

Act IV, Scene ii

Before ALBANY's palace.

Enter GONERIL and EDMUND

GONERIL

Welcome, my lord. I marvel our mild husband
Not met us on the way.

"I marvel our mild husband / Not met us" = *I'm surprised my meek husband had not met me*

"on the way" – i.e. as they were returning from Gloucester's castle

Enter OSWALD

Now, where's your master?

OSWALD

Madam, within. But never man so chang'd.
I told him of the army that was landed.
He smil'd at it. I told him you were coming.
His answer was "The worse." Of Gloucester's treachery
And of the loyal service of his son,
When I inform'd him, then he call'd me sot
And told me I had turn'd the wrong side out.
What most he should dislike seems pleasant to him.
What like, offensive.

"sot" = *fool*

"turn'd the wrong side out" = *got things the wrong way round. (Albany knows that Gloucester is not a traitor and that Edmund was not acting as a loyal subject.)*

"What like, offensive" = *What he should like seems offensive to him*

GONERIL

[To EDMUND] Then shall you go no further.
It is the cowish terror of his spirit
That dares not undertake. He'll not feel wrongs
Which tie him to an answer. Our wishes on the way
May prove effects. Back, Edmund, to my brother.
Hasten his musters and conduct his powers.
I must change arms at home and give the distaff
Into my husband's hands. This trusty servant
Shall pass between us. Ere long you are like to hear,
If you dare venture in your own behalf,
A mistress' command. Wear this. Spare speech.

"cowish" = *cowardly*

"undertake" = *take any responsibility on himself*

"He'll not ... an answer" = *He will pretend not to notice any insults that would demand his retaliation*

"Our wishes ... prove effects" = *what we were hoping for on the way might come true*

"brother" – i.e. brother-in-law

"Hasten his musters" = *make him call up his armies*

"conduct his powers" = *lead his forces*

"I must ... husband's hands" = *I must exchange arms with Albany (i.e. she would take his sword) and put the woman's distaff (used for spinning wool) into his hands*

"Ere long you are like" = *before long you are likely*

"dare venture in your own behalf" = *are bold enough to do something for yourself*

"Wear this" – Goneril gives Edmund a token (e.g. a scarf or chain) to wear as a sign of her favor (i.e. a pledge of her commitment)

"Spare speech" = *Say nothing*

"Decline your head" – i.e. to receive the favor or her kiss

"durst speak" = *dared to or could speak*

"stretch" = *raise. (Goneril's words are sexually suggestive, and Edmund responds to it with a pun. He says that he will be faithful even unto death, but "death" is also a traditional metaphor for the experience of orgasm.)*

"Conceive" = *understand what I mean*

Giving a favor

Decline your head. This kiss, if it durst speak,
Would stretch thy spirits up into the air.
Conceive, and fare thee well.

EDMUND

Yours in the ranks of death.

GONERIL
My most dear Gloucester!

Exit EDMUND

O the difference of man and man!
To thee a woman's services are due.
A fool usurps my bed.

OSWALD

Madam, here comes my lord.

Exit

Enter ALBANY

GONERIL
I have been worth the whistle.

ALBANY

O Goneril!

You are not worth the dust which the rude wind
Blows in your face. I fear your disposition.
That nature which contemns its origin
Cannot be border'd certain in itself.
She that herself will sliver and disbranch
From her material sap perforce must wither
And come to deadly use.

GONERIL
No more. The text is foolish.

ALBANY

Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile.
Filths savor but themselves. What have you done?
Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform'd?
A father and a gracious aged man,
Whose reverence even the head-lugg'd bear would
lick'd—
Most barbarous! Most degenerate!—have you madded.
Could my good brother suffer you to do it?
A man, a prince, by him so benefited!
If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vilde offences,
It will come.
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep.

"of man and man" = *between one man and another* (i.e. between Albany and Edmund)

"To thee ... are due" = *You deserve all that a woman can do for you*

"A fool" – i.e. Albany

"usurps" = *has taken possession of*. (To usurp is to illegally seize authority.)

"worth the whistle" – Goneril refers to the proverb *It's a poor dog that's not worth the whistle* (i.e. worth whistling for). She is scolding her husband for not having come to meet her on the road.

"rude" = *rough; uncivil*

"fear your disposition" = *am fearful about your temperament*

"contemns its origin" = *despises its beginnings* (Albany accuses Goneril of having been cruel to her father.)

"Cannot be ... in itself" = *cannot be trusted to stay within normal bounds* (He fears what she is yet capable of.)

"She that ... deadly use" = *A woman who will sever connection with the one* (i.e. her father) *who has given life to her* (i.e. has been her "sap") *must, necessarily* ("perforce"), *shrivel and come to a bad end*

"text" – i.e. the subject of Albany's preaching

"Filths savor but themselves" = *Filthy things take pleasure only in filthy things*

"Whose reverence ... would lick" = *whose respected person even a bear dragged about by a ring through its nose would show affection to*

"barbarous" = *savage*

"degenerate" = *debased*

"madded" = *driven mad*

"by him so benefited" = *by whom you have received such generosity*

"If that ... vilde offenses" = *If the gods do not soon send avengers* (in the form of "visible spirits") *to tame these savage crimes*. (The word "vilde"—a form of the adjective *vile* ["disgusting"]—is probably meant to suggest also the adjective *wild*, standing juxtaposed to the verb "tame," which precedes it.)

