

### Act III, Scene vii

#### Gloucester's castle.

Enter CORNWALL, REGAN, GONERIL,  
EDMUND, and servants

CORNWALL

Post speedily to my lord your husband. Show him this letter. The army of France is landed. Seek out the traitor Gloucester.

*Exeunt some of the servants*

REGAN

Hang him instantly.

GONERIL

Pluck out his eyes.

CORNWALL

Leave him to my displeasure. Edmund, keep you our sister company. The revenges we are bound to take upon your traitorous father are not fit for your beholding. Advise the duke, where you are going, to a most festinate preparation. We are bound to the like. Our posts shall be swift and intelligent betwixt us. Farewell, dear sister. Farewell, my Lord of Gloucester.

*Enter OSWALD*

How now! Where's the king?

OSWALD

My Lord of Gloucester hath convey'd him hence.  
Some five or six and thirty of his knights,  
Hot questrists after him, met him at gate,  
Who, with some other of the lord's dependants,  
Are gone with him towards Dover, where they boast  
To have well-armed friends.

"Post speedily" = *ride quickly*

"this letter" – i.e. the letter that Gloucester has shown to Edmund and that Edmund has shown to Cornwall, the letter that speaks of Cordelia's return with French forces. We are aware that the houses of Cornwall and Albany are preparing for war against each other. But now, with news of a foreign army coming to England, we see that Cornwall and Albany will need to unite to resist the French.

We should recognize here an interesting use of the inversion motif. England and France have often been at odds, and wars aplenty have been waged between the two countries. But in this inside-out case, a French army is coming to England not so much to attack as to defend—that is, under Cordelia's command, to defend and restore the nation to its right and proper rule, to take it back from the control of tyrants-in-training such as Cornwall and Regan, Goneril and Albany (*supposedly* Albany, that is, for recall that there is either some inconsistency on Shakespeare's part or some misunderstanding on characters' parts regarding Albany's nature and intention, for he is *not* the war-like duke that his brother-in-law Cornwall is).

"keep you our sister company" – i.e. leave the room with Cornwall's sister-in-law Goneril

"bound" = *obliged or prepared*

"The revenges ... are not fit for your beholding" – Note that Cornwall's line can be read either as an example of dramatic irony or of verbal irony, depending on how much he knows about Edmund's true nature and actual scheming. If he does *not* know that Edmund is capable of scheming his own father's destruction (and, given the chance, would even kill Gloucester himself), then Cornwall's saying that the punishment of Gloucester is "not fit for [Edmund's] beholding" is dramatically ironic. But if he *does* know of Edmund's treachery, then the line is a dark verbal irony.

"festinate" = *quick*

"We are bound to the like" = *We must do the same*

"posts shall be swift and intelligent betwixt us" = *messengers on horseback shall ride swiftly with information between the two of us*

"my Lord of Gloucester" – Cornwall addresses Edmund as the new lord (earl) of Gloucester.

"My Lord of Gloucester" – Oswald is not yet aware that Edmund is the new Earl of Gloucester. His "Lord of Gloucester" refers to the old man.

"Hot questrists" = *eager seekers*

"boast" = *claim*

CORNWALL

Get horses for your mistress.

GONERIL

Farewell, sweet lord, and sister.

CORNWALL

Edmund, farewell.

*Exeunt GONERIL, EDMUND, and OSWALD*

Go seek the traitor Gloucester,  
Pinion him like a thief. Bring him before us.

*Exeunt other servants*

Though well we may not pass upon his life  
Without the form of justice, yet our power  
Shall do a court'sy to our wrath, which men  
May blame, but not control. Who's there? The traitor?

*Enter GLOUCESTER, brought in by two or three*

REGAN

Ingrateful fox! 'Tis he.

CORNWALL

Bind fast his corky arms.

GLOUCESTER

What means your graces? Good my friends, consider  
You are my guests. Do me no foul play, friends.

CORNWALL

Bind him, I say.

*Servants bind him*

REGAN

Hard, hard. O filthy traitor!

GLOUCESTER

Unmerciful lady as you are, I'm none.

CORNWALL

To this chair bind him. Villain, thou shalt find—

*REGAN plucks his beard*

"pinion him" = *bind his arms*

"pass on his life" = *condemn him to death*

"form of justice" = *appearance of a proper trial*

"do a court'sy" = *bow; yield to.* (Cornwall says he will let his anger get the better of his rightful power—i.e. to formally try and convict Gloucester of treason).

"Ingrateful fox" – In Regan's view, Gloucester has acted with ingratitude toward his "noble arch and patron," Cornwall, and has been as stealthy as a fox in giving aid to Lear.

