

King Lear

Scene Commentary

ACT I, SCENE I

In King Lear, Shakespeare names for us 21 characters, along with an assortment of officers, knights, messengers, and so on. In this first scene, you meet 11 of these characters in Shakespeare's setup, or exposition, of the play. The introductions include all but one member of the two primary families of the drama: the royal family of King Lear and the family of the Earl of Gloucester.

The first players to enter the stage are the Earl of Kent, the Earl of Gloucester, and Edmund, Gloucester's son. At first, the two earls discuss King Lear's proposal to divide his kingdom between Lear's sons-in-law, the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany. The Dukes are married to Lear's elder daughters Regan and Goneril, respectively.

Edmund's Illegitimacy

The talk between the earls turns quickly from matters of state to matters of family as Gloucester introduces Edmund to Kent. Gloucester makes plain the fact that Edmund is illegitimate; he displays no outward regret at having a son out of wedlock. In a sense, Gloucester ridicules Edmund by making light of his son's illegitimacy, especially given that Gloucester has a legitimate son as well. Edmund's facial expressions, which prove that he is both embarrassed and angry, give us our first hint that Edmund bears ill will toward his father. The arrival of Lear and his entourage is signaled by a trumpet flourish (a pronounced entrance both appreciated and expected by Shakespeare's Early Modern audiences). When Lear appears, accompanied by his married daughters Goneril and Regan, their husbands the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall, and his youngest daughter Cordelia, the language of the play shifts. While Kent and Gloucester converse in prose, the type of language used by regular citizens, Lear and his daughters speak in somewhat formal, courtly language.

The Love Test

The change from prose to iambic pentameter verse takes place as Lear forces his daughters into a "love test." During this kind of test the head of a family – usually a monarch or nobleman – issues a challenge to his children. His offspring must respond by trying to outdo each other in praising their father. The love test challenge was a standard of court life -- one of the expected charades. The children's responses were also supposed to be standard. (No one expected anything less than glowing praise, and if we were to grade Goneril and Regan on their performances in this scene we would assuredly assign them an "A.")

Lear's reasons for dividing his kingdom among his three daughters may initially seem wise to modern readers. He says, "Know that we have divided / In three our kingdom ... that future strife/ May be prevented now" (38-46). But to an Early Modern audience, a king's division of his kingdom and relinquishing of rule could only spell disaster. The idea of kingship -and fatherhood, for that matter -was linked to the divine in Elizabethan thought. Lear's announcement disrupts the accepted hierarchical order in Lear's kingdom and family.

Though he renounces the responsibilities of rule, Lear plans to retain the respect due to a king and the other perks of his position. Rather than simply dividing his kingdom and making a graceful exit, Lear uses his royal power and authority not only to test the love of his daughters but also to divide his kingdom based upon the results of that test. Because Goneril and Regan offer such fabulous descriptions of their undying love for Lear, the king metes out generous portions of his kingdom to these two daughters, both of whom claim that their foremost goal in life is to continue in the love of their father, a man they love more than they do their husbands!

Cordelia says a single word -"Nothing" (90). Lear's pride -both as king and as father- is injured to the extent that he disinherits Cordelia. Kent berates the king for making such a foolish decision, but Lear refuses to listen to his loyal advisor and goes so far as to banish Kent from the kingdom.

Cordelia's response is a powerful one in several respects. The word "Nothing" is strong enough to send her father into a rage. But the response is also powerful in contrast to the flowery words spoken by Regan and Goneril, who claim that their love for their father surpasses all. Cordelia says "Nothing" because the love and respect she holds for her father are founded upon her "bond" to him. Hers is a more profound and honest sentiment than the words spoken by Goneril and Regan.

The word "Nothing" also has Christian overtones in the context of the play. Though the action of King Lear is set before the time of Christ, Shakespeare's audiences would have understood the Christian allusions. In Christian theology, no amount of prayer or flattery can save the soul of humanity; only the unselfish and steady love of the Creator and His Son can accomplish that salvation. Cordelia, by refusing to offer hollow praise to her father, stands precisely in the position of humanity, which has nothing to offer the deity, but the duty required by the Christian bond. Lear reacts not with the unconditional love of a Christian lord toward his subject but rather with spite and sullen pride.

Disinheriting Cordelia

Lear strips Cordelia of her dowry and then offers her in marriage to the Duke of Burgundy. Many scholars debate why Lear offers Cordelia first to the duke instead of to the King of France. In earlier historical periods, Burgundy was more than simply one part of France. The Dukes of Burgundy were nearly as powerful as the French kings, and the dukes were traditionally allied with Britain. Lear may consider the security of the kingdom when offering Cordelia to Burgundy. Lear also may want to keep Cordelia closer to home by wedding her to the duke. However, Lear's action may be purely spiteful; perhaps, he is unwilling to see Cordelia elevated to the rank of queen, a title Regan and Goneril can never hold.

In any case, the duke refuses to marry Cordelia because her dowry is gone. The duke proves that he cares more about the money than about Cordelia. Almost by default, the King of France wins Cordelia as his wife; this king does not concern himself with material goods, and he claims that his affection for Cordelia has grown as he has observed both her honor and the actions of her father.

The opening scene establishes a parallel between Kent and Cordelia. Lear has overlooked the true love that Cordelia offers him in favor of the formalistic love speeches that Goneril and Regan recite. Likewise, Lear does not appreciate the true and loyal service of Kent. Both Kent and Cordelia are thrust from

Lear's kingdom and supposedly from Lear's heart as well, primarily because neither offender chooses to speak the false truth of the court, proclaiming instead the plain truth that Lear refuses to believe.

Regan and Goneril's anger This scene also begins to examine the relationship between Lear and his elder daughters. Goneril and Regan are both married women, regents in the kingdom and in their own homes as wives of dukes. For these women to be put to the "test" -to be asked publicly to bow and scrape before their father and loudly magnify his virtues and their love for him -is probably an insult. Lear himself was outraged when Kent berated his judgment in a public setting. Goneril and Regan very probably feel anger at being forced to publicly profess their love for their father.

The elder sisters' anger toward their father has other sources as well. They know that Cordelia is Lear's "joy"; Lear offers to give her the largest portion of the kingdom if she will only speak the right words. Cordelia has clearly been Lear's favorite; "I loved her most," he says, "and thought to set my rest/ On her kind nursery" (124-125). The elder sisters can see this preference plainly; Goneril reminds Regan that Lear "always loved our sister most" (291). The elder sisters' anger at this favoritism is hardly surprising. To fuel their frustration even more, at the scene's end, they are forced into being caretakers and hosts for their father because Cordelia has been renounced.

But while Goneril and Regan's anger with their father may seem somewhat justified, their actions throughout the play indicate that they are corrupt, unloving daughters. Critic William Hazlitt sees Goneril and Regan as "thoroughly hateful"; he does not "even like to repeat their names." When Cordelia refers to her sisters as the "jewels of our father," her words are bitterly ironic (269). Cordelia knows that her father's care and well-being should be left "to a better place" than the households of the elder sisters (275).

The Daughters' Duty

Regan's response to Cordelia's admonition that the sisters take good care of Lear is chilling: "Prescribe not us our duty" (277). Goneril, however, is quick to turn the tables. Goneril reminds Cordelia that her duty is to satisfy her soon-to-be husband, the King of France. She also declares that Cordelia herself has fallen short of duty to Lear -she has "scanted" obedience in her refusal to shower her father with lavish praise (279).

Having bid their sister a cold farewell, the hypocritical elder sisters conference immediately. Their discussion is openly disrespectful to their father, contrasting sharply with their public declarations of love and pointing out further how unfair the judgment against Cordelia has been. Lear's age and changeable nature disturb Goneril and Regan; they feel that Lear's mental state which supposedly has never been good, is fast approaching a crisis. Lear's mental crisis would likely have a negative effect upon his daughters and their households.

Goneril and Regan seem stunned by Lear's foolish actions in this scene. The sisters are concerned that their father may, at some point, do the same thing to them that he has so rashly done to Cordelia. Consequently, Goneril and Regan must remain alert and prepare in advance for that possibility. Note that Goneril is the instigator here. She urges the conference about Lear with Regan, and she finds Regan's agreement to "further think. of it" insufficient (307). For Goneril the answer to their fears is immediate action, not just brainstorming: "We must do something, and i' th' heat" (308).

Poor Judgment

A parallel between Lear and Gloucester becomes apparent in the plans that Regan and Goneril make to take advantage of their father's poor judgment. (Note that poor judgment is itself a concept to observe throughout the play.) Gloucester has exercised poor judgment in speaking of Edmund's bastardy in the presence of Edmund and Kent. Lear has exercised poor judgment in banishing Kent and_ in disinheriting Cordelia. Interestingly, this pattern of ill-advised thought and actions, so obvious in the parents, is continued in some of the children. In the second scene of the play. Edmund will take blatant advantage of Gloucester's gullibility, and later in the drama Edgar will do the same, for different and much more noble purposes.

ACT I, SCENE II

Entering alone as Scene 2 opens, Edmund presents us with a soliloquy. A conventional part of Shakespearean dramas, the soliloquy serves several purposes, including the elaboration and development of an individual character. Alone on stage, the player has the opportunity to reveal many things not brought out in dialogue. The character's beliefs and plans come alive during a soliloquy, and the audience glimpses how good -or in Edmund's case, how evil -a character truly can be.

As well as developing character, the soliloquy also serves to further the plot by passing along information impossible to portray reasonably on stage. For example, when Edmund speaks to the goddess Nature in lines 1 and 2, he issues a formal pledge that explains much of the plot that will follow. Edmund has two goals: to discredit Edgar in the eyes of Gloucester and to make himself into a man of means by acquiring an inheritance of his own. By turning Gloucester against Edgar, Edmund hopes to achieve both of these goals. If Edmund's pledge had been a silent one, we wouldn't know the reasons for Edmund's later actions.

Nature

The concept of Nature is important in this play, and we should note that more than one type of Nature is represented in this drama. The Nature in which Edmund operates is animalistic; the common acts of decency and morality that we expect from human beings are not present in him. Later -in the play, we see that Lear operates and believes in a different level of Nature --a higher plateau in which morality and decency are the expected norms.

Edmund's illegitimacy explains his pledge to the animalistic world of Nature. The law of the society that Edmund lives in stands to rob him of everything he desires in life: respect, position, and wealth. That's because society's laws reward the legitimate and punish the illegitimate. To Edmund, therefore, the rule of "survival of the fittest" reigns supreme; the law of Nature affords him a chance to succeed. Edmund questions the accepted order; indeed, he pledges to overthrow that order in favor of the individual's right to success.

Deceiving Gloucester

Because the soliloquy has revealed Edmund's true intentions, we realize that he must play-act in front of Gloucester and Edgar in order to convince them to dis-trust each other. Pretending to be reluctant, Edmund tells Gloucester that the letter he holds looks like it was written by Edgar. Feigning anguish, Edmund looks on as Gloucester reads the treacherous remarks that Edgar has supposedly written. Believing that Edgar is ridiculing him, Gloucester learns that his legitimate son is anxious to spend his inheritance.

Gloucester is already upset; he finds the recent banishments and unpleasantness at court difficult to comprehend and quite against his sensual nature that loves pleasure, not strife. With ease, Edmund convinces his father that Edgar has been disloyal. Gloucester's emotional reaction is all too predictable; he refers to his legitimate son as an "Abhorred villain, unnatural, detested, brutish/villain" (79-80).

Edmund is well aware of his father's tendency to place importance upon the portents of the sky. Here, his timing is perfect, because Gloucester blames "[t]hese late eclipses in the sun and moon" for Edgar's treachery and the recent upheavals at court as well (107).

Gloucester's Selective Blindness

Gloucester's willingness to see Edgar as a traitor cannot be blamed entirely on Edmund. As seen in Gloucester's brazen discussion with Kent about Edmund's parentage in Scene 1, Gloucester often decides what is right and what is wrong based not on moral absolutes but rather on what benefits him personally. His judgment is questionable. Gloucester is quick to believe Edmund's case with only the flimsiest of circumstantial evidence. When Gloucester cannot identify Edgar's handwriting with certainty, he defers to Edmund for identification -- even though Edmund has been away for nine years. This selective blindness is characteristic of Gloucester and will have horrific consequences later in the drama.

While taking advantage of Gloucester's gullibility, Edmund also demonstrates his belief that his father's superstitions are ridiculous. He may be criticizing the beliefs of the Elizabethan people in general. Critic Northrop Frye writes that "in Shakespeare's day astrology was taken seriously because of the assumption God had made the world primarily for the benefit of man Stars aren't just there; they've been put there for a purpose and that's why the configurations of stars can spell out the destinies of men and women."

