

Act II, Scene i

A court within the castle of the Earl of Gloucester

Enter EDMUND, and CURAN meets him

EDMUND
Save thee, Curan.

"Save thee" – a common Elizabethan greeting (an abbreviated form of *May God save you*)

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

EDMUND
How comes that?

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

"news abroad" = *talk going around*

"ear-bussing" = *ear-kissing; whispered* ("kissing" because one who whispers to another seems as though he kissing his hearer's ear)

"arguments" = *topics of conversation*

EDMUND
Not I. Pray you, what are they?

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

"toward" = *threatened*. (This is the first suggestion that the two dukes intend to fight, presumably for the third of the kingdom that had been intended for Cordelia).

"'twixt" = *between*

EDMUND
Not a word.

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

Exit

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

"This weaves ... my business" = *This will tie in neatly with my schemes*

"queasy question" = *sensitive nature* ("queasy" = *liable to vomit*; in such a state, one must move delicately)

"Briefness and fortune, work" = *quickness and good luck, act now on my side*

"watches" = *is still awake*

"Intelligence is given" = *someone has told him*

"good advantage of the night" – i.e. because he will be better able to escape in darkness than in daylight

"i' th' haste" = *in a hurry*

"Upon his party" = *on his side*

"Advise yourself" = *think of what you have been saying*

Enter EDGAR

My father watches. O sir, fly this place!
Intelligence is given where you are hid.
You have now the good advantage of the night.
Have you not spoken 'gainst the Duke of Cornwall?
He's coming hither, now, i' th' night, i' th' haste,
And Regan with him. Have you nothing said
Upon his party 'gainst the Duke of Albany?
Advise yourself.

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

"on't" = *of it*

EDMUND
I hear my father coming. Pardon me,
In cunning I must draw my sword upon you.
Draw. Seem to defend yourself. Now quit you well.
Yield! Come before my father! Light, ho, here!
Fly, brother. Torches, torches! So, farewell.

"In cunning" = *as part of the deception*. (There is, of course, some question about how Edmund thinks this action of a pretended fight between his brother and himself will cause Edgar to think that Edmund is helping him. But Edmund is acting so frantically to hasten Edgar away that Edgar is entirely confused and frightened, having no time to examine the logic of it.)

Exit EDGAR

"Yield! ... ho, here" – Edmund shouts these lines so that he will be overheard.

Some blood drawn on me would beget opinion
Of my more fierce endeavor.

"beget opinion ... fierce endeavor" = *create* ("beget" = *give birth to*) *the belief that I had to fight fiercely*

Wounds his arm

"I have seen ... in sport" = *I've seen fools under the influence of drink do more damage to themselves than this and for more trifling reasons*. (The self-wounding Edmund refers to is the practice of drunken gallants who would stab themselves and drip their blood into their cups in order to drink the health of their mistresses.)

I have seen drunkards
Do more than this in sport. Father, father!
Stop, stop! No help?

Enter GLOUCESTER and servants with torches

GLOUCESTER
Now, Edmund, where's the villain?

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

"charms" = *spells*. (Edmund plays on Gloucester's superstitious nature.)

"conjuring the moon to stand auspicious mistress" = *calling on the moon to look favorably (auspiciously) on him*

GLOUCESTER
But where is he?

EDMUND
Look, sir, I bleed.

GLOUCESTER
Where is the villain, Edmund?

EDMUND
Fled this way, sir, when by no means he could—

GLOUCESTER
Pursue him, ho! Go after!

Exeunt some servants

"By no means" what?

EDMUND

Persuade me to the murder of your lordship—
But that I told him the revenging gods
'Gainst parricides did all the thunders bend,
Spoke with how manifold and strong a bond
The child was bound to th' father. Sir, in fine,
Seeing how loathly opposite I stood
To his unnatural purpose, in fell motion,
With his prepared sword, he charges home
My unprovided body, lanch'd mine arm.
And when he saw my best alarum'd spirits,
Bold in the quarrel's right, rous'd to th' encounter,
Or whether gasted by the noise I made,
Full suddenly he fled.

"revenging" = *avenging*

"parricides" = *those who murder close relatives*. (The word could just as well have been *patricides*. Patricide is the killing of a father.)

"'Gainst parricides did all the thunders bend" – i.e. The gods direct ("bend") all of their anger (their "thunders") against killers of kin.

"in fine" = *to put it briefly; finally*

"loathly opposite" = *bitterly opposed*

"in fell motion" = *with a deadly ("fell") thrust*

"prepared" = *unsheathed*

"charges home" = *makes a direct attack on*

"unprovided" = *unprotected*

"lanch'd" = *pierced; wounded*

"best alarum'd spirits" = *courage aroused* (as though by an alarum—a trumpet call signaling the start of a battle)

"Bold in the quarrel's right" = *made brave by the justice of the cause*

"rous'd to th' encounter" = *energized for the fight*

"gasted" = *frightened*

"full" = *very*

GLOUCESTER

Let him fly far.

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

"Let him fly far" = *however far he flees*

"And found—dispatch" = *and when he is found, kill him*

"My worthy arch and patron" = *the most honorable and best patron that I have* (i.e. his overlord)

"the stake" – i.e. any place of execution (not necessarily execution by burning; the gallows, for example, could be called the stake as well)

"He that conceals him, death" – i.e. Anyone who tries to assist the traitor by hiding him shall himself be a traitor and be executed as well.

