

Act V, Scene iii

The British camp near Dover

*Enter in conquest, with drum and colors,
EDMUND, LEAR, CORDELIA, CAPTAIN, and
soldiers*

EDMUND

Some officers take them away. Good guard,
Until their greater pleasures first be known
That are to censure them.

"Good guard" = *keep them well guarded*

"their greater pleasures" = *the wishes of those in command*

"censure" = *judge*

CORDELIA

We are not the first
Who with best meaning have incur'd the worst.
For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down.
Myself could else out-frown false fortune's frown.
Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?

"with best ... the worst" = *in spite of their best intentions have received the worst punishment*

"cast down" = *overcome (i.e. by fortune)*

"Myself" = *for my own part (i.e. if she alone were affected)*

"out-frown" = *frown back at*

"false" – *Fortune is always untrustworthy.*

LEAR

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news. And we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out.
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies. And we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,
That ebb and flow by the moon.

"let's away" = *let us go away*

"i' th' cage" – *i.e. in their prison cell*

"So we'll live" = *we'll live in this way*

"gilded butterflies" = *gaily dressed members of the royal court*

"poor rogues" = *other wretched creatures (probably other prisoners)*

"who's in, who's out" = *who's in favor and who is not*

"take upon's" = *take in; absorb. ("upon's" = upon us)*

"wear out" = *outlast*

"packs and sects of great ones" = *political cliques and parties*

"ebb and flow by the moon" = *suffer shifts in political power, just as the tides are affected by the moon*

"And we'll ... the moon" – *Lear assures Cordelia that as "poor wretches" in prison they will actually be happier and better off than the privileged elite of the land.*

EDMUND

Take them away.

LEAR

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
The gods themselves throw incense. Have I caught
thee?

He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven
And fire us hence like foxes. Wipe thine eyes.
The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell,
Ere they shall make us weep. We'll see 'em starve first.
Come.

Exeunt LEAR and CORDELIA, guarded

EDMUND

Come hither, captain. Hark.
Take thou this note.

Giving a paper

Go follow them to prison.
One step I have advanc'd thee. If thou dost
As this instructs thee, thou dost make thy way
To noble fortunes. Know thou this—that men
Are as the time is. To be tender-minded
Does not become a sword. Thy great employment
Will not bear question. Either say thou'lt do't,
Or thrive by other means.

CAPTAIN

I'll do 't, my lord.

EDMUND

About it, and write happy when th' hast done.
Mark, I say, instantly, and carry it so
As I have set it down.

CAPTAIN

I cannot draw a cart, nor eat dried oats.
If it be man's work, I'll do 't.

Exit

"such sacrifices" – i.e. their forsaking of the world

"throw incense" = *give their blessing*

"caught thee" = *made you weep*

"He that ... from heaven" = *anyone who thinks he would try to separate us will need to bring fire from the gods (for no earthly power will be able to part them)*

"fire us hence like foxes" = *drive us out (with fire and smoke), just as foxes are driven from their lairs*

"good years" = *bogeymen; evil spirits. (The derivation of the phrase is uncertain.)*

"Ere they shall make us weep" = *before they make us cry. Note here the echo of Lear's exit line when he leaves Gloucester's castle and enters the storm on the heath: "this heart / Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws, / Or ere I'll weep."*

"advanc'd" = *promoted*

"Are as the time is" = *have to behave in ways appropriate to their times and places*

"Does not become a sword" = *is not appropriate for a soldier (i.e. one who wears a sword)*

"Will not bear question" = *is not to be questioned*

"thrive by other means" = *achieve a promotion in some other way (with the implication that he will not be able to do so)*

"About it ... hast done" = *Do the job, and then count yourself a happy man (i.e. because he can expect a great reward)*

"carry it so" = *do it exactly*

"I cannot ... dried oats" – The captain assures Edmund that he is no horse (i.e. not a beast).

Flourish. Enter ALBANY, GONERIL, REGAN, another captain, and soldiers

ALBANY

Sir, you have show'd today your valiant strain,
And fortune led you well. You have the captives
That were the opposites of this day's strife.
I do require them of you, so to use them
As we shall find their merits and our safety
May equally determine.

