

Act III, Scene iv

The heath. Before a hovel

Enter LEAR, KENT, and FOOL

KENT

Here is the place, my lord. Good my lord, enter.
The tyranny of the open night's too rough
For nature to endure.

Storm still

"open night" = *night in the open air*

LEAR

Let me alone.

KENT

Good my lord, enter here.

LEAR

Will't break my heart?

"Will't break my heart?" – Lear wants to remain outside in the storm so that the physical discomfort will distract him from his mental suffering, which will otherwise break his heart.

KENT

I had rather break mine own. Good my lord, enter.

LEAR

Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm
Invades us to the skin. So 'tis to thee.
But where the greater malady is fix'd,
The lesser is scarce felt. Thou'dst shun a bear,
But if thy flight lay toward the raging sea,
Thou'dst meet the bear i' th' mouth. When the mind's
free,
The body's delicate. The tempest in my mind
Doth from my senses take all feeling else
Save what beats there—filial ingratitude!
Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand
For lifting food to't? But I will punish home.
No, I will weep no more. In such a night
To shut me out! Pour on! I will endure.
In such a night as this! O Regan, Goneril!
Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all—
O that way madness lies! Let me shun that.
No more of that.

"Thou think'st ... to thee" = *You think it remarkable that this troublesome storm attacks our bodies, and indeed it is troublesome—to you*

"greater malady is fix'd" = *worse sickness has taken hold (i.e. the cruelty he has suffered as a result of his daughters' treatment of him)*

"The lesser is scarce felt" = *the lesser trouble (i.e. the storm) is hardly noticed*

"i' th' mouth" = *head on*

"free" = *at ease*

"delicate" = *sensitive*

"all feeling else" = *every other feeling*

"Save what ... filial ingratitude" = *except the feeling beating there (like a mockery of a heartbeat), which is the recognition of ungrateful children*

"Is it not as" = *is it not as if*

"home" = *thoroughly*

"frank" = *generous*

"O, that way madness lies!" – Lear feels that to even think about this anymore will lead him to total insanity.

KENT

Good my lord, enter here.

LEAR

Prithee, go in thyself. Seek thine own ease.
This tempest will not give me leave to ponder
On things would hurt me more. But I'll go in.
[To the FOOL] In, boy. Go first. You houseless
poverty—
Nay, get thee in. I'll pray and then I'll sleep.

FOOL goes in

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp.
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.

"Seek thine own ease" = *Find comfort for yourself*

"This tempest ... me more" = *The storm will prevent me from thinking about things that are more painful than it*

"You houseless poverty" – Lear begins to speak a prayer, one addressed not to the gods but to all the homeless poor people (the "poverty") of the world. Note a striking use of the inversion motif here in the action of a king who prays not "upward" to beings even greater than he, but "downward" to creatures ordinarily thought insignificant (but who, as it turns out, just might have some kind of advantage over "sophisticated" royals).

"bide" = *endure*

"houseless heads" – i.e. without houses to shelter them

"unfed sides" = *starving bodies*

"loop'd and window'd raggedness" – i.e. the rags' tatters fall in loops, and their holes are like windows

"O, I have ta'en / Too little care of this" – i.e. As a king, Lear might have helped the suffering poor, but he did not "see" them and so did nothing for them.

"Take physic, pomp" = *Take medicine ("physic"), you proud people of the world (the pompous ones—the "pomp")*

"Expose thyself ... more just" – Lear calls for the proud and wealthy people of the world to take medicine in the form of standing naked out here in the storm. By this they will know how the poor feel, and they will see the need to give of themselves—that is, to "shake" their excess goods (the "superflux") down to the poor. With such actions of kindness, the wealthy of the world may help the poor (and indeed all people who see such kindness being done) to believe that the gods are caring and merciful.

This speech emphasizes the value of caring for those in need, and its points are reinforced elsewhere in the play. It is an aspect of *King Lear* that causes many readers to speak of the play as one that calls for social justice. Note, by the way, that, while the phrase may be relatively modern, the idea of social justice is ancient. The poor of the world have always been with us, and humans have always needed to be charitable. This was just as much a fact of Shakespeare's age as it is of our own. For more commentary on the idea of social justice in *King Lear*, see Fintan O'Toole's essay "Zero Hour."