Edmund simply doesn't believe that the stars have influence over the lives of humans. With sarcasm, Edmund says, "My father compounded with/ my mother under the Dragon's Tail, and my/ nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows I am/ rough and lecherous" (132-135). In saying this, he defies the notion that the alignment of the stars when he was conceived has somehow created his unsavory personality. But Edmund plays the role of a believer, even when explaining Gloucester's anger to Edgar. He tells his brother that the recent eclipses "do portend / these divisions" (140-141).

Brother's Keeper

Having successfully deceived Gloucester, Edmund now turns his attention to Edgar. Pretending to have studied the signs in the heavens, Edmund predicts that divisions are coming. He claims to foresee friendships crumble, marriages dissolve, parents distrust their children, and nations struggle both internally and with foreign enemies.

Ironically, we shall see later in the drama that all of Edmund's predictions come true. At this point, however, his words seem silly to Edgar, who is astonished that his brother busies himself with such astronomical playthings. What does seem noteworthy to Edgar, however, is the fact that Edmund is so willing to come to his aid. Edmund's role-playing is so astute that Edgar believes he is trustworthy in the role of brother's keeper.

Sure of his brother's honesty, Edgar easily falls in line with each step of Edmund's plan, earning Edmund's scorn as he does. Edmund says with disgust that he was "[a] credulous father, and a brother noble,/ Whose nature is so far from doing harms/ That he suspects none" (186-188). The scene closes as Edmund gloats over the ease with which his machinations are proceeding.

Edmund's final remark in this scene, "All with me's meet that I can fashion fit" expresses the modern concept, "Let the end justify the means" (191). This single-mindedness of purpose describes the evil developing in the character of Edmund.

Throughout this scene, parallels in the overall story continue to take shape. Edmund takes advantage of poor judgment, a recurring theme, by recognizing that neither his father nor his brother exhibit any suspicion about what Edmund has told them. Certain characters begin to hint of "doubles" in the play. As discussed in the commentary for Act I, Scene 1, Lear's double is Gloucester. In this scene, we start to notice that the roles of Goneril and Regan are mirrored in Edmund. Finally, Cordelia can be paired with Edgar; both are children whose "price has fallen" because their fathers are foolish men deceived by their other offspring.

ACT I, SCENE III

In this brief scene, we meet Goneril's steward Oswald, for the first time. Some sense of wrongdoing is apparent between the two, although the play infers no direct indication of any improper relationship. Goneril discusses with Oswald her frustration with having a house full of her father's attendants. She speaks much more openly with him than you might expect a mistress to speak to her servant. With Oswald, Shakespeare creates another parallel; his loyalty to Goneril will prove to be strong and remind us of Kent's loyalty to Lear.

The dialogue here also elaborates Goneril's role as instigator. Although Regan rarely seems to have inspirations of her own, Goneril is quite creative when making plans to strip Lear of any remaining power. In this scene, she urges Oswald to let Lear's needs and desires go unmet and unsatisfied. With such neglect, Goneril hopes not only to reduce the threat Lear and his knights present to an ordered household but also to establish a modicum of control over her father. Echoing the exchange between Edmund and Gloucester in the previous scene, here again a child preys upon the weaknesses of an aging parent in order to gain power and advantage.

ACT I, SCENE IV

In Scene 4, Kent appears in disguise playing of a man in search of a master. At court in Act I, Scene 1, Kent promised to "shape his old course in a country new." Although Kent has not changed his geographical country, he has changed his personal landscape by assuming a different identity. His course, or service; however, remains the same as before; he petitions to be taken into Lear's service.

Kent's Heroism

Interestingly, in a play named for a king, Kent seems to be quite the hero. Classical heroes are dedicated to a cause, display unflinching loyalty, function well in disguise, and seek higher morals and values. With every right and reason to remain angry with Lear and to leave the king to his own devices, Kent instead rises above the average. He assumes the disguise and characteristics of a mere indentured ruffian for the purpose of continuing to protect his beloved king.

Note that when Lear asks Kent, "[W]hat art thou?," Kent replies, "A man, sir" (9-11). At first offering no name, status, or qualifications, Kent presents himself as symbolically unadorned: simply a human being. Kent is divested of position, name, and title. He stands before his old master as nothing more than stark humanity, and as the play progresses, we shall see this vision of stark humanity emerge in almost every character. Yet in the act of continuing to serve his king, Kent is more humane in his humanity than are many of the other characters encountered thus far.

In his loyalty, Kent is quick-tempered and aggressive -- traits that will get him into trouble in the future. When Oswald slights Lear and one of Lear's knights reports that the king is not being served well, Kent's temper is roused. After Lear strikes Oswald for his insolence, Kent trips the steward and promises to teach him "differences" (91). Kent's action pleases Lear, who gives Kent money and calls him a "friendly knave" (95). In this scene, Kent and Oswald are like two boisterous boys, playing a game of dare. But later, we will see just how deadly such a game can become when Kent again lets his temper and zeal get the better of him.

The Fool's Role

Another character introduced in this scene is Lear's Fool. Shakespeare's fools and clowns are the subjects of much discussion because they play such important and dynamic roles in his plays. Placed in positions where they can watch the goings-on at court, fools tend to serve as foils and sounding boards for their masters. The Fool in *King Lear* is no exception. Privy to the inner-most feelings of his king, the Fool also observes the outcomes of Lear's rash judgments and will comment upon those judgments throughout the drama.

In this scene, the Fool provides commentary on two mistakes that Lear has made. First, in lines 168-171 the Fool sings about masters usurping the roles of professional fools. The Fool castigates Lear for giving away his kingly authority, suggesting that because Lear no longer has the authority of a crown, then perhaps Lear should don the coxcomb, or fool's cap. In a second snippet of song in lines 177-180, the Fool makes plain his discontent over the parceling out of the kingdom. While the Fool admits that Regan and Goneril have benefited immensely, he also recognizes Lear's almost infantile behavior when making such divisions.

Second, the Fool hints at his disagreement with Lear's disowning of Cordelia. "Why, this fellow has banished two of his daughters," says the Fool, "and did the third a blessing against his will" (104-105). The Fool's remarks here are sarcastic; the Fool does not believe at all that Lear has done right by his youngest child. In some respects, the Fool, according to the limitations of his profession, serves as the "true blank" of Lear's eye that Kent wished to be in Scene 1.

Notice that Lear cannot help but be reminded of Cordelia through this scene. Having listened to the Fool's rhymed proverbs in lines 121-130, Kent remarks, "This is nothing, Fool" (131). The word "nothing" appears twice more in the Fool's next lines, and Lear himself comments that "nothing can be made out of nothing" (135-136). Though Lear's comment about a "bitter fool" is ostensibly directed at the fool, Lear may also be starting to see himself as something of a fool who grows decidedly bitter (139).

Lear's neglect

As Lear confronts Goneril about her servants' neglect, he begins to discover how his authority is being usurped. Having given up the responsibilities of rule, Lear feels that it is now time to enjoy an unencumbered rest-a time to play and bask in the care of his children. Instead, Lear finds that in giving up his responsibility, he has also lost all respect due him as a king.

Amazed that he is not being taken seriously, Lear remarks: "Does any here know me? This is not Lear" (228). At this particular juncture the king begins to question his own identity; indeed, Lear voices the question, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (232). The Fool's response -"Lear's shadow" -answers Lear's question ambiguously, with two meanings possible (233). The Fool may mean that Lear is now but a shadow of his former self, or he may mean that only the shadow of the old Lear can explain to Lear his current status. In either case, some clues now surface about how much of Lear's sense of self has been wrapped up in his power and authority as king and father. To be effectively stripped of both of these titles renders Lear susceptible and weak.

Lear versus Goneril

As a sense of his ineffectuality dawns Lear attempts in two ways to reestablish some superiority. His first strategy is to position himself above his daughter Goneril in the hierarchy of creation-- the "Great Chain of Being." Lear compares ingratitude in a child to ingratitude in a sea monster; he finds the sea monster more appealing. Lear also calls Goneril a "[d]etestable kite" and a "creature" (265, 280). This attempt to elevate himself by degrading Goneril to the rank of a beast represents just one example of the animal imagery with which Shakespeare fills this play. A great deal of scholarship focuses on this imagery, and within the play certain persons are compared, either explicitly or through the use of simile, to a lengthy list of creatures: lions, sheep horses, dogs, cows, hogs, wolves, polecats, monkeys' foxes, bears, civet cats, wrens, flies, pelicans, butter: flies, owls, rats, crows, mice, choughs, water newts tadpoles, worms, frogs, kites, serpents, dragons, and spotted toads.

Lear's second strategy is to affect the stance of titan --or at least prophet-- as he demands a curse upon Goneril, revealing that he views Nature differently than Edmund does. Lear's Nature is one that applauds human morality, respect, and dignity -not one that wallows in the more animalistic sensuality and raging desire. Just as Lear tries to affirm his humanity by relegating Goneril to the status of a beast, so does Lear further the affirmation by engaging in an activity that is uniquely human: invoking the divine.

Near the end of this scene, as Lear rails at his daughter, Goneril's husband Albany seems to be completely ineffectual in mediating this father-daughter quarrel. Albany's comments here are sparse; in the Quarto text, his remarks are even more spare in his request to Lear -- "Pray, sir, be patient" -- is absent (264).

Albany's Weakness

Despite Goneril's powerful personality, Albany is not free of responsibility concerning his wife's actions. Regent or no, Goneril is still the wife of this Duke, and her actions reflect upon her husband. Earlier in the scene, the knight describes the atmosphere in Goneril's household to Lear this way: "There's a great abatement of kindness appears as/ well in the general dependants as in the Duke/ himself also and your daughter" (61-63).

Given the mastery that Albany allows Goneril over the household and the fact that he shrinks from her to avoid confrontation, Albany does not seem like the type of person to purposely neglect or affront Lear. Rather, Albany more likely has simply ignored or been blind to what goes on in his own household. Goneril, her plans, and her little kingdom all form a situation that Albany appears to have taken "too little care of" -another example of poor judgment. And just as the audience recognizes the folly of both Lear and Gloucester in previous scenes, so the audience sees in this scene that Albany has abdicated rule in his own home. None of these three characters can foresee the impact his mis-takes in judgment will have.

As the scene draws to a close, a basis develops for several conflicts that arise in later scenes. First, Lear makes comparisons between Goneril and Regan. Angered and insulted by Goneril, Lear remarks, "Yet have I left a daughter./ Who I am sure is kind and comfortable" (308-309). This daughter, Regan, is Lear's hope for the salvation of his honor. Lear is certain that Regan will "flay" Goneril's "wolfish visage" in retaliation for the manner in which Lear has been treated in the house of Goneril (311). Soon, however, Regan proves to be equally as unloving and unkind as her sister.

Second, Goneril commissions Oswald to deliver a letter to Regan. Note again the ease with which this mistress and steward conspire together. Goneril instructs Oswald to "inform her [Regan] full of my particular fear./ And thereto add such reasons of your own/ As may compact it more" (340-342). Goneril wants to inform her sister not only of what has occurred in Goneril's home but also how to react when Lear appears at Regan's door and asks to be welcomed and served. As later revealed, Oswald finds his postal mission to be something more than the simple delivery of Goneril's message. In finding Regan, Oswald will also find Kent.

Note also how Goneril and Regan- mainly through the direction of the former -are allies at this point in the play. The control of their father, especially with an eye toward reducing his entourage of 100 knights, is their common goal, and to this end they indeed initially "hit together." Soon, however, both women become aware of Edmund, and with this awareness will come a parting of the ways. The common goal the sisters now share will acquire a new face and a new direction -one that elevates personal desire above the common good.

ACT I, SCENE V

Lear prepares to leave Goneril's home, and he sends Kent ahead with letters to pave the way with what Lear assumes will be a receptive Regan. Kent leaves, and Lear and the Fool are left in dialogue. Traditionally, fools tend to point out their masters' errors in these dialogues, leading the conversation in such a way that the master seems almost as much a fool as is the professional clown.

The Fool lives up to the traditional expectation in this scene, for the Fool is quite critical of Lear's confidence in Regan. "Shalt see thy mother daughter will use thee/ kindly; for thou she's as like this as a crab's like/ an apple, yet I can tell what I can tell" quips the Fool sarcastically (14-18). Not for a minute does the Fool believe Lear will be better treated by Regan than Goneril, and it becomes apparent that Lear, despite his bravado, may harbor such doubts as well.

