I think the world's asleep.

Re-enter KNIGHT

How now! Where's that mongrel?

KNIGHT
He says, my lord, your daughter is not well.

LEAR
Why came not the slave back to me when I call'd him.

KNIGHT
Sir, he answer'd me in the roundest manner, he would not.

"roundest" = *bluntest; rudest*

LEAR
He would not!

KNIGHT

My lord, I know not what the matter is, but to my judgment your highness is not entertain'd 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 your daughter.

"to my judgment ... were wont" = *in my opinion your majesty is not being treated ("entertain'd") with the ceremony (due to a king) and affection (due to a father) that you have been accustomed to ("were wont")*

"abatement" = *decrease*

"general dependants" = *the servants in general*

Note that the knight's report includes an unexplained inconsistency. For his noting that the "duke himself" is showing less "kindness" toward Lear and the knights than he has previously shown does not square with the attitude that Albany will show toward Lear later in this scene and throughout the remainder of the play.

LEAR

Ha! Say'st 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 wrong'd.

"beseech" = *beg; request*. Note that the knight's requesting pardon for what might be considered blunt speech is an echo of Kent's more forceful challenge to Lear's vanity back in the first scene.

LEAR

Thou but rememb'rest me of mine own conception. I have perceiv'd a most faint neglect of late, which I have rather blam'd as mine own jealous curiosity than as a very pretence and purpose of unkindness. I will look further into't. But where's my fool? I have not seen him this two days.

"Thou but ... own conception" = *You are only reminding me of something I myself had been thinking*

"most faint" = *barely noticeable*

"mine own ... of unkindness" = *I put it down to my own worries about whether they were treating me properly ("very pretence and purpose" = actual intention)*

"this" = *these*

KNIGHT

Since my young lady's going into France, sir, the fool hath much pin'd away.

"hath much pin'd away" = *has been depressed*. (The verb "pin'd" is from the word *repine*, which means to be dejected or to long for someone or something.)

That the Fool has "pin'd" for Cordelia suggests that the two are good friends. Incidentally, scholars believe that the roles of Cordelia and the Fool would have been, in Shakespeare's time, played by the same actor. In the Elizabethan era, women were not allowed to perform on stages. The role of a young woman would be played by a boy actor who would raise his vocal pitch.

LEAR

No more of that. I have noted it well. Go you, and tell my daughter I would speak with her.

Exit an attendant

Go you, call hither my fool.

Exit another attendant

Re-enter OSWALD

O you sir, you, come you hither, sir! Who am I, sir?

"My lady's father" – Oswald's response—which Lear would expect should be something along the line of "You are my king"—is about the equivalent of our saying to a respected elder "You're just some guy!"

OSWALD

My lady's father.

"cur" – *mutt*

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.

"bandy" = *exchange*. (Lear's metaphor is from the game of tennis, in which players "bandy" the ball between each other.)

LEAR

Do you bandy looks with me, you rascal?

Striking him

OSWALD
I'll not be stricken, my lord.

KENT
Nor tripp'd neither, you base football player.

"strucken" = *struck*. (Oswald refuses to be Lear's tennis ball.)

"Nor tripp'd ... football player" – Kent kicks Oswald, roughly suggesting that he is better suited to a different game. Only aristocrats played tennis. Football was a game for the lower classes.

Tripping up his heels

LEAR
I thank thee, fellow. Thou serv'st 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! Go to! Have you wisdom? So.

"differences" – i.e. differences between masters and servants or between nobles and peasants. (Kent says, then, that he will teach Oswald his place.)

"measure your lubber's length" = *be thrown again to the ground* (as a clumsy lout or "lubber" such as he deserves)

"tarry" = *stay here* (i.e. if he wants to be knocked down again, then he should by all means stick around, the damned lubber!)

"Have you wisdom?" = *Do you have any sense?*

Pushes OSWALD out

LEAR
Now, my friendly knave, I thank thee. There's earnest of
thy service.

"earnest" = *earnest money* (i.e. a small sum of money paid to secure a contract)

Giving KENT money

Enter FOOL

FOOL
Let me hire him too. Here's my coxcomb.

