Act I, Scene iv

A hall in the same

Enter KENT disguised

KENT
If but as well I other accents borrow
That can my speech defuse, my good intent
May carry through itself to that full issue
For which I raz'd my likeness. Now, banish'd Kent,
If thou canst serve where thou dost stand condemn'd,
So may it come, thy master, whom thou lov'st,
Shall find thee full of labors.

Horns within. Enter LEAR, knights, and attendants

LEAR
Let me not stay a jot for dinner! Go, get it ready.

Exit an attendant

How now! What art thou?

KENT
A man, sir.
LEAR
What dost thou profess? What wouldst thou with us?

KENT
I do profess to be no less than I seem, to serve him truly that will put me in trust, to love him that is honest, to converse with him that is wise and says little, to fear judgment, to fight when I cannot choose, and to eat no fish.

LEAR
What art thou?

KENT
A very honest-hearted fellow and as poor as the king.

LEAR
If thou be'st as poor for a subject as he is for a king, thou art poor enough. What wouldst thou?

KENT
Service.

LEAR
Who wouldst thou serve?

KENT
You.

LEAR
Dost thou know me, fellow?

KENT
No, sir, but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master.

LEAR
What's that?

KENT
Authority.

LEAR
What services canst thou do?

KENT
I can keep honest counsel, ride, run, mar a curious tale in telling it, and deliver a plain message bluntly. That which ordinary men are fit for, I am qualified in, and the best of me is diligence.
LEAR
How old art thou?

KENT
Not so young, sir, to love a woman for singing nor so old to dote on her for anything. I have years on my back forty-eight.

LEAR
Follow me. Thou shalt serve me. If I like thee no worse after dinner, I will not part from thee yet. Dinner, ho! Dinner! Where's my knave? My fool? Go you and call my fool hither.

Exit an attendant

Enter OSWALD

You, you, sirrah, where's my daughter?

OSWALD
So please you—

Exit

LEAR
What says the fellow there? Call the clotpoll back.

Exit a night

Where's my fool? Ho! I think the world's asleep.

Re-enter KNIGHT

How now! Where's that mongrel?

KNIGHT
He says, my lord, your daughter is not well.

LEAR
Why came not the slave back to me when I call'd him.

KNIGHT
Sir, he answer'd me in the roundest manner, he would not.

LEAR
He would not!
KNIGHT
My lord, I know not what the matter is, but to my
judgment your highness is not entertain'd with that
ceremonious affection as you were wont. There's a great
abatement of kindness appears as well in the general
dependants as in the duke himself also and your
daughter.

LEAR
Ha! Say'st thou so?

KNIGHT
I beseech you, pardon me, my lord, if I be mistaken,
for my duty cannot be silent when I think your highness
wrong'd.

LEAR
Thou but rememb'rest me of mine own conception. I
have perceiv'd a most faint neglect of late, which I have
rather blam'd as mine own jealous curiosity than as a
very pretence and purpose of unkindness. I will look
further into't. But where's my fool? I have not seen him
this two days.

KNIGHT
Since my young lady's going into France, sir, the fool
hath much pin'd away.

LEAR
No more of that. I have noted it well. Go you, and tell
my daughter I would speak with her.

Exit an attendant

Go you, call hither my fool.

Exit another attendant

Re-enter OSWALD

O you sir, you, come you hither, sir! Who am I, sir?

OSWALD
My lady's father.

LEAR
"My lady's father"! My lord's knave, you whoreson dog!
You slave! You cur!

OSWALD
I am none of these, my lord. I beseech your pardon.

LEAR
Do you bandy looks with me, you rascal?

"to my judgment … were wont" = in my opinion your majesty is not
being treated ("entertain'd") with the ceremony (due to a king) and
affection (due to a father) that you have been accustomed to ("were
wont")

"abatement" = decrease

"general dependants" = the servants in general

Note that the knight's report includes an unexplained inconsistency.
For his noting that the "duke himself" is showing less "kindness"
toward Lear and the knights than he has previously shown does not
square with the attitude that Albany will show toward Lear later in
this scene and throughout the remainder of the play.