A Hint of Madness

Some of Lear's "unconstant starts," which Regan complained of in Scene 1, become evident in this scene. Over and over again, Lear catches himself in slips of speech, inattention or wandering thoughts. His remark in line 24 - "I did her wrong" - undoubtedly refers to Cordelia. In lines 269-270 of Scene 4, Lear looked back to the reason he disinherited his youngest daughter. "O most small fault,/ How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!" In line 32 of this scene, Lear fears he will "forget [his] nature" and then abruptly asks about the readiness of his horses. Lear even briefly voices the possibility of reassuring his kingly role - "To take 't again perforce" as he considers the "Monster ingratitude" of Goneril (38-39).

The beginning of Lear's journey into madness can be seen here. Earlier, in Scene 4, Lear struck his head, punishing the "gate that let thy folly in." Now Lear no longer speaks in metaphor. The distraught cries, "O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!/ Keep my in temper; I would not be mad!" (45-46). This titan who demanded love as a commodity in Scene 1 is now realizing the effects of designating love, loyalty, and affection as items that can be bartered.

ACT II, SCENE I

The threads of story introduced by Shakespeare in the exposition of Act I now begin to interweave in the development of Act II. The main plot that involves Lear and his daughters intersects with the subplot of Gloucester and his sons. In this act, one of the play's major themes -that of good versus evil -begins to solidify as lines are drawn clearly between these two oppositions. The parallels exposed in the previous act also become more fully elaborated and underscored.

Edmund Continues His Deceit

From the courtier Curan, Edmund receives two important pieces of information. First, Regan and her husband, the Duke of Cornwall, are en route to Gloucester's home. Edmund receives this news gladly, because he feels that his campaign against his brother Edgar may be assisted by the involvement of Cornwall. Second, Edmund learns of trouble between Cornwall and Albany, and though this is the first definite indication of dissension between the two dukes, Lear's plan to prevent strife by dividing his kingdom clearly has been a failure as a preemptive strike.

As Edgar enters, Edmund assumes again his role as brother's keeper and protector. Edmund masterfully uses the information just gained from Curan to convince Edgar that he has been maligned. Supposedly, Edgar has been overheard voicing favor for or opposition to the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany; Edmund is quick to use this information as a means toward his personal ends. Hearing Gloucester approach, Edmund suggests that the two brothers stage a mock sword duel. Edmund's stated reason for this false fight is to assist his brother by running interference between Edgar and Gloucester. We see, however, that Edmund's real plan is to place his brother in the worst possible light as a disloyal son who attacks his own brother. Edmund wounds himself with his own sword just before Gloucester enters the scene.

Once again, Edmund plays on Gloucester's belief in the gods and superstition. In relating his supposed conversation with Edgar, Edmund claims to have made comments about "revenging gods" and their thunders, fully aware that by seeming to profess sentiments similar to those of his father, Edmund can

further his case against Edgar and continue to pull Gloucester in (45). The success of Edmund's maneuvers is evident. Gloucester now declares that Edgar is unnatural and dubs Edmund "[l]oyal and natural" boy (84). Gloucester promises to make Edmund the legitimate heir of the earldom.

Hasty Judgment

Here again the parallel between Gloucester and Lear is apparent. Gloucester asks Edmund if Edgar would "deny his letter" (78). Without waiting for a response from Edmund, Gloucester draws his own conclusion and remarks, "I never got him" (78). Notice how, with this remark, Gloucester essentially disinherits Edgar. Gloucester attempts to sever the bond of blood by claiming responsibility for the fathering of his legitimate son. Following in Lear's path, Gloucester seems to misunderstand the nature of the parent-child bond; each father is cleverly duped by his evil child (or children) and renounces the good.

Additionally, Gloucester makes his distrust and woes known to the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall. Some parents might seek to hide a child's transgression or to protect the wayward son, but Gloucester feels obligated to make public his grievance with Edgar and to accept Cornwall's promise to aid in the capture and punishment of the errant Edgar. (Notice that Gloucester does nothing to stop Edmund from discussing this matter and makes only a brief remark on the shame of doing so.)

Evidence Mounts Against Edgar

Regan is quick to draw a connection between Edgar's disloyalty and the "riotous knights" about which she has already received a communication from her sister (94). Edmund is equally quick to verify that Edgar was, indeed, "of that consort" (97). Edmund, then, immediately allies himself with Regan, and her reaction to Edmund's attention is soon to become apparent.

Note also that Regan refers to Edgar as her "father's godson" (91). This relationship is scarcely noted in the play, but the mention of it here has the peculiar quality of making Edgar appear even more evil. For Edgar to plot against his own father contradicts the proper and natural laws of obedience toward one's parent. When Edgar is seen as Lear's godson, however, all of Edgar's supposed plots can also be viewed as treasonous actions toward the king.

As the scene closes, Gloucester turns against Edgar, Edmund joins league with Cornwall, and Regan is intent upon drawing Gloucester in against the king. Having fled their own home to avoid Lear's visit, Cornwall and Regan descend upon Gloucester, fully anticipating his assistance and compliance. A veritable nest of evil seems situated at Gloucester's castle in the "dark-eyed" night-- a night that is soon to witness an array of outrages.

ACT II, SCENE II

King Lear presents worlds in opposition: the world of good and the world of evil. The play revolves around two types of Nature: the Nature of Lear, which assumes a higher order of creation, and the Nature of Edmund, which emphasizes the animalistic. An established world of the "old" is evident in the tradition and sometimes questionable morality of Lear, Gloucester, and Kent. Also alive in the drama is the world of the young -- the realm of violence, deceit, and self-serving ambition. In this scene, yet another pair of worlds are set in opposition: the worlds of the upper class and the servant.

Kent Confronts Oswald

Arriving at Gloucester's castle at the same time, Kent and Oswald both bear letters that their respective masters have bidden be promptly delivered. Accordingly, a sort of race or competition is established between these two messengers. Kent is quick to unleash his anger on Oswald who, apparently somewhat slow-witted, fails to recognize Kent as the man who tripped him in the house of Goneril, Kent, careless in his zeal, verbally attacks Oswald in a classic barrage of insults, which at first bewilders the steward. Once reminded by Kent, however, of the time when these two servants previously met, Oswald wants to go about his business and have nothing more to do with Kent. Characteristically, Kent pushes this quarrel, drawing his sword against Oswald with the intent to vanquish the steward completely. The result is a negative one for Kent.

Just as Lear let his pride and temper get the better of him in the play's opening scene, ultimately causing Lear's suffering in the home of Goneril, and so does Kent's tendency to fly off the handle now land him in difficulty. While Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience would have enjoyed hearing Kent rail at Oswald, the characters in the play do not enjoy it. After questioning the two servants about their brawl, Cornwall finds little to commend in Kent. (Though in Cornwall's defense, not that the Duke did, at least, question Oswald as to what offense he had given Kent.) If Kent at this point would calm his temper and behave somewhat reasonably, Cornwall may be willing to listen to Kent's side of the story. But Kent appears to have no side to tell; what Kent utters ranges from the plain speech of a seeming ruffian to the flowery but nonsensical flourishes of a courtier.

Kent has unwittingly played into the hands of Regan and Goneril. Both women have discovered, through long experience with their father that an outburst of temper is likely to erupt from Lear with sometimes little provocation. The sisters expect their father to respond to insults against the king's messenger by living up to Lear's reputation, raging loud and long. These cunning daughters realize that in those moments when their father is angry, upset; and hurt in his pride, he is also at his weakest and is therefore more susceptible to control.

Lear's Messenger in Stocks

The insult to Oswald is deemed serious enough for Kent to be set in the stocks. Cornwall's reasoning is difficult to determine; to insult Kent this way is a terrible affront to Lear. Yet later, during moments when his own pride or anger is peaked, Cornwall is quite capable of bending either the law of the social amenities in order to serve his purpose.

Also important here is Regan's uncanny ability to take an evil proposition and make it even worse. Cornwall orders Kent to be set in the stocks, and Cornwall designates that Kent sit there until noon. Regan, however, states that Kent shall sit "[t]ill night, my lord, and all night, too" (139). Whatever Regan lacks in original thought she makes up for tenfold in cruel enhancement.

Gloucester is caught unawares in this situation; he finds himself uncomfortably placed. Cornwall and Regan have already solicited his aid; now, however, Gloucester finds that he has little stomach for putting Lear's messenger in stocks. Despite Gloucester's protests, Kent is set in the stocks, and Cornwall claims full responsibility for the action. Gloucester, left alone with Kent, commiserates with the captive, revealing a clue about the general public reception of the Duke of Cornwall. Gloucester comments upon the Duke's disposition, which "all the world well knows/ Will not be rubbed nor stopped" (158-159). Apparently, Regan's husband has a reputation for inflexibility, if not for outright meanness. Later, Gloucester will be made painfully aware of just how deep the evil streak in Cornwall runs.

News from Cordelia

As Kent sits stocked, alone and weary, he ruminates about some matters of importance. First, Kent wishes for the beacon of the sun to provide light enough to read by. What Kent wants to read is a letter from Cordelia. Cordelia obviously is not only alive and well but also in contact with Kent. Presumably Cordelia also knows that Kent has been disguised and in service to her father. Some hope glimmers here as the audience recognizes that the lost daughter is not truly lost.

Kent also makes reference to a concept well-known to Elizabethan audiences. "Fortune, good night," says Kent (177). "Smile once more, turn thy wheel" (178). Fortune or Fate has long been compared to a wheel whose revolutions bring humanity sometimes into shadow and despair but inevitably again into some measure of sunshine and good times. Dante referred to this wheel as "our lady of Permutations." The idea that "what goes around, comes around" is somewhat similar to this vision of life moving in a circular fashion and balancing out the evil with the good. As the play progresses, Shakespeare's audience likely wonders exactly when that wheel of fate is due to turn for the better, so gloomy and pessimistic is much of the drama.

ACT II, SCENE III

Edgar's treason has been publicly announced. He is an outlaw who must disguise himself to avoid capture and stay alive. Another facet of the good versus evil opposition becomes clear; in every case, evil shows its face in the sun while good is forced to hide.

The disguise that Edgar assumes is that of a Bedlam beggar, or Poor Tom. According to critic Alexander Leggatt, "[T]he stage lunatic was one of the popular figures in the drawer of Shakespeare's time; whatever else they thought of madness, Shakespeare's contemporaries saw it as good theater." Edgar begrimed and nearly naked, struck a familiar chord with Elizabethan theatregoers, and Edgar's rantings about striking wooden pricks into his "numbed" arms corresponds to actual reported activities of lunatics in Shakespeare's day (15).

The elaboration of a parallel is also notable here. When Tom remarks, "Edgar I nothing am," he mirrors Cordelia, who became nothing in the eyes of her father (21). Both of these honest and loyal children have now become outcasts while their evil siblings have come to power. Surely here Kent's wheel of fortune is at a very low point.

ACT II, SCENE IV

This scene is one of the longest in the play and also one of the most important, because here the vixen daughters of Lear come together and a formidable opposition to their aging father. The extent of the sisters' cruelty toward Lear becomes evident, and Lear takes another step on the road toward madness.

The Daughter's Full Disrespect

The scene opens as Lear and his Fool attended by an unnamed gentleman, arrive at Gloucester's castle to find Kent sitting in the stocks. Lear is already at a loss to explain why Cornwall and Regan were not at their home; consequently, when Lear arrives to discover his messenger in stocks, his already kindled suspicions fire rapidly—precisely as his daughters had anticipated.

Lear does not want to believe that Regan and Cornwall could be so disrespectful as to punish the king's messenger; Lear's argument with Kent on this matter goes a long way to highlight Lear's stubborn streak. But perhaps more than proving Lear stubborn, the interchange with Kent causes a rising passion in Lear—a soul-searching that the old king feels as it "swells up toward [his] heart" (55). Interestingly, Lear recognizes that this passion is not a virtue; neither is the manner in which a sane man feels or responds. Lear fights against this unnatural emotion: "Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow;/ Thy element's below" (56-57). Lear is plenty sane enough at this point to realize that losing control of himself can pave the way to madness, and he struggles to restrain his temper as he storms off in search of Regan.

The Fool, then, is left with Kent and a dialogue arises between the two of them that is at once comical and deadly serious. Having heard Kent explain to Lear the circumstances that resulted in stocking, the Fool insightfully finds Kent to be something of a fool- a fool in need of instruction. With Cornwall and Oswald, Kent has attempted the type of honesty that court fools often pronounce. Kent, though, does not have the fool's occupation and thus has no license or permission to behave in such a disorderly—albeit honest—fashion.