Now, here's a picky technical question: *Should Lear's prayer to the "poor naked wretches" be considered a case of apostrophe, or is it direct address?* Apostrophe is a form of personification in which one addresses an inanimate object, abstract condition, or absent entity as if that object, condition, or entity could hear and reply (though the speaker knows that such a thing cannot reply; therefore, apostrophe may also be considered a mode of ironic speech). But by this time, Lear is, if not completely insane, well on his way to madness, in which case he may believe that all the pitiable wretches of the world really *can* hear him—*must* hear him. He is, after all, a king (at least in his own mind and according to his habit). And a king must be listened to! By the logic of a mad man, then, this speech would not be apostrophic. The settling of this issue is probably not critical to most readers or viewers of the play, but it would be most important to the actor playing Lear. He must know at what key moments Lear slips from sane to insane.

EDGAR
[*Within*] Fathom and half, fathom and half! Poor Tom!

The FOOL runs out from the hovel

FOOL
Come not in here, nuncle! Here's a spirit!
Help me, help me!

KENT
Give me thy hand. Who's there?

FOOL
A spirit, a spirit! He says his name's Poor Tom.

KENT
What art thou that dost grumble there i' th' straw?
Come forth.

Enter EDGAR disguised as a mad man

EDGAR
Away! The foul fiend follows me! Through the sharp
hawthorn blows the cold wind. Humh! Go to thy cold
bed, and warm thee.

LEAR
Didst thou give all to thy two daughters?
And art thou come to this?

"Fathom and half" – From inside the hovel Tom (Edgar playing the part of a mad beggar) calls out the depth of the rainwater as though he were a sailor.

"spirit" – i.e. evil spirit. (A popular belief held that those who were mad were possessed by demons.)

"And art thou come to this?" = *And is this the state you have been brought to?* (From Lear's point of view, the only condition that could drive one to such madness is the work of ungrateful daughters.)

EDGAR

Who gives any thing to Poor Tom? Whom the foul fiend hath led through fire and through flame and through ford and whirlpool, o'er bog and quagmire, that hath laid knives under his pillow and halters in his pew, set ratsbane by his porridge, made him proud of heart, to ride on a bay trotting-horse over four-inch'd bridges, to course his own shadow for a traitor. Bless thy five wits! Tom's a-cold—O do de, do de, do de. Bless thee from whirlwinds, star-blasting, and taking! Do Poor Tom some charity, whom the foul fiend vexes—there could I have him now—and there—and there again and there.

"ford" – a shallow area in a body of water through which one may wade

"bog" and "quagmire" – swampy grounds

"halters" – hangman's nooses

"ratsbane" – rat poison

"bay trotting-horse over four-inch'd bridges" – A bay horse was sometimes trained to be a "high-stepper" by having it walk across tiny bridges.

"course his own shadow for a traitor" = *pursue his own shadow, thinking to apprehend it on a charge of treason*

"O, do de, do de, do de" – probably meant to suggest Tom's shivering

In his acting the part of Poor Tom, Edgar speaks of demons trying to destroy him—and always by indirect means: by leading him into dangerous regions, by leaving tools of suicide close to hand, by encouraging him to be proud (a subtle approach to self-destruction but effective all the same), by confusing him and making him a stranger to himself (i.e. by leading him to madness and its attendant despair). These references to what demons will do—all they *can* do—are informed by a key idea advanced in the plays of Shakespeare and in tragedies generally. It is the idea that evil, though it can invite us, cannot overcome us unless we allow it to do so. Nor, for that matter, can goodness overcome us unless we allow it to do so. This is because God, it is believed, has created humans with the faculty of free will. We *choose* our own behaviors. We *choose* to live as angels or as beasts. God and the Devil, then, have limited power in our lives. They can present themselves to us, influence and advise us, but they cannot *do* for us. The *doing* is up to us. This condition, incidentally, is comparable to the relationship of heroes and their mentors (and is therefore relevant to our reading of *King Lear*, with its emphasis on mentorship). Mentors too will lead their protégés, but in the end these would-be heroes must face their decisive ordeals alone and make choices out of the wisdom of their own hearts.