"beseech" = beg; request. Note that the knight's requesting pardon for
what might be considered blunt speech is an echo of Kent's more
forceful challenge to Lear's vanity back in the first scene.

"Thou but … own conception" = You are only reminding me of
something I myself had been thinking

"most faint" = barely noticeable

"mine own … of unkindness" = I put it down to my own worries about
whether they were treating me properly ("very pretence and purpose" =
actual intention)

"this" = these

"hath much pin'd away" = has been depressed. (The verb 'pin'd' is from
the word repine, which means to be dejected or to long for someone or
something.)

That the Fool has "pin'd" for Cordelia suggests that the two are
good friends. Incidentally, scholars believe that the roles of Cordelia
and the Fool would have been, in Shakespeare's time, played by the
same actor. In the Elizabethan era, women were not allowed to
perform on stages. The role of a young woman would be played by a
boy actor who would raise his vocal pitch.

"My lady's father" – Oswald's response—which Lear would expect
should be something along the line of "You are my king"—is about the
equivalent of our saying to a respected elder "You're just some guy!

"cur" – mutt

"bandy" = exchange. (Lear's metaphor is from the game of tennis, in
which players "bandy" the ball between each other.)
Striking him

OSWALD
I'll not be struck, my lord.

KENT
Nor tripp'd neither, you base football player.

Tripping up his heels

LEAR
I thank thee, fellow. Thou serv' st me, and I'll love thee.

KENT
Come, sir, arises, away! I'll teach you differences. Away, away! If you will measure your lubber's length again, tarry. But away! Go to! Have you wisdom? So.

Pushes OSWALD out

LEAR
Now, my friendly knave, I thank thee. There's earnest of thy service.

Giving KENT money

Enter FOOL

FOOL
Let me hire him too. Here's my coxcomb.

Offering KENT his cap

LEAR
How now, my pretty knave! How dost thou?

FOOL
Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb.

KENT
Why, fool?

"strucken" = struck. (Oswald refuses to be Lear's tennis ball.)

"Nor tripp'd ... football player" – Kent kicks Oswald, roughly suggesting that he is better suited to a different game. Only aristocrats played tennis. Football was a game for the lower classes.

"differences" – i.e. differences between masters and servants or between nobles and peasants. (Kent says, then, that he will teach Oswald his place.)

"measure your lubber's length" = be thrown again to the ground (as a clumsy lout or "lubber" such as he deserves)

"tarry" = stay here (i.e. if he wants to be knocked down again, then he should by all means stick around, the damned lubber!)

"Have you wisdom?" = Do you have any sense?

"earnest" = earnest money (i.e. a small sum of money paid to secure a contract)

"coxcomb" – i.e. a fool's cap. The professional jester wore the head and neck of a rooster (cock's comb) in his cap.

In addressing Kent, the Fool uses the word "sirrah," a form of "sir" normally used to address inferiors, and it may be meant as his sarcastic way of suggesting that this new servant is truly inferior, at least in intelligence, for he must be a fool himself if he wishes to serve a fool—namely Lear. And this is the thrust of the Fool's interaction with Lear throughout this scene and in much of the play's action hereafter. Indeed, he repeatedly implies that Lear has been a true fool for giving away his land, for being duped by the flattery of Goneril and Regan, and for banishing his one honest daughter, Cordelia. Strange, it would seem, for a fool to chide another for being a fool. But an all-licensed fool cannot be truly foolish. Rather, such a professional must be most astute—a keen judge of character and an insightful observer of the human condition, not just a smartass but a genuinely smart guy. He is the equivalent of the modern-day stand-up comic who specializes in observational humor.

Note too that his offering of the coxcomb—a gesture that says, in effect, Go ahead, take my job—heightens the Fool's sarcasm, for it is a farcical echo of Lear's giving away of his authority, with the attendant symbolism of passing on his official hat, his crown.