"It will come" – Albany's half-line indicates that he takes a dramatic pause before delivering the next two lines, which read like a dire, even apocalyptic, prophecy.

"Humanity must ... the deep" = *Humans will be forced to feed on each other, as monsters of the deep do*

GONERIL

Milk-liver'd man!

That bear'st a cheek for blows, a head for wrongs,
Who hast not in thy brows an eye discerning
Thine honor from thy suffering, that not know'st
Fools do those villains pity who are punish'd
Ere they have done their mischief. Where's thy drum?
France spreads his banners in our noiseless land.
With plumed helm thy slayer begins to threat,
Whiles thou, a moral fool, sits still and cries
"Alack, why does he so?"

"Milk-liver'd man" = *coward*. (The liver was seen as the organ associated with bravery. The coward was one whose liver was bloodless or milk-colored).

"That bear'st ... for wrongs" = *who (being a coward) has a cheek that was made to be struck, and has a brain that was made to conceive wrong thoughts*

"Who hast ... thy suffering" = *who (being a fool) does not have in his head an eye that can tell the difference between (discern) what can be honorably endured and what should be resented*

"Fools do ... their mischief" = *Fools (like Albany) will feel sorry for criminals (like Lear) who are corrected before they can commit their crimes*

"Where's thy drum?" – i.e. war-drum, to summon and to lead armies

"noiseless" = *undefended* (because the war-drum is silent)

"plumed helm" – i.e. helmets with plumes (feathers)

"thy slayer begins to threat" = *your would-be killer (the French army) is now threatening you*

"moral" = *moralizing* (preaching)

"Alack" – a cry of alarm

ALBANY

See thyself, devil!

Proper deformity seems not in the fiend
So horrid as in woman.

"See thyself" = *take a look at yourself*

"Proper deformity ... in woman" = *A devilish appearance does not look so hideous in the devil himself (deformity's "proper" form) as it does in a woman (well, a woman like Goneril, anyway)*

GONERIL

O vain fool!

"vain" = *misguided*

ALBANY

Thou changed and self-cover'd thing, for shame,
Bemonster not thy feature. Were't my fitness
To let these hands obey my blood,
They are apt enough to dislocate and tear
Thy flesh and bones. Howe'er thou art a fiend,
A woman's shape doth shield thee.

"changed and self-cover'd thing" – To Albany, Goneril's nature seems to be transformed into something sub-human, and even her outward appearance (probably because she is scowling at Albany) makes her look fiendish.

"Bemonster not thy feature" = *stop looking like a monster*

"Were't my fitness" = *if it were appropriate for me*

"blood" = *instinct; passion*

"apt" = *ready*

"Howe'er" = *but although*

GONERIL
Marry, your manhood—mew!

"Marry ... mew" = Goneril dismisses Albany's supposed masculinity with a contemptuous oath ("Marry" = *by the Virgin Mary*) and the timid cry of a kitten.

Enter MESSENGER

ALBANY
What news?

MESSENGER
O my good lord, the Duke of Cornwall's dead,
Slain by his servant, going to put out
The other eye of Gloucester.

ALBANY
Gloucester's eyes!

"bred" – i.e. a servant who was raised in Cornwall's household

"thrill'd with remorse" = *stirred to action by pity*

"bending" = *turning*

"To" = *against*

"thereat enrag'd" = *angered at that action*

"fell'd" = *struck*

"that harmful stroke" – i.e. the wound he received from the servant

"pluck'd him after" = *taken him to follow his servant (i.e. to death)*

MESSENGER
A servant that he bred, thrill'd with remorse,
Oppos'd against the act, bending his sword
To his great master, who, thereat enrag'd,
Flew on him and amongst them fell'd him dead,
But not without that harmful stroke, which since
Hath pluck'd him after.

ALBANY
This shows you are above,
You justicers, that these our nether crimes
So speedily can venge! But, O poor Gloucester!
Lost he his other eye?

"justicers" = *judges (i.e. the gods)*

"nether crimes" = *crimes committed on earth (under the heavens; "nether" means below)*

"So speedily can venge" = *can avenge so swiftly*

MESSENGER
Both, both, my lord.
This letter, madam, craves a speedy answer.
'Tis from your sister.

"craves" = *requires*

GONERIL
[*Aside*] One way I like this well.
But being widow, and my Gloucester with her,
May all the building in my fancy pluck
Upon my hateful life. Another way,
The news is not so tart [*Aloud*] I'll read and answer.

"may all the building in my fancy" = *everything I have dreamed up may*

"pluck" = *pull down*

"hateful" – i.e. Her own life will be hateful to her because Regan will be able to have Edmund, while Goneril will be left with Albany.

"tart" = *bitter*

Exit

ALBANY

Where was his son when they did take his eyes?

MESSENGER

Come with my lady hither.

ALBANY

He is not here.

MESSENGER

No, my good lord. I met him back again.

"back again" – i.e. on his way back to Gloucester's castle

ALBANY

Knows he the wickedness?

MESSENGER

Ay, my good lord. 'Twas he inform'd against him
And quit the house on purpose, that their punishment
Might have the freer course.

"quit" = left

"that" = so that

ALBANY

Gloucester, I live
To thank thee for the love thou show'dst the king,
And to revenge thine eyes. Come hither, friend.
Tell me what more thou know'st.

Exeunt