We will see in time just how ironic a foreshadow this line stands.

EDMUND

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

"pight" = *determined*

"curst" = *angry*

"discover" = *expose*

"un-possessing" = *property-less* (because a bastard son had no legal rights of inheritance)

"reposal" = *placement*

"faith'd" = *believed*

"though thou didst produce / My very character" = *even if you did bring evidence in my own writing* (which Edmund *did*, however falsely, in Act I, Scene ii)

"turn it ... damned practice" = *I would blame everything on you—your instigation, your scheme, your treacherous action*

"thou must make a dullard of the world" = *you must think everyone is stupid*

"If they ... seek it" = *if they were not to conclude that what you would gain by my death wasn't conceivable ("pregnant") and potentially profitable enough for you to attempt it*

Note that Edmund—though he passes it off as Edgar's invention—has just described his very own action.

GLOUCESTER

O strange and fast'ned villain!
Would he deny his letter, said he? I never got him.

"strange and fast'ned" = *unnatural and hardened*

"got" = *fathered* (*got* is an abbreviation of *begot*)

Tucket within

tucket – a unique trumpet call indicating a particular party

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

"All ports I'll bar" = *I'll close all the seaports*

"work the means" = *make the legal arrangements*

"capable" = *able to inherit*

Enter CORNWALL, REGAN, and attendants

CORNWALL

How now, my noble friend! Since I came hither,
Which I can call but now, I have heard strange news.

"I can call but now" = *was just this moment*

REGAN

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

"all vengeance ... th' offender" = *the fullest punishment will be inadequate for this traitor*

GLOUCESTER

O madam, my old heart is crack'd. It's crack'd.

REGAN
What! Did my father's godson seek your life?
He whom my father nam'd, your Edgar?

"He whom my father nam'd" – In Christian practice, the godparent may pronounce the infant's name in the ceremony of baptism. (Note the anachronism [inconsistency in time setting]. The setting of *King Lear* is supposed to be pagan [pre-Christian] Britain. The practices of choosing godparents and baptizing babies, therefore, wouldn't have existed.)

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

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

"tended upon" = *attended to; served*

GLOUCESTER
I know not, madam. 'Tis too bad, too bad.

EDMUND
Yes, madam, he was of that consort.

"consort" = *group of people*

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

"No marvel ... his revenues" = *It's no wonder, therefore, if he's been disloyal, for they (Lear's "riotous" knights) would've urged him to kill his father so that he'd be able to spend, even squander, all the old man's income*

"sojourn" = *make a stay*

"That if they come to sojourn at my house, / I'll not be there"—which would explain (though not altogether satisfactorily) why she is here

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

"assure thee" = *you may be certain*

"shown your father / A child-like office" – i.e. acted with loyalty, as all good children should do for their parents

EDMUND
'Twas my duty, sir.

GLOUCESTER
He did bewray his practice and receiv'd
This hurt you see, striving to apprehend him.

"bewray his practice" = *reveal his plot*

CORNWALL
Is he pursu'd?

GLOUCESTER
Ay, my good lord.

CORNWALL
If he be taken, he shall never more
Be fear'd of doing harm. Make your own purpose,
How in my strength you please. For you, Edmund,
Whose virtue and obedience doth this instant
So much commend itself, you shall be ours.
Natures of such deep trust we shall much need.
You we first seize on.

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

GLOUCESTER
For him I thank your grace.

CORNWALL
You know not why we came to visit you—

REGAN
Thus out of season, threading dark-ey'd night.
Occasions, noble Gloucester, of some prize,
Wherein we must have use of your advice.
Our father he hath writ, so hath our sister,
Of differences, which I best thought it fit
To answer from our home. The several messengers
From hence attend dispatch. Our good old friend,
Lay comforts to your bosom, and bestow
Your needful counsel to our business,
Which craves the instant use.

GLOUCESTER
I serve you, madam.
Your graces are right welcome.

Exeunt

"Make your ... you please" = *Use all my resources to do whatever you think necessary*

"you shall be ours" = *you will work for me.* (Cornwall uses the royal plural)

"Natures of ... much need" = *Such trustworthy people will be useful to us*

Cornwall's lines "You shall be ours" and "You we first seize on" suggest faintly that he may already suspect that Edmund is not the "loyal and natural boy" he seems to be. For Cornwall might have said *You are the first and best sort of lad to take into my service or I could use a loyal-hearted young man like you.* But he doesn't. Rather, he says "you shall be ours," with its implications of ownership and control, and he uses the verb "seize," which is ordinarily associated with rough treatment, as of, say, a policeman arresting a criminal. Indeed, Cornwall may be acting on the platitude *keep your friends close but your enemies closer*—that is, keep them where you can keep your eye on them. Now, Cornwall, as we shall discover shortly, is no more moral than is Edmund himself. He's properly villainous and properly matched to his venomous wife. And if it's true, as another old cliché tells us, that *it takes one to know one*, then it's reasonable to suppose that Cornwall could believe that Edmund might someday plot against him too.

"out of season" = *at an unexpected time*

"threading dark-ey'd night" – *Traveling at night needs as much care as threading a needle.*

"Occasions" = *matters*

"prize" = *importance*

"differences" = *quarrels*

"from our home" = *in a place away from our home*

"several messengers" = *different messengers* (i.e. Oswald and Kent)

"attend dispatch" = *are waiting to be sent back* (with replies)

"needful counsel ... instant use" = *much-needed advice, which is needed immediately*