"coxcomb" – i.e. a fool's cap. The professional jester wore the head and neck of a rooster (cock's comb) in his cap.

Offering KENT his cap

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

FOOL
Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb.

In addressing Kent, the Fool uses the word "sirrah," a form of "sir" normally used to address inferiors, and it may be meant as his sarcastic way of suggesting that this new servant *is* truly inferior, at least in intelligence, for he must be a fool himself if he wishes to serve a fool—namely Lear. And this is the thrust of the Fool's interaction with Lear throughout this scene and in much of the play's action hereafter. Indeed, he repeatedly implies that Lear has been a *true* fool for giving away his land, for being duped by the flattery of Goneril and Regan, and for banishing his one honest daughter, Cordelia. Strange, it would seem, for a fool to chide another for being a fool. But an all-licensed fool cannot be truly foolish. Rather, such a professional must be most astute—a keen judge of character and an insightful observer of the human condition, not just a smartass but a genuinely smart guy. He is the equivalent of the modern-day stand-up comic who specializes in observational humor.

Note too that his offering of the coxcomb—a gesture that says, in effect, *Go ahead, take my job*—heightens the Fool's sarcasm, for it is a farcical echo of Lear's giving away of his authority, with the attendant symbolism of passing on *his* official hat, his crown.

One more observation about the Fool: in some productions of *King Lear*, the actor playing the Fool will appear to recognize Kent as Kent (though nothing in the dialogue indicates that he actually does). But the point of revealing such a recognition on the Fool's part reinforces the fact that the Fool is more alert than is Lear, that he can "see better" than Lear can.

KENT
Why, fool?

FOOL

Why, for taking one's part that's out of favor. Nay, and thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou'lt catch cold shortly. There, take my coxcomb. Why, this fellow has banish'd 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!

"taking one's part that's out of favor" = *supporting someone (i.e. Lear) who no longer has any privilege or power*

"and thou canst not" = *if you cannot*

"thou canst not ... wind sits" = *you cannot take the winning side*

"catch cold shortly" = *be out of favor soon*

"on's" = *of his*

"did the third a blessing against his will" – The fool asserts that by disinheriting Cordelia, Lear has actually done her a favor.

"nuncle" = *an abbreviation of "mine uncle." This is not to say that Lear is actually the Fool's uncle. Rather, the term is simply an endearment. And we must observe here that Lear is truly dear to the Fool. Yes, Lear has behaved rashly—most foolishly—but this does not mean that the Fool would dismiss as irredeemable the man whom he still regards as his king. In this sense, he is similar to Kent, who also judges the sin, not the sinner. They are both loyal to Lear, and they are both mentors to the old man.*

"Would I had" = *I wish I had*

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.

"living" = *property*

"Beg another of thy daughters" = *Ask your daughters to give you another one (so Lear will be twice a fool)*

LEAR

Take heed, sirrah. The whip.

"The whip" – Lear threatens the Fool with punishment. The all-licensed fool could take considerable liberties in the teasing of his master, but if he went too far, he would risk being whipped.

FOOL

Truth's a dog must to kennel. He must be whipp'd out, when the Lady's Brach may stand by th' fire and stink.

"Truth's a dog ... and stink" – *Truth is like a dog that must be whipped and sent to its kennel, while the fawning pet (Brach was a common name for bitch hounds) can live comfortably indoors, by the fire, however much it smells*

LEAR

A pestilent gall to me!

FOOL

Sirrah, I'll teach thee a speech.

"A pestilent gall to me!" = *a diseased ("pestilent") sore ("gall") in my mind*

LEAR

Do.

This line appears as something of a *non sequitur*, a thought that appears not to flow logically out of preceding thoughts. It may, by some indiscernible logic, be connected to something the Fool has said, or he may be meditating on his own situation. In either case, it seems to foreshadow the breakdown of Lear's sanity.

FOOL
Mark it, nuncle.

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.
Leave thy drink and thy whore,
And keep in-a-door,
And thou shalt have more
Than two tens to a score.

KENT
This is nothing, fool.

