

Act II, Scene ii

Before Gloucester's castle

Enter KENT and OSWALD severally

OSWALD

Good dawning to thee, friend. Art of this house?

"Good dawning" = *good morning*

"Art of this house?" = *Are you a member of this house? (i.e. a servant here)*

KENT

Ay.

OSWALD

Where may we set our horses?

"set" = *stable*

KENT

I' the mire.

"mire" = *mud*

OSWALD

Prithee, if thou lov'st me, tell me.

KENT

I love thee not.

OSWALD

Why, then, I care not for thee.

KENT

If I had thee in Lipsbury pincfold, I would make thee care for me.

"If I ... Lipsbury pincfold" = *if you were where I would like to have you (i.e. in Kent's power). (Kent's meaning is plain enough, although Lipsbury is unknown. Perhaps Kent is saying Lip-town, to mean between my teeth. A pincfold is a corral for stray cattle.)*

"I would make thee care for me" = *I'd give you good reason to concern yourself with me*

OSWALD

Why dost thou use me thus? I know thee not.

"use me thus" = *treat me this way*

KENT

Fellow, I know thee.

OSWALD

What dost thou know me for?

KENT

A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats, a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave, a lily-liver'd, action-taking knave, a whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable finical rogue, one-trunk-inheriting slave, one that wouldst be a bawd in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch, one whom I will beat into clamorous whining, if thou deniest the least syllable of thy addition.

"an eater of broken meats" = *one who lives on left-over table scraps*

"three-suited" – a reference to the three suits of clothes that were given annually to servants

"hundred-pound" = *cheap*. (The adjective "hundred-pound" can mean only *cheap* because it is a reference to King James I's selling of knighthoods for a hundred pounds.)

"worsted-stocking" – a reference to stockings made of cheap wool ("worsted"), in contrast to the silk stockings worn by gentlemen

"action-taking knave" = *coward who takes grievances to court* (i.e. instead of taking the more "manly" course of fighting)

"glass-gazing" = *vain* (i.e. one who spends his time gazing in a mirror, a "looking glass")

"super-serviceable" = *over-officious* (i.e. as of people who swagger about with the little authority they have)

"finical" = *fussy*

"one-trunk-inheriting slave" = *servant whose possessions will all fit in one trunk*

"be a bawd in ... good service" = *do anything (including bawdry, sexual services) for money*

"composition" = *mixture*

"pandar" = *lowly go-between* (especially one who serves as a pimp)

"heir" = *inheritor of the traits*

"clamorous" = *noisy*

"if thou ... thy addition" = *if you deny the truth of even the slightest detail of the titles ("addition") I've called you by*

As much fun as an actor can have with this passage of invective (insulting speech addressed to someone), he will often have to pare it down significantly, given that the dramatic tension of the moment (which is in the fact that Kent is supposed to be actually threatening Oswald) will be diffused by the time he has finished the whole speech.

OSWALD

Why, what a monstrous fellow art thou, thus to rail on one that is neither known of thee nor knows thee!

"known of" = *known by*

KENT

What a brazen-fac'd varlet art thou to deny thou knowest me! Is it two days ago since I tripp'd up thy heels and beat thee before the king? Draw, you rogue, for though it be night, yet the moon shines. I'll make a sop o' the moonshine of you. Draw, you whoreson cullionly barber-monger, draw.

"brazen-fac'd varlet" = *shameless rascal*

"sop" – bread or cake soaked in liquid. (The sense of Kent's insult is unclear. Perhaps he means that he will beat Oswald until he is soaked in his own blood and leave him to lie in the moonlight.)

"cullionly" = *wretched*

"barber-monger" – one who goes often to the barber's shop (and is, by implication, vain)

Drawing his sword

OSWALD

Away! I have nothing to do with thee.

KENT

Draw, you rascal. You come with letters against the king and take Vanity the puppet's part against the royalty of her father. Draw, you rogue, or I'll so carbonado your shanks. Draw, you rascal. Come your ways.

"Vanity the puppet" – The Lady Vanity was a regular character in morality plays and puppet shows.

"carbonado" = *score meat* (make parallel cuts in it for the purposes of grilling)

"Come your ways" = *come along now*

OSWALD

Help, ho! Murder! Help!

KENT

Strike, you slave! Stand, rogue, stand! You neat slave, strike!

"neat" = *fancy*

Beating him

OSWALD

Help, ho! Murder! Murder!

*Enter EDMUND with his rapier drawn,
CORNWALL, REGAN, GLOUCESTER, and
servants*

EDMUND

How now! What's the matter? Part!

KENT

With you, goodman boy, if you please. Come, I'll flesh ye. Come on, young master.