"five wits" – i.e. five forms of intelligence—common wit, imagination, fantasy, estimation, and memory

"Tom's a-cold" – the common cry of the Bedlam beggar

"star-blasting" – coming under the influence of an evil star

"taking" = *infection*

"There could I ... and there" – Tom swats at demons swirling about him like tormenting insects.

Storm still

LEAR

What, has his daughters brought him to this pass?
Couldst thou save nothing? Didst thou give them all?

"pass" = *distressing state*

FOOL

Nay, he reserv'd a blanket. Else we had been all sham'd.

"Nay, he reserv'd ... all sham'd" = *No, he kept a blanket (i.e. to cover his genitals). If he hadn't done as much, we'd all be embarrassed*

LEAR

Now, all the plagues that in the pendulous air
Hang fated o'er men's faults light on thy daughters!

"all the plagues ... men's faults" – There was a belief that diseases were stored up in the air, hanging ("pendulous") there until the time came for them to be poured down to punish sinners. (Lear calls for the plagues that have beset Poor Tom to be transferred to his evil daughters.)

KENT

He hath no daughters, sir.

LEAR

Death, traitor! Nothing could have subdu'd nature
To such a lowness but his unkind daughters.
Is it the fashion that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
Judicious punishment! 'Twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters.

"Death, traitor!" = *Death to you, you traitor* (i.e. a traitor because he challenges the belief of his sovereign)

"subdu'd nature" = *reduced his natural powers*

"Judicious" = *fitting; well judged*

"'Twas this flesh begot" = *It was my own body that sired* (Goneril and Regan)

"pelican" – Young pelicans were thought to devour the flesh of their parents.

Note two implications in Lear's speech:

1) that in spite of his enlarged vision (his new ability to sympathize with someone else in distress—and he *is* sympathizing with Poor Tom) he is still prone to understand another person's crisis only in terms of his own experience; he is not objective enough to consider circumstances different from his own

2) that Lear's penchant for vacillation (an indicator of his mental instability) is apparent here, for he begins by speaking self-righteously on behalf of "discarded fathers," but suddenly judges them harshly, himself included, for being the creators of wicked creatures in the first place

EDGAR

Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill.
Halloo, halloo, loo, loo!

"Pillicock sat ... loo, loo" – The word "pillicock," which could serve as an endearment for a loved one or as a euphemism for *penis*, is probably suggested to Edgar by Lear's "pelican." Note that many of Edgar's phrases and exclamations are meant as the babblings of a madman.

FOOL

This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.

EDGAR

Take heed o' the foul fiend. Obey thy parents. Keep thy word justly. Swear not. Commit not with man's sworn spouse. Set not thy sweet heart on proud array. Tom's a-cold.

"Obey thy ... proud array" – Here Tom recites a kind of catechism, the principles of which are drawn from the Ten Commandments. But note again the anachronism, for the Commandments are biblical, but the setting of *King Lear* is supposed to be pre-Christian.

- "Obey thy parents" < "Thou shalt honor thy mother and father"
- "Keep thy word justly" < "Thou shalt not bear false witness"
- "Swear not" < "Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain"
- "Commit not with man's sworn spouse" < "Thou shalt not commit adultery"
- "Set not thy sweet heart on proud array" < "Thou shalt not covet ..." or "Thou shalt make no graven images"

LEAR

What hast thou been?

