

Act III, Scene i

A heath

Storm still. Enter KENT and GENTLEMAN, meeting

KENT
Who's there besides foul weather?

GENTLEMAN
One minded like the weather, most unquietly.

"minded like" = *whose mind is like*

KENT
I know you. Where's the king?

GENTLEMAN
Contending with the fretful elements.
Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea
Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
That things might change or cease. Tears his white hair,
Which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage,
Catch in their fury and make nothing of.
Strives in his little world of man to out-storm
The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain.
This night, wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch,
The lion and the belly-pinched wolf
Keep their fur dry, un-bonneted he runs
And bids what will take all.

"contending with the fretful elements" = *competing against / struggling with the raging wind and rain*

"curled waters 'bove the main" = *high waves above the land*

"things" – i.e. *all things in the world. Among the most striking overall impressions of King Lear is its suggestion of apocalypse—the end of the world. That impression is evident in this speech and at other points in the play. For commentary on this most major of all reductions to nothing, see the essay "Zero Hour" by Fintan O'Toole, which can be found among the other Lear files on-line.*

"eyeless" = *unseeing*

"make nothing of" = *show no respect for* (i.e. for Lear's white hair)

"little world of man" – As noted in your readings on the Elizabethan world view, many people of the age believed that significant and complex correspondences stood between the universe (the macrocosm) and the human body (the microcosm). In this sense, each body is a little world in itself—and each death, we may say therefore, is a little apocalypse.

"to-and-fro conflicting" = *turbulent*

"cub-drawn bear" = *mother bear suckling her cubs* (and consequently ravenously hungry)

"couch" = *huddle in its lair*

"belly-pinched" = *hungry*

"un-bonneted" = *bareheaded*

"bids what will take all" – the cry of the gambler who stakes everything on a final throw of the dice

But who is with him?

GENTLEMAN
None but the fool, who labors to out-jest
His heart-strook injuries.

"labors to ... heart-strook injuries" = *tries to drive the thoughts of heartbreaking injuries out of Lear's mind*

KENT

Sir, I do know you
And dare, upon the warrant of my note,
Commend a dear thing to you. There is division,
Although as yet the face of it be cover'd
With mutual cunning, 'twixt Albany and Cornwall,
Who have—as who have not, that their great stars
Thron'd and set high?—servants, who seem no less,
Which are to France the spies and speculations
Intelligent of our state, what hath been seen,
Either in snuffs and packings of the dukes,
Or the hard rein which both of them have borne
Against the old kind king, or something deeper,
Whereof perchance these are but furnishings—
But true it is, from France there comes a power
Into this scatter'd kingdom, who already,
Wise in our negligence, have secret feet
In some of our best ports and are at point
To show their open banner. Now to you.
If on my credit you dare build so far
To make your speed to Dover, you shall find
Some that will thank you, making just report
Of how unnatural and bemadding sorrow
The king hath cause to 'plain.
I am a gentleman of blood and breeding,
And from some knowledge and assurance offer
This office to you.

GENTLEMAN

I will talk further with you.

KENT

No, do not.
For confirmation that I am much more
Than my out-wall, open this purse and take
What it contains. If you shall see Cordelia—
As fear not but you shall—show her this ring,
And she will tell you who your fellow is
That yet you do not know. Fie on this storm!
I will go seek the king.

"upon the warrant of my note" = *because of what I recognize you to be*

"Commend" = *entrust*

"Although as yet ... mutual cunning" – i.e. Open war has not been declared between Albany and Cornwall. They appear to be on peaceful terms, when they are actually plotting against each other.

Note that this information would seem to suit well with the character of Cornwall, based on what we have seen of him so far and on what we will see shortly. But it is *not* consistent with what we have seen and will see of Albany, who is, in the main, a compassionate, gentle, and honest nobleman, one worthy of that designation. And, even as his own wife will note, a warlike impulse (especially where that impulse might be founded in greed) is not in his nature.

"as who ... set high?" = *and who (after all) among those people that good fortune has put in high places don't have servants?*

"who seem no less" – i.e. who *look* like servants

"Which are ... but furnishings" = *who are French spies and secret agents giving information about circumstances they have observed regarding quarrels ("snuffs") and plots ("packings") between the dukes or the strictness ("hard rein") they have both shown Lear, which possibly are outward signs that conceal what is really going on. Once more, this depiction of Albany seems implausible.*

"power" = *army*

"scatter'd" = *unsettled; divided among itself* (and therefore easy prey for an invading force)

"Wise in our negligence" = *aware of our lack of preparedness*

"have secret feet" = *have gained a secret foothold*

"at point" = *ready*

"show their open banner" = *declare themselves openly* (i.e. by spreading military banners)

"on my credit" = *trusting me*

"To make your speed" = *as to hasten*

"making just ... to 'plain" = *for giving an honest account of the madness-inducing grief the king has reason to complain of*

"of blood and breeding" = *by birth and education*

"assurance" = *reliable information*

"office" = *service* (i.e. the mission to Dover)

"out-wall" = *outward appearance*

GENTLEMAN

Give me your hand. Have you no more to say?

KENT

Few words, but, to effect, more than all yet,
That, when we have found the king—in which your pain
That way, I'll this—he that first lights on him
Holla the other.

Exeunt severally

"to effect" = *in importance*

"your pain / That way, I'll this" = *your effort being to go that way, mine to go this way*

"lights on" = *finds*

"Holla" = *call out to*

severally – at separate exits