Act IV, Scene vi

Fields near Dover

Enter GLOUCESTER and EDGAR dressed like a peasant.

GLOUCESTER
When shall we come to th' top of that same hill?

EDGAR
You do climb up it now. Look how we labor.

GLOUCESTER
Methinks the ground is even.

EDGAR
Horrible steep.  Hark, do you hear the sea?

GLOUCESTER
No, truly.

EDGAR
Why, then, your other senses grow imperfect
By your eyes' anguish.

GLOUCESTER
So may it be, indeed.
Methinks thy voice is alter'd, and thou speak'st
In better phrase and matter than thou didst.

EDGAR
You're much deceiv'd. In nothing am I chang'd
But in my garments.

GLOUCESTER
Methinks you're better spoken.
EDGAR
Come on, sir. Here's the place. Stand still. How fearful
And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!
The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
Show scarce so gross as beetles. Halfway down
Hangs one that gathers sampire. Dreadful trade!
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
The fishermen that walk upon the beach
Appear like mice, and yond tall anchoring bark
Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy
Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge
That on th' un-number'd idle pebbles chafes
Cannot be heard so high. I'll look no more,
Lest my brain turn and the deficient sight
Topple down headlong.

GLOUCESTER
Set me where you stand.

EDGAR
Give me your hand. You are now within a foot
Of the extreme verge. For all beneath the moon
Would I not leap upright.

GLOUCESTER
Let go my hand.
Here, friend, 's another purse, in it a jewel
Well worth a poor man's taking. Fairies and gods
Prosper it with thee! Go thou farther off.
Bid me farewell, and let me hear thee going.

EDGAR
Now fare ye well, good sir.

GLOUCESTER
With all my heart.

EDGAR
[Aside] Why I do trifle thus with his despair
Is done to cure it.
GLOUCESTER

[Kneeling] O you mighty gods!
This world I do renounce, and in your sights
Shake patiently my great affliction off.
If I could bear it longer and not fall
To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,
My snuff and loathed part of nature should
Burn itself out. If Edgar live, O bless him!
Now, fellow, fare thee well.

He falls forward

EDGAR

Gone, sir. Farewell.

[Aside] And yet I know not how conceit may rob
The treasury of life when life itself
Yields to the theft. Had he been where he thought
By this had thought been past. Alive or dead?

[Aloud] Ho, you sir! Friend! Hear you, sir! Speak!

[Aside] Thus might he pass indeed. Yet he revives.
[Aloud] What are you, sir?

GLOUCESTER

Away, and let me die.
EDGAR
Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air,
So many fathom down precipitating,
Thou'dst shiver'd like an egg. But thou dost breathe,
Hast heavy substance, bleed'st not, speak'st, art sound.
Ten masts at each make not the altitude
Which thou hast perpendicularly fell.
Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again.

GLOUCESTER
But have I fall'n, or no?

EDGAR
From the dread summit of this chalky bourn.
Look up a-height. The shrill-gorg'd lark so far
Cannot be seen or heard. Do but look up.

GLOUCESTER
Alack, I have no eyes.
Is wretchedness depriv'd that benefit
To end itself by death? 'Twas yet some comfort
When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage
And frustrate his proud will.
EDGAR
Give me your arm.

GLOUCESTER
Too well, too well.

EDGAR
This is above all strangeness.
Upon the crown o' th' cliff, what thing was that
Which parted from you?

GLOUCESTER
A poor unfortunate beggar.

EDGAR
As I stood here below, methought his eyes
Were two full moons. He had a thousand noses,
Horns whelk'd and wav'd like the enridged sea.
It was some fiend. Therefore, thou happy father,
Think that the clearest gods, who make them honors
Of men's impossibilities, have preserv'd thee.

GLOUCESTER
I do remember now. Henceforth I'll bear
Affliction till it do cry out itself
"Enough, enough," and die. That thing you speak of,
I took it for a man. Often 'twould say
"The fiend, the fiend." He led me to that place.

EDGAR
Bear free and patient thoughts. But who comes here?

Enter LEAR fantastically dressed with wild flowers
The safer sense will ne'er accommodate
His master thus.
LEAR
No, they cannot touch me for coining. I am the king himself.

EDGAR
O thou side-piercing sight!

LEAR
Nature's above art in that respect. There's your press money. That fellow handles his bow like a crow keeper. Draw me a clothier's yard. Look, look, a mouse! Peace, peace. This piece of toasted cheese will do't. There's my gauntlet. I'll prove it on a giant. Bring up the brown bills. O well flown, bird! 't' the clout, 't' the clout. Hewgh! Give the word.