"valiant strain" = *courageous nature*

"fortune led you well" = *you were lucky*

"opposites" = *opponents*

"I do ... equally determine" = *I request their presence from you in order to treat them as they deserve though with consideration for our safety*

EDMUND

Sir, I thought it fit
To send the old and miserable king
To some retention and appointed guard,
Whose age has charms in it, whose title more,
To pluck the common bosom on his side,
And turn our impress'd lances in our eyes
Which do command them. With him I sent the queen,
My reason all the same, and they are ready
Tomorrow, or at further space, t' appear
Where you shall hold your session. At this time
We sweat and bleed. The friend hath lost his friend.
And the best quarrels, in the heat, are curs'd
By those that feel their sharpness.
The question of Cordelia and her father
Requires a fitter place.

"retention" = *confinement*

"Whose" – i.e. the king's

"title" = *entitlement; legal right*

"To pluck ... his side" = *to win the hearts of the common people over to his side*

"impress'd lances" = *conscripted soldiers*. (Metonymy is used in this phrase. The soldiers' lances substitute for the soldiers themselves.)

"My reason all the same" = *for the same reason*

"further space" = *some later time*

"session" = *trial*

"quarrels" = *causes*

"in the heat" – i.e. in a state of passion. (Edmund implies that Lear and Cordelia might not receive a fair trial in the present circumstances.)

ALBANY

Sir, by your patience,
I hold you but a subject of this war,
Not as a brother.

"by your patience" = *if you don't mind*

"I hold you but" = *I regard you merely as*

"I hold ... a brother" – Albany warns Edmund, now the battle is over, that he must not presume to think himself Albany's social equal.

REGAN

That's as we list to grace him.
Methinks our pleasure might have been demanded,
Ere you had spoke so far. He led our powers,
Bore the commission of my place and person,
The which immediacy may well stand up,
And call itself your brother.

"list" = *please*

"Methinks our ... been demanded" = *I would have expected you to ask what I wanted*. (Regan uses the royal plural.)

"Ere you had spoke so far" = *before you had said so much*

"Bore the ... and person" = *carried the authority of my position and represented me personally*

"The which immediacy" = *which having such a direct connection to me*

GONERIL

Not so hot.
In his own grace he doth exalt himself
More than in your addition.

"Not so hot" = *Don't get so excited (or possessive about Edmund)*
"In his ... your addition" = *By his own abilities he makes himself worthy, more than by any title you can give him*

REGAN

In my rights,
By me invested, he compeers the best.

"In my ... the best" = *Being given my "addition," and by me, he equals ("compeers") the best ranked of men*

GONERIL

That were the most if he should husband you.

"That were the most if he should husband you" = *He would be the very highest ranked if he should become your husband*

REGAN

Jesters do oft prove prophets.

"Jesters do oft prove prophets" = *People making jokes often speak truth*

GONERIL

Holla, holla!
That eye that told you so look'd but a-squint.

"That eye ... but a-squint" = *you can't see straight*

REGAN

Lady, I am not well. Else I should answer
From a full-flowing stomach. General,
Take thou my soldiers, prisoners, patrimony.
Dispose of them, of me. The walls are thine.
Witness the world that I create thee here
My lord and master.

"Else I ... full-flowing stomach" = *otherwise I would speak with many angry words*

"General" – Regan is addressing Edmund, conferring all her authority and property on him. **Note that Regan, ironically, is doing as her father had done in the first scene—conferring all that is hers on a smiling deceiver who, doubtless, would forsake her at the earliest opportunity.**

"patrimony" – estate inherited from one's father

"Dispose of them, of me" = *By my authority (they are made yours, and you may do with them ("dispose of them")) as you choose*

GONERIL

Mean you to enjoy him?

"enjoy him" = *take him as your lover*

ALBANY

The let-alone lies not in your good will.

"The let-alone ... good will" = *It is not in your power to forbid it*

EDMUND

Nor in thine, lord.

ALBANY

Half-blooded fellow, yes.

"Half-blooded fellow, yes" = *Bastard! It does (i.e. lie in Albany's power to forbid it)*

REGAN
[To EDMUND] Let the drum strike, and prove my title
thine.

ALBANY
Stay yet. Hear reason. Edmund, I arrest thee
On capital treason, and, in thy attaint,
This gilded serpent.

Pointing to GONERIL

For your claim, fair sister,
I bar it in the interest of my wife.
'Tis she is sub-contracted to this lord,
And I, her husband, contradict your banns.
If you will marry, make your loves to me,
My lady is bespoke.