"Have ... showest" = *Don't display everything you own*

"Speak ... knowest" = *Don't tell everything you know*

"Lend ... owest" = *Don't lend more than you own*

"Ride ... goest" = *Don't walk more than you ride*

"Learn ... trowest" = *Don't believe everything you hear*

"Set ... throwest" = *Don't gamble everything you have on a single throw of the dice*

"Leave ... whore" = *Don't drink and consort with prostitutes*

"And ... door" = *Don't leave home* (with the implication of not giving away your home, especially if your home is a kingdom)

"And thou ... to a score" = *And you will be better off than most people* (i.e. Though most others have a score [twenty], you will have more than two tens [a score]).

Such a silly little rhyme would be expected from any jester. For a jester's job is to amuse his master with riddles and jokes, verses and songs. And that is just what *this* jester does. But the Fool's wordplay at this time in Lear's life is relentlessly bent toward instruction. In his own way, he seeks to mentor the old king with an understanding of where he has gone wrong and how to be wise in the future. The point of his verse here is to emphasize the importance of ordinary logic and of trying to "see better." Through a series of simple, sensible commands, the Fool makes the case that the best sense is *common* sense. Kent calls it "nothing," but we should see it as another case of a nothing that is really a something.

FOOL
Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer. You gave me nothing for't. Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?

"unfee'd" = *unpaid*. (A lawyer will not plead a case unless he is paid.)

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.

"Prithee" = *I pray thee* (i.e. I ask you)

"tell him ... comes to" = *advise him that this is how much the rent of his land amounts to* (i.e. his rent comes to nothing because he no longer has land to rent)

LEAR
A bitter fool!

FOOL
Dost thou know the difference, my boy, between a bitter fool and a sweet fool?

LEAR
No, lad. Teach me.

Interestingly, although Lear often refers to him as "boy," and here as "lad," the Fool in most productions of *King Lear* is played by a mature actor, not a boy at all, and in some cases (as in the Ian Holm version of the play) the Fool appears even older than Lear.

FOOL

That lord that counsel'd thee
To give away thy land,
Come place him here by me.
Do thou for him stand.
The sweet and bitter fool
Will presently appear—
The one in motley here,
The other found out there.

"Do thou for him stand" = *You can stand for the other fool* (because of course there was no "lord that counsel'd" Lear to give away his land; rather, he was his own counselor—and as it is said, it is a fool who heeds his own counsel)

"presently" = *immediately*

"motley" = *multi-colored* or *multi-faceted*. (A jester typically wore a multi-colored costume, referred to as a motley.)

"The other found out there" – The Fool points at Lear.

LEAR

Dost thou call me fool, boy?

FOOL

All thy other titles thou hast given away. That thou wast born with.

"That thou wast born with" = *You were born a fool* (as we all are)

KENT

This is not altogether fool, my lord.

FOOL

No, faith, lords and great men will not let me. If I had a monopoly out, they would have part on't. And ladies too, they will not let me have all fool to myself. They'll be snatching. —Nuncle, give me an egg, and I'll give thee two crowns.

"This is not altogether fool" – Kent seems to say to Lear that the Fool is stepping beyond his license, that his joking goes too far. But the Fool answers in the next passage as though Kent has meant *one who possesses all the foolery there is to be had*, and he carries his deliberate misunderstanding onward to the observation that there is much foolery, truly, to be had in the world. Why, just look to all the great lords and ladies of society. We wouldn't expect such important people to be fools, would we? But there they are, behaving as though they were born yesterday!

"If I had ... be snatching" = *If I had the legal right to all the foolishness in the world, the lords and other great men of the world would still be stealing my business. The great ladies would as well. They'll always steal whatever foolishness they can.*

LEAR

What two crowns shall they be?

"meat" = *yolk*

"clovest" = *split*

FOOL

Why, after I have cut the egg i' the middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i' th' middle and gav'st away both parts, thou bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt. Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away. If I speak like myself in this, let him be whipp'd that first finds it so.

"thou bor'st ... the dirt" – The Fool refers to one of Aesop's fables, the one about the man who, fearing he has overloaded his ass, carries the animal to the market—a fool, plainly, and, as the Fool implies, just like Lear.