Again, the issue of truth surfaces: When should one proclaim it honestly, and when should one speak the truth as it is preferred? The two truths are not always the same, and the Fool well understands this while Kent apparently does not—or will not. When Kent asks, "Where learned you this, fool?" the Fool replies, "Not I' th' stocks, fool" (84-85). Lear's Fool has learned to walk a fine line; Kent has learned only to rush the door.

Lear, already angered at Cornwall's treatment of Kent, becomes even more incensed when Gloucester, sent to inform the duke of the king's presence, returns to say that Cornwall and Regan refuse to speak with Lear. Surely another calculated move on the part of Regan, this refusal infuriates Lear further, and Lear has difficulty again with his "unconstant starts." Actors portraying Lear often stutter in anger here, as lines 98 and 99 suggest: "The dear father/ Would with his daughter speak, commands—tends—service."

Lear rants on, catching himself at the end of line 101, as he attempts to apply reason and find some truly acceptable, rational excuse for the Duke's refusal to appear. Indeed, Lear almost convinces himself that all will eventually be well. "I'll forbear," he says (106). But another glance at Kent, still seated in the stocks, inflames the king again: "Bid them come forth and hear me,/ Or... I'll beat the drum/ Till it cry sleep to death" (114-116).

The Last Hope Dashed

At long last Regan and Cornwall appear, and Lear loses no time in expounding to Regan about the insults and failings of Goneril. Lear quickly discovers, however, that Regan seems already to know what complaints her father is going to make. Further, Regan- the "Beloved Regan" - sides with her sister rather than Lear (130). "O, sir, you are old," says Regan (143). "Nature in you stands on the very verge/ Of his confine. You should be ruled, and led" (144-145). Her words are saturated with cruelty and disrespect.

Critic Stephen Greenblatt writes that Early Modern England had a "strong official regard for the rights and privileges of age. By the will of God and the natural order of things, authority gravitated to old men." Regan, however, seeks to deprive her father of his authority. Still Lear fails to see the cruelty that is Regan, promising "Regan, thou shalt never have my curse./ Thy tender-hefted nature shall not. Give/ Thee o'er to harshness" (167-169). Lear will shortly learn about the true nature of Regan, and he shall not find it "tender-hefted" (gentle).

With the arrival of Goneril, Lear's faith in Regan is destined to be short-lived. The argument about Lear's knights escalates, and finally Lear becomes exasperated, crying "I gave you all" (246). Lear's disgruntlement here is not merely disappointment about the number of knights his daughters will accept as Lear's companions. The issue here is again love – love treated as a bartered good. The large number of knights could easily instigate some sort of household revolution in either daughter's house, but Lear bargains neither for the knights nor for a compromise that better ensures household security. Lear says to Goneril, "I'll go with thee./ They fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty,/ And thou art twice her love" (255-257). Again, Lear attempts to treat love as a marketable commodity. What a horror, then, when Lear sees his daughter's love reduced to the equivalent of a single servant.

In one of the more moving speeches of the play, Lear expresses a myriad of emotions in lines 261-283; some would argue that Lear gets part of his comeuppance here. When Lear as king devalued the true affection of Cordelia during the love trial, Lear set up a sort of chain reaction.

The Struggle for Sanity

Now that Lear—father as well as king – seeks honest affection from his older daughters, he finds that request denied. For all his practicality in attempting to find a measure for affection, Lear now bemoans the practical daughters who reason that Lear has no need for even one attendant to call his own. Lear's argument turns to pure pathos and desire. Even "[o]ur basest beggars / Are in the poorest thing superfluous," cries Lear. "Allow not nature more than nature needs./ Man's life cheap as beast's" (261-263). Lear, in his growing passion, touches very closely here upon the ultimate lesson: In the long run, the life of a bare and unadorned human being is indeed little more than that of an animal. This lesson is one that Lear has yet to learn, but he is well on the way to his education.

Lear's lack of judgment and understanding should, never, of course, be taken as any sort of excuse for the behavior of Regan and Goneril. These women, both examples of supreme self-interest, turn out to be two of the coldest creatures in all of literature. Hard-hearted and cruel, the two sisters are guilty of two crimes, according to critic Edwin Muir. One is the crime of filial ingratitude—Lear himself has said as much. The other crime is a public crime, a crime against the state. As royal princesses, Goneril and Regan are regents, representatives of the crown. Their actions certainly constitute what military personnel call "behavior unbecoming." Further, the sisters' involvement in and encouragement of factions against the king amounts to treason even though the kingdom though the kingdom has been divided between them, because Lear retains the name of king.

The struggle Lear undertakes now is to retain his sanity; by his words, he fears he may well lost the struggle. Lear calls upon the gods to grant him a noble anger; indeed, Lear's anger and hurt is such that tears threaten, and Lear does not care to weep in the presence of these vulture daughters. The old king finds himself unable to utter what "revenges" he shall have upon the sisters; he can say only that his redresses shall be "[t]he terrors of the earth" (276, 279). Valiantly struggling against tears, Lear finally departs with the Fool, Kent, and Gloucester, expressing loudly his deepest fear as he goes: "O fool, I shall go mad!" (283). What Lear cannot reconcile is more than just the unkindness of his daughters. Lear cannot see himself in that same light in which his daughters now see him: a powerless, weak old man given to eccentricities and volatile eruptions of temper.

Masterful Language and Imagery

Both Shakespeare and his audience were familiar with complex images, poetic phrases, and the mixing of the aristocratic with the commonplace. In this scene we can observe Shakespeare, the master of language, at work. The imagery of the wheel and its relationship to fate and destiny continue to be prevalent. We may notice the mixed metaphors and witticisms of the Fool. Passion is assuredly not lacking in the speeches of Lear, and in this single scene we watch both the grand manner of kings and the ordinary attitudes of the subject as both struggle to accommodate their spiritual natures to the cold, material world.

Observe also how Shakespeare has developed his characters in preparation for the forthcoming climactic act. Goneril, Cornwall, and Regan are sovereigns whose sense of their own worth leads them to defy morality. Lear, initially blind to the hypocrisy of his older daughters, begins to develop from a somewhat childishly-behaving king beset by vicious offspring and mental turmoil. Edmund is showing himself to be a classic Machiavellian hero, replete with political savvy and a cold, evil nature. Of the "good faction" present at this time, perhaps the most profound description of their joint character is that they offer, regardless of their circumstances, sincere devotion and unhesitating loyalty.

Into the Storm

As the scene closes, Lear goes out into the now stormy night, and his daughters remain within the walls of Gloucester's castle. Forbidden to allow Lear reentry, Gloucester must obey Cornwall's edict to "[s]hut up your doors" (305). The closing of those gates signifies the establishment of a new order. The cruel sisters are now in power; the aged king is locked out in the "wild night" (305). The audience recognizes the scenario as preparatory for some sort of climax, and how devastating that climax will be remains to be discovered in the third act.

ACT III, SCENE I

The third act of this play presents the climax of the plot. In *King Lear*, the horrors presented in Act III provide plural turning points. A conversation between Kent and an unnamed gentleman in this first scene serves mainly to provide information to the audience about the political state of affairs in Lear's kingdom and to give additional news of Cordelia.

As discussed in the "Introduction to Early Modern England" and the "Introduction to *King Lear*," Shakespearean plays appear in two different versions: quartos and folios. The quarto texts are editions of a single play, while the folio texts are collections of several plays. Interestingly, the Quarto version and the Folio version of *Lear* differ significantly in this scene. In the Quarto we learn of trouble brewing between Albany and Cornwall; we also learn that France has landed a military force upon British soil. In the Folio text, however, there is no specific mention of a French force. Only by recalling that Cordelia has wed

the King of France do we have an inkling that because Cordelia is in the vicinity, French troops are likely present as well. The text in this book combines both versions, so we are aware that both civil war as well as conflict with a foreign state are possibilities in the near future.

The kingdom, both internally and externally, appears to be in a state of unrest. The storm on the heath — churning through this and subsequent scenes — is a reflection of that unrest. The unrest in the mind of the king and the fusion of various upheavals in Act III underscore how the Elizabethan world viewed its rulers: as appointees of the divine whose personal well-being — or lack thereof — was directly connected with the condition of the kingdom.

In this scene, Kent becomes separated from Lear — a significant development. Kent cannot help but feel chagrined and ineffectual; he is the point of contact between Lear and Cordelia, but at this moment Kent's master is lost to him. All Kent can do is commiserate with a gentleman of the realm, exchanging comments about Lear's current condition and about the entry of French troops into Britain. Though Kent does not reveal his identity, he does offer the gentleman a ring, probably a signet ring. This piece of jewelry is to serve as a calling card of sorts; if the gentleman encounters Cordelia, the ring will let her know that Kent is indeed still working for the advancement of the kingdom and for the reunion of Lear and his youngest daughter. It seems incredibly ironic that even in this time of unrest and separation, the good (in this case, Kent) must still keep itself in disguise.

ACT III, SCENE II

One of the great directorial challenges inherent in a performance of *King Lear* involves the staging of the storm scenes on the heath. In particular, Lear's raging back at the storm here in Scene 2 presents special problems. Although the most profound storm exists in Lear's mind, most directors nevertheless feel obliged to provide something of an external storm for realism's sake. The storm, then, has been produced in various ways, with effects ranging from electronically synthesized sounds and deluges of water to very minimalistic sets with more subdued torrents.

The overall success of the scene, however, depends entirely upon Lear himself. Despite the commentary of the Fool and Kent, the power of Lear's towering personality must carry the scene. Defiant in his rage, Lear embraces the fury of the storm, daring the fullest ire of nature to "[s]trike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world" (7). Implicit in Lear's taunt is his vision of himself as world; as all else in Lear's life has just crumbled around him, Lear's view here is that he now stands open to assault from every angle.

Battling the tempest

As Lear shouts at the storm, addressing the winds and rains almost as if they were human, both we and Lear recognize that a new view of reality is appearing here. In his power and glory, Lear has been accustomed to seeing life and nature as predictable, reasonable, and controllable. Now, however, all of Lear's expectations are being challenged. That which he has considered predictable has been proven unruly, that which has appeared reasonable now appears fanciful, and that which has been restrained and disciplined now rages uncontrolled. When what Lear expects is overthrown by the new reality, we see what is called dramatic irony.

For Lear, this dramatic irony — the disparity between what he felt was the truth about his daughters and what he has discovered the truth to be — plunges him into fury that leads directly to the unhooking of his mind. Lear envisions the storm as a cohort of his "two pernicious daughters," and he declares that the gods who cause the storm are bent upon discovering the deep-held secrets of their enemies (22). "My wits begin to turn," admits Lear to the Fool as Kent arrives and entreats Lear to come along and seek the shelter of a nearby hovel (68).

The bare essentials

A new concern for the essentials of survival begins to grow now in Lear; he discovers that "[t]he art of our necessities . . . can make vile things precious" (70–71). Lear also finds it in his heart to pity his Fool: "Poor fool and knave," says Lear. "I have one part in my heart / That's sorry yet for thee" (72–73). The tables surely turn, for the Fool previously has expressed concern and pity for his king. Now Lear worries about his Fool being cold. And with something of a revelation — as though the concept is quite new to him — Lear states, "I am cold myself" (69).

Note the Fool's song in response to Lear's pity. Lear feels sorry that the Fool is exposed to the storm, and the Fool sings a four-line song reminiscent of Feste's concluding song in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. The action in this scene of *King Lear* somewhat resembles that of the other play; likely, Shakespeare noted the similarity in plot and emotion and intended for the audience to make the connection as well.

In addition to singing, the Fool also utters a prophecy. The gist of the prophecy deals with the unnaturalness in the world and how that unnaturalness can sometimes appear to be the normal order. In *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, critic Jan Kott says about this inversion, "The Fool knows that the only true madness is to regard this world as rational. . . . The world stands upside down." Lear's world is indeed topsy-turvy, and the king is just beginning to realize that fact.

Lear has not had a complete change of heart, however. For perhaps the first time in his life, Lear is taking note of the miseries of others, but the king has not yet recognized that his own current sufferings are at least in part of his own making. The staging of the love test, the shunning of Cordelia, and the bickering over the retinue of 100 knights were all within Lear's capability of control. Lear, however, stubbornly forges along his own path, and he affirms in this scene that he is "a man / More sinned against than sinning" (59–60). Lear has yet to realize and accept his own responsibility for the wretched state of affairs in which he finds himself.

ACT III, SCENE III

This scene inspires the question: How can two such persons as Gloucester and Edmund share the same blood? Gloucester, full of pity for the king, pledges to aid Lear secretly. Edmund receives this news with malevolent joy, seeing in this mercy mission a ripe opportunity to forward his own designs. Some critics have questioned whether this malice on the part of Edmund is a comment by Shakespeare on the evil of illegitimacy. Such a theory, however, hardly holds water when applied to the cruelty of the legitimate children of the king.