"attaint" = *arrest*

"gilded" = *beautified*. (But note that the word "gilded" can also mean *bloodied*, which is the meaning, incidentally, that Lady Macbeth has in mind when she says "If [Duncan] do bleed, / I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal, / For it must seem their guilt.")

"sub-contracted" – only "sub-contracted" because she is already contracted (in marriage) to Albany

"banns" – proclamation of an impending marriage

"make your loves" = *make your courtship*

"bespoke" = *spoken for* (by Edmund)

GONERIL

An interlude!

"An interlude!" = *What a performance!*

ALBANY
Thou art arm'd, Gloucester. Let the trumpet sound.
If none appear to prove upon thy person
Thy heinous, manifest, and many treasons,
There is my pledge.

Throwing down a glove

I'll make it on thy heart,
Ere I taste bread, thou art in nothing less
Than I have here proclaim'd thee.

"prove upon thy person" = *challenge you*

"pledge" = *commitment* (i.e. to fight)

"make" = *prove*

"Ere I taste bread" – i.e. immediately—before he so much as takes a meal

REGAN

Sick, O sick!

GONERIL
[Aside] If not, I'll ne'er trust medicine.

EDMUND
There's my exchange.

Throwing down a glove

What in the world he is
That names me traitor, villain-like he lies.
Call by thy trumpet. He that dares approach,
On him, on you, who not? I will maintain
My truth and honor firmly.

"If not, I'll ne'er trust medicine" – Goneril's aside reveals that Regan's sickness—a deadly one, as it turns out—is the result of Goneril's having poisoned her.

Edmund treats Albany's challenge not so much as a man-to-man fight as an army-to-army fight . . .

ALBANY

A herald, ho!
Trust to thy single virtue, for thy soldiers,
All levied in my name, have in my name
Took their discharge.

... but Albany declares that the soldiers, being under his own payment, have been dismissed, and Edmund will have to trust to his own "single virtue" (i.e. his complete integrity).

REGAN

My sickness grows upon me.

ALBANY

She is not well. Convey her to my tent.

Exit REGAN, led

Enter HERALD

Come hither, herald. Let the trumpet sound,
And read out this.

CAPTAIN

Sound, trumpet!

A trumpet sounds

HERALD

[Reads] "If any man of quality or degree within the lists of the army will maintain upon Edmund, supposed Earl of Gloucester, that he is a manifold traitor, let him appear by the third sound of the trumpet. He is bold in his defense."

"man of quality or degree" – i.e. a knighted man

"manifold" = *manifest; obvious*

Sound!

First trumpet

Again!

Second trumpet

Again!

Third trumpet

Trumpet answers within

Enter EDGAR at the third sound, armed and with a trumpet before him

"with a trumpet before him" – i.e. preceded by a trumpeter. (Also, Edgar's face is covered by his armor, so Edmund does not know that it is his brother who has come to challenge him.)

ALBANY

Ask him his purposes, why he appears
Upon this call o' the trumpet.

HERALD

What are you?
Your name, your quality, and why you answer
This present summons?

"quality" = rank

EDGAR

Know, my name is lost
By treason's tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit.
Yet am I noble as the adversary
I come to cope.

"By treason's ... and canker-bit" = *chewed down to nothing* ("bare-gnawn") and *diseased* ("canker-bit") by treason

"Yet am ... to cope" = *But I am as noble in rank as the one I come to fight with*

ALBANY

Which is that adversary?

EDGAR

What's he that speaks for Edmund Earl of Gloucester?

EDMUND

Himself! What say'st thou to him?

EDGAR

Draw thy sword,
That if my speech offend a noble heart
Thy arm may do thee justice. Here is mine.
Behold, it is the privilege of mine honors,
My oath, and my profession. I protest,
Maugre thy strength, youth, place, and eminence,
Despite thy victor sword and fire-new fortune,
Thy valor and thy heart, thou art a traitor,
False to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father,
Conspirant 'gainst this high-illustrious prince,
And, from the extremest upward of thy head
To the descent and dust below thy foot,
A most toad-spotted traitor. Say thou "No,"
This sword, this arm, and my best spirits are bent
To prove upon thy heart, whereto I speak,
Thou liest.

"mine" – i.e. his sword

"it is ... my profession" – Edgar claims the right to draw his sword by his knighthood ("honors"), loyalty ("oath"), and religion ("profession"—i.e. the faith he professes).