One more observation about the Fool: in some productions of King Lear, the actor playing the Fool will appear to recognize Kent as Kent (though nothing in the dialogue indicates that he actually does). But the point of revealing such a recognition on the Fool's part reinforces the fact that the Fool is more alert than is Lear, that he can "see better" than Lear can.
FOOL
Why, for taking one's part that's out of favor. Nay, and thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou'lt catch cold shortly. There, take my coxcomb. Why, this fellow has banish'd two on's daughters and did the third a blessing against his will. If thou follow him thou must needs wear my coxcomb. How now, nuncle! Would I had two coxcombs and two daughters!

LEAR
Why, my boy?

FOOL
If I gave them all my living, I'd keep my coxcombs myself. There's mine. Beg another of thy daughters.

LEAR
Take heed, sirrah. The whip.

FOOL
Truth's a dog must to kennel. He must be whipp'd out, when the Lady's Brach may stand by th' fire and stink.

LEAR
A pestilent gall to me!

FOOL
Sirrah, I'll teach thee a speech.

LEAR
Do.
FOOL
Mark it, nuncle.

Have more than thou showest,
Speak less than thou knowest,
Lend less than thou owest,
Ride more than thou goest,
Learn more than thou trowest,
Set less than thou throwest.
Leave thy drink and thy whore,
And keep in-a-door,
And thou shalt have more
Than two tens to a score.

KENT
This is nothing, fool.

FOOL
Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer. You gave me nothing for't. Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?

LEAR
Why, no, boy. Nothing can be made out of nothing.

FOOL
[To KENT] Prithee, tell him, so much the rent of his land comes to. He will not believe a fool.

LEAR
A bitter fool!

FOOL
Dost thou know the difference, my boy, between a bitter fool and a sweet fool?

LEAR
No, lad. Teach me.
FOOL
That lord that counsel'd thee
To give away thy land,
Come place him here by me.
Do thou for him stand.
The sweet and bitter fool
Will presently appear—
The one in motley here,
The other found out there.

LEAR
Dost thou call me fool, boy?

FOOL
All thy other titles thou hast given away. That thou wast born with.

KENT
This is not altogether fool, my lord.

FOOL
No, faith, lords and great men will not let me. If I had a monopoly out, they would have part on't. And ladies too, they will not let me have all fool to myself. They'll be snatching. —Nuncle, give me an egg, and I'll give thee two crowns.

LEAR
What two crowns shall they be?

FOOL
Why, after I have cut the egg i' the middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i' th' middle and gav'st away both parts, thou bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt. Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away. If I speak like myself in this, let him be whipp'd that first finds it so.

[Sings]
Fools had ne'er less grace in a year,
For wise men are grown foppish,
And know not how their wits to wear,
Their manners are so apish.
LEAR
When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?

FOOL
I have us'd it, nuncle, ever since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers, for when thou gav'st them the rod and put'st down thine own breeches,

[Sings] Then they for sudden joy did weep,  
And I for sorrow sung,  
That such a king should play bo-peep  
And go the fools among.

Prithee, nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can teach thy fool to lie. I would fain learn to lie.

LEAR
And you lie, sirrah, we'll have you whipp'd.

FOOL
I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They'll have me whipp'd for speaking true. Thou'lt have me whipp'd for lying. And sometimes I am whipp'd for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind o' thing than a fool. And yet I would not be thee, nuncle. Thou hast par'd thy wit o' both sides and left nothing i' th' middle. —Here comes one o' th' parings.

Enter GONERIL
LEAR
How now, daughter! What makes that frontlet on? Methinks you are too much of late i’ th’ frown.

FOOL
Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning. Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now. I am a fool. Thou art nothing. [To GONERIL] Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue. So your face bids me, though you say nothing.

Mum, mum,
He that keeps nor crust nor crumb,
Weary of all, shall want some.

Pointing to LEAR
That's a sheal'd peascod.