"With you ... young master" – Kent now tries to make Edmund fight, taunting him as an impudent youth ("goodman boy") and offering to initiate him ("I'll flesh ye") into the adult world.

GLOUCESTER

Weapons! Arms! What's the matter here?

CORNWALL

Keep peace, upon your lives.
He dies that strikes again. What is the matter?

REGAN

The messengers from our sister and the king.

CORNWALL

What is your difference? Speak.

"your difference" = *the subject of your quarrel*

OSWALD

I am scarce in breath, my lord.

KENT

No marvel, you have so bestirr'd your valor. You cowardly rascal, nature disclaims in thee. A tailor made thee.

"No marvel, you have so bestirr'd your valor" = *It's no surprise* (that you're out of breath), *considering that you've had* (to go to such effort) *to wake up* (bestir) *your courage* ("valor")

"disclaims in thee" = *refuses to recognize you as its own*

"A tailor made thee" – Kent says that Oswald is no more than the work of a tailor, a suit of clothes, for there is no real man inside this suit.

CORNWALL

Thou art a strange fellow. A tailor make a man?

KENT
Ay, a tailor, sir. A stone cutter or painter could not have made him so ill, though they had been but two years o' th' trade.

"ill" = *poorly*

"but two years o' th' trade" = *only two years at the job*

CORNWALL
Speak yet. How grew your quarrel?

"at suit" = *in pity*. (Oswald falsely depicts himself to Cornwall as the noble and superior fighter, one who did not simply dispatch the "ancient ruffian" because of the man's age.)

OSWALD
This ancient ruffian, sir, whose life I have spar'd at suit of his grey beard—

"Thou whoreson zed! Thou unnecessary letter" – The letter *z* was often ignored in dictionaries of Shakespeare's time, said to be unnecessary because it could be replaced by the letter *s*. Kent declares that Oswald is a similarly excess detail in the world.

KENT
Thou whoreson zed! Thou unnecessary letter! My lord, if you will give me leave, I will tread this unbolted villain into mortar, and daub the wall of a jakes with him. Spare my grey beard, you wagtail?

"unbolted" = *thoroughgoing; un-sifted*—like lime whose lumps must be smoothed out (by being treading on) in order to make mortar

"daub" = *dab*

"jakes" = *outhouse*

"wagtail" – By this insult Kent implies that Oswald is like a fawning puppy, complete with wagging tail, to Cornwall, or perhaps is like a nervous little bird shaking its tail feathers.

CORNWALL
Peace, sirrah!
You beastly knave, know you no reverence?

"reverence" = *respect*

KENT
Yes, sir, but anger hath a privilege.

"privilege" = *right to overstep its bounds* (i.e. in cases where one might otherwise show respect)

CORNWALL
Why art thou angry?

KENT
That such a slave as this should wear a sword,
Who wears no honesty. Such smiling rogues as these,
Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain
Which are too intrinse t' unloose, smooth every passion
That in the natures of their lords rebel,
Bring oil to fire, snow to their colder moods,
Renege, affirm, and turn their halcyon beaks
With every gale and vary of their masters,
Knowing nought, like dogs, but following.
A plague upon your epileptic visage!
Smile you my speeches, as I were a fool?
Goose, if I had you upon Sarum Plain,
I'd drive ye cackling home to Camelot.

"wear a sword" – In Shakespeare's day, only gentlemen were allowed to wear swords.

"bite the holy ... unloose" = *bite apart those knots* (i.e. of honor) which are too tightly fastened ("intrinsic") to untie ("unloose")

"smooth" = *flatter*

"rebel"—i.e. against reason, which should control the passions

"bring oil to fire" = *pour oil on the flames*

"Renege" = *deny*

"halcyon beaks" – A popular belief held that the dead kingfisher hung up by the neck would always turn its beak into the prevailing wind.

"gale and vary" = *varying wind*

"nought" = *nothing*

"epileptic visage" – Oswald's face ("visage") shows his confusion and distress, as though he were experiencing a seizure.

"Smile you ... a fool" = *Do you smile at my speeches, as if I were a fool?*

"Goose, if ... to Camelot" – Kent's line of associations is not clear. Geese are proverbially foolish birds. Sarum (Salisbury) Plain is near Winchester, which was sometimes identified with Camelot, the home of King Arthur. And a syphilitic swelling was called the "Winchester goose" because there were so many brothels on land owned in Southwark, which was part of the county of Winchester. Any or all of these references may go into the making of Kent's lines in this passage.

CORNWALL
What, art thou mad, old fellow?

GLOUCESTER
How fell you out? Say that.

KENT
No contraries hold more antipathy
Than I and such a knave.

CORNWALL
Why dost thou call him knave? What is his fault?

KENT
His countenance likes me not!