EDGAR
Sweet marjoram.

Lear has been absent for a relatively long period. On reappearing, he is seen to be thoroughly insane. He is now prone to hallucinations and his lines (in which, generally, he styles himself still a king) seem often to be disconnected. But as Edgar will observe, Lear's speeches are "matter and impertinency mix'd" (a blend of sense and nonsense). And indeed, some of the play's most significant observations about human nature and the world's workings are expressed in the mad king's words.

"they cannot … king himself" = they (the authorities) cannot arrest ("touch") me for minting/counterfeiting money ("coining"—which was a king's right), for I am the king

"thou side-piercing sight" = you heart-breaking sight. (This sight of King Lear insane and wandering alone is no less painful to Edgar than was the first sight of his blinded father. That Edgar calls it a "side-piercing sight" is another suggestion of his function as a Christ figure, for Christ is said to have had his side pierced by a Roman soldier during the crucifixion.)

"Nature's above art in that respect" = a born king can never lose his natural rights

"press money" – i.e. money paid to recruits when they were impressed (forcibly enlisted) into the army

"crow keeper" = scarecrow

"Draw me a clothier's yard" = Give me a yard-long arrow (i.e. a yard as defined by a "clothier," a cloth merchant)

"Look, look … will do't" – The mouse that Lear sees is probably imaginary, as is the piece of cheese with which he would feed it. Lear's action is important for its suggestion of what he now knows to be the proper relationship between a large (even godlike) being and a little (manlike) wretch of a being: the greater must care for the lesser.

"gauntlet" – soldier's glove (which he throws down in front of someone that he wishes to challenge to a fight)

"prove it on" = defend myself/my case against

"Bring up the brown bills" = Call up the soldiers armed with pikes (which were painted brown to prevent rusting)

"well flown bird" – Lear praises the shooting of the arrow with the falconer's call of approval to his hawk.

"'t' the clout" = right in the center of the target

"Hewgh!" – Lear imitates the sound of the arrow flying towards its target.

"Give the word" = Give me the password

"Sweet marjoram" – "Sweet marjoram" (Edgar's "password") is an herb that was said to help heal diseases of the brain.
LEAR
Pass.

GLOUCESTER
I know that voice.

LEAR
Ha! Goneril, with a white beard! They flatter'd me like a dog and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say "ay" and "no" to every thing that I said! "Ay" and "no" too was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em. There I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words. They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie. I am not ague-proof.

GLOUCESTER
The trick of that voice I do well remember. Is 't not the king?
LEAR

Ay, every inch a king.
When I do stare, see how the subject quakes.
I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause? Adultery?
Thou shalt not die. Die for adultery? No.
The wren goes to 't, and the small gilded fly
Does lecher in my sight.
Let copulation thrive. For Gloucester's bastard son
Was kinder to his father than my daughters
Got 'tween the lawful sheets.
To 't, luxury, pell-mell!
For I lack soldiers.
Behold yond simpering dame,
Whose face between her forks presages snow,
That minces virtue and does shake the head
To hear of pleasure's name.
The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to 't
With a more riotous appetite.
Down from the waist they are centaurs,
Though women all above.
But to the girdle do the gods inherit.
Beneath is all the fiend's. There's hell. There's darkness.
There is the sulphurous pit—burning, scalding,
Stench, consumption—fie, fie, fie! Pah, pah!
Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary,
To sweeten my imagination.
There's money for thee.

GLOUCESTER

O let me kiss that hand!

LEAR

Let me wipe it first. It smells of mortality.
GLOUCESTER
O ruin'd piece of nature! This great world
Shall so wear out to naught. Dost thou know me?

LEAR
I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squiny at me?
No, do thy worst, blind Cupid! I'll not love.
Read thou this challenge. Mark but the penning of it.

GLOUCESTER
Were all thy letters suns, I could not see.

EDGAR
[Aside] I would not take this from report. It is, And my heart breaks at it.

LEAR
Read.

GLOUCESTER
What, with the case of eyes?

LEAR
O ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head nor no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light, yet you see how this world goes.

GLOUCESTER
I see it feelingly.

LEAR
What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears. See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear. Change places and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

"This great world … to naught" = The whole universe will likewise (i.e. like this degraded version of his old master) collapse into nothing ("naught"). Note the apocalypse motif.