"protest" = *declare*

"Maugre" = *in spite of*

"eminence" = *high position*

"victor" = *victorious* (because Edmund has been successful in battle)

"fire-new" = *brand new*

"heart" = *courage*

"Conspirant" = *one who conspires* (plots)

"extremest upward" = *very top*

"descent" = *lowest part*

"toad-spotted traitor" = *treacherous subject stained with villainy* (i.e. resembling a toad, which is spotted and venomous)

"Say thou 'No'" = *if you say you are not* (a traitor)

"bent" = *determined*

EDMUND

In wisdom I should ask thy name,
But since thy outside looks so fair and warlike,
And that thy tongue some say of breeding breathes,
What safe and nicely I might well delay
By rule of knighthood, I disdain and spurn.
Back do I toss these treasons to thy head.
With the hell-hated lie o'erwhelm thy heart,
Which, for they yet glance by and scarcely bruise,
This sword of mine shall give them instant way,
Where they shall rest for ever. Trumpets, speak!

Alarums. They fight. EDMUND falls

"In wisdom" – i.e. because he is not honor-bound to fight one of lower rank or one whose identity is unknown

"outside" = *appearance*

"And that ... breeding breathes" = *Your speech shows some signs of education*

"safe and nicely" = *with caution and propriety*

"rule of knighthood" = *code of knightly conduct*

"disdain and spurn" = *loathe and reject*

"hell-hated" – i.e. hated like hell

"Which" – i.e. the terrible charges

"for they glance" = *since they glide*

"extremest upward" = *very top*

"instant way" = *an immediate outlet* (i.e. back into the accuser's heart)

ALBANY

Save him! Save him!

"Save him" – Albany wants to save Edmund's life so that a full confession can be obtained from him.

GONERIL

This is practice, Gloucester.
By th' law of arms thou wast not bound to answer
An unknown opposite. Thou art not vanquish'd,
But cozen'd and beguil'd.

"practice" = *treachery*

"opposite" = *opponent*

"cozen'd and beguil'd" = *cheated and deceived*

ALBANY

Shut your mouth, dame,
Or with this paper shall I stople it. Hold, sir.
Thou worse than any name, read thine own evil.
No tearing, lady. I perceive you know it.

"this paper" – i.e. the letter revealing Goneril's plot on Albany's life

"stople" = *put a stopper in*

Gives the letter to EDMUND

GONERIL

Say, if I do, the laws are mine, not thine.
Who can arraign me for't?

"Say, if ... me for't" = *Know that if I do (know the letter), the law is under my control, not yours. Who can bring me to trial? (Goneril asserts her position of queen. Albany is merely her consort.)*

ALBANY

Most monstrous! O!
Know'st thou this paper?

GONERIL

Ask me not what I know.

Exit

ALBANY

Go after her. She's desperate. Govern her.

EDMUND

What you have charg'd me with, that have I done,
And more, much more. The time will bring it out.
'Tis past, and so am I. But what art thou
That hast this fortune on me? If thou'rt noble,
I do forgive thee.

"But what ... on me" = *Who are you that have had the good luck to conquer me?*

EDGAR

Let's exchange charity.
I am no less in blood than thou art, Edmund.
If more, the more thou hast wrong'd me.
My name is Edgar, and thy father's son.
The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us.
The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes.

"Let's exchange charity" – Edgar is prepared to forgive Edmund.

"of our pleasant vices" = *out of the sins we take pleasure in*

"The dark ... his eyes" – Edgar says that the original starting place of Gloucester's blinding was the adulterous bed in which he produced ("got") Edmund.

EDMUND

Thou hast spoken right, 'tis true.
The wheel is come full circle. I am here.

"The wheel is come full circle" – i.e. Fortune's wheel, which began with Edmund at the bottom, has made a complete revolution.

If the current action were the climax of *King Lear*—if the wheel had indeed "come full circle"—we could say that the tragedy resolves conventionally: a wronged hero having triumphed over an evil antagonist, that antagonist having confessed fault, and the disordered universe having been restored to harmony. But though Edgar is *a* hero, he is not *the* hero of this play. We still need to know what becomes of Lear himself.

ALBANY

Methought thy very gait did prophesy
A royal nobleness. I must embrace thee.
Let sorrow split my heart if ever I
Did hate thee or thy father.

"Methought thy ... royal nobleness" = *I suspected that even your way of walking ("thy very gait") was a sign of your nobility*

EDGAR

Worthy prince, I know't.

ALBANY

Where have you hid yourself?
How have you known the miseries of your father?