GONERIL
Not only, sir, this your all-licens'd fool,
But other of your insolent retinue
Do hourly carp and quarrel, breaking forth
In rank and not-to-be-endured riots. Sir,
I had thought, by making this well known unto you,
To have found a safe redress, but now grow fearful,
By what yourself too late have spoke and done,
That you protect this course and put it on
By your allowance, which if you should, the fault
Would not 'scape censure nor the redresses sleep,
Which, in the tender of a wholesome weal,
Might in their working do you that offence,
Which else were shame, that then necessity
Will call discreet proceeding.
FOOL
For, you know, nuncle,

The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
That it's had it head bit off by it young.

So, out went the candle, and we were left darkling.

LEAR
Are you our daughter?

GONERIL
I would you would make use of that good wisdom,
Whereof I know you are fraught,
and put away
These dispositions
that of late transform you
From what you rightly are.

FOOL
May not an ass know when a cart draws the horse?
Whoop, Jug! I love thee.

LEAR
Does any here know me? This is not Lear.
Does Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied—Ha! Waking? 'Tis not so.
Who is it that can tell me who I am?

"The hedge-sparrow … it young" – Cuckoos, which are relatively large birds, lay their eggs in the nests of smaller birds, which then have to rear the young cuckoos. (The Fool's couplet sounds as though it may have been a proverb current in Shakespeare's time.)

"it" = its
"darkling" = in the dark

"Are you our daughter?" – With this rhetorical question Lear begins a series of sarcastic volleys. Asking "Are you our daughter?" he suggests that she could not possibly be his own, as a true daughter would not speak to him so unkindly.

"I would you would" – I wish you would

"Whereof I know you are fraught!" = which I know you have plenty of
"dispositions" = states of mind
"of late transport you" = recently change you

"May not … the horse?" – an analogy for Cannot even a fool see that something is wrong when a daughter gives orders to her father?

"Whoop, Jug! I love thee" – This is probably from the refrain of a song that is now lost. "Jug" is a nickname for Joan.

"Does any here … who I am?" – Lear's sarcasm is more heavy-handed here than it is in his question "Are you our daughter?" Now he pretends to be someone other than himself, implying that the "real" Lear does not walk and talk like this, and then says that if Lear is here, then something must be wrong with him—that he is blind, or his "notion" (capacity for thought) has grown feeble, or his "discernings" (understandings) are "lethargied" (slowed down), or he is simply asleep. Why, it cannot be so!

"Who is it that can tell me who I am?" – Lear intends this final jab, this bitterly rhetorical question, as verbal irony (sarcasm being a form of verbal irony). But we can read it also as dramatic irony (a case of the audience knowing more than the speaker knows), as it is a question that he might as well be asking actually rather than rhetorically. In fact it is the same question that might be asked by many a tragic hero, whose task ever is to know himself and his place in a larger order. For the tragic hero is commonly afflicted by hubris—one who, in his arrogance, does not see himself clearly and who styles himself as apart from (or at least at the top of) the grand design. The hero's hubris must, then, be stripped from him. He must learn to see his naked self, to see others as they truly are, and be brought down (violently brought down in most cases) to the ground.
LEAR
I would learn that, for by the marks of sovereignty, knowledge, and reason, I should be false persuaded I had daughters.

LEAR
Your name, fair gentlewoman?

GONERIL
This admiration, sir, is much o' th' savor Of other your new pranks. I do beseech you To understand my purposes aright. As you are old and reverend, should be wise. Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires, Men so disorder'd, so debosh'd and bold, That this our court, infected with their manners, Shows like a riotous inn. Epicurism and lust Makes it more like a tavern or a brothel Than a grac'd palace. The shame itself doth speak For instant remedy. Be then desired By her that else will take the thing she begs A little to disquantity your train, And the remainders that shall still depend To be such men as may besort your age, Which know themselves and you.