"squiny" = squint

"blind Cupid" – Cupid, the Roman god of love, was often depicted as blind. And ironically, Lear himself, in the first scene, was blind to love when it came to Cordelia.

"Mark but the penning of it" = Just take a look at the way it is written.

"I would not … It is" = I would not believe this could happen, if someone were to tell me about having seen it. But it is happening.

"with the case of eyes" = with only sockets (where eyes should be)

"O ho, are you there with me?" = Ah, is that what you mean?

"Your eyes … a light" = your eyes are in a serious condition (a "heavy case"), while your purse is light (i.e. because it has no money in it to give it weight).

"how this world goes" = what is happening in the world.

"feelingly" – Gloucester means that he "sees" (in part) by using his sense of touch. But "feelingly" can also mean with great emotion. Therefore, he also means that he emotionally feels the pain of a cruel world.

Both Gloucester's line here as well as Lear's lines before and after it emphasize the change-in-perspectives motif.

"What, art mad?" = What, are you insane? (a question that is nothing if not ironic, coming from Lear)

"justice" = magistrate

"rails upon" = harshly scolds

"handy-dandy" = take your pick. (The phrase is derived from a guessing game in which an object is concealed in one hand.)
GLOUCESTER
Ay, sir.

LEAR
And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold
The great image of authority.
A dog's obey'd in office.
Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!
Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back.
Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind
For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.
Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear.
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks.
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.
None does offend. None, I say, none. I'll able 'em.
Take that of me, my friend, who have the power
To seal the accuser's lips. Get thee glass eyes,
And, like a scurvy politicion, seem
To see the things thou dost not. —Now, now, now, now,
Pull off my boots—harder, harder—so.

EDGAR
[Aside] O matter and impertinency mix'd!
Reason in madness!

LEAR
If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.
I know thee well enough. Thy name is Gloucester.
Thou must be patient. We came crying hither.
Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air
We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee. Mark.
GLOUCESTER
Alack, alack the day!

LEAR
When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools. —This' a good block!
It were a delicate stratagem to shoe
A troop of horse with felt. I'll put't in proof,
And when I have stol'n upon these sons-in-law,
Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!

Enter GENTLEMAN with attendants

GENTLEMAN
O here he is! Lay hand upon him. Sir,
Your most dear daughter—

LEAR
No rescue? What, a prisoner? I am even
The natural fool of fortune. Use me well.
You shall have ransom. Let me have surgeons.
I am cut to th' brains.

GENTLEMAN
You shall have anything.

LEAR
No seconds? All myself?
Why, this would make a man a man of salt,
To use his eyes for garden water pots,
Ay, and laying autumn's dust. I will die bravely,
Like a smug bridegroom. What! I will be jovial.
Come, come, I am a king, my masters, know you that?

GENTLEMAN
You are a royal one, and we obey you.

LEAR
Then there's life in't. Come, and you get it, you shall get
it by running. Sa, sa, sa, sa!

Exit running. Attendents follow

GENTLEMAN
A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch,
Past speaking of in a king! Thou hast one daughter,
Who redeems nature from the general curse
Which twain have brought her to.
EDGAR
Hail, gentle sir.

GENTLEMAN
Sir, speed you. What's your will?

EDGAR
Do you hear aught, sir, of a battle toward?

GENTLEMAN
Most sure and vulgar. Every one hears that Which can distinguish sound.

EDGAR
But, by your favor, How near's the other army?

GENTLEMAN
Near and on speedy foot. The main descry Stands on the hourly thought.

EDGAR
I thank you, sir. That's all.

GENTLEMAN
Though that the queen on special cause is here, Her army is mov'd on.

EDGAR
I thank you, sir.

Exit GENTLEMAN

GLOUCESTER
You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me. Let not my worser spirit tempt me again To die before you please!

EDGAR
Well pray you, father.

GLOUCESTER
Now, good sir, what are you?
EDGAR
A most poor man, made tame to fortune's blows,
Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,
Am pregnant to good pity. Give me your hand.
I'll lead you to some bidding.

GLOUCESTER
Hearty thanks.
The bounty and the benison of heaven
To boot and boot!

Enter OSWALD

OSWALD
A proclaim'd prize! Most happy!
That eyeless head of thine was first fram'd flesh
To raise my fortunes. Thou old unhappy traitor,
Briefly thyself remember. The sword is out
That must destroy thee.

