

## Act III, Scene vi

### A chamber in a farmhouse adjoining the castle

Enter GLOUCESTER, LEAR, KENT, FOOL, and EDGAR

GLOUCESTER

Here is better than the open air. Take it thankfully. I will piece out the comfort with what addition I can. I will not be long from you.

"piece out ... I can" = *do what I can to make it more comfortable*

KENT

All the power of his wits have given way to his impatience. The gods reward your kindness!

"power of ... his impatience" = *his mind is destroyed because he cannot bear this suffering*

Exit GLOUCESTER

EDGAR

Frateretto calls me and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness. Pray, innocent, and beware the foul fiend.

"Fratteretto" – a demon

"Nero" – tyrannical ruler in first-century Rome, associated with cruelty, extravagance, and extreme persecution of Christians

"an angler in the Lake of Darkness" = *a fisherman in a lake in hell*

FOOL

Prithee, nuncle, tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman.

"yeoman" – a property owner without a coat-of-arms (i.e. lower in status than a gentleman)

LEAR

A king, a king!

FOOL

No, he's a yeoman that has a gentleman to his son, for he's a mad yeoman that sees his son a gentleman before him.

"a mad yeoman that sees his son a gentleman before him" – i.e. because the son will despise his father's humbler status

LEAR

To have a thousand with red burning spits  
Come hissing in upon 'em—

"To have ... upon 'em" – Lear pictures Goneril and Regan being tormented by a thousand devils with red-hot pokers.

EDGAR

The foul fiend bites my back.

FOOL

He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath.

"horse's health" – the supposed health of a horse as touted by a horse dealer

"oath" – a sworn affirmation of something as true

LEAR

It shall be done. I will arraign them straight.

[To EDGAR] Come, sit thou here, most learned justicer.

[To the FOOL] Thou, sapient sir, sit here. Now, you she foxes!

"arraign" – to call a defendant before a court to answer a charge

"justicer" = *justice of the peace*

"sapient" = *wise*

EDGAR  
Look where he stands and glares!  
Want'st thou eyes at trial, madam?  
Come o'er the bourn, Bessy, to me—

"he" – an imaginary devil

"eyes" = *an audience*

"Come o'er the bourn, Bessy, to me" – Edgar sings a line from a song in which a lover calls his sweetheart to cross a stream ("bourn"). The Fool then improvises a reply.

FOOL  
[Sings] Her boat hath a leak,  
And she must not speak.  
Why she dares not come over to thee!

EDGAR  
The foul fiend haunts Poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale. Hoppedance cries in Tom's belly for two white herring. Croak not, black angel. I have no food for thee.

"nightingale" – i.e. the voice of the Fool

"Hoppedance" – a demon

"white" = *un-smoked*

"Croak not" = *stop rumbling*

KENT  
How do you, sir? Stand you not so amaz'd.  
Will you lie down and rest upon the cushions?

"amaz'd" = *dumbfounded*

LEAR  
I'll see their trial first. Bring in their evidence.  
[To EDGAR] Thou robed man of justice, take thy place.  
[To the FOOL] And thou, his yoke-fellow of equity,  
Bench by his side. [To KENT] You are o' th'  
commission.  
Sit you too.

"their evidence" = *those who will give evidence against them*

"yoke-fellow of equity" = *partner in justice*

"Bench" = *take your seat on the judges' bench*

"o' th' commission" = *part of the committee of judges*

EDGAR  
Let us deal justly.

Sleepest or wakest thou, jolly shepherd?  
Thy sheep be in the corn.  
And for one blast of thy minikin mouth,  
Thy sheep shall take no harm.

"Sleepest or wakest ... no harm" – This is a fragment of a song, similar to "Little Boy Blue," in which certain sheep will come to no harm as long as the shepherd whistles a few notes with his delicate ("minikin") lips.

Purr! The cat is gray.

LEAR  
Arraign her first. 'Tis Goneril. I here take my oath  
before this honorable assembly, she kick'd the poor king  
her father.

FOOL  
Come hither, mistress. Is your name Goneril?

LEAR  
She cannot deny it.

FOOL  
Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool.

"Cry you mercy ... joint-stool" = *Begging your pardon, I thought you were a joint-stool (i.e. a stool made by a joiner)*

LEAR  
And here's another, whose warp'd looks proclaim  
What store her heart is made on. Stop her there!  
Arms, arms, sword, fire! Corruption in the place!  
False justicer, why hast thou let her 'scape?

"warp'd looks ... made on" = *distorted looks are signs of* (i.e. they "proclaim") *the material* ("what store") *her heart is made of* ("on")

"Stop her ... let her 'scape" – In Lear's hallucination, the prisoner has fled the courtroom.