CORNWALL
No more, perchance, does mine, nor his, nor hers.

KENT
Sir, 'tis my occupation to be plain.
I have seen better faces in my time
Than stands on any shoulder than I see
Before me at this instant.

CORNWALL
This is some fellow,
Who, having been prais'd for bluntness, doth affect
A saucy roughness and constrains the garb
Quite from his nature. He cannot flatter, he,
An honest mind and plain, he must speak truth.
And they will take it, so. If not, he's plain.
These kind of knaves I know, which in this plainness
Harbor more craft and more corrupter ends
Than twenty silly ducking observants
That stretch their duties nicely.

"How fell you out?" = *How did your fight start?*

"contraries" = *opposed objects or conditions*

"antipathy" = *opposition of feeling; contempt*

"His countenance likes me not!" – In his anger, Kent can say only *The look of his face I do not like* ("likes me not").

"occupation to be plain" = *habit to be honest*

"affect" = *put on*

"saucy" = *daring*

"constrains the garb / Quite from his nature" = *forces the fashion* ("garb") *of his speech to be absolutely* ("quite") *unnatural.* ("his" = *its*)

"An honest ... he's plain" = *If people will put up with his rudeness, that's fine; if they won't, then he says he is only speaking the truth*

"Harbor" = *conceal*

"craft" = *deceptive craftiness*

"more corrupter ends" = *more destructive goals*

"silly ducking observants" = *suck-up servants making absurd little bows*

"stretch their duties nicely" = *make great efforts to carry out their tasks with excessive precision*

Note that Cornwall's depiction of the "silly ducking servants" is an apt summation of Oswald's nature.

KENT

Sir, in good sooth, in sincere verity,
Under the allowance of your great aspect,
Whose influence, like the wreath of radiant fire
On flickering Phoebus' front—

CORNWALL

What mean'st by this?

"sooth" = *truth*

"verity" = *truthfulness*. (Kent, speaking sarcastically, is deliberately redundant. His opening phrases here could be paraphrased as *Sir, in good truth, in truthful truthfulness*.)

"Under the allowance of your great aspect" = *with the permission of your most magnificent self in your great authority ("aspect")*

"Whose influence ... Phoebus' front" = *whose power is like the bright circle of fire appearing on the forehead of the sun* (Phoebus Apollo, the classical Greek god of the sun, was commonly represented with a crown ["wreath"] of flames on his forehead.)

Kent speaks with exaggerated courtliness to make fun of those who do not speak plainly—as though he were asking Cornwall if he would prefer him to speak in this hyperbolic, flattering way.

KENT

To go out of my dialect, which you discommend so much. I know, sir, I am no flatterer. He that beguil'd you in a plain accent was a plain knave, which for my part I will not be, though I should win your displeasure to entreat me to't.

CORNWALL

What was th' offence you gave him?

OSWALD

I never gave him any.
It pleas'd the king his master very late
To strike at me, upon his misconstruction,
When he, conjunct, and flattering his displeasure,
Tripp'd me behind. Being down, insulted, rail'd,
And put upon him such a deal of man,
That worthied him, got praises of the king
For him attempting who was self-subdu'd,
And, in the fleshment of this dread exploit,
Drew on me here again.

"dialect" = *manner of speaking*

"discommend" = *disapprove of*

"He that ... plain knave" = *Anyone who ever deceived ("beguil'd") you by speaking in an honest way was simply a villain*

"which for ... me to't" = *as for me, I won't be such a knave even if I should make you so annoyed with me that you say I am one*

"very late" = *recently*

"upon his misconstruction" = *because of something he did not understand*

"conjunct ... his displeasure" = *in league with the king and wanting to encourage him in his bad temper*

"Being down, insulted, rail'd" = *when I was on the floor, he verbally abused me*

"put upon him such a deal of man" = *pretended to be so brave and manly*

"worthied him" = *made him seem a hero (so worthy)*

"For him ... self-subdu'd" = *for attacking someone who already had to humble himself*

"fleshment ... dread exploit" = *excitement of doing this fearsome ("dread") deed*. (Oswald is speaking sarcastically of Kent's action.)

"Drew" – i.e. his sword

KENT

None of these rogues and cowards
But Ajax is their fool.

"None of ... their fool" = *everyone of these pale-hearted villains (such as Oswald) wants you to believe that, in comparison with him, Ajax (a legendary Greek warrior) is worth nothing*

CORNWALL

Fetch forth the stocks!
You stubborn ancient knave, you reverend braggart,
We'll teach you.

"stocks" – Confinement in the stocks was not so much excruciating as humiliating, used mainly for petty misdemeanors.

