

Act IV, Scene i

The heath

Enter EDGAR

EDGAR

Yet better thus, and known to be contemn'd,
Than, still contemn'd and flatter'd, to be worst.
The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune
Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear.
The lamentable change is from the best.
The worst returns to laughter. Welcome, then,
Thou unsubstantial air that I embrace!
The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst
Owes nothing to thy blasts. But who comes here?

Enter GLOUCESTER led by an Old Man

My father, poorly led? World, world! O world!
But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee,
Life would not yield to age.

OLD MAN

O my good lord,
I have been your tenant and your father's tenant
These fourscore years.

GLOUCESTER

Away, get thee away. Good friend, be gone.
Thy comforts can do me no good at all.
Thee they may hurt.

OLD MAN

You cannot see your way.

GLOUCESTER

I have no way and therefore want no eyes.
I stumbl'd when I saw. Full oft 'tis seen
Our means secure us and our mere defects
Prove our commodities. O dear son Edgar,
The food of thy abused father's wrath!
Might I but live to see thee in my touch,
I'd say I had eyes again!

"Yet better ... be worst" = *It is better to be like this (i.e. a Bedlam beggar), knowing that I am despised ("contemn'd"), than to be flattered and at the same time despised—which is worst of all*

"most dejected thing of fortune" = *the creature most oppressed by fortune*

"Stands still in esperance" = *may still be hopeful*

"The lamentable change is from the best" = *The change to feel sad about is (the one that takes a person) from a good state (to a bad one)*

"The worst returns to laughter" – i.e. At least, the person in the worst state knows that things can only get better.

"unsubstantial" = *empty*

"The wretch ... thy blasts" = *I owe nothing to you, wind (Edgar speaks in apostrophe to the wind of fortune), who blew the wretch I was to an even worse condition*

"poorly led" = *helped as though he were a beggar*

"But that ... to age" = *If it were not for the fact that we come to hate you, world (now he speaks in apostrophe to the world) because of your bizarre changes, we would never be pleased to accept the knowledge that we must grow old (i.e. because the world is hard to live in, we are glad to know that we must grow old and die, for then we'll be released)*

"tenant" = *servant*

"fourscore" = *eighty (because a score is 20)*

"I stumbl'd when I saw" – i.e. When he had eyes, he did not "see better."

"Full oft" = *very often*

"Our means secure us" = *having possessions or abilities makes us over-confident*

"mere defects prove our commodities" = *disadvantages turn out to be assets*

"The food ... father's wrath" = *being the food (i.e. food as a metaphor for Edgar) that fed your father's anger while he was deceived about you (i.e. while his belief was "abus'd")*

"see" = *recognize*

Note that the paradoxes of having eyesight but being blind and of having advantage but being at a disadvantage stand as examples of the inversion motif.

OLD MAN

How now! Who's there?

EDGAR

[*Aside*] O gods! Who is't can say "I am at the worst"?

I am worse than e'er I was.

"Who is't can say 'I am the worst?'" – i.e. No one can legitimately say that circumstances are as bad as they can be, for they can always become worse yet.

OLD MAN

'Tis poor mad Tom.

EDGAR

[*Aside*] And worse I may be yet. The worst is not So long as we can say "This is the worst."

"The worst ... 'This is the worst'" = *The worst has not happened as long as we are still able to say that things can't get worse*

OLD MAN

Fellow, where goest?

GLOUCESTER

Is it a beggar-man?

OLD MAN

Madman and beggar too.

GLOUCESTER

He has some reason. Else he could not beg. I' th' last night's storm I such a fellow saw, Which made me think a man a worm. My son Came then into my mind. And yet my mind Was then scarce friends with him. I have heard more since.

As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' gods.

They kill us for their sport.

"has some reason" = *must have some intelligence*

"Else" = *otherwise*

"my mind / Was then scarce friends with him" – i.e. Gloucester could not identify with the mad beggar because he had never seen the world from the beggar's point of view.

"As flies ... for sport" = i.e. The gods treat humans in the same way that thoughtless ("wanton") boys treat flies. They kill us for fun.

EDGAR

[*Aside*] How should this be?

Bad is the trade that must play fool to sorrow, Angering itself and others. [*Aloud*] Bless thee, master!

"How should this be?" = *How could this have happened?*

"Bad is the trade" = *it is a bad business*

"play fool to sorrow" = Edgar prepares to resume his role as Poor Tom.

GLOUCESTER

Is that the naked fellow?

OLD MAN

Ay, my lord.

GLOUCESTER

Then, prithee, get thee gone. If, for my sake, Thou wilt o'ertake us, hence a mile or twain, I' th' way toward Dover, do it for ancient love, And bring some covering for this naked soul, Who I'll entreat to lead me.