In addition to expecting praise for informing upon his father, Edmund also envisions reward for his political endeavors. Gloucester tells Edmund of the plan to help Lear and of a letter describing a foreign “power already footed” (14). How Gloucester came by this letter is a mystery, yet it is plain that the letter contains the same information to which Kent is privy in Scene 1 of this act.

The chance to divulge treasonous news fills Edmund with delight. Edmund expects the ultimate recompense for his betrayal: “This seems a fair deserving, and must draw me / That which my father loses — no less than all” (24–25). Edmund’s closing line — “The younger rises when the old doth fall” — provides a chilling view of a world in which the older generation is overthrown by the wicked new (26).

ACT III, SCENE IV

A play’s climax is the ultimate moment that serves as a turning point in the action. Most see Scene 4 as that climactic moment, at least for Lear. Here on the heath, still battered by the exterior storm of nature and hounded by the internal storm in his mind, Lear finds himself situated before a lowly hut that offers but scant protection from the elements. Here the unsettled mind of the king begins to reach a fever pitch, and Lear and his Fool meet another form of madness in the disguised Edgar.

Just as Shakespeare plays on the imagery of the body in Act II when Lear calls Goneril a “boil, a plaguesore, an embossed carbuncle,” so does Shakespeare here call upon the medical theories prevalent in his day. Lear responds to Kent’s entreaties to take shelter with a mournful “Wilt break my heart?” (4). Indeed, Lear has good reason for his query, for the king is aware that respite from the storm will allow his ravaging emotions to be more acutely felt. “But where the greater malady is fixed,” cries Lear, “[t]he lesser is scarce felt” (8–9). The notion that a more acute pain, once alleviated, will give way to suffering from lesser pains was a familiar one to Shakespeare and his audiences.

Losing the battle against madness

Lear continues to fight his madness here. To this point, Lear has struggled against it valiantly. Yet here we see that Lear is beginning to lose this battle; note that he feels he has the power to place curses upon his daughters. Further, Lear is becoming obsessed by his own failings, and though the Fool tries desperately to draw Lear’s mind away from these depressing thoughts, the king’s errors and the wrongs done to him now loom utmost in his mind.

More evidence of Lear’s internal struggle surfaces. His remarks wander back and forth. He promises vengeance for his daughters’ “[f]ilial ingratitude,” yet he also pledges to “weep no more” (14, 17). Immediately thereafter, Lear rails at the storm and at the cruel daughters who would shut him out “[i]n such a night as this” (19). By line 21, Lear has recognized that “O, that way madness lies; let me shun that.” Finally convinced to take shelter, Lear decides to pray, and here the king becomes the first of three characters to discover that certain important things in his life have heretofore gone untended. In his sympathy for the “[p]oor naked wretches,” Lear admits “O, I have ta’en / Too little care of this!” (28, 32–33).

The Bedlam beggar

From the depths of the hovel, having terrified Lear’s Fool, Edgar appears disguised as Bedlam beggar and fully enacting his assumed role. The beggar character was well-known to Shakespeare’s audience, and playgoers saw the stereotypical Bedlam as something to be despised. Numerous Elizabethan accounts relate the descriptions of Poor Tom figures who roamed the English countryside, sticking pins and twigs in their skin, terrifying young maidens into offering money, and more often than not only pretending to be mad.

Though some of these souls were truly unhinged — escaped or released men from the Bethlehem (or Bedlam) Hospital — many were simply wanderers and vagabonds whose lack of good fortune or initiative placed them on the lowest rungs of society’s ladder. If Elizabethans felt any pity at all for Edgar disguised as Poor Tom, they felt that sympathy because they saw the good character of Edgar shining through the blanket costume of the lunatic.

Such, then, is the vision that rises before Elizabethan eyes at the entry of Tom, the lunatic whose nakedness is scarcely covered because “he reserved a blanket, else we had been all shamed” (64). Tom is a vision of contradictions, in many ways uttering in his feigned madness such paradoxes as Lear utters out of a true illness: “[G]o to thy cold bed,” rasps Tom, “and warm thee” (46–47). Edgar’s performance as the Bedlam beggar becomes even more convincing when, in combination with his wandering speech, he jousts and jabs at the unseen demons who torment him: “There I could have him now — and there — and there again — and there” (60–61).

Lear is certain that Tom’s desperate plight has been brought about through the conniving of Tom’s daughters. Lear’s mind is obviously dominated by this obsession: “[N]othing,” cries Lear, “could have subdued nature / To such a lowness but his unkind daughters” (69–70). Lear even curses Tom’s fictitious daughters in lines 66–67, just as Lear has already cursed Goneril and Regan. Lear’s cursing creates a bizarre picture when coupled with Tom’s peculiar version of biblical commandments in lines 79–82, and again in lines 94 and 95.

The picture that Tom paints of himself in response to Lear’s “What hast thou been?” is as base a view as one could imagine and is in some respects perhaps reminiscent of Edmund (83). According to Poor Tom, he has been a servant who satisfied the sexual wishes of his mistress. He has been given to swearing falsely and breaking promises. He drank, he gambled, he “out-paramoured the Turk”; he has been lazy, sneaky, greedy, and mad (90). All the rules and instructions Tom recites in lines 94 through 96 he has apparently broken, and he presents himself to Lear as the picture of utter depravity.

“Unaccommodated man”

Moved not by the recitation of the Bedlam beggar’s misconduct but rather by Tom’s present, near-naked condition, Lear has another revelation. He sees Tom as “the thing itself” and recognizes that “unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal” (105–107). This is an important realization for the distraught king, for in the past Lear has assumed that respectability went hand-in-hand with appearance.

Now, however, Lear sees that though circumstances may strip a human of all outward show of strength, the basic humanity remains and is worthy of respect and care. When Lear tears at his own clothing, he recognizes that his own situation in life is not so very different after all from that of the beggar.

Note the significance of names with respect to Edgar as Tom. As Gloucester arrives carrying a torch, Tom calls Gloucester “the foul Flibbertigibbet” (113). (The Notes mention Shakespeare’s source for this and other demon names.) The emphasis is not so much upon the name as it is upon the behaviors associated with the fiend or person named. For Tom, the defining features of the demon are its actions: the night stalks, the purposed deformities, the uncaring injuries. Tom even identifies himself mainly by his characteristics; he elaborates upon his accustomed menu, describes his reception in the

community, and details the pieces of his wardrobe. This lack of emphasis upon the importance of name alone is not new for Shakespeare. Recall those famous lines from *Romeo and Juliet*: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet.”

Shakespeare’s word choices open up multiple meanings here. When Tom mentions that he is customarily “whipped from tithing to tithing,” the general sense of the word “tithing” to Elizabethans was that of a parish or district; Tom, therefore, was whipped wherever he went (132). A more contemporary connotation of “tithing,” however, relates to the tenth of one’s salary given to the church. Read in this sense, Tom’s line also means he was whipped from Sunday (the day of tithing) to Sunday: hence, he was whipped continually.

Near the end of the scene, Lear has elevated Tom to the position of philosopher, Theban, and Athenian. To Lear, Tom’s words are wise ones, yet they seem wise only because Lear’s true madness is escalating. Remarks that others would see as bemused ramblings, Lear believes are sane pronouncements. Aristotle once said that “no excellent soul is exempt from a mixture of madness,” and Taine wrote, “Insanity is not a distinct and separate empire; our ordinary life borders upon it, and we cross the frontier in some part of our nature.” There is a ring of truth, then, in the Fool’s description of the world as a place where the “upside-down” is normal. But the mystery remains regarding how everything that seems wrong can ultimately be right.

ACT III, SCENE V

Shakespeare has two purposes in this scene between Cornwall and Edmund. First is a very practical purpose. Recall that the last scene featured appearances by Gloucester, Lear, Edgar, Kent, and the Fool. According to an unwritten rule of Elizabethan theatre called the “law of reentry,” it was bad drama for the characters at the end of one scene to enter the stage immediately in the following scene. Because Act III, Scene 6 will return the audience to Lear and his followers, Shakespeare needed to create this intervening scene to avoid breaking the reentry convention.

The second purpose of the scene is to bring Edmund’s endeavors to their culmination. When he informs Cornwall of the supposed treason of Gloucester, Cornwall awards Edmund with the title of “Earl of Gloucester” (18–19). Edmund hopes to push his advantage yet more; he feels that though “the conflict be sore between [his course of loyalty] and [his] blood,” he will be able to enhance his position with Cornwall further if he can actually catch Gloucester giving assistance to Lear (23–24). Note the irony in Edmund’s concern about loyalty and blood. To Cornwall, Edmund’s remark sounds like that of a child bemoaning the need to betray his father. For Edmund — and for the audience — the remark reveals only Edmund’s loyalty to his own plans.

ACT III, SCENE VI

We have to admire Shakespeare’s creativity and sense of stagecraft in this third act. Note how many aspects of human personality are presented to us here — how many fine distinctions of madness. We observe Lear’s insanity, listen to the Fool’s wit, and admire the accuracy of Edgar’s portrayal of the Bedlam. What a student of human nature Shakespeare was to have created for us these moving characters who at times almost seem fragments of a single personality. Each action and each utterance seem wholly appropriate for the particular dramatic situation.

This sense of rightness pervades Scene 6, not so much because we agree with what happens but because truth itself permeates the action. Lear’s mind is dominated by the thought of wicked daughters — both his own and the fictional ones of Poor Tom. But Lear is also quite deranged at this point, and his ramblings and antics are viewed by many literary-minded psychiatrists as highly apropos to his condition.

The daughters on trial

Settled now in the somewhat more amenable surroundings of a farmhouse, Lear and his entourage engage in an apparently disconnected series of words and phrases that perhaps only Shakespeare could have devised. Edgar rants about his demons, the Fool offers jokes and riddles, and Lear organizes a judicial investigation of Goneril and Regan.

Lear holds a mock trial of Goneril and Regan. Appointed as judges and jury, Edgar, Kent, and the Fool observe as Lear arraigns his daughters, who are represented by three-legged stools. Lear’s reason in madness and madness in reason is clearly exhibited, and the fact that the others in Lear’s party offer no real objection to these events gives the whole scene an air of absurdity.

Note the animal imagery that is rife in this scene; the characters allude to wolves, horses, she-foxes, nightingales, herrings, sheep, cats, and dogs — nine varieties of dog, in fact. The concept to grasp here is the very elemental “nature” of this farmhouse drama — the enactment of Lear’s “Man’s life is cheap as beast’s.” The deadly seriousness of that thought is offset by the ludicrous action of the scene, especially as Tom now seems to usurp the Fool’s position as poet. Along with the rhymed list of canines he presents, Poor Tom shares a ditty in lines 41–44 that resembles the old nursery rhyme: “Little Boy Blue, come blow your horn. The sheep’s in the meadow; the cow’s in the corn.”

In a poignant moment, Lear suggests that Tom’s kennel “anatomize Regan” (74). Lear’s supposed reasoning here is that perhaps some “cause in nature” has hardened the hearts of his daughters (75). Lear immediately links this thought with that bone of contention, the 100 knights his daughters refuse to host. Lear announces to Edgar, “You, sir, / I entertain for one of my hundred” (76–77). In some ways this invitation is superbly moving; remember that Lear speaks here, albeit unknowingly, to his own godson. Though Edgar plays the role of Bedlam beggar throughout this scene, he yet remains Edgar. The betrayed son of Gloucester, not a rambling madman, is watching Lear’s descent.

No time to rest

Edgar somewhat parrots the earlier remarks of his godfather about pain and suffering: “How light and portable my pain seems now, / When that which makes me bend, makes the King bow” (106–107). His comment echoes Lear’s earlier statement that “where the greater malady is fixed / The lesser is scarce felt” (III.4.8–9). Edgar voices his recognition of the parallel between his filial relationship to Gloucester and that of Lear to his daughters, saying, “He childed as I fathered” (108).

This scene presents a poignant picture of suffering. The long-loyal Kent realizes that Lear's nature is greatly weighed down with depression, and Kent suggests that had Lear been given the opportunity to sleep, some measure of comfort and reason might have returned. The immediate disturbance of Lear's much-needed rest has much to do with his continued suffering and frenzy. Rest and closure are needed at this point by all concerned; note how Tom's lines, all but the last two words of which are spoken not from the personality of the beggar but in the more elegant speech of Edgar, lend a sense of closure to the scene.