"fast" = *securely*

"corky" = *sapless; withered*

That Regan should pluck whiskers from Gloucester's chin is a grave insult, for a man's facial hair, in various cultures, has been associated with virility and bravery. To pluck whiskers, then, is a kind of symbolic castration. It is to accuse a man of wearing a false manliness, to call him a coward or a knave. That a woman should pluck a man's whiskers is doubly insulting.

GLOUCESTER  
By the kind gods, 'tis most ignobly done  
To pluck me by the beard.

REGAN  
So white, and such a traitor!

GLOUCESTER  
Naughty lady,  
These hairs, which thou dost ravish from my chin,  
Will quicken and accuse thee. I am your host.  
With robbers' hands my hospitable favors  
You should not ruffle thus. What will you do?

"naughty" = *wicked*. (Recall again that *naughty* is derived from *naught*, meaning *nothing*.)

"ravish" = *violently seize*

"quicken" = *come to life*

"hospitable favors" = *the features of a host*

"ruffle" = *treat with violence*

"late" = *lately*

CORNWALL  
Come, sir, what letters had you late from France?

REGAN  
Be simple-answer'd, for we know the truth.

"Be simple-answer'd" = *give a straight answer*

CORNWALL  
And what confederacy have you with the traitors  
Late footed in the kingdom?

"confederacy" = *conspiracy*

"late-footed" = *recently landed*

REGAN  
To whose hands  
You have sent the lunatic king. Speak.

"guessingly set down" = *written without certain knowledge*

GLOUCESTER  
I have a letter guessingly set down,  
Which came from one that's of a neutral heart,  
And not from one oppos'd.

"that's of a neutral heart" = *who's not taking sides*

CORNWALL  
Cunning.

REGAN  
And false.

CORNWALL  
Where hast thou sent the king?

GLOUCESTER  
To Dover.

"at peril" – Regan is not able to finish her phrase before being interrupted by Cornwall. She would say "at peril of death."

REGAN  
Wherefore to Dover? Wast thou not charg'd at peril—

CORNWALL  
Wherefore to Dover? Let him first answer that.

GLOUCESTER  
I am tied to th' stake, and I must stand the course.

"I am tied ... stand the course" – Gloucester compares himself to a bear in a bear-baiting spectacle. In this popular Elizabethan "entertainment," a bear was tied to a stake and attacked by a pack ("course") of dogs. (You may recall that Macbeth uses the same metaphor—saying "They have tied me to a stake. / I cannot fly, but bear-like I must fight the course"—when he is near to realizing that he can no longer hold his throne but must nevertheless go down fighting.)

REGAN  
Wherefore to Dover, sir?

GLOUCESTER  
Because I would not see  
Thy cruel nails pluck out his poor old eyes,  
Nor thy fierce sister in his anointed flesh  
Rash boarish fangs. The sea, with such a storm  
As his bare head in hell-black night endur'd,  
Would have buoy'd up and quench'd the stelled fires.  
Yet, poor old heart, he help the heavens to rain.  
If wolves had at thy gate howl'd that dearn time,  
Thou shouldst have said "Good porter, turn the key."  
All cruels else subscribe. But I shall see  
The winged vengeance overtake such children.

"anointed" = *sanctified*. (At a king's coronation, his body was anointed with holy oil. To harm the royal person was therefore sacrilegious.)

"Rash boarish fangs" = *attack like a wild boar*. (Here the word "rash" is used as a verb.)

"The sea ... stelled fires" = *The sea—during the storm that he, without even a hat on his head, suffered in that hellishly dark night—would have risen ("buoy'd up") high enough to put out the stars ("stelled fires")*

"Yet, poor ... to rain" = *But even at that, the suffering old man called out to ("help," an archaic form of helped) the heavens to "pour on"*

"If wolves ... turn the key" = *Even if wolves had been at your door howling in fear of that dreadful ("dearn") storm, you (if she were actually capable of pity) should have said "Gatekeeper, open the door"*

"All cruels else subscribe" = *All other cruel creatures (though a cruel creature such as Regan, Gloucester implies, is different) will show compassion in extraordinary situations*

"winged vengeance" = *justice of the gods*

CORNWALL  
See't shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair.  
Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.

GLOUCESTER  
He that will think to live till he be old,  
Give me some help! O cruel! O you gods!

"He that ... be old" = *anyone who values his life*

REGAN  
One side will mock another. Th' other too.

CORNWALL  
If you see vengeance—

FIRST SERVANT  
Hold your hand, my lord!  
I have serv'd you ever since I was a child,  
But better service have I never done you  
Than now to bid you hold.