"Thou wilt ... or twain" = *you will catch up with us a mile or two ("twain") from here ("hence")*

"i' th' way toward" = *in the direction of*

"entreat" = *ask*

OLD MAN

Alack, sir, he is mad.

GLOUCESTER

'Tis the times' plague when madmen lead the blind.
Do as I bid thee. Or rather do thy pleasure.
Above the rest, be gone.

"'Tis the times' plague" = *it is the sickness that characterizes these days*

"do thy pleasure" = *do as you wish*

"the rest" = *all*

OLD MAN

I'll bring him the best 'parel that I have,
Come on't what will.

Exit

"'parel" = *apparel; clothing*

"Come on't what will" = *no matter what happens*

Note that when the Old Man promises to bring clothing for the mad beggar (risking his own safety, incidentally), he does not say that he will bring some old rags that he would just as soon discard anyway. Instead he says that he will bring to Tom "the best 'parel that [he has]." In the Old Man's intention is developed an idea about sacrifice—which is that giving to those in need is not a matter of casting off the worst of what one has. Rather, it is about giving graciously the *best* of what one has and cherishes. It is a principle of action informed by what we often call the Golden Rule—*Do for others as you would have them do for you*—and it is at the heart of social justice. It is also at the heart of characters such as Cordelia, Edgar, Kent, and the Fool. The Machiavels, meanwhile—Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall—practice the very antithesis of the Golden Rule. The essence of their actions is self-service, and their guiding principle is summed in the expression *The end justifies the means*.

GLOUCESTER

Sirrah, naked fellow—

EDGAR

Poor Tom's a-cold. [*Aside*] I cannot daub it further.

"daub it further" = *carry on with this pretence* (The metaphor of daubing [dabbing] as disguising is taken from the job of plastering walls. Recall that Kent used the same word when he spoke of using a paste made out of Oswald's stomped-up body to plaster over the cracks in the walls of an outhouse.)

GLOUCESTER

Come hither, fellow.

EDGAR

[*Aside*] And yet I must. [*Aloud*] Bless thy sweet eyes.
They bleed.

GLOUCESTER

Know'st thou the way to Dover?

"stile" – a set of steps for crossing over a fence or low wall

"Obidicut ... and waiting-women" – As in his encounter with Lear in the storm, Tom speaks of the demons that supposedly inhabit him and the sins or misfortunes for which they are responsible.

"mopping and mowing" = *grimacing and pulling faces*

EDGAR

Both stile and gate, horse-way and footpath. Poor Tom hath been scar'd out of his good wits. Bless thee, good man's son, from the foul fiend! Five fiends have been in Poor Tom at once—as Obidicut, of lust; Hoberdiance, prince of dumbness; Mahu, of stealing; Modo, of murder; Flibbertigibbet, of mopping and mowing, who since possesses chambermaids and waiting-women. So, bless thee, master!

GLOUCESTER

Here, take this purse, thou whom the heavens' plagues
Have humbl'd to all strokes. That I am wretched
Makes thee the happier. Heavens, deal so still!
Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
Because he doth not feel, feel your power quickly.
So distribution should undo excess
And each man have enough. Dost thou know Dover?

EDGAR

Ay, master.

"Have humbl'd to all strokes" = *made to bear the blows of the gods (or of fortune) until you have been humbled.* (Note that Gloucester is now able to feel what this wretch feels, as he too has been humbled by his own cruel fortune.)

"That I ... the happier" = *My having been humbled will now prove your good fortune*

"Heavens, deal so still" = *May the gods always ("still") do as much (i.e. be kind to those in need)*

"Let the superfluous ... power quickly" = *May the man whose possessions are excessive ("superfluous") and who can obtain whatever he desires (i.e. who is "lust-dieted"), the man who treats what the gods have given him as though it were his to command ("slaves [the gods'] ordinance [their laws]"), let such a man soon be humbled by you (the gods)*

"So distribution ... have enough" – i.e. If the people who have much (*too much*) were properly humbled by the gods, they would learn how to share their goods, and all people would then have enough.

Note that Gloucester's speech echoes—not only in content but in form as well—Lear's earlier prayer to the "poor naked wretches":

**Take physic, pomp.
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.**

An important idea implied in both Gloucester's and Lear's speeches is that humans are meant to serve as the agents of the gods—that if the gods send blessings (or trials, for that matter) to some humans, they do so via the assistance of other humans.

GLOUCESTER

There is a cliff whose high and bending head
Looks fearfully in the confined deep.
Bring me but to the very brim of it,
And I'll repair the misery thou dost bear
With something rich about me. From that place
I shall no leading need.

EDGAR

Give me thy arm.

Poor Tom shall lead thee.

Exeunt

"bending head" – i.e. The cliff's top leans out over its base.

"fearfully" – Gloucester personifies the cliff, saying that *it* looks "fearfully" toward the water below.

"but to the very brim" = *right to the edge*

"about me" = *that I have with me*