As Kent urges him to rest, Lear clearly evidences his mental exhaustion, urging his fellows to "make no noise; draw the curtains. / So, so. We'll go to supper i' th' morning" (81–82). Lear's tirade is slowing in pace, but his mind is far from healed. Indeed, healing sleep will not come to Lear until much later. Instead, Gloucester arrives with news that it is no longer safe for Lear and his mismatched entourage to remain at this farmhouse; immediate relocation is necessary to escape a plot against Lear's life. What should have been a rest and relief from strain and tension for all concerned, therefore, becomes a flight in the night.

ACT III, SCENE VII

This scene presents a controversial scenario. In it, Shakespeare violates one of the rules of classical theatre. If you have read Sophocles's *Oedipus*, recall that Jocasta's death and Oedipus's blinding occur offstage. These events become apparent after the fact; the violence itself is not perpetrated onstage. Here in Gloucester's castle, however, the horrible violence effected upon Gloucester is performed before the audience's eyes.

The Gloucester subplot comes into direct contact with the main story line as Gloucester is brought before Cornwall. Note that before Gloucester is even apprehended, both sisters offer suggestions about how to punish him. Regan suggests hanging; characteristically, Goneril suggests an even more vicious punishment: "Pluck out his eyes" (6).

Cornwall's true nature

In the brief interim before Gloucester is actually ushered in, Cornwall's irascible nature surfaces. Inflamed with thoughts of the war that is likely to come because French troops have now landed at Dover, Cornwall is ready to enlarge upon his previous cruelty. Earlier, remember, Cornwall placed Kent in the stocks, irreverently insulting the messenger of the king. Now, Cornwall coldly reasons, "Though well we may not pass upon his life / Without the form of justice, yet our power / Shall do a court'sy to our wrath, which men / May blame, but not control" (25–28). Gloucester has previously referred to Cornwall's disposition as one that "will not be rubbed or stopped." In this scene, Cornwall blatantly places himself above the law.

The difference in general attitude between Gloucester and Cornwall is striking. Gloucester hails from the old regime. His set of values entertains no place for insult and discourtesy. As host to the duke and duchess, Gloucester assumes a general respect and decency observed by all. With bewilderment, then, Gloucester comments upon crass treatment by his guests. "Good my friends," remarks Gloucester, "consider / You are my guests. Do me no foul play, friends" (31–32).

Derailed justice

Gloucester's plea, of course, goes unheeded. Bound to a chair at the command of Cornwall, Gloucester's interrogation is accompanied by the insolent Regan's plucking of his beard. Nothing Gloucester says concerning information about the French forces is believed, and his revelation that Lear is now safely at Dover provides Cornwall and Regan with valuable information with which to forward their plots against the king. Gloucester is no more effective in defending himself while tied to the chair than were the joint-stools that served for Lear's evil daughters during the mock trial. An overwhelming sense of derailed justice persists. The injustice began in the first scene with Cordelia's disinheritance, continues here, and remains an issue through the rest of the play.

The common conception of justice revolves around perpetrators being appropriately punished for their crimes. Most democratic nations also hold, however, that such justice is applied according to certain statutes and procedures that clearly indicate the guilt of the accused. Poetic justice, on the other hand, connotes something a bit different. This type of justice is a logical and direct result of events and actions — a retribution that is swift and that sometimes seems to benefit the evildoer. Poetic justice often means that a good man who has erred, even though he has seemingly learned from his mistake, will generally reap the punishment for his past bad actions.

Bearing these ideas of justice in mind, it seems inconceivable that Gloucester, regardless of his faults and errors, deserves what befalls him here in his own home at the hands of his guests, especially when we consider how truly compassionate he has been to the slighted king. One of the major arguments concerning this tragedy of King Lear is that neither poetic justice nor legal justice is well-served, as further evidenced later in the drama.

Incessant cruelty

One of the ironies in this scene is Gloucester's prophetic statement when he bravely tells Regan that he "would not see thy cruel nails / Pluck out [Lear's] poor old eyes" (58–59). That precise punishment is instead levied against Gloucester. Further, Cornwall announces to Gloucester that "[u]pon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot" (70). The viciousness of Cornwall seems to know no bounds.

After Gloucester is blinded, note how the cruelty of the scene continues. Gloucester's hopes of being avenged by Edmund are viciously shattered, for he learns that it was Edmund who betrayed him to Cornwall. Regan, enraged at the audacity of a servant who dares to intercede, kills the intercessor. (In many performances, the actress portraying Regan simply turns away with a cold stare when the injured Cornwall asks for her arm.)

Despite the punishment that awaits them if Regan should discover their actions, two servants not only comment upon how monstrous her behavior is but also offer their help to the "old Earl" (105). Without the final lines and actions of these servants, Act III would close with an almost unbearable pathos. Because of their inclusion, however, we know that Gloucester will eventually be reunited with Edgar as "the bedlam," so a glimpse of hope remains (105).

ACT IV, SCENE I

After the horrendous vision offered at the close of Act III, viewers need some relief for their battered sensitivities. In contrast with the violence just witnessed in Gloucester's castle, this scene is poignant in its depiction of the blinded Gloucester being guided by the still disguised Edgar. The scene also underscores the pessimism that continues to abound.

As the scene opens, Edgar speaks words containing a hint of optimism. Because he is "[t]he lowest and most dejected thing of fortune," he believes his situation can only improve — it cannot worsen (3). No sooner does he utter these words than an Old Man enters leading the blinded Gloucester. The kindness of this Old Man, who is one of Gloucester's tenants, has been somewhat slighted by critics; he is, after all, not a major character. Yet what he does is important, for he not only brings Gloucester to Edgar but also agrees to bring clothing to Poor Tom. Such loyalty from Gloucester's tenant contrasts sharply with the disloyalty of Gloucester's bastard son.

Gloucester speaks and philosophizes without knowing that his disguised son Edgar now joins him. Gloucester's most famous lines — "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods; / They kill us for their sport" — stand in stark opposition to the hopeful words spoken by Edgar at the beginning of the scene (36–37). In addition, Gloucester's reference to the gods reminds Edgar of his father's peculiar weakness with respect to the supernatural — a weakness upon which Edgar will shortly play.

Edgar is clearly distressed by the visible evidence of his father's suffering, and we might think that he should now reveal himself to his father. But he does not do so, difficult as it is for him to maintain his beggar's role. Remember that Edgar is still an outlaw, and while no mention is made at present of further injury planned for Gloucester, the possibility of pursuit nevertheless exists. Gloucester, in his present condition, is not likely to keep Edgar's identity secret. Further, Gloucester has another lesson to learn. He desires that Edgar guide the way to the cliffs of Dover; Edgar's dramatic task as Poor Tom, then, is to help Gloucester not only find the cliffs he seeks but to learn an important lesson about life as well.

Gloucester becomes the second man in the play to recognize how little care he has taken in the past for those less fortunate than he. Mirroring Lear's earlier remarks, Gloucester cries, "Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man, / That slaves your ordinance, that will not see / Because he does not feel, feel your pow'r quickly; / So distribution should undo excess, / And each man have enough" (67–71). Gloucester, the "lust-dieted man," realizes now something of the basic suffering of humanity and the roots common to all.

But Gloucester has not yet come to terms with the fact that each person is ultimately responsible for his own life. Gloucester's purgatory yet awaits him. He must experience it before he can develop into a greater man than the naive person who, according to Jan Kott, initially has "nothing about him" that "hints at the tragic old man whose eyes will be gouged out."

ACT IV, SCENE II

As Scene 2 opens, a new twist in the plot presents itself. Previously, Goneril has spoken with something less than affection to her husband Albany. Now she issues outright derision. Again talking in an unusually familiar fashion with her steward Oswald, Goneril remarks on the "cowish" nature of her husband (12). She feels obliged to become the man of the house, so to speak. Obviously, there is no love lost in this marital relationship — at least not on Goneril's part.

Goneril's infidelity

Goneril also is clearly not above disloyalty and unfaithfulness. Her father Lear is not the only one to be fleeced by Goneril; Albany stands to become a classic cuckold. Goneril's hints to Edmund — "Ere long you are like to hear / (If you dare venture in your own behalf) / A mistress's command" — are thinly veiled at best (19–21). Plainly, she intends a romantic interlude, and she presents Edmund with a love token in earnest of that affair.

Her thoughts still anticipating future involvement with Edmund, Goneril comments to her entering husband about the cold reception she receives. His response is to tell her, "You are not worth the dust which the rude wind / Blows in your face" (30–31). This is the first evidence in the play of Albany standing up to his wife, and we learn that he does so out of disgust at the treatment of Lear.

Quickly brought down to earth by Albany's cutting slight, Goneril ridicules her husband, calling his words foolish and his personality "[m]ilk-livered" (50). Despite the fact that Albany is showing his spine for the first time, Goneril refuses to credit him with any strength of character. But we can imagine that if Goneril's treatment of the king causes Albany to have to restrain himself lest he "dislocate and tear / [her] flesh and bones," his response would be no less furious if he knew of his wife's plans for Edmund (65–66).

Albany's dilemma

Note the position in which Albany finds himself at this point. He knows that Cornwall is dead; consequently, the enmity between these two noblemen, hinted at and rumored already in the play, now shifts to a conflict between Albany and the merry widow Regan. The entrance of French troops into the realm adds yet another twist, and while Albany has not entered into any treasonous alliance with the French, it is clear that his allegiance rests with the mistreated Lear.

Additionally, Albany now mistrusts his wife and is fast discovering how unstable his domestic life has become. This series of events, coupled with Albany's realization that a human being can harbor much that is unpleasant, plays into the theme of nature threaded through the play. Albany compares Goneril and her sister with beastly creatures. The women are "[t]igers," and in their actions Albany sees humanity preying upon itself "[l]ike monsters of the deep" (40, 50).

ACT IV, SCENE III

A meeting between Kent and a gentleman at the French camp near Dover prepares the audience for what will transpire shortly between Lear and Cordelia. Although we learned earlier that Kent has been in contact with Lear's youngest daughter, her presence in the kingdom now becomes clearer.

Cordelia has come, with her husband the King of France, at the head of the French invading army. For reasons of security to his own state, the French king has returned to France, leaving Cordelia behind with the marshal and troops. Imminent danger to Cordelia is not directly addressed, but the fact that she is here without her husband-king can be thought to foreshadow some disaster. Note also that as the French are camped near Dover, the troops — and Lear — are situated in close proximity to the location where Gloucester has asked Poor Tom to lead him.

The gentleman's moving description of Cordelia's grief serves to further the contrast between this abandoned yet loyal daughter and the vixens who are her sisters. With every right in the world to turn her back on the father who has done the same to her, Cordelia yet stands steadfast in her "ill-spoken" love and decries the actions of Goneril and Regan. Yet Cordelia's grief is not immediately to be alleviated or her loyalty rewarded because Lear, encompassed by a "sovereign shame [that] so elbows him," will not go to see Cordelia (43). Lear, ridden with guilt, remains a mad roamer on the heath, and what little kingdom he has there among the weeds and rushes, he intends to retain. Consequently, Kent must not only effect the reunion of Lear and Cordelia but also monitor the proceedings of the civil and international unrest.

ACT IV, SCENE IV

In his madness, Lear has indeed concocted a little kingdom for himself in the fields near Dover. Cordelia has received a report that Lear was spied close to the French encampment wearing a crown fashioned from "all the idle weeds that grow / In our sustaining corn" (5–6). This news about her bemused and bedraggled father is almost more than a loving daughter can bear, and Cordelia pledges any price to see her father improved.

Note also the additional demands placed on Cordelia in the absence of her sovereign husband. News is brought that "[t]he British pow'rs are marching hitherward," and Cordelia has already attended to preparing for an inevitable battle (21). In this pre-Christian setting, it is remarkable that the seemingly overwhelming duties Cordelia must fulfill seem suspiciously similar to those placed before Jesus. Because King Lear was performed for a Christian audience, such comparisons would be easily perceived by Elizabethan playgoers. For example, when referring to her father, Cordelia says, "It is thy business that I go about" (24). Her words bring to mind the biblical phrase "I go about my Father's business."

ACT IV, SCENE V

Immediately following a scene in which Cordelia's continued devotion to her father is a focal point, this scene presents another twist on the wheel of fate — this time, not nearly as optimistic. Three main functions are served here: the establishment of Oswald's loyalty to Goneril, the recognition by Regan that she has erred in allowing Gloucester to live, and the romantic entanglement of Gloucester's bastard son with Lear's opportunistic daughters. Of these three functions, the most important is the developing triangle now forming among Goneril, Regan, and Edmund.

Regan, in an incredibly familiar conversation with Goneril's servant Oswald, reveals her designs upon Edmund. "Edmund and I have talked," says Regan, "And more convenient is he for my hand / Than for your lady's. You may gather more" (30–32). Regan grows increasingly suspicious of Goneril as a potential rival for Edmund's affections, and she is chagrined when Oswald declines to let her read Goneril's letter to Edmund.