EDGAR  
Bless thy five wits!

KENT  
O pity! Sir, where is the patience now,  
That thou so oft have boasted to retain?

"My tears begin to take his part" = *The pity I am able to feel* (of which tears are the sign) *is for him* ("take his part")

"mar my counterfeiting" = (threaten to) *ruin my acting* (i.e. the part of Tom)

EDGAR  
[*Aside*] My tears begin to take his part so much,  
They mar my counterfeiting.

LEAR  
The little dogs and all,  
Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart, see, they bark at me.

"Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart" – common names for pet dogs. (In Lear's imagination, his three daughters are conflated with three little pet dogs that have turned on him, their master.)

EDGAR  
Tom will throw his head at them. Avaunt, you curs!

"throw his head" = *shout at*

"Avaunt" = *clear off*

"curs" = *mongrel dogs; mutts*

Be thy mouth or black or white,  
Tooth that poisons if it bite,  
Mastiff, greyhound, mongrel grim,  
Hound or spaniel, brach or lym,  
Or bobtail tike or trundle-tail,  
Tom will make them weep and wail,  
For with throwing thus my head,  
Dogs leap the hatch and all are fled.

"thy horn is dry" – The Bedlam beggar commonly wore a horn round his neck, both to carry coins he had begged and to drink from. But Edgar's saying that Tom's horn is "dry" is his way of saying that he is finding it increasingly hard to play convincingly his part of the madman, for the sane man (Edgar himself) is overwhelmed with sadness for the suffering Lear.

Do de, de, de. Sessa! Come, march to wakes and fairs  
and market towns. Poor Tom, thy horn is dry.

**Note, throughout this scene, Edgar's manner of playing along with Lear's hallucinations—his pretending to see the things that Lear sees. Of course, it is fitting that he should do so, as it makes his acting the part of Tom believable. On the level of logic, we may say, one madman *should* be able to speak in common terms with another madman. But in symbolic terms, Edgar's behavior also suggests a significant idea about how one person may truly love another person—which is by changing his perspective so completely that he may see the world from the other person's point of view. In this sense, Edgar is unwittingly following the advice that Lear had urged on the pompous men of the world: to stand out in the storm alongside the "poor, naked wretches" in order to know how they feel and understand the world that both are in but that each would otherwise know separately and inequitably. Edgar's effort here is not merely to sympathize but to *empathize* with Lear. Sympathy is a matter of "feeling like." It is being compassionate for a suffering other by imagining oneself in the other person's situation and by comparing the sufferer's experience to one's own. Empathy, however, is the condition of "feeling *into*." It is actually feeling what the suffering other feels without reference to one's own experience or feeling. Edgar's mentorship of Lear, therefore, is substantially different from Kent's and the Fool's, both of whom approach Lear objectively—as a sufferer who must be instructed or otherwise tended to—while Edgar mentors Lear *subjectively*, by allowing himself to be absorbed (in part symbolically; in part actually) into the old man's experience.**

LEAR

Then let them anatomize Regan. See what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts? [To EDGAR] You, sir, I entertain for one of my hundred. Only I do not like the fashion of your garments. You will say they are Persian attire, but let them be chang'd.

KENT

Now, good my lord, lie here and rest awhile.

LEAR

Make no noise. Make no noise. Draw the curtains—so, so, so. We'll go to supper i' he morning—so, so, so.

FOOL

And I'll go to bed at noon.

"anatomize" = *dissect; analyze*

"breeds about" = *grows around (and influences)*

"make" = *should make*

"entertain" = *take into service*

"hundred" – i.e. the hundred knights

"I do not like ... be chang'd" – The Roman poet Horace wrote of how he disliked the elaborate dress of the Persians.

"Draw the curtains" – Lear imagines he is in his own curtained bed.

"We'll go to supper i' th' morning" – i.e. They can forget about supper for the moment, as rest is more important than food right now.

"And I'll go to bed at noon" – The Fool's silly rejoinder to Lear's saying "We'll go to supper i' th' morning" is fitting, for it's the kind of absurdity one expects of a jester. After all, people are supposed to go to supper in the early evening, not in the morning, and to bed in the late evening, not at noon. But the Fool's line can also be read as symbolically significant in other ways.

1) It is an expression of the inversion motif. The times have, in the world of *King Lear*, been turned inside out, and changes of perspective are now necessary if one is to make sense of the madness and to survive.