"like myself" – i.e. like a fool

"If I speak ... finds it so" – i.e. The person who thinks this fool's words are foolish should himself be punished for being a fool. For what he has said is *not* foolish. It's wholly true.

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

"Fools had ... so apish" = *Fools have never been so out of favor* (or *out of work*) *as they are now, for wise men have grown weak* ("foppish") *in their minds. Instead of being intelligent* (properly wearing their wits), *they imitate* ("ape") *the fools.*

Note here (and in his earlier reference to lords, great men, and ladies behaving foolishly) that the Fool's accusations are not pointed solely at Lear. He observes that other people who should be wise also act like fools. In this way (and in several others) Shakespeare suggests that *King Lear* is not just a play about one foolish man. Rather, it is about foolish people in general. And this, of course, includes you and me. We are all fools.

LEAR
When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?

"wont to be" = *in the habit of being*

FOOL
I have us'd it, nuncle, ever since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers, for when thou gav'st them the rod and put'st down thine own breeches,

"us'd" = *made a habit of*

"when thou ... own breeches" = *when you gave them the stick (i.e. one to beat you with—gave them authority, as of a mother over her child), and dropped your trousers (i.e. as a child who submits to physical punishment)*

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

"bo-peep" – a children's game that involves covering the eyes and pretending to be blind

"Prithee, nuncle ... learn to lie" = *Please, sir, hire a teacher who can instruct me in the craft of lying. I would rather ("fain") know how to lie*

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

The Fool laments—and seems to do so genuinely, not ironically—that he is unable to speak anything but the truth, however much that truth is conveyed obliquely through jokes and songs. He knows how much easier life would be if he could simply lie like others do. Telling the truth, after all, can be difficult. In this he is (again) similar to Kent, who also is bound to speak honestly and who also must approach Lear obliquely—that is, by coming to Lear in disguise rather than in his own "likeness." This idea of being truthful at an angle, so to speak, may remind some readers of a poem by Emily Dickinson:

**Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise**

**As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—**

LEAR
And you lie, sirrah, we'll have you whipp'd.

"and" = *if*

FOOL
I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They'll have me whipp'd for speaking true. Thou'lt have me whipp'd for lying. And sometimes I am whipp'd 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 par'd thy wit o' both sides and left nothing i' th' middle. —Here comes one o' th' parings.

"I marvel ... daughters are" = *I'm amazed at the family relationship that you and your daughters (supposedly) have*

"holding my peace" = *keeping my mouth shut*

"par'd" = *peeled; whittled down. Note again the stripping-down motif.*

"one o' the parings" = *one of the peeled-off pieces (with a pun on pairings—i.e. the pairing of Goneril and Regan)*

Enter GONERIL

LEAR

How now, daughter! What makes that frontlet on?
Methinks you are too much of late i' th' frown.

"What makes that frontlet on?" = *Why are you looking like that?* (A frontlet was a band worn round the forehead.)

"Methinks" = *I think*

"You are ... i' th' frown" = *Lately you've been frowning too much* (with "frown" as a play on "frontlet")

FOOL

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 GONERIL*] 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,
Weary of all, shall want some.

Pointing to LEAR

That's a sheal'd peascod.

"Thou wast ... her frowning" = *You were a nice little man when you had no need to concern yourself with her being grumpy* (i.e. in the days when he was in charge)

"an O without a figure" = *a zero with no number* ("figure") *in front* (to give the zero a value, rather than be a nothing)

"forsooth" = *in truth*

"Mum, mum" = *softly, softly* (The expression "keep mum" means to *be silent*.)

"He that ... want some" = *He who gives away everything* ("nor / nor" = *neither / nor*) *because he is tired of it all will one day want it back*

"sheal'd peascod" = *shelled peapod*

GONERIL

Not only, sir, this your all-licens'd fool,
But other of your insolent retinue
Do hourly carp and quarrel, breaking forth
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
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
Will call discreet proceeding.