"reverend" – The adjective is normally applied to one who is worthy of respect. Cornwall may be using it to indicate that Kent is old (or old-ish anyway; he is, as he mentioned earlier, a middle-aged man). Or he may be speaking sarcastically to suggest that this plain-speaking brawler is anything *but* reverend.

"braggart" = *boaster*

KENT

Sir, I am too old to learn.
Call not your stocks for me. I serve the king,
On whose employment I was sent to you.
You shall do small respect, show too bold malice
Against the grace and person of my master,
Stocking his messenger.

"employment" = *business*

"do small respect" = *prove insulting*

"Stocking his messenger" = *putting his messenger in the stocks*

CORNWALL

Fetch forth the stocks! As I have life and honor,
There shall he sit till noon.

REGAN

Till noon? Till night, my lord, and all night too.

KENT

Why, madam, if I were your father's dog,
You should not use me so.

REGAN

Sir, being his knave, I will.

CORNWALL

This is a fellow of the self-same color
Our sister speaks of. Come, bring away the stocks!

"color" = *description*

"bring away" = *bring out*

Stocks brought out

GLOUCESTER

Let me beseech your grace not to do so.
His fault is much, and the good king his master
Will check him for't. Your purpos'd low correction
Is such as basest and contemned'st wretches,
For pilfrings and most common trespasses,
Are punish'd with. The king must take it ill,
That he, so slightly valu'd in his messenger,
Should have him thus restrain'd.

"check" = *rebuke; punish*

"purpos'd" = *intended*

"low correction" – As noted above, the stocks were intended as punishment ("correction") for petty ("low") crimes.

"contemned'st" = *most contemptible*

"pilfrings" = *petty thefts*

"trespasses" = *faults*

"The king must ... thus restrain'd" = *The king is bound to be insulted to see that you've shown him so little esteem by stock-punishing his messenger.*

CORNWALL
I'll answer that.

"answer" = *be responsible for*

REGAN
My sister may receive it much more worse,
To have her gentleman abus'd, assaulted
For following her affairs. Put in his legs.

KENT is put in the stocks

Come, my lord, away.

Exeunt all but GLOUCESTER and KENT

GLOUCESTER
I am sorry for thee, friend. 'Tis the duke's pleasure,
Whose disposition, all the world well knows,
Will not be rubb'd nor stopp'd. I'll entreat for thee.

"rubb'd" = *held back*. (The metaphor comes from the game of bowls, in which a rub is anything that impedes the bowl's course.)

"entreat" = *plead*

KENT
Pray, do not, sir. I have watch'd and travell'd hard.
Some time I shall sleep out. The rest I'll whistle.
A good man's fortune may grow out at heels.
Give you good morrow!

"watch'd" = *been awake all night*

"whistle" – i.e. *pass the time as well as he can*

"grow out at heels" = *become threadbare* (like worn-out stockings)

"Give you good morrow" = *May God give you a good day*

GLOUCESTER
The duke's to blame in this. 'Twill be ill taken.

Exit

KENT
Good king, that must approve the common saw,
Thou out of heaven's benediction com'st
To the warm sun!
Approach, thou beacon to this under globe,
That by thy comfortable beams I may
Peruse this letter! Nothing almost sees miracles
But misery. I know 'tis from Cordelia,
Who hath most fortunately been inform'd
Of my obscured course and shall find time
From this enormous state, seeking to give
Losses their remedies. All weary and o'erwatch'd,
Take 'vantage, heavy eyes, not to behold
This shameful lodging.
Fortune, good night. Smile once more. Turn thy wheel!

"common saw" = *familiar expression*

"out of ... warm sun" = *away from a good state and into a bad one* (i.e. from the pleasant shade into the hot sun)

"Approach, thou ... under globe" – Kent welcomes the rising sun (the "beacon"), which gives light to the earth beneath it ("this under globe").

"Peruse" = *examine*

"Nothing almost sees miracles / But misery" = *When you are miserable, you start to believe in miracles*

"my obscured course" = *my going in disguise*

"and shall ... their remedies" – The sense of this passage (the text of which is probably corrupt) seems to be this: *In time Cordelia will rescue us from this terribly abnormal state of affairs ("enormous state") and give us back what we have lost.*

"o'erwatch'd" = *exhausted from loss of sleep*

"'vantage" = *advantage; opportunity* (of falling asleep)

"to behold / This shameful lodging" = *to see myself stuck in the stocks*

"Fortune ... Turn thy wheel" – The goddess Fortune was commonly depicted with a wheel, the turning of which brought good or bad luck. Another popular conception of fortune's wheel was the image of all humans with places on it. The wheel is constantly turning, and when we rise up to the top of its rotation, life is good—luck is on our side—and when we drop down to the bottom, we have bad luck.

Sleeps