GLOUCESTER
Now let thy friendly hand
Put strength enough to't.

EDGAR interposes

OSWALD
Wherefore, bold peasant,
Dar'st thou support a publish'd traitor? Hence,
Lest that the infection of his fortune take
Like hold on thee. Let go his arm.

"A most … good pity" = I am a poor fellow who has become submissive to the assaults of fortune and has been instructed by his own sadness. And this sadness has made me full of ("pregnant to") pity (for others who likewise suffer).

"biding" = a place to rest

Note that Edgar describes himself as one who, in his way, has taken the "physic" that Lear, in the storm, had recommended to the "pomp" of the world. The first-born of an earl, Edgar has been wealthy and privileged (though not necessarily a proud young man, for we have no real knowledge of his nature and behavior before his being deceived by Edmund and forced to flee his home), but he has been made to stand in the company of "poor naked wretches." And this has taught him how to care for others—how, therefore, to "show the heavens more just."

"The bounty … to boot" = May the generosity ("bounty") and blessing ("benison") of the gods come to reward you in addition ("to boot") to my thanks

"proclaim'd" – The word "proclaim'd," referring to that which has been announced, can refer to one who has been publicly declared an outlaw (recall that Edgar, on the run from Gloucester's hunters, had said "I am proclaim'd"), or it can refer to a more general assertion—in this case, to Regan's assurance to Oswald that a promotion would come to whoever finds and kills Gloucester.

"fram'd" = made into. (Oswald makes a dark joke, saying that Gloucester's function in being born a human was to make life better for Oswald.)

"thyself remember" = think of your sins (i.e. in order to make his peace with heaven before dying)

"Now let … enough to't" – Plainly, Gloucester has not been wholly cured of his suicidal impulse, given that he is so eager for Oswald to kill him.

"interposes" – i.e. stands between Gloucester and Oswald in order to protect his father

"support" = protect

"publish'd" = proclaimed

"Hence … on thee" = Get away ("hence"), unless ("lest") you want the trouble coming to him to come to you too
EDGAR
Chi'll not let go, zir, without vurther 'casion.

OSWALD
Let go, slave, or thou diest!

EDGAR
Good gentleman, go your gait, and let poor volk pass. And 'chud ha' bin zwagger'd out of my life, 'twould not ha' bin zo long as 'tis by a vortnight. Nay, come not near th' old man. Keep out, che vor ye, or ise try whether your costard or my ballow be th' harder. Chi'll be plain with you.

OSWALD
Out, dunghill!

EDGAR
Chi'll pick your teeth, zir. Come, no matter vor your foins.

They fight, and EDGAR knocks him down

OSWALD
Slave, thou hast slain me. Villain, take my purse. If ever thou wilt thrive, bury my body. And give the letters which thou find'st about me To Edmund Earl of Gloucester. Seek him out Upon the British party. O untimely death! Death!

Dies

EDGAR
I know thee well. A serviceable villain, As duteous to the vices of thy mistress As badness would desire.

GLOUCESTER
What, is he dead?
EDGAR
Sit you down, father. Rest you.
Let's see these pockets. The letters that he speaks of
May be my friends. He's dead. I am only sorry
He had no other deathsman. Let us see.
Leave, gentle wax, and, manners, blame us not.
To know our enemies' minds, we'd rip their hearts.
Their papers is more lawful.

[Reads] "Let our reciprocal vows be remember'd. You
have many opportunities to cut him off. If your will
want not, time and place will be fruitfully offer'd. There
is nothing done if he return the conqueror. Then am I
the prisoner and his bed my gaol, from the loathed
warmth whereof deliver me, and supply the place for
your labor. Your wife—so I would say—Affectionate
servant, Goneril."

O indistinguish'd space of woman's will!
A plot upon her virtuous husband's life.
And the exchange my brother! Here, in the sands,
Thee I'll rake up, the post unsanctifi'd
Of murderous lechers, and in the mature time
With this ungracious paper strike the sight
Of the death-practis'd duke. For him 'tis well
That of thy death and business I can tell.

GLOUCESTER
The king is mad. How stiff is my vile sense,
That I stand up and have ingenious feeling
Of my huge sorrows! Better I were distract.
So should my thoughts be sever'd from my griefs,
And woes by wrong imaginations lose
The knowledge of themselves.

EDGAR
Give me your hand.

Drum afar off
Far off, methinks, I hear the beaten drum.
Come, father, I'll bestow you with a friend.

Exeunt