"other of your insolent retinue" = *others among your rude* ("insolent") *followers* ("retinue")

"carp" = *find fault* (with us)

"rank and not-to-be-endured riots" = *foul and unacceptable commotions*

"safe redress" = *sure remedy*

"too late" = *only recently*

"protect this course and put it on / By your allowance" = *support this behavior and encourage it further by giving your permission*

"which if you should ... discreet proceeding" – Goneril's speech in this passage is decidedly formal—rather like that of a bureaucrat formally criticizing a negligent underling. The passage might be paraphrased thus: *If you are encouraging this misbehavior* ("course"), *you are making a mistake* ("fault") *that cannot go unnoticed* ("scape censure"), *and I shall have to find remedies for that misbehavior—even though in my desire for a healthy state of affairs* ("wholesome weal") *I might have to adopt measures whose effects* ("working") *are displeasing to you and which at any other time would be wrong of me* ("else were shame"), *but when it is seen how necessary this is, it will be called a sensible course of action* ("discreet proceeding").

FOOL

For, you know, nuncle,

The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
That it's had its head bit off by its young.

So, out went the candle, and we were left darkling.

"The hedge-sparrow ... its young" – Cuckoos, which are relatively large birds, lay their eggs in the nests of smaller birds, which then have to rear the young cuckoos. (The Fool's couplet sounds as though it may have been a proverb current in Shakespeare's time.)

"it" = *its*

"darkling" = *in the dark*

LEAR

Are you our daughter?

"Are you our daughter?" – With this rhetorical question Lear begins a series of sarcastic volleys. Asking "Are you our daughter?" he suggests that she could not possibly be his own, as a true daughter would not speak to him so unkindly.

GONERIL

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.

"I would you would" – *I wish you would*

"Whereof I know you are fraught" = *which I know you have plenty of*

"dispositions" = *states of mind*

"of late transform you" = *recently change you*

FOOL

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

"May not ... the horse?" – an analogy for *Cannot even a fool see that something is wrong when a daughter gives orders to her father?*

"Whoop, Jug! I love thee" – This is probably from the refrain of a song that is now lost. "Jug" is a nickname for Joan.

LEAR

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

"Does any here ... who I am?" – Lear's sarcasm is more heavy-handed here than it is in his question "Are you our daughter?" Now he pretends to be someone other than himself, implying that the "real" Lear does not walk and talk like this, and then says that if Lear *is* here, then something must be wrong with him—that he is blind, or his "notion" (capacity for thought) has grown feeble, or his "discernings" (understandings) are "lethargied" (slowed down), or he is simply asleep. Why, it cannot be so!

"Who is it that can tell me who I am?" – Lear intends this final jab, this bitterly rhetorical question, as verbal irony (sarcasm being a form of verbal irony). But we can read it also as dramatic irony (a case of the audience knowing more than the speaker knows), as it is a question that he might as well be asking *actually* rather than rhetorically. In fact it is the same question that might be asked by many a tragic hero, whose task ever is to know himself and his place in a larger order. For the tragic hero is commonly afflicted by hubris—one who, in his arrogance, does not see himself clearly and who styles himself as apart from (or at least at the top of) the grand design. The hero's hubris must, then, be stripped from him. He must learn to see his naked self, to see others as they truly are, and be brought down (*violently* brought down in most cases) to the ground.

FOOL
Lear's shadow.

"Lear's shadow" – The Fool asserts that Lear is no more than an image of the figure he used to be.

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

"false persuaded" = *falsely led to believe*

FOOL
Which they will make an obedient father.

LEAR
Your name, fair gentlewoman?

"Your name, fair gentlewoman?" – again, Lear's sarcasm, as he pretends not to have met this lady before

GONERIL
This admiration, sir, is much o' th' savor
Of other your new pranks. I do beseech you
To understand my purposes aright.
As you are old and reverend, should be wise.
Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires,
Men so disorder'd, so debosh'd and bold,
That this our court, infected with their manners,
Shows like a riotous inn. Epicurism and lust
Makes it more like a tavern or a brothel
Than a grac'd palace. The shame itself doth speak
For instant remedy. Be then desir'd
By her that else will take the thing she begs
A little to disquantity your train,
And the remainders that shall still depend
To be such men as may besort your age,
Which know themselves and you.