EDGAR

A serving man, proud in heart and mind, that curl'd my hair, wore gloves in my cap, serv'd the lust of my mistress' heart and did the act of darkness with her, swore as many oaths as I spake words and broke them in the sweet face of heaven. One that slept in the contriving of lust and wak'd to do it. Wine lov'd I deeply, dice dearly, and in woman out-paramor'd the Turk. False of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand, hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey. Let not the creaking of shoes nor the rustling of silks betray thy poor heart to woman. Keep thy foot out of brothels, thy hand out of plackets, thy pen from lenders' books, and defy the foul fiend. Still through the hawthorn blows the cold wind, says suum, mun, hey no, nonny. Dolphin my boy, my boy, sessa! Let him trot by.

"A serving man ... lion in prey" – In this passage Edgar creates a "back-story" for his character of Poor Tom, saying that he had lived a privileged but thoroughly sinful life—the implication being that his sinfulness has resulted in the low state to which he has been brought. Each of the ill behaviors he cites indicates a common vice.

- "that curl'd my hair, wore gloves in my cap" (arrogantly showed off love tokens) < was vain
- "serv'd the lust of my mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her" < fornicated
- "swore as many oaths as I spake words, and broke them in the sweet face of heaven" < shattered sacred vows
- "one that slept in the contriving of lust, and wak'd to do it" (went to bed planning/dreaming of ways to satisfy sexual desire, and on waking up went out to do it) < schemed and fornicated
- "Wine lov'd I deeply" < drank excessively
- "dice [I also loved] dearly" < gambled
- "in woman out-paramour'd the Turk" (slept with more women than would a grand sultan with his harem) < whored
- "false of heart" < not to be trusted
- "light of ear" < eager to join in gossip
- "bloody of hand" < violent
- "hog in sloth" < lazy
- "fox in stealth" < sneaky
- "wolf in greediness" < covetous
- "dog in madness" < irrational/prone to fits of temper
- "lion in prey" < opportunistic

"Let not the creaking ... defy the foul fiend" – Here Tom now lists his own "commandments"—the moral pronouncements he has derived from his own sinning and suffering—as opposed to pronouncements only "theoretically" derived). Reading this passage, one thinks of a passage from another of Shakespeare's plays, *Measure for Measure*:

**They say best men are moulded out of faults
And, for the most part, become much more the better
For being a little bad.**

These lines suggest the positive value that may be derived from negative experience, and they are therefore relevant to that central principle of tragedy—that wisdom is achieved only through suffering.

Storm still

LEAR

Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncover'd body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! Here's three on's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself! Un-accommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, fork'd animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come unbutton here.

Tearing off his clothes

"Thou wert better" = *you would be better off*

"answer" = *confront*

"extremity" = *severity*

"man" – i.e. a man / all men / humanity

"worm" – i.e. silkworm

"cat" – i.e. civet-cat, giving musk for perfumes

"three on's are sophisticated" = *three of us* (i.e. Kent, the Fool, and himself) *who are "refined dunces."* (We commonly use the word "sophisticated" to mean *refined, elegant, or clever*. But the word actually derives from the Latin *sophisticare*, meaning to *adulterate, cheat, or quibble*, and in ancient Greece it was also associated with the sophists, philosophers who were regarded (by wiser men) as thinkers that expressed seemingly sound but finally flawed, even deliberately deceptive, ideas—thinkers who had it "wrong"—eloquent liars. In this moment of epiphany, Lear sees Tom as the only one in this group of four who's got it "right.")

"Thou art the thing itself!" = *You are the essential man!*

"Un-accommodated" – in this use, *naked or one without "lendings"*

"fork'd" = *two-legged*

"lendings" – Lear calls his clothes mere "lendings"—material on loan from animals.

"Come unbutton here" – He calls the others to help him tear off his clothes. **Note that this line stands an important foreshadowing of a moment in the play's climax at the end of Act V.**

In part because of listening to Poor Tom, but more as a result of gazing on one of the actual "poor naked wretches" to whom, in their absence, he earlier prayed, Lear now decides to tear off his "lendings." Lear recognizes in Poor Tom a man who stands for the essential nature of all humanity. Indeed, Tom is "the thing itself." He is the personification of "un-accommodated man . . . a poor, bare, fork'd animal." Inspired by this figure, Lear seeks to purify himself—that is, to "[raze his] likeness," to be reduced to his truest self—and become one with Tom. In this moment, joining Kent and the Fool, Tom becomes Lear's third mentor.