"bid you hold" = *plead with you to stop*

**This action of a servant rising up justly against his master's rashness stands an echo to Kent's challenging of Lear's folly in banishing Cordelia and in falling for Goneril and Regan's flattery. It is therefore an example of the "speak what we feel" motif. The phrase "speak what we feel" (as noted earlier) appears in the play's final moments.**

REGAN  
How now, you dog!

FIRST SERVANT  
If you did wear a beard upon your chin,  
I'd shake it on this quarrel.

"If you ... this quarrel" = *If you were a man, I'd pull your beard off for this offense*. (The servant's saying that he'd attack Regan's would-be beard refers to her earlier plucking of Gloucester's whiskers.)

REGAN  
What do you mean?

"What do you mean?" = *How do you dare to speak so?*

CORNWALL  
My villain!

*They draw and fight*

FIRST SERVANT  
Nay, then, come on, and take the chance of anger.

"take the chance of anger" = *risk fighting me in my anger*

REGAN  
Give me thy sword. A peasant stand up thus!

"stand up thus" = *make such a challenge*

*Takes a sword and runs at him behind*

FIRST SERVANT  
O I am slain! My lord, you have one eye left  
To see some mischief on him. Oh!

"some mischief on him" = *that some harm comes to him*

*Dies*

CORNWALL  
Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly!  
Where is thy lustre now?

"enkindle all ... horrid act" = *arouse all your natural passions to pay back ("quit" – an abbreviation of acquit) this terrible crime*

GLOUCESTER  
All dark and comfortless. Where's my son Edmund?  
Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature,  
To quit this horrid act!

REGAN  
Out, treacherous villain!  
Thou call'st on him that hates thee. It was he  
That made the overture of thy treasons to us,  
Who is too good to pity thee.

"made the overture of" = *first disclosed*

GLOUCESTER  
O my follies! then Edgar was abus'd.  
Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him!

"abus'd" = *wronged*

"that" – i.e. his misjudgment of Edgar

"prosper him" = *help him*

Note that we must exercise some willing suspension of disbelief to accept that Gloucester could so quickly conclude that, if Edmund is actually a villain, Edgar must be innocent. The action strains our credulity, but we accept it all the same for the sake of economically moving the action forward. The important point, however, is that Gloucester's sudden ability to "see better" is attended by the horrible situational irony of his eyes being plucked out. Here, then, is the second significant touch to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the first having been Lear's speech in the storm, the one in which he speaks of criminals as yet "unwhipp'd of justice" by the gods.

REGAN  
Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell  
His way to Dover.

*Exit one with GLOUCESTER*

How is't, my lord? How look you?

Recall that Cornwall and Regan's intention has been to execute Gloucester for treason, but they have only maimed him. Presumably Regan believes that Gloucester will not be able to survive an attempt to travel anywhere and therefore is as good as dead.

Note here a dark use of the changing-perspectives motif. What Regan proposes for Gloucester is a cruelly mocking inversion of the Fool's answer to the riddle concerning eyes on either side of one's nose--"that what a man cannot smell out, he may spy into."

"How look you?" = *How are you feeling?*

CORNWALL  
I have receiv'd a hurt. Follow me, lady.  
Turn out that eyeless villain. Throw this slave  
Upon the dunghill. Regan, I bleed apace.  
Untimely comes this hurt. Give me your arm.

*Exit CORNWALL led by REGAN*

SECOND SERVANT  
I'll never care what wickedness I do  
If this man come to good.

THIRD SERVANT  
If she live long  
And in the end meet the old course of death,  
Women will all turn monsters.

SECOND SERVANT  
Let's follow the old earl and get the Bedlam  
To lead him where he would. His roguish madness  
Allows itself to any thing.

THIRD SERVANT  
Go thou. I'll fetch some flax and whites of eggs  
To apply to his bleeding face. Now, heaven help him!

*Exeunt severally*

"apace" = *rapidly*

"Untimely comes this hurt" = *This is a bad time for me to be wounded*

Cornwall's wound is mortal. He himself is "as good as dead," and we do not see him again after this scene.

"If she ... turn monsters" – i.e. If Regan should live into old age and come to death by natural causes ("the old course of death"), then nothing will prevent *all* women from turning into monsters such as she, for they will not have to fear the punishment of the gods for their crimes.

"the Bedlam" – i.e. Poor Tom

"To lead ... to any thing" = *to lead him to Dover, for a madman will undertake any sort of (strange or dangerous) task*

"flax and whites of eggs" – i.e. flax, a fibrous plant out of which bandage material can be made, and egg whites, which are used for poultices