2) The line is the Fool's last line in the play. We see him no more after this scene. Many readers see his sudden disappearance as a fault of the play and believe that there is perhaps some textual corruption afoot, speculating that in some earlier version of the play the Fool had been more gracefully dismissed from the action. His inexplicable evaporation, too, causes a problem for directors who want to suggest a logical leaving of the character behind. One effective treatment is to play the Fool as someone who grows exhausted and physically sickened by the extremities he endures in staying with Lear—the emotional turmoil and, of course, the stormy night—such that by the time he feebly jokes "And I'll go to bed at noon" he is almost dead. The image of going to bed at noon, then, takes on a dark suggestion inasmuch as sleeping is so commonly a metaphor for dying. He may be heard, therefore, as saying *And I will die before my time* (i.e. dying at noon rather than at a more usual evening hour). As well, the Fool's abrupt disappearance is appropriate when we consider the work of mentors in the lives of the heroes they help. As noted earlier, the mentor guides the hero, but he cannot do the hero's work for him. Rather, the hero must, of his own resources, slay the dragon or rescue the damsel or find the precious gem—or, if he is King Lear, learn his true nature and humbly learn his proper place in the universal design. With the Fool now to depart, Lear is one step closer to completing on his own his tragic/heroic mission.

*Re-enter GLOUCESTER*

GLOUCESTER

Come hither, friend. Where is the king my master?

KENT

Here, sir, but trouble him not. His wits are gone.

GLOUCESTER  
 Good friend, I prithee, take him in thy arms.  
 I have o'erheard a plot of death upon him.  
 There is a litter ready. Lay him in't  
 And drive towards Dover, friend, where thou shalt meet  
 Both welcome and protection. Take up thy master.  
 If thou shouldst dally half an hour, his life,  
 With thine and all that offer to defend him,  
 Stand in assured loss. Take up, take up,  
 And follow me, that will to some provision  
 Give thee quick conduct.

"litter" – a cart or other transport vehicle  
 "dally" = *delay*  
 "Stand in assured loss" = *will certainly be lost*

KENT  
 Oppressed nature sleeps.  
 This rest might yet have balm'd thy broken sinews,  
 Which, if convenience will not allow,  
 Stand in hard cure. [*To the FOOL*] Come, help to  
 bear thy master.  
 Thou must not stay behind.

"balm'd thy broken sinews" = *been a soothing ointment (balm) for your tortured nerves*  
 "convenience will not allow" = *it is not available (i.e. if he is not allowed to sleep)*  
 "Stand in hard cure" = *are not likely to be healed*

GLOUCESTER  
 Come, come, away.

*Exeunt all but EDGAR*

EDGAR  
 When we our betters see bearing our woes,  
 We scarcely think our miseries our foes.  
 Who alone suffers, suffers most i' th' mind,  
 Leaving free things and happy shows behind.  
 But then the mind much suffrance doth o'erskip,  
 When grief hath mates and bearing fellowship.  
 How light and portable my pain seems now,  
 When that which makes me bend makes the king bow,  
 He childed as I father'd! Tom, away!  
 Mark the high noises and thyself bewray,  
 When false opinion, whose wrong thought defiles thee,  
 In thy just proof, repeals and reconciles thee.  
 What will hap more tonight, safe 'scape the king!  
 Lurk, lurk.

Edgar—as himself, not as Tom—brings the scene to a close with formal rhymed couplets, and his speech emphasizes the interconnectedness of the play's two plots.

"When we our betters see bearing our woes" = *When we see our elders/superiors dealing with troubles*  
 "We scarcely think our miseries our foes" = *We hardly feel as though our own troubles are so great*  
 "Who alone suffers, suffers most i' th' mind" = *The one who must bear his sufferings in isolation feels them most keenly in the mind (i.e. not in the body)*  
 "free things and happy shows" = *carefree things and things that look pleasant*  
 "But then ... bearing fellowship" = *But the mind will pass over ("o'erskip") much suffering if the sufferer has companions to share the suffering with*  
 "portable" = *endurable (literally able to be carried)*  
 "He childed as I father'd" = *He has cruel children, just as I have a cruel father*  
 "Mark the high noises" = *Take note of what is happening at the top (i.e. between the houses of Cornwall and Albany)*  
 "thyself bewray" = *reveal your true identity*  
 "false opinion" – i.e. Gloucester's mistaken belief about Edgar  
 "defile" = *soil; make filthy*  
 "thy just proof" = *the proving of your innocence*  
 "repeals" – i.e. retracts the accusation of his being an outlaw  
 "reconciles thee" = *reinstates you in your former position of favor*  
 "What will hap more tonight, safe 'scape the king" = *Whatever happens tonight, may the king escape safely*  
 "Lurk" = *keep in hiding*

*Exit*