

Act III, Scene ii

Another part of the heath. Storm still

Enter LEAR and FOOL

LEAR

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world!
Crack nature's moulds! All germens spill at once,
That makes ingrateful man!

"crack your cheeks" – This image derives from pictures on old maps of the world's winds being blown from faces with puffed-up cheeks.

"cataracts and hurricanoes" – waterspouts from the air and from the sea.

In keeping with the play's images of apocalypse, Lear is, in this moment, petitioning the gods to send a world-ending flood (of the kind associated with Noah in the Old Testament).

"drown'd the cocks" = *submerged the weathercocks* (i.e. weathervanes placed on the roofs of buildings)

"thought-executing fires" – i.e. lightning that flashes as quick as thoughts occur

"Vaunt-couriers" = *forerunners; heralds*

"oak-cleaving" = *oak-splitting*

"thick rotundity o' th' world" = *world's dense roundness*

"nature's moulds" = *moulds in which human nature is made*

"germens" = *germs; seeds*. (Lear wants to see the entire ungrateful human race destroyed—right from the point where it is "seeded.")

FOOL

O nuncle, court holy water in a dry house is better than this rainwater out o' door. Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters' blessing. Here's a night pities neither wise man nor fool.

"court holy water" = *flattery; courtly blessing*

"in" = *go in*

"ask thy daughters' blessing" = *ask your daughters to give you their blessing*. (But Lear would first have to admit that he was wrong.)

LEAR

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters.
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness.
I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children.
You owe me no subscription. Then let fall
Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand, your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man—
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That have with two pernicious daughters join'd
Your high engender'd battles 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. O ho! 'Tis foul!

"thy bellyful" = *as much as you want*

"tax" = *charge; accuse*

"subscription" = *allegiance; sworn loyalty*

"horrible" = *horrifying* (just as, incidentally, "terrible" really means *terrifying*)

"pleasure" = *will*

"servile ministers" = *fawning (suck-up) agents willing to serve others* (in this case, Lear's daughters)

"pernicious" = *evil*

"high-engender'd battles" = *battalions ("battles") born ("engender'd") in the sky*

Observe the yo-yo quality of Lear's attitude toward the storm, as shown in the preceding speech and this one. He goes from commanding the storm (commanding, note, because he is a king and is used to commanding), to standing in servant-like obedience to it, to accusing it of acting in conspiracy with his daughters against him. Apart from the fact that he is addressing a storm as though it would do his bidding, the vacillation in his attitude towards it suggests Lear's increasing mental instability.

FOOL
He that has a house to put's head in has a good head-piece.

The codpiece that will house
Before the head has any,
The head and he shall louse,
So beggars marry many.
The man that makes his toe
What he his heart should make
Shall of a corn cry woe
And turn his sleep to wake.

For there was never yet fair woman but she made
mouths in a glass.

LEAR
No, I will be the pattern of all patience.
I will say nothing.

Enter KENT

KENT
Who's there?

FOOL
Marry, here's grace and a codpiece. That's a wise man
and a fool.

KENT
Alas, sir, are you here? Things that love night
Love not such nights as these. The wrathful skies
Gallow the very wanderers of the dark
And make them keep their caves. Since I was man,
Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,
Such groans of roaring wind and rain, I never
Remember to have heard. Man's nature cannot carry
Th' affliction nor the fear.

"put's" = *put his*

"head-piece" = *both covering for his head and head on his shoulders*

"codpiece" = *cover worn in front of the hose to protect the penis, and hence the penis itself*

"The codpiece ... marry many" = *The man who takes a woman before he has a house to live in will find that he will have to share her lice*

"The man ... to wake" = *The man who cherishes something trivial rather than something precious will never be free from pain and will never be able to rest*

"For there ... a glass" = *Lovely ladies always glance at themselves in the mirror*

Note that directors of the play will often regard much (even all) of the material in this passage as largely irrelevant, feeling that it does not so much increase the tension of the scene as deflate it, and so will cut it.