LEAR
Darkness and devils!
Saddle my horses. Call my train together. Degenerate bastard! I'll not trouble thee. Yet have I left a daughter.
GONERIL
You strike my people, and your disorder'd rabble
Make servants of their betters.

Enter ALBANY

LEAR
Woe, that too late repents—[To ALBANY] O sir, are you come?
Is it your will? Speak, sir. Prepare my horses.
Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend,
More hideous when thou show'st thee in a child
Than the sea monster!

ALBANY
Pray, sir, be patient.

LEAR
[To GONERIL] Detested kite! Thou liest.
My train are men of choice and rarest parts,
That all particulars of duty know,
And in the most exact regard support
The worships of their name. O most small fault,
How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!
Which, like an engine, wrench'd my frame of nature
From the fix'd place,
Draw from my heart all love,
And added to the gall. [Striking his head]
O Lear, Lear, Lear!
Beat at this gate that let thy folly in,
And thy dear judgment out! Go, go, my people.

Exeunt KENT and knights

ALBANY
My lord, I am guiltless, as I am ignorant
Of what hath mov'd you.

LEAR
It may be so, my lord.
Hear, nature, hear! Dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility!
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honor her! If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen, that it may live,
And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her!
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth.
With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks.
Turn all her mother's pains and benefits
To laughter and contempt, that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child! Away, away!

Exit
ALBANY
Now, gods that we adore, whereof comes this?

GONERIL
Never afflict yourself to know more of it.
But let his disposition have that scope
That dotage gives it.

Re-enter LEAR

LEAR
What, fifty of my followers at a clap!
Within a fortnight!

ALBANY
What's the matter, sir?

LEAR
I'll tell thee. [To GONERIL] Life and death! I am
asham'd
That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,
That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,
Should make thee worth them. Blasts and fogs upon
thee!
Th' untented woundings of a father's curse
Pierce every sense about thee! Old fond eyes,
Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out,
And cast you, with the waters that you loose,
To temper clay. Yea, is't come to this?
Ha! Let it be so. I have another daughter,
Who, I am sure, is kind and comfortable.
When she shall hear this of thee, with her nails
She'll flay thy wolvish visage. Thou shalt find
That I'll resume the shape which thou dost think
I have cast off forever.

Exeunt LEAR, KENT, and attendants

GONERIL
Do you mark that, my lord?

ALBANY
I cannot be so partial, Goneril,
To the great love I bear you—
GONERIL
Pray you, content. What, Oswald, ho!
[To the FOOL] You, sir, more knave than fool, after your master.

FOOL
Nuncle Lear, nuncle Lear, tarry! Take the fool with thee.

A fox, when one has caught her, 
And such a daughter, 
Should sure to the slaughter, 
If my cap would buy a halter. 
So the fool follows after.

Exit

GONERIL
This man hath had good counsel! A hundred knights! 
'Tis politic and safe to let him keep 
At point a hundred knights! Yes, that on every dream, 
Each buzz, each fancy, each complaint, dislike, 
He may enguard his dotage with their powers, 
And hold our lives in mercy. Oswald, I say!

ALBANY
Well, you may fear too far.

GONERIL
Safer than trust too far. 
Let me still take away the harms I fear, 
Not fear still to be taken. I know his heart. 
What he hath utter'd I have writ my sister. 
If she sustain him and his hundred knights 
When I have show'd the unfitness—

Re-enter OSWALD

How now, Oswald!

What, have you writ that letter to my sister?

OSWALD
Ay, madam.
GONERIL
Take you some company, and away to horse.
Inform her full of my particular fear,
And thereto add such reasons of your own
As may compact it more. Get you gone,
And hasten your return.

Exit OSWALD

No, no, my lord,
This milky gentleness and course of yours
Though I condemn not, yet, under pardon,
You are much more attax'd for want of wisdom
Than prais'd for harmful mildness.

ALBANY
How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell.
Striving to better, oft we mar what's well.

GONERIL
Nay, then—

ALBANY
Well, well, th' event.

Exeunt