

## Act I, Scene v

### Court before the same

Enter LEAR, KENT, and FOOL

LEAR

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

KENT

I will not sleep, my lord, till I have deliver'd your letter.

Exit

"Go you before" = *ride ahead*

"Gloucester" – Some editors take this reference to be to the town of Gloucester, near which is the residence of the Earl of Gloucester. Others read it simply as an error, for Kent's journey with the letter that Lear sent him to deliver will be first to Cornwall and Regan's castle, and when he finds them not there he will then go to Gloucester's castle. Lear, following after, will also go first to find Regan at her home and then to Gloucester's.

"Acquaint my ... the letter" = *Don't tell her anything more than she might ask after reading the letter.* (Lear already seems a little wary of Regan.)

FOOL

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

LEAR

Ay, boy.

FOOL

Then, I prithee, be merry. Thy wit shall ne'er go slip-shod.

LEAR

Ha, ha, ha!

"kibes" = *chilblains* (inflamed sores caused by exposure to extreme cold)

"Thy wit shall ne'er go slip-shod" = *Your brains will never be in slippers* ("slip-shod"). (The Fool's question and answer make up a joking jab at Lear, though the sense of the gag is difficult to follow. The idea is that Lear will never have to wear slippers, so as not to irritate his chilblains, the more usual footwear causing discomfort. The reason is that if he is foolish enough to believe that Regan will treat him any better than Goneril has, then he has no intelligence ("wit"), even in his heels.)

Perhaps more important here than our getting a joke scarcely worth the figuring out is our registering the image of a brain "in danger of kibes"—that is, of a mind sore and inflamed. We have by this point seen some faint hints at Lear's slipping sanity, and by the end of the scene we will find Lear himself becoming alarmed at the prospect of losing his mind.

Consider that even at this early point in the scene Lear may be thinking about the possibility of his mind's failing. How, then, would you, were you playing the role of Lear, play his reaction to the Fool—his "Ha, ha, ha"?

Are there other ways of (with justifications for) playing the "Ha, ha, ha"?

FOOL

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

LEAR

Why, what canst thou tell, my boy?

"kindly" – The Fool's word "kindly" has two uses. With one sense of the word in mind—"kindly" as *gently and lovingly*—the Fool speaks ironically, for he certainly does not expect Regan to behave gently and lovingly. With another sense of the word intended—"kindly" meaning *in kind* or *in keeping with a type*—he speaks without a trace of irony, suggesting that as Goneril has treated Lear, so Regan will treat him *in the same kind*.

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

"crab" – i.e. crabapple. (As one crabapple—for example, Goneril—  
tastes, so will another crabapple—say, Regan—taste.)

LEAR  
No.

Again, probably more important here than a less-than-hilarious  
riddle is the serious idea informing the Fool's line. And it is the motif  
of changing perspectives. In this passage, and elsewhere throughout  
the play, is the idea of seeing and understanding in different ways.  
What is mere confusion and madness from one vantage is clarity and  
sanity from another. The changing-perspectives motif is compatible  
therefore with the inversion motif, in particular the idea of nothing  
as something. Significant, too, in the matter of changing perspectives  
is Shakespeare's eminently practical suggestion that when one  
cannot solve a problem by the usual method, he does well to try  
another—to, for example, exchange one sense for another. So, if a  
man cannot "smell out" a situation, he may still be able to "spy into"  
it.

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

LEAR  
I did her wrong—

FOOL  
Canst tell how an oyster makes his shell?

LEAR  
No.

"house" – i.e. the snail's shell

FOOL  
Nor I neither. But I can tell why a snail has a house.

LEAR  
Why?

"case" – i.e. the snail's shell as protection for its horns

FOOL  
Why, to put's head in, not to give it away to his  
daughters and leave his horns without a case.

In this implied metaphor of Lear as a snail that has given away its  
protective "case" is another related symbol: the cuckold's horns. A  
cuckold is one whose spouse or lover is cheating on him. And  
commonly the cuckold is the only one in his community not aware  
that he is being cheated on. For this reason, he is often depicted as  
wearing horns on his forehead, the idea being that he is the only one  
who does not see how absurd he looks. The Fool is not suggesting  
that Lear is actually a cuckold, but he does imply that Lear cannot  
see what anyone else can—that he has been deceived by his  
daughters and that he is setting himself up for further abuse.

LEAR  
I will forget my nature. So kind a father! Be my horses  
ready?

FOOL  
Thy asses are gone about 'em. The reason why the seven  
stars are no more than seven is a pretty reason.

"the seven stars" – i.e. the constellation called the Pleiades

Here is the riddle more conventionally set up and finished.

Q: Why are there seven stars in the Pleiades?

A: Because there aren't eight.

LEAR  
Because they are not eight?

Then follows raucous laughter.

FOOL  
Yes, indeed! Thou wouldst make a good fool.

One bit of wisdom we might draw from the Fool's eminently logical  
riddle is (again) the idea of using one's common sense and choosing  
to see the obvious. But the more important detail for us to see is that  
Lear actually answers one of the Fool's riddles! And his ability to do  
so is a delight to the Fool, as he indicates in his response "Yes,  
indeed! Thou wouldst make a good fool." Recall what was noted  
earlier about the all-licensed fool: he must be wise. The fact that  
Lear is capable of answering a riddle suggests, then, that wisdom is  
latent in Lear. He has indeed the potential to "see better."

LEAR  
To take't again perforce! Monster ingratitude!

"To take't again perforce" – i.e. to take his kingdom back by force

This line, played more as private railing than as anything meant for the Fool, suggests again the approach of Lear's insanity.

FOOL  
If thou wert my fool, nuncle, I'd have thee beaten for being old before thy time.

LEAR  
How's that?

FOOL  
Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise.

LEAR  
O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven  
Keep me in temper. I would not be mad!

Commonly in performance, this is a moment of immense pathos—the evocation of sympathetic sorrow. And truly we'd have to be "marble-hearted" not to feel sympathy for this old man who feels the juggernaut of insanity bearing down on him and who pleads with the gods to prevent it.

*Enter GENTLEMAN*

How now! are the horses ready?

GENTLEMAN  
Ready, my lord.

LEAR  
Come, boy.

*Exeunt*