"pattern" = *model*

"Marry" = *by the Virgin Mary* (a common exclamation—a mild oath, derived from *by the Virgin Mary*)

"grace and a codpiece" – i.e. the king (his "grace") and the Fool himself (his grace's current protector)

"wrathful" = *angry*

"Gallow the very wanderers of the dark" = *terrify even the wild animals*

"keep their caves" = *stay in their lairs*

"carry" = *endure*

LEAR

Let the great gods
That keep this dreadful pudder o'er our heads
Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch,
That hast within thee undivulged crimes,
Unwhipp'd of justice. Hide thee, thou bloody hand,
Thou perjur'd, and thou simular of virtue
That art incestuous. Caitiff, to pieces shake,
That under covert and convenient seeming
Hath practis'd on man's life. Close pent-up guilts,
Rive your concealing continents, and cry
These dreadful summoners grace. —I am a man
More sinn'd against than sinning!

"pudder" = *tumult; chaos*

"Find out their enemies now" – i.e. by the terror that the sinners must be showing

"Tremble, thou wretch ... dreadful summoners grace" – In this passage, Lear speaks in apostrophe to various kinds of sinners in the world—in particular, those who have committed murder, perjury, and incest.

Speaking of murder and incest, note in this speech that Shakespeare makes significant touches to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. And they are probably not accidental touches, considering especially their relation to a key plot turn that will occur at the end of Act III.

"undivulged" = *not confessed or not revealed*

"Unwhipp'd of" = *not punished by*

"bloody hand" = *murderer*

"perjur'd" – i.e. one who has perjured himself (committed perjury), which is to lie after having sworn to tell the truth. (In a general sense, however, any lie can be considered a kind of perjury.)

"simular of virtue" = *hypocrite; mere imitator of goodness*. (Note that "simular," a noun related to the verb *simulate*, is not to be confused with the adjective *similar*.)

"Caitiff" = *wretch; pathetic coward*

"under covert and convenient seeming" = *behind a cunningly planned appearance*

"practis'd" = *plotted against*

"close pent-up guilts" = *thoroughly concealed crimes*

"Rive your concealing continents" = *burst out of your hiding places*

"cry / These dreadful summoners grace" = *plead for mercy from those terrible powers that will haul you to judgment (as summoners dragged criminals before Church courts)*

"I am a man more sinned against than sinning" – i.e. The sinning he is guilty of is not equal to the sinful treatment he has been subjected to.

Note that while Lear's statement may well be true—as what Goneril and Regan have done to him *is* extreme and unjustified—Lear is nevertheless culpable—for he too has acted unjustly, been morally flawed, willful and blind. Therefore, his declaration that he is "more sinned against than sinning," while it may call forth our pity, still suggests that he sees himself as separate from the sinners he has just spoken of. But the argument Shakespeare will have advanced by the end of this play is that there really is no separation between humans—that what a person is and the actions he has done are at one with what *all* people are and what *all* people have done. This is the premise that informs the concept of *culpability*—an idea that runs through tragic literature generally, not through Shakespeare alone—the idea that everyone has a stake in all of humanity's poorly (and, for that matter, properly) done deeds.

KENT

Alack, bare-headed!
Gracious my lord, hard by here is a hovel.
Some friendship will it lend you 'gainst the tempest.
Repose you there while I to this hard house—
More harder than the stones whereof 'tis rais'd,
Which even but now, demanding after you,
Denied me to come in—return and force
Their scanted courtesy.

LEAR

My wits begin to turn.
Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?
I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow?
The art of our necessities is strange,
That can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel.
Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart
That's sorry yet for thee.

FOOL

[Sings] He that has and a little tiny wit—
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain—
Must make content with his fortunes fit,
For the rain it raineth every day.

LEAR

True, my good boy. Come, bring us to this hovel.

Exeunt LEAR and KENT

"Gracious my lord" = *my gracious lord*

"hard by here is a hovel" = *near this place is a shack*

"lend" = *provide*. Watch for other uses of this idea of assistance provided in the form of loans to those in need. Lending, as opposed to giving outright, is important for its suggestion of impermanence—the idea that the good effect produced by the lending does not last, just as, indeed, the world does not last forever. Here again is the idea of apocalypse.