Consider now the following related commentary on the subject of clothing and nakedness.

We choose and wear our identities, just as we choose and wear our clothes. That is to say, we clothe ourselves in the attitudes and behaviors of the cultures or sub-cultures with which we associate. And if we say that we put on our social identities at the beginning of the day and remove them at day's end, then we may say also that clothing (or disguise) belongs to the Apollonian consciousness of sunlight and community, while nakedness belongs to the Dionysian unconsciousness of moonlight and solitude. We might compare these myth concepts from classical Greece with the Judeo-Christian myth of Adam and Eve, who, having eaten of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and emerging into the "curse of consciousness," discover that they are naked and feel compelled to cover themselves.

Our nakedness, one might argue, is symbolically our most essential identity. And ironically, it is the identity of which many of us are most afraid. We cannot bear to be naked, partly because our view of our own bodies—that is, our actual identities—so seldom accords society's view of the ideal body—which, as it turns out, is a non-existent identity. We feel ourselves always falling short of an alleged perfection. Our self-esteem is continually being assaulted. To salvage our broken integrity, then, we don the acceptable alter-identities afforded us by society, palpably in the form of clothes. What we fail to see, however, is that society cannot provide any but the most superficial of identities—mere fashions.

The conclusion that this reasoning forces on us is that we must be able to accept first our naked selves as they are in their immovable, irreducible truth. An acceptance of our nakedness is metaphorically an acceptance of our true identities. In this reduction to nothing, we become indeed something.

FOOL

Prithee, nuncle, be contented. 'Tis a naughty night to swim in. Now a little fire in a wild field were like an old lecher's heart, a small spark, all the rest on's body cold. Look, here comes a walking fire.

Enter GLOUCESTER with a torch

EDGAR

This is the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet. He begins at curfew and walks till the first cock. He gives the web and the pin, squinies the eye and makes the harelip, mildews the white wheat and hurts the poor creature of earth.

Swithold footed thrice the wold.
He met the nightmare and her nine-fold.
Bid her alight,
And her troth plight,
And aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!

KENT

How fares your grace?

LEAR

What's he?

KENT

Who's there? What is't you seek?

GLOUCESTER

What are you there? Your names?

EDGAR

Poor Tom, that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt and the water, that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cow dung for sallets, swallows the old rat and the ditch dog, drinks the green mantle of the standing pool, who is whipp'd from tithing to tithing and stock-punish'd and imprison'd, who hath had three suits to his back, six shirts to his body,

Horse to ride and weapon to wear.
But mice and rats and such small deer,
Have been Tom's food for seven long year.

Beware my follower. Peace, Smulkin! Peace, thou fiend!

GLOUCESTER

What, hath your grace no better company?

"naughty" = *wicked*. (Note that the word *naughty* is derived from *naught*, meaning *nothing*.)

"a little fire" – The Fool catches sight of Gloucester's approaching torch.

"Flibbertigibbet" – the name of a demon

"begins at curfew and walks till the first cock" = *is active from dusk till dawn*. (When the first cock crows, evil spirits must withdraw from the world of the living.)

"the web and the pin" = *cataract of the eye*

"squinies" = *squints*

"harelip" – a defect of the upper lip

"white wheat" – nearly ripened corn

"Swithold footed . . . aroint thee" – As protection against the fiendish Flibbertigibbet, Tom recites a rhyme describing how Saint Withold, having gone three times round the "wold" (*weald* = *upland plains*), subdued a demon and her nine followers. He made her promise to obey him ("her troth plight") and ordered her to be gone ("aroint"). **You may recall, incidentally, that the command "Aroint thee, witch" is also uttered in *Macbeth*, a play which also asserts that humans, exercising free will, have power over evil spirits.**

"wall-newt" = *lizard*

"sallets" = *salads*

"ditch dog" = *dead dog lying in a ditch*

"green mantle of the standing pool" = *scum that covers the stagnant pond*

"tithing" – hamlet (i.e. a small village) containing ten households

"stock-punish'd" = *set in the stocks for petty crimes*

"three suits" – Recall (from Kent's speech of invective to Oswald) that a servant's allowance included three suits of clothes.