Oswald, in his refusal to be tempted into betraying his mistress, exhibits a loyalty that parallels that of Kent to Lear. Though Kent and Oswald are vastly different men, each nevertheless shares a bond with his master that cannot be compromised. Unfortunately, the minions of evil are often as adept and devoted as the ministers of good.

Finally, Regan's disposition reveals further evidence of darkness. She recognizes her poor judgment in allowing Gloucester to live, thus adding to that element of error already traced throughout the play. She indicates her belief that Edmund has gone in search of his father in order to kill him. Regan fears Gloucester's influence on those he meets: "Where he arrives," she says, "he moves / All hearts against us" (10–11).

Anxious to rectify her mistake, Regan commissions Oswald to remain on the lookout for the blinded earl, promising that "[p]referment falls on him that cuts him off" (38). Though Oswald refuses to betray his mistress Goneril, he is quite willing to perform evil service for Regan. In this way Oswald can be beloved of both women, a position in which Edmund is also situated.

ACT IV, SCENE VI

On the cliffs of Dover, Edgar appears in yet another role. He pretends to be a peasant, leading Gloucester on his journey to the cliffs. Even Gloucester notices the change from Edgar's earlier role, for he thinks that this man's speech is altogether better phrased than it was when they first met. Despite Edgar's comments to the contrary, an air of change is apparent, and that atmosphere foreshadows the changes soon to be seen in Gloucester and Lear.

The lesson of the cliff

The blinded Gloucester and his disguised son present vivid pictures of human suffering in this scene. Now dubbed a traitor and stripped of status, sight, and sons, Gloucester wants only to throw himself over the cliffs and drown in the sea. Edgar, too, has been in misery. Just as Lear has entered into the madness of lost identity, so has Edgar nearly lost himself in the role of Bedlam beggar. Falling from the upper echelons of society to the lowest, Edgar has engaged in a journey that stripped him of all life's accoutrements: his name, his reputation, his position, his family ties, his apparel, and (seemingly) his sanity.

Yet Edgar's determination to help his father teaches a vital lesson. It reminds us that humanity, when it operates with morality and a sense of values, is a great community in which individuals succeed by taking responsibility for one another's well-being. The good of the many is served through ensuring the

good of the few and the one. Here on the Dover fields with his blinded father, Edgar is just one step away from hitting rock bottom. He holds on to the small advantage of that one step only so he can pull his father from the threatening abyss of suicidal depression.

In the midst of so much tragedy, the interaction between Gloucester and Edgar takes on a comical feel at times. Jan Kott explains that the comedy is effected through proper staging of the scene: “Edgar is supporting Gloucester; he lifts his feet high pretending to walk uphill. Gloucester, too, lifts his feet, as if expecting the ground to rise, but underneath his feet there is only air. The entire scene is written for a very definite type of theatre, namely pantomime. This pantomime only makes sense if enacted on a flat and level stage.” Performances of *King Lear* staged with something resembling real cliffs or heights do a great injustice to Shakespeare’s dramatic impetus here, for Gloucester’s fall is meant to be comical, and anything tending toward realism destroys the intended effect.

A “somersault on an empty stage”

In lines 34–40, as Gloucester prepares to dive from the rocks, he once again calls upon the “mighty gods” who have ever held his attention. As Kott points out, his speech here tells us that “Gloucester’s suicide has a meaning only if the gods exist. It is a protest against undeserved suffering and the world’s injustice. But if the gods, and their moral order in the world, do not exist, Gloucester’s suicide does not solve or alter anything. It is only a somersault on an empty stage.” Of course, Gloucester’s suicide attempt turns out to be just that — a “somersault on an empty stage.” As a result, his high sounding protest comes to “nothing,” reiterating the emphasis upon nothingness that threads throughout the play.

Edgar is not yet finished with role-playing; he dons yet another personality after Gloucester’s supposed fall. Now Edgar claims to be a passing countryman who witnessed Gloucester’s plunge from the cliffs. Note how Edgar is in some respects similar to Edmund at this point. Edmund has repeatedly taken advantage of his father’s gullibility; here, Edgar does the same. Well aware of his father’s tendency toward belief in the supernatural, Edgar leads Gloucester to believe it was a fiend whose “eyes were two full moons” that stood nearby as Gloucester fell (69–70). Just as Edgar plays on Gloucester’s beliefs, Shakespeare played on his contemporary audiences’ fascination with folk tales and legends. By placing Gloucester on a rocky cliff, the playwright was able to play upon common knowledge that boulders and mountainous areas were often thought to be the abodes of supernatural beings. Gloucester and playgoer alike are easily drawn into Edgar’s tale of a cliff dweller with whelked horns and a thousand noses.

Surrendering to life

At least part of what Gloucester is doing in this scene is questioning — even challenging — the relationship between humanity and the gods. The interconnections of divinity and human life have always produced questions about the value of human life and our responsibility to maintain and nurture it. In the presence of a divinity, does humanity have jurisdiction over its own existence?

Jan Kott writes that “if there are no gods, suicide is impossible. There is only death. Suicide cannot alter human fate, but only accelerate it. . . . It is a surrender.” Gloucester, having failed in his protest, begins to accept, with some forced stoicism, the dole of life: “Henceforth I’ll bear / Affliction till it do cry out itself / ‘Enough, enough and die’” (75–77). What Gloucester surrenders to here is not death but life, however cruel and cold it seems to be.

Lear transformed

The first major movement of this scene now complete, the stage is set for the entrance of that other mind-weary character, Lear himself. Just as Cordelia has heard, the maddened Lear is now roaming the fields “fantastically dressed with flowers.” (In the film version of *Lear* starring Laurence Olivier, Lear even guts and eats an uncooked rabbit.)

Note the dramatic difference between the Lear we saw at the beginning of the play and the Lear we see now. The Lear who sat on the throne and disinherited Cordelia was a passionate monarch — regal, powerful, sure of himself, and confident in his ability to control the world around him. This new Lear, however, has been so dominated by his cruel daughters that little of the former tyrant remains visible. R. C. Bald remarks that “in no other play of Shakespeare’s is the change in the principal characters during the course of the action so striking as in this.”

Whereas earlier scenes showed Lear at least somewhat focused on the sources of his anger, the Lear of the flowers now rambles almost incoherently. Gloucester easily recognizes “[t]he trick of that voice” and identifies his king despite the loss of sight (107). But the voice of the king is all that Gloucester finds familiar, for the content of Lear’s speeches is far from those powerful, sovereign commands Gloucester is accustomed to hearing.

Lear does not even recognize his Earl of Gloucester but rather dubs him “Goneril with a white beard” (97). The blind Gloucester and Lear converse; Lear questions Gloucester about his “cause” (110). Recall that in the first scene of the play, Gloucester bragged about having a bastard son. He boasted of the “good sport at his making” and the fact that Edmund’s mother “grew round-wombed, and had indeed . . . a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed” (I.1.23, 14–15). How ironic that in this scene Lear declares that Gloucester will not die for adultery.

In excusing an act engaged in by both the “wren . . . and the small gilded fly,” Lear inadvertently twists the knife in Gloucester’s heart (113). Lear cries that “Gloucester’s bastard son / Was kinder to his father than my daughters / Got ‘tween the lawful sheets” (115–117). Note also how Lear’s defense of adultery here parallels Edmund’s defense of bastardy in Act I, Scene 2.

A thirst for revenge

Even in the extremes of his derangement, Lear express a desire for revenge. Lear denounces women, who from the waist down are all “Centaurs, / though women all above” (125–126). This venomous statement is followed by a fit of retching (“Fie, fie, fie! pah! pah!”), as though the very idea of femininity turns Lear’s stomach and brings bile to his mouth (130–131). William Hazlitt writes that by this point in the play, “[T]he mind of Lear staggers between the weight of attachment and the hurried movements of passion . . . like a tall ship driven about by the winds.” Indeed, most actors portray Lear in this scene as semi frantic and always in motion.

Yet for all his ravings, Lear evokes pity from Gloucester as well as from the audience. We don’t agree with how Lear has treated Kent and Cordelia, and we don’t find it wise that Lear gave away his kingdom. How, though, can we help but have sympathy for and empathy with this king whose passionate temperament and one-sided thinking has brought so much sadness and pain upon himself?

Note also the emphasis upon eyes, sight, and blindness in this scene. Lear remarks to Gloucester, “I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou / squint at me?” (138–139). He commands Gloucester to “[r]ead thou this challenge” and makes further comments in lines 146–173 that hinge upon seeing, looking,

and beholding (140). He even urges Gloucester to “[g]et thee glass eyes / And, like a scurvy politician, seem / To see the things thou dost not” (171–173). Lear doesn’t admit to recognizing Gloucester until line 178.

As Lear continues in his flailings and musings, playacting a scene in which he will “kill, kill” his sons-in-law, Cordelia’s men enter (188). Even though the men are respectful to Lear and promise him comfort, Lear is so caught up in his fictions that he eludes those who would help him. Pursued by attendants, Lear leaves the stage to Edgar and Gloucester. The news they receive is both good and bad: Cordelia is indeed nearby. Her army, however, has moved on. Cordelia is left with precious few to protect her as she attempts to retrieve her father.

Goneril’s letter to Edmund

The closing section of this scene brings the entry and demise of Oswald. Delighted to have found Gloucester and anticipating a fine reward for service, Oswald prepares to make short shrift of the blind earl. Edgar, of course, intervenes. He first attempts diplomacy, adopting a thick accent in his speech and urging Oswald to move along.

Edgar’s nonviolence marks an important difference between his morality and that of Edmund and his followers. Violence is not in the forefront of Edgar’s mind, and cruelty is not his first thought. But when his initial peaceful maneuver fails, Edgar is forced to fight, and Oswald is mortally wounded. True to the last, Oswald’s last thoughts and dying remarks concern his mission. As an audience that knows the contents of Oswald’s letter — “loving” remarks from Goneril to Edmund — we should sense immediately that Edgar will never deliver that letter to Edmund as Oswald has requested. Indeed, Edgar proves us right; he plans instead to deliver the letter in due time to Albany.

Edgar still does not identify himself to Gloucester, which is perplexing. Indeed, three times in the scene’s closing lines he calls Gloucester “father,” and once he acknowledges his brother. Yet Edgar’s mission, like Oswald’s, is not yet fulfilled. Armed with the letter taken from Oswald — the letter that will indict Goneril for her plans with Edmund — Edgar plans to further the cause of Lear and Gloucester “in the mature time” (275).

ACT IV, SCENE VII

Critic A.C. Bradley remarks that throughout this play, “Lear follows an old man’s whim, half generous, half selfish; and in a moment it loses all the powers of darkness upon him.” Lear begins to emerge from the darkness in this scene, generally referred to as a scene of reconciliation. Lear finally obtains the sleep and rest that Kent much earlier said would ease Lear’s “oppressed nature,” and here Lear begins to retrieve something of his lost self.

Kent has done Cordelia a great service by restoring her father to her, and he deserves a reward commensurate with that service. Cordelia gratefully acknowledges this. Characteristically, however, Kent feels that “[t]o be acknowledged . . . is o’erpaid” (4). He refuses even the offer of new garments, certain that he can do further good by remaining disguised a little longer. While the loyal service of Oswald to Goneril has proven to be greedy, self-serving, and violent, the service of Kent to Lear and Cordelia is self-denying, modest, and honorable.

Notice here the use of music and the doctor’s urging that the volume be increased. As well as helping establish the setting of harmony and calm for the audience, music is also part of Lear’s therapy. From the bitter weather, harsh arguments, and deranged ravings of the past stormy times, Lear’s mind is in desperate need of soothing, just as his body is in need of rest.

Cordelia in this scene clearly has much to share with her father. Her words are poetic and her thoughts sympathetic as she muses on what storms her father has suffered because of his other daughters. And how appropriate her use of “poor perdu” (lost one) in reference to Lear (35). The French phrase originates from the military. But when applied to her father, the words are doubly symbolic, for the mad and lonely Lear has been every bit as isolated as an endangered sentry.

As Lear awakens from his rest, he arrives at something like the end of purgatory. Just as Gloucester faced his moment of truth on the Dover cliffs, so now Lear faces Cordelia. Here at last is some peace and order, a far cry from the maelstrom in body and spirit to which Lear has been subjected. Still “far wide” (not yet recovered), Lear initially mistakes Cordelia for a “soul in bliss” (50, 46). But ever so gently, Cordelia brings Lear around to an awareness not only of who she is but also of where he is. Cordelia assures Lear that he is in his own kingdom, not the subdivided land that Lear gave to Albany and Cornwall. Note also that Lear, after the simplest of Christian teachings, offers no long apologies, explanations, or wailings, but simply says to Cordelia, “Pray you now, forget and forgive, I am old and foolish” (85–86).