"admiration" = *pretended amazement*

"o' th' savor / Of other your new pranks" = *of the same sort as your other sarcastic remarks*

"purposes aright" = *intentions correctly*

"As you ... be wise" = *Given that you are old and respected, you should be wise*

"disorder'd" = *disorderly*

"debosh'd" = a variant of *debauched*, meaning *morally corrupted*

"shows like" = *looks like*

"epicurism" = *gluttony*

"grac'd" – i.e. *graced because of its royal presence*

"doth speak / For" = *calls for*

"desir'd" = *requested*

"else" = *otherwise*

"disquantity" = *reduce the size of*

"train" = *followers* (i.e. Lear's one-hundred knights)

"remainders that still depend" = *those who remain as your followers*

"besort" = *be suitable to*

"Which know themselves and you" = *Who know their own places and understand your needs*

LEAR
Darkness and devils!
Saddle my horses. Call my train together.
Degenerate bastard! I'll not trouble thee.
Yet have I left a daughter.

"Yet have I left a daughter" = *I still have another daughter* (i.e. Regan)

GONERIL

You strike my people, and your disorder'd rabble
Make servants of their betters.

Enter ALBANY

LEAR

Woe, that too late repents— [To ALBANY] O sir, are
you come?

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

ALBANY

Pray, sir, be patient.

LEAR

[To GONERIL] Detested kite! Thou liest.
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!
Which, like an engine, wrench'd my frame of nature
From the fix'd place, drew from my heart all love,
And added to the gall. [Striking his head] O Lear, Lear,
Lear!

Beat at this gate that let thy folly in,
And thy dear judgment out! Go, go, my people.

Exeunt KENT and knights

ALBANY

My lord, I am guiltless, as I am ignorant
Of what hath mov'd you.

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!
Into her womb convey sterility!
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honor her! If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen, that it may live,
And be a thwart disnatur'd 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
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child! Away, away!

Exit

"Woe, that too late repents" = *unhappiness must come to the person who regrets a situation when it's too late*

"Ingratitude, thou ... the sea monster" = *Ungratefulness, you hard-hearted devil—you are more ugly when you appear in the form of a child than when you appear as a sea monster. (Note that Lear addresses the abstract condition of ingratitude as though it could hear and reply—another use of apostrophe, a form of personification.)*

"kite" – a carrion-eating bird (i.e. a scavenging bird, such as a vulture, that eats dead flesh)

"of choice and rarest parts" = *chosen for their special qualities/talents*

"That all ... their name" = *Who know exactly what is expected of them and who are most careful to live up to their reputations*

"Which, like ... fix'd place" – The sense of this passage is somewhat obscure. The general idea seems to be that Cordelia's behavior, like some kind of powerful instrument, has thrown Lear's whole being out of order.

"Suspend thy ... creature fruitful" = *Put your intention on hold, if your intention was to allow this woman to bear children*

"Into her womb convey sterility" = *make her barren*

"organs of increase" = *reproductive mechanisms*

"derogate" = *dishonored; corrupted*

"teem" = *bear offspring*

"spleen" = *ill temper* (In Medieval and Renaissance medical theory, the spleen was considered the organ from which springs a harsh temper—of a person prone to violence, vengeance, and ruthless ambition.)

"thwart" = *perverse (going against the grain)*

"disnatur'd" = *unnatural*

"cadent" = *falling*

"fret" = *wear away*

"Turn all ... and contempt" = *Change for her all the cares and joys that a mother should have into a source for other people's amusement and scorn*

ALBANY
Now, gods that we adore, whereof comes this?

GONERIL
Never afflict yourself to know more of it.
But let his disposition have that scope
That dotage gives it.

Re-enter LEAR

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

ALBANY
What's the matter, sir?

