

## Act II, Scene iii

### A wood

Enter EDGAR

EDGAR

I heard myself proclaim'd,  
And by the happy hollow of a tree  
Escap'd the hunt. No port is free. No place  
That guard and most unusual vigilance  
Does not attend my taking. Whiles I may 'scape,  
I will preserve myself, and am bethought  
To take the basest and most poorest shape  
That ever penury in contempt of man  
Brought near to beast. My face I'll grime with filth,  
Blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots,  
And with presented nakedness out-face  
The winds and persecutions of the sky.  
The country gives me proof and precedent  
Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,  
Strike in their numb'd and mortifi'd bare arms  
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary,  
And with this horrible object, from low farms,  
Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes, and mills,  
Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,  
Enforce their charity. Poor Turlygod! Poor Tom!  
That's something yet. Edgar I nothing am.

Exit

"proclaim'd" = *declared an outlaw*

"And by ... a tree" = *and by the good fortune of finding a hollow tree (i.e. in which to hide)*

"No port is free" – He cannot escape by way of a seaport because Gloucester has posted guards at all of them.

"No place ... my taking" = *There is no port where extra security ("unusual vigilance") is not waiting to capture me*

"Whiles I may 'scape" = *as long as I can evade capture*

"am bethought" = *have the idea*

"shape" = *appearance; identity*

"That ever ... to beast" = *that poverty ("penury"), which shows hatred ("contempt") to humans, ever brought down to the level of animals. (Note that poverty is personified as a vicious entity.)*

"Blanket my loins" – i.e. be naked except for a cloth around his waist

"elf" = *tangle*. (The word "elf" is used here as a verb. The idea is that when one's hair is matted and knotted, it is because elves have been making mischief there.)

"presented nakedness" = *openly shown nakedness*

"out-face" = *stand bravely against*

"proof and precedent" = *examples that I have seen before (i.e. of vagrant madmen)*

"Bedlam beggars" – Former inmates of the Bethlehem ("Bedlam") Hospital for the insane, who, when there was no more room or resources for all of them, were selectively released with licenses to beg. (We should note, however, that Bedlam would not at all have resembled a modern hospital. It would have been more like a warehouse or prison for the mad, especially the violently mad.)

"numb'd and mortifi'd" = *frozen and dead to pain*

"horrible object" = *terrifying spectacle*

"low" = *lowly; humble*

"pelting" = *paltry; unimpressive*

"sheep-cotes" = *shepherds' cottages*

"bans" = *curses*

"Sometime with ... their charity" = *sometimes by cursing wildly, sometimes by praying gently, cause people to offer charity*

"Poor Turlygod! Poor Tom!" – Edgar is rehearsing his character of the Bedlam beggar. ("Turlygod" has never been satisfactorily explained.)

"That's something ... nothing am" – i.e. At least he can have some identity as Poor Tom. But he can no longer be Edgar.

**Here again is the reduction-to-nothing motif at work: in the transformation of a nobleman, shown as no longer at the top of the social order but at the bottom, and in the image of his stripping down to go in disguise—just as Kent, who "raz'd [his] likeness," has gone in disguise, not by putting on an identity but by taking one off.**

**Also important to see here is the symbolism of Edgar. Shakespeare renders him as a Christ figure (recall that, although the time setting of the play is pre-Christian Britain, Shakespeare is writing out of a Christian culture and from a Christian point of view). Recall that, according to Christian belief, Jesus is the sinless one who is abased and persecuted, and this is the condition of Edgar too. The suggestion of Edgar as Christ figure is reinforced by the image of him as naked but for a loin cloth—comparable to the image of the crucified Christ—and scarred by "pins, wooden pricks, [and] nails"—comparable to the image of the scourged and humiliated Christ. We may even observe the (probably coincidental) detail that both Jesus and Poor Tom come from, as it were, Bedlam (Bethlehem).**