"tempest" = *storm*

"hard house" = *cruel dwelling*

"More harder ... 'tis rais'd" = *harder than the stones it is made of*

"Which" – i.e. the people there

"even but now" = *only just now*

"demanding after you" = *asking where you were*

"Denied me to come in" = *refused me entrance*

"force / Their scanted courtesy" = *compel them to show some small amount of pity*

"My wits begin to turn" = *My mind begins to fail*

"Art cold?" = *Are you cold?*

"The art ... things precious" = *Necessity has a mysterious power, one that can make conditions we would ordinarily think repulsive ("vile") seem most desirable*

"I have ... for thee" = *There is part of my heart that is able to feel pity, and I pity you*

Ah! Another sign of Lear's learning to "see better." His range of vision has suddenly grown large enough to encompass the suffering of someone other than himself. This is a step toward his understanding of the interconnectedness of humans—even of kings and their servants—and therefore toward an understanding of genuine love.

Note too that the Fool's song supports Lear's foregoing lines. The sense of his verse is this: *If a man hasn't much sense, he must make the best use of what he has in order to cope with the troubles that every day brings.* This reinforces Lear's observation that necessity makes "vile things precious" and teaches us to survive the mean old world as well as we can. As well, the idea that "the rain it raineth every day" puts us in mind of another common concept—that of the rain's not being "fussy 'bout where it lands"—that it falls on the wise and the foolish, the great and the small alike—which speaks, then, of the interconnectedness of humans too. Add to this the paradox of rain, which is that while it causes us to shiver and moan, it also nourishes life, and this is in keeping with the essential dictum of tragedy that wisdom is achieved only through suffering.

FOOL

This is a brave night to cool a courtesan.
I'll speak a prophecy ere I go.
When priests are more in word than matter,
When brewers mar their malt with water,
When nobles are their tailors' tutors,
No heretics burn'd, but wenches' suitors,
When every case in law is right,
No squire in debt, nor no poor knight,
When slanders do not live in tongues,
Nor cutpurses come not to throngs,
When usurers tell their gold i' th' field,
And bawds and whores do churches build,
Then shall the realm of Albion
Come to great confusion.
Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
That going shall be us'd with feet.
This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his
time.

Exit

"brave" = *fine*

"courtesan" = *prostitute*

"more in word than matter" = *spend more time talking (especially about morality) than doing*

"brewers mar their malt with water" = *beer makers ruin their drink by adding extra water (in order to cheat their buyers)*

"nobles are their tailors' tutors" = *gentlemen tell tailors how to do their jobs*

"No heretics burned, but wenches' suitors" – i.e. only faithless lovers are burned (i.e. with syphilis sores)

"tongues" = *what people say*

"cut-purses" = *thieves (who cut the strings of purses hanging from belts in order to steal them)*

"tell their gold i' th' field" = *count their profits openly*

"do churches build" – i.e. as signs of repentance

"Albion" = *ancient name for Britain*

"who lives to see't" = *if anyone should live long enough to see this time come*

"going shall be us'd with feet" = *feet shall be used for walking*

"This prophecy ... before his time" – Merlin, the magician at King Arthur's court, is said to have lived in the sixth century AD. The historical Lear is supposed to have lived in the eighth century BC.

The general idea of the Fool's "prophecy" is that when one observes certain telling conditions in Britain, then he will know that the end of Britain itself is at hand (Britain and, by implication therefore, the whole world—again, the apocalypse.) But because some of the so-called prophecies bespeak conditions that already exist—for example, priests are already "more in word than matter" and brewers already "mar their malt with water"—the end of Britain is occurring right now. The speech is often cut from productions of *King Lear* because (like the material concerning codpieces and fair ladies fixed on their mirrors) it tends to diminish dramatic tension. As well, the speech is not in keeping with the logic of the play generally, for at no other point does the Fool (or any other character) speak as though he were a one-man tragic chorus, who can step out of the action of the play and converse with the audience. All of the characters are supposed to be living and acting in a "real" world. If they *were* able, as the Fool is here, to step out of that world (and become time travelers besides)—saying, in effect, *Look, I know this is only a play*—audiences would have no reason to believe in the characters' world or to feel that it has as much importance as their own "really real" world.