LEAR
I'll tell thee. [*To GONERIL*] Life and death! I am
asham'd
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!
Th' untented woundings of a father's curse
Pierce every sense about thee! Old fond eyes,
Bewep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out,
And cast you, with the waters that you loose,
To temper clay. Yea, is't come to this?
Ha! Let it be so. I have another daughter,
Who, I am sure, is kind and comfortable.
When she shall hear this of thee, with her nails
She'll flay thy wolfish visage. Thou shalt find
That I'll resume the shape which thou dost think
I have cast off forever.

Exeunt LEAR, KENT, and attendants

GONERIL
Do you mark that, my lord?

ALBANY
I cannot be so partial, Goneril,
To the great love I bear you—

"Never afflict ... more of it" = *Don't trouble yourself by thinking any more of this*

"But let ... gives it" = *Just let him have his mood, the mood that comes with weak-minded old age ("dotage")*

"fifty followers at a clap" – *fifty of my men (dismissed) in an instant ("at a clap")*

"Within a fortnight" – *Lear has been staying at Albany and Goneril's castle for less than two weeks (a fortnight).*

That Lear should lose half of his attendant knights so suddenly is dramatically effective, but it is difficult to explain when or how this dismissal would have taken place.

We may say that the stripping-down—the reducing to nothing—of Lear begins in earnest at this point.

"perforce" = *by force*

"Should make thee worth them" = *should make you equivalent to them (i.e. in that she has caused them)*

"Th' untented ... about thee" = *Let the wounds of my curses cut every sense you possess ("untented woundings" – wounds too deep to be cleansed by a "tent," a roll of lint that could be used for probing a wound)*

"fond" = *foolish*

"Bewep this cause" = *if you cry again because of this action*

"loose" = *release*

"And cast you ... temper clay" – *i.e. cast his eyeballs into a mixture used to soften clay*

"kind" – *Two senses of the word "kind" are apparent here: kind as in gentle and loving, and kind as in of the same family or type (because, in Lear's mind, Goneril is unnatural and no longer any daughter of his, while Regan is still properly his loving child)*

"shape" – *i.e. the shape of a king*

"mark" = *notice; pay attention to*

GONERIL

Pray you, content. What, Oswald, ho!
[To the FOOL] You, sir, more knave than fool, after
your master.

FOOL

Nuncle Lear, nuncle Lear, tarry! Take the fool with
thee.

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.

"Should sure" = *should certainly be sent*

"halter" – a hangman's noose

Exit

GONERIL

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,
And hold our lives in mercy. Oswald, I say!

"'Tis politic" = *it is good policy*

"at point" = armed with swords

"buzz" = *rumor*

"fancy" = *whim*

"enguard his dotage" = *protect his senility*

"in mercy" = *at his mercy*

Note here Goneril's verbal irony. She does not actually mean that allowing Lear to keep his one hundred knights would be "politic and safe." She means in fact the very opposite.

ALBANY

Well, you may fear too far.

GONERIL

 Safer than trust too far.
Let me still take away the harms I fear,
Not fear still to be taken. I know his heart.
What he hath utter'd I have writ my sister.
If she sustain him and his hundred knights
When I have show'd the unfitness—

"still" = *always*

"Not fear still to be taken" = *rather than be constantly in fear for my safety*

"writ" = *written*

Re-enter OSWALD

 How now, Oswald!
What, have you writ that letter to my sister?

OSWALD

Ay, madam.

GONERIL

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.

Exit OSWALD

No, no, my lord,
This milky gentleness and course of yours
Though I condemn not, yet, under pardon,
You are much more attax'd for want of wisdom
Than prais'd for harmful mildness.

ALBANY

How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell.
Striving to better, oft we mar what's well.

GONERIL

Nay, then—

ALBANY

Well, well, th' event.

Exeunt

"away to horse" = *ride off quickly*

"particular" = *personal*

"compact it more" = *reinforce it*

"This milky ... of yours" = *your mild and gentle course of action*

"under pardon" = *if you will excuse my saying so*

"attax'd for want of" = *to be blamed for lacking*

"harmful mildness" = *a leniency (sense of forgiveness) that could prove dangerous*

"How far ... what's well" = *I cannot tell how far into the future you are envisioning. In attempts to improve our conditions, we often ruin ("mar") our current contentment*

"th' event" = *we shall see what happens*