EDGAR

By nursing them, my lord. List a brief tale.
And when 'tis told, O that my heart would burst!
The bloody proclamation to escape,
That follow'd me so near—O our lives' sweetness,
That we the pain of death would hourly die
Rather than die at once—taught me to shift
Into a madman's rags, to assume a semblance
That very dogs disdain'd. And in this habit
Met I my father with his bleeding rings,
Their precious stones new lost, became his guide,
Led him, begg'd for him, sav'd him from despair—
Never—O fault!—reveal'd myself unto him
Until some half-hour past, when I was arm'd.
Not sure, though hoping, of this good success,
I ask'd his blessing, and from first to last
Told him my pilgrimage. But his flaw'd heart—
Alack, too weak the conflict to support!—
'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly.

EDMUND

This speech of yours hath mov'd me,
And shall perchance do good. But speak you on.
You look as you had something more to say.

ALBANY

If there be more, more woeful, hold it in.
For I am almost ready to dissolve,
Hearing of this.

"List" = *listen to*

"And when ... would burst" = *And when I've finished telling the story, I hope that my heart will stop*

"The bloody ... so near" = *in order to escape the proclamation of my death that followed me so closely*

"we the pain ... at once" = *we would rather suffer the pain of death every hour of our lives than actually die once (and get it over with). Note that Edgar's point here is consistent with the wisdom he has urged on his father—namely that one's obligation is ever to persevere, even in the face of insurmountable troubles, and never to assume the gods authority by ending one's own life.*

"taught me to shift" = *encouraged me to change*

"assume a semblance / That very dogs disdain'd" = *put on an appearance that even dogs would look down on*

"in this habit" = *in these rags*

"rings / Their precious stones new lost" = *eye sockets with their jewels (his eyes) recently taken*

"O fault" = *that was a terrible mistake*

"some half-hour past" = *about half an hour ago*

"was arm'd" = *had put on my armor*

"success" = *outcome*

"flaw'd" = *already overstrained*

"the conflict to support" = *to support the conflict (i.e. between joy at finding Edgar alive and grief at Edgar's suffering)*

"Burst smilingly" – i.e. His heart failed, but he died in joy.

EDGAR

This would have seem'd a period
To such as love not sorrow, but another,
To amplify too much, would make much more,
And top extremity.
Whilst I was big in clamor came there in a man,
Who, having seen me in my worst estate,
Shunn'd my abhorr'd society. But then, finding
Who 'twas that so endur'd, with his strong arms
He fasten'd on my neck, and bellow'd out
As he'd burst heaven, threw him on my father,
Told the most piteous tale of Lear and him
That ever ear receiv'd, which in recounting
His grief grew puissant and the strings of life
Began to crack. Twice then the trumpets sounded,
And there I left him tranc'd.

ALBANY

But who was this?

EDGAR

Kent, sir, the banish'd Kent, who in disguise
Follow'd his enemy king and did him service
Improper for a slave.

Enter GENTLEMAN with a bloody knife

GENTLEMAN

Help, help! O help!

EDGAR

What kind of help?

ALBANY

Speak, man.

EDGAR

What means that bloody knife?

GENTLEMAN

'Tis hot, it smokes.
It came even from the heart of—O she's dead!

ALBANY

Who dead? Speak, man.

GENTLEMAN

Your lady, sir, your lady, and her sister
By her is poison'd. She hath confess'd it.

EDMUND

I was contracted to them both. All three
Now marry in an instant.

"This would ... not sorrow" = *This would seem to be the end of the story (and a story that would already have proven too much) for people who do not like to be sad*

"but only ... top extremity" = *only one more sorrow would go beyond all bounds*

"big in clamor" = *ready to burst out in my grief*

"my worst estate" = *my poorest condition (i.e. as Poor Tom)*

"As" = *as if*

"threw him" = *threw himself*

"puissant" = *powerful*

"the strings of life / Began to crack" = *heart strings (i.e. his heart) were beginning to fail*

"tranc'd" = *apparently senseless*

"smokes" = *steams*

"All three ... an instant" = *Now the three of us are united (i.e. because the sisters are dead and he is nearly dead)*

EDGAR

Here comes Kent.

Enter KENT

ALBANY

Produce their bodies, be they alive or dead.

Exit GENTLEMAN

This judgment of the heavens, that makes us tremble,
Touches us not with pity.

[*To KENT*] O, is this he?

The time will not allow the compliment
Which very manners urges.