"Smulkin" – another demon (like *Modo* and *Mahu*, mentioned in Edgar's next speech)

EDGAR
The prince of darkness is a gentleman.
Mudo he's call'd and Mahu.

GLOUCESTER
Our flesh and blood is grown so vile, my lord,
That it doth hate what gets it.

"Our flesh ... gets it" = *Our children* ("flesh and blood") *have grown so evil that they hate their parents* (the ones who "get" them—*get* being an abbreviated form of *beget*). (Gloucester is thinking, of course, about Goneril and Regan's treatment of Lear, but he speaks in the plural because he is thinking also of Edgar's [supposed] treatment of him.)

EDGAR
Poor Tom's a-cold.

GLOUCESTER
Go in with me. My duty cannot suffer
To obey in all your daughters' hard commands.
Though their injunction be to bar my doors
And let this tyrannous night take hold upon you,
Yet have I ventur'd to come seek you out
And bring you where both fire and food is ready.

"My duty cannot suffer" = *my obligation to obey* (Cornwall and Regan) *will not bear*

"injunction" = *command*

"tyrannous night" = *night that behaves like a raging tyrant*

LEAR
First let me talk with this philosopher.
What is the cause of thunder?

"this philosopher" – Having made Tom out to be one of deep wisdom, Lear now calls him a philosopher, such a man as might be able to answer the question "What is the cause of thunder?"

KENT
Good my lord, take his offer. Go into the house.

LEAR
I'll talk a word with this same learned Theban.
What is your study?

"Theban" – i.e. a man of Thebes, a city of ancient Greece (recall that Oedipus was the king of Thebes) with which one would associate philosophers

"your study" = *the subject of your research*

EDGAR
How to prevent the fiend and to kill vermin.

LEAR
Let me ask you one word in private.

KENT
Importune him once more to go, my lord.
His wits begin to unsettle.

"Importune" = *urgently beg*

GLOUCESTER
Canst thou blame him?

Storm still

His daughters seek his death. Ah, that good Kent!
He said it would be thus, poor banish'd man!
Thou say'st the king grows mad. I'll tell thee, friend,
I am almost mad myself. I had a son,
Now outlaw'd from my blood. He sought my life,
But lately, very late. I lov'd him, friend.
No father his son dearer. Truth to tell thee,
The grief hath craz'd my wits. What a night's this!
I do beseech your grace—

Recall that Gloucester has already been established as a character that is paralleled with Lear. And here is a parallel now in the fact that he sees no better than Lear does, for he cannot recognize that he is speaking to his old friend and fellow councilor Kent.

LEAR

O cry you mercy, sir.
Noble philosopher, your company.

"cry you mercy" = *I beg your pardon*

EDGAR

Tom's a-cold.

GLOUCESTER

In, fellow, there, into the hovel. Keep thee warm.

LEAR

Come, let's in all.

KENT

This way, my lord.

LEAR

I will keep still with my philosopher.
With him.

"With him" – Lear refuses to be separated from Tom.

KENT

Good my lord, soothe him. Let him take the fellow.

"soothe" = *humor*

GLOUCESTER

Take him you on.

KENT

Sirrah, come on. Go along with us.

LEAR

Come, good Athenian.

"Athenian" – Like "Theban," an Athenian is a resident of Athens, also associated with the philosophers of old.

GLOUCESTER

No words, no words. Hush.

EDGAR

Child Rowland to the dark tower came.
His word was still "Fie, foh, and fum,
I smell the blood of a British man."

"Child Rowland ... British man" – As the little party moves to the better shelter that Gloucester can provide, Tom's nonsense rhyme (derived from the story of "Jack the Giant Killer") intensifies the terror of the moment.

Exeunt