"judgment of the heavens" – i.e. divine justice done on Goneril and Regan

"compliment" = *ceremony*

"very manners urges" = *is merely a matter of manners*

KENT

I am come

To bid my king and master aye good night.
Is he not here?

"aye" = *forever*. (Kent's entrance line could be taken to mean that he expects Lear to be dead or dying and that he wishes to pay his last respects to his king. Or, as the line is more usually interpreted in performance, it may suggest that Kent himself is dying and knows it.)

ALBANY

Great thing of us forgot!

Speak, Edmund, where's the king? And where's
Cordelia?

See'st thou this object, Kent?

The bodies of GONERIL and REGAN are brought in

KENT

Alack, why thus?

EDMUND

Yet Edmund was belov'd.

The one the other poison'd for my sake,
And after slew herself.

"Yet Edmund was belov'd" = *Still, at least someone loved me*

"after" = *afterward*

ALBANY

Even so. Cover their faces.

EDMUND

I pant for life! Some good I mean to do,
Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send,
Be brief in it, to th' castle, for my writ
Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia.
Nay, send in time!

"writ" = *order of execution*

ALBANY

Run, run! O run!

EDGAR
To who, my lord? Who hath the office? Send
Thy token of reprieve.

"token of reprieve" = *authority for a release from the threat of death*

EDMUND
Well thought on. Take my sword,
Give it the captain.

"take my sword" – Because the killing of Lear and Cordelia is to have been enacted on Edmund's authority, his sword may be taken for a sign that he has authorized the reprieve.

ALBANY
Haste thee, for thy life.

Exit EDGAR

EDMUND
He hath commission from thy wife and me
To hang Cordelia in the prison and
To lay the blame upon her own despair,
That she fordid herself.

"fordid" = *destroyed*

ALBANY
The gods defend her!
Bear him hence awhile.

EDMUND is borne off

*Re-enter LEAR, with CORDELIA dead in his arms,
EDGAR, CAPTAIN, and others following*

LEAR
Howl, howl, howl, howl! O you are men of stones!
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever!
I know when one is dead, and when one lives.
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking glass.
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives.

"If that ... she lives" – Lear has just said "she's gone forever," but immediately thereafter wants to find evidence that she is alive. In this way, he seems to have slipped back into the vacillation (the "yo-yo-ism") that characterized his behavior when earlier he had been approaching insanity. The indication here is that this newest cruelty is driving Lear back into the horror from which, we had been relieved to believe, he was released.

This idea of catastrophe and grief being amplified past the point of our believing that they could be greater has been prefigured at other points—for example, in Edgar's first sight of the blinded Gloucester, and then in his account of Kent's discovery of Edgar and the newly dead Gloucester.

KENT
Is this the promis'd end?

"the promis'd end" – i.e. the prophesied end of the world

EDGAR
Or image of that horror?

"image of that horror" – i.e. a representation of that horror to come

ALBANY
Fall and cease!

"Fall and cease" = *Let the heavens fall and all things come to an end*

LEAR
This feather stirs. She lives! If it be so,
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt.

"This feather stirs" – Lear holds a feather—which may be played as an actual feather or as a feather that he hallucinates—to Cordelia's lips to see if a breath of life will ruffle it.

"She lives!" – Though of course, she does not.

"It is ... all sorrows" = *this would be a piece of good fortune that would make up for all the suffering he has ever known*

KENT
[*Kneeling*] O my good master!

LEAR
Prithce, away.

EDGAR
'Tis noble Kent, your friend.

LEAR
A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!
I might have sav'd her. Now she's gone forever!
Cordelia, Cordelia! Stay a little. Ha!
What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.
I kill'd the slave that was a-hanging thee.

CAPTAIN
'Tis true, my lords, he did.

LEAR
Did I not, fellow?
I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion
I would have made them skip. I am old now,
And these same crosses spoil me. Who are you?
Mine eyes are not o' th' best, I'll tell you straight.

"I have ... them skip" = *In my prime, I would with my falchion (a light sword with its point bending inward) have been able to make him dance*

"these same crosses spoil me" = *all these troubles (including old age) ruin me as a swordsman*

KENT
If fortune brag of two she lov'd and hated,
One of them we behold.

"If fortune ... we behold" = *If fortune should boast of the way she has treated two people, giving one great success and the other great misery, we are now looking at one of these.*

LEAR
This is a dull sight. Are you not Kent?

"dull sight" = *miserable spectacle*

KENT
The same,
Your servant Kent. Where is your servant Caius?

"Caius" – This Roman name is the one that Kent has called himself while in disguise as Lear's servant. Kent's question "Where is your servant Caius?" should be heard as rhetorical. In effect, he says that Lear will not be able to see Caius any longer, for Caius is no longer here. Only Kent is.

LEAR
He's a good fellow, I can tell you that.
He'll strike, and quickly too. He's dead and rotten.

KENT
No, my good lord, I am the very man—

LEAR
I'll see that straight.

KENT
That, from your first of difference and decay,
Have follow'd your sad steps.

"first of difference and decay" = *from the beginning of the change and decline in your fortunes*

LEAR
You are welcome hither.

KENT
Nor no man else. All's cheerless, dark, and deadly.
Your eldest daughters have fordone them selves
And desperately are dead.

"Nor no man else" = *That's really who I am. (Kent is anxious about Lear's making the connection.)*

"fordone" = *destroyed*

"desperately are dead" = *in despair have been killed*

LEAR
Ay, so I think.

ALBANY
He knows not what he says. And vain it is
That we present us to him.

"vain it is ... to him" = *it is useless to try to explain matters to him*

EDGAR
Very bootless.

"very bootless" = *utterly without benefit*

Enter CAPTAIN

CAPTAIN
Edmund is dead, my lord.

ALBANY
That's but a trifle here.
You lords and noble friends, know our intent.
What comfort to this great decay may come
Shall be applied. For us, we will resign,
During the life of this old majesty,
To him our absolute power.

"this great decay" = *this ruin of a great piece of humanity (i.e. Lear)*

"come" = *be given*

"For us" = *as for me*

"We will resign ... absolute power" – Albany gives back the kingdom, and Lear is once more king.

"You, to your ... than merited" – Edgar and Kent are restored to their former positions with extra rewards ("boot") and titles ("addition"), which their noble deeds ("honors") have earned them.

To EDGAR and KENT

You, to your rights,
With boot and such addition as your honors
Have more than merited. All friends shall taste
The wages of their virtue, and all foes
The cup of their deservings. O see, see!

"All friends ... their deservings" – i.e. The good and the evil shall be accordingly rewarded and punished.

LEAR
And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!
Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there!

Dies

"fool" – Here the word "fool" is taken as a term of endearment for Cordelia. But, as noted earlier, theatre historians have observed that in Shakespeare's time the same actor, probably, would have played the roles of both Cordelia and the Fool.

"undo this button" – Lear feels again the sense of suffocation that he earlier referred to as *Hysterica Passio*. Note too that the action of Lear's calling for assistance with the restrictive button parallels his action of disrobing in the storm—his attempt to be reduced to *nothing*. In some sense, then, we may say that Lear has been hurled again into a kind of storm. As well, he is moving toward his final reduction to nothing: death.

"Look" – Again, Lear thinks that Cordelia is breathing.

EDGAR
He faints! My lord! My lord!

KENT
Break, heart, I prithee, break!

EDGAR
Look up, my lord.

KENT
Vex not his ghost. O let him pass! He hates him much
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.

"Vex not his ghost. O let him pass" = *Do not trouble his departing spirit. Let him die*

"rack" – instrument of torture that stretched the body until all joints were forced apart

"longer" – i.e. in the sense of time (*for a longer time*) and in the sense of the body's being stretched on the rack

EDGAR
He is gone, indeed.

KENT
The wonder is he hath endur'd so long.
He but usurp'd his life.

"The wonder ... so long" = *The amazing thing is that he has lasted this long. Indeed Lear has exercised the great king-becoming grace of perseverance. Truly he has endured in the face of the unendurable.*

"usurp'd his life" = *lived longer than he ought to have done*

ALBANY
Bear them from hence. Our present business
Is general woe.

"general woe" = *public mourning for all*

"gor'd state" = *wounded kingdom*

[*To KENT and EDGAR*] Friends of my soul, you twain
Rule in this realm and the gor'd state sustain.

KENT
I have a journey, sir, shortly to go.
My master calls me, I must not say no.

"journey" – i.e. to another world

"My master calls me" – The suggestion is that Kent will follow Lear even into the afterlife.

EDGAR
The weight of this sad time we must obey—
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most. We that are young
Shall never see so much nor live so long.

"weight" = *grief*

Exeunt with a dead march