Some versions of this play text end the scene here, with the calm and peaceful reunion of Lear and Cordelia. Other versions, including ours, contain lines that place Kent in conversation with a gentleman. The two share news, comparing conflicting and changeable reports, and Kent closes the scene. His final words indicate suspense — a prophecy of Kent’s destiny to be fulfilled this very day. Because the next act begins in a more hurried, military setting, this meeting of Kent and the Gentleman serves as a bridge for what would otherwise be a very abrupt shift from the peaceful tent of Cordelia to the war zone of Edmund.

ACT V, SCENE I

In this scene, the conflict between Goneril and Regan escalates. Both women have distinct designs upon Edmund, and Edmund apparently has no qualms about playing both sides of the field. Notice how he evades a direct response to Regan’s questions about his relationship with Goneril. Regan’s primary concern is whether or not Edmund and Goneril have been sexually intimate. Edmund sidesteps her questions, which does not ease Regan’s doubts, and she feels obliged to issue a command: “Dear my lord, / Be not familiar with her” (15–16).

A tentative alliance

Goneril and Albany join Regan and Edmund in the British camp. Given Albany’s opinion of Goneril and Regan, stated so clearly in Act IV, Scene 2, we suspect that his loyalty is divided between the sisters and the king. Albany states that he will fight against the French, but only because of the threat of

foreign invasion; he does not want his actions interpreted as affronts to Lear. The others feign agreement, claiming (as Goneril states) that “these domestic and particular broils” should be ignored for the time being in order to focus on the French threat (30).

Despite having forged a tentative alliance, Regan and Goneril still extend their talons in this scene. Each clearly feels malice toward the other because of their mutual designs on Edmund. Neither wants to allow the other to be alone with Edmund. Thus, both must exit simultaneously. When Goneril offers to linger, Regan insists that she leave. Goneril knows Regan’s mind: “O ho, I know the riddle,” she quips (37).

Edgar’s proposal

Edgar’s entrance shortly after the exit of the sisters poses an interesting situation for Albany. Albany’s mind is still uneasy regarding the conflict with France, and Edgar’s proposal does little to settle the duke’s unrest.

Edgar brings with him the letter that Goneril wrote for Edmund, which Oswald was supposed to deliver. The letter reveals Goneril’s intentions for Edmund. Edgar asks Albany to read the letter before going to battle with the French.

When Edgar asks Albany to have a trumpet sounded after the impending battle, he is offering a formal challenge to prove the contents of the letter. This trumpet call is part of a ritualistic formula; note that Edgar states in lines 43 and 44 that he can “produce a champion” — or knight — who can prove that what is said in the letter is indeed the truth.

What Edgar proposes is a traditional trial by combat. Normally, such an event required a certain amount of ceremony, including the proclamation of the participants’ lineage and the announcement of the complaint. The person who won the battle was assumed vindicated; his cause was deemed just. In Act V, we will see the trial by combat take place. Here, Edgar simply makes the proposal; he does not want to be present when Albany reads the letter that explains the reason for the challenge.

Edgar’s letter and request place Albany in a potentially compromising situation. Albany does not know Edgar or his allegiances, so he has no means of knowing the true reason for this challenge. At the same time, the audience knows the contents of the letter but does not yet understand the full nature of Edgar’s challenge. What we have, then, is Albany faced with a formal challenge for an unknown reason, and an audience that knows the reason but not the precise form that the challenge will take. In this way, suspense is enhanced.

Edmund’s indifference

Note that much of Edmund’s closing soliloquy concerns Goneril and Regan. Edmund’s relative indifference is apparent; he seems to have no preference for either duchess — much like their own father has no preference for either daughter in the opening scene of the play. Edmund’s mercilessness also becomes clear; he determines that Cordelia and Lear shall never see Albany’s pardon. Following on the heels of Edgar’s mysterious visit, these lines by Edmund serve to heighten the contrast between the two brothers. They also indicate that perhaps it is Edmund who will be required to face the challenge that Edgar has issued.

ACT V, SCENE II

Shakespeare is able to accomplish a great deal here with a symbolic military march and corresponding retreat. He provides a concise representation of the battle between France and Britain — a battle that ends in defeat for the French and capture for Lear and Cordelia.

Edgar reports the news of Lear’s defeat to Gloucester. Discouraged, Gloucester begs to be left alone. Edgar responds, “Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither; / Ripeness is all” (9–11). His words effectively paraphrase Ecclesiastes: “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens.” Gloucester has not yet reached his season of death, and Edgar seeks to remind his father of this.

ACT V, SCENE III

In this final scene of the play, Shakespeare seems to guide us toward a tentative optimism in the midst of deep tragedy. The structure of the scene offers a hint at that optimism. The scene’s opening features Lear and Cordelia, two of the characters representing goodness in the play. In the middle of the scene, the focus turns toward evil as Edmund, Goneril, and Regan command the stage one last time. But the scene’s ending turns back to the good by bringing Edgar, Albany, Kent, and Lear together. While many critics have emphasized the pessimism inherent in this drama, a scene structure that both begins and ends with the light of the good must offer some hope.

A brief respite

As the scene opens, Lear and Cordelia have been captured by Edmund’s troops, and Lear submits to his captivity with joy. The Lear of the opening scenes would never have submitted so peacefully to incarceration; this Lear, however, is a new being. Having suffered immensely, undergoing a purification of sorts, the king’s now quite content to envision “setting his rest” upon Cordelia at any cost and in any place, even in a jail. “Setting his rest” upon this dearest, youngest daughter was all that Lear really wanted right from the start, and the poignancy of this brief period of happiness with her stands in sharp relief to the suffering Lear will encounter in the play’s final sequences.

Notice how a reunion with his beloved Cordelia has in some measure restored a bit of Lear’s old fire. In lines 22–23, Lear proclaims with spirit that “[h]e that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven / And fire us hence like foxes.” Caught up in the joy of the moment and in the exhilaration of thinking he is almost in his right mind again, Lear does not see the danger in his present situation. With Edmund’s next words, Lear’s threat loses its menace.

Having sent Lear and Cordelia off under guard, Edmund initiates the next step in his power play: He orders the Captain to murder the King and his daughter. Edmund reasons that “men / Are as the time is. To be tender-minded / Does not become a sword” (30–32). To convince the Captain to execute this plan, Edmund plays upon his sense of manhood and soldierly swagger. By explaining that he will “thrive by other means” should the Captain refuse the command,

Edmund pricks the Captain's pride (34). Further, by providing the Captain with written authorization, Edmund supplies him with a clear excuse for his actions. When questioned about the deaths of Lear and Cordelia, the Captain can honestly say he was just following orders.

Evil dominates the stage

The entrance of Goneril, Regan, and Albany into this scene creates a sense of overall balance in the play. The play opens with a tableau: trumpets and royalty, ceremony and banishment — and all the major characters either on stage or introduced. This closing scene reminds us of the first. Missing, of course, are the royal trumpets and some of the regalia. But the scene is nonetheless similar in that the major characters all appear, and many are banished — into death.

Edmund's initial role in this tableau is to portray himself as loyal and efficient. Much like in a game of wagering, however, Albany calls Edmund's bluff. Albany is now aware of Edmund's involvement with Goneril; the letter provided by Edgar is Albany's trump card. Both duchesses bare their fangs as they all but come to blows over Edmund; their arguments reveal their spite. When Albany decrees that the marital alliance of Edmund and Regan is solely within his power to decide, Edmund again changes colors, intimating that Albany has no control over the proposed union.

Albany's new strength

Albany here is no longer the "milk-livered" man chided by Goneril. Albany's transformation parallels that of Lear and Gloucester in that Albany learns to recognize the incredible capability for evil that humanity possesses. Fortunately for Albany, the methods by which he learned this lesson were less physically devastating than the trials of Lear and Gloucester. Albany's dry wit and sarcasm here reveal for us a new man — a man who can undermine Edmund's plots with a biting logic. Addressing Regan, Albany says that because Goneril is "subcontracted" to Edmund and Albany forbids that union, then Regan should woo Albany if she wishes to wed (86). This new Albany has discovered — as have Lear and Gloucester before him — that he has been far too inattentive to certain aspects of his life.

Edmund finds himself backed into a corner. Albany has thrown down his own glove, pledging that he himself will fight Edmund if no other champion appears. Though Albany probably finds this a safe challenge to issue — he is aware that another has promised to confront Edmund — Albany is nonetheless set on resolving this strife. Edmund is warned that he must answer alone in this situation, for Edmund's soldiers — "levied" in Albany's name — cannot assist the accused (106).

Trial by combat

As Edgar responds to the trumpet call, the trial by combat unfolds. The Herald issues the traditional call for name, lineage, and complaint. Edgar's response carries an ironic truth, for indeed his name is lost; Edgar's rightful title as heir to Gloucester's earldom has been stolen by the bastard Edmund. (This should remind us of the biblical story of Jacob usurping the birthright of Esau.) Although he has no name, Edgar is quick to name Edmund: "False to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father, / Conspirant 'gainst this high illustrious prince" (135–136). Notice again the beast imagery: Edmund is a "toad-spotted traitor" (139).

Surprisingly, Edmund declines to demand the name of his challenger. Many modern critics have questioned why Edmund would fight someone unknown to him. One suggestion is that Edmund, knowing that Albany intends to carry out the challenge himself if necessary, feels he has no choice but to fight the stranger.

Because of the nature of trials by combat, Edmund cannot rely on youth and skill to succeed. A divine judge controls the outcome of this contest, and Edmund knows he is guilty of plotting against Albany. Edmund may possibly feel that he has some hope of success in this battle because the unnamed man could be a charlatan. To win the battle with the stranger would help to vindicate Edmund in the eyes of Albany.

Edgar's vindication

Vindication does occur, but not for Edmund. Defeated by Edgar, Edmund is proven complicit in wrongdoing. Goneril's reaction does not help his case. The conniving Duchess, having seen her hero fall, pronounces the victory unjust because Edmund "wast not bound to answer / An unknown opposite" (153–154). True to her character, Goneril tries to pull rank on Albany when he reveals the letter proving her alliance with Edmund. Goneril argues that, as a princess of the kingdom, she is above the law: "[T]he laws are mine, not thine. / Who can arraign me for 't?" (159–160). Goneril, much like Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund, does not feel obliged to adhere to moral law; each of these evil characters adheres only to the lower laws of Nature.

Through the trial by combat, Edgar has become the instrument of justice. Respectful of his father and dutiful in every way, Edgar admits that Gloucester's blinding is the result of those "pleasant vices" that the just gods use to "plague us" (171–172). Although he is willing to "exchange charity" with his dying brother, Edgar does not hesitate to unveil Edmund's treachery (167). Edgar could have justifiably challenged Edmund solely to avenge his father, but that would have been selfish. Instead, Edgar also challenges Edmund for his treason against the gods and the rightful princes of the land. Edgar, unlike the evildoers, refuses to subsist on the baser level of Nature and chooses instead a higher order.

As Edmund lies dying from a wound Edgar gave him, two other deaths occur offstage: Regan dies from the poison Goneril has given her, and Goneril commits suicide. Edmund expresses, with a sort of amazement, that in death he achieves a love that he never received from the father who laughed about his illegitimacy. For Edmund, being beloved of two women represents a type of victory: "The one the other poisoned for my sake, / And after slew herself" (241–242).

Too late for Cordelia

Seemingly forgotten among the chaos of battle and death, Lear and Cordelia become more than just means to an end for the weakening Edmund. Meaning to do some good "[d]espite of mine own nature," Edmund reveals his death order for the king and his daughter (245). Edmund's last act may be interpreted as a compassionate one. On the other hand, Edmund may be striving to find favor with a superior — in this case, God — with a last-minute good deed.

Tragically, Edmund's attempt at goodwill comes too late. Cordelia has died, hanged by a lowly captain for no crime whatsoever and without the trial that even the reprobate Edmund was afforded. Lear, who tries to catch some breath lingering upon Cordelia's lips, has lost his entire family, as well as his kingdom, title, and sense of self. Even Gloucester is now gone, his heart having "[b]urst smilingly" when Edgar revealed his identity to his father (200). Only Kent, Edgar, and Albany remain to observe the final moments of the enfeebled king.

Fortune's slight comfort

Even in the midst of so much despair, slight hope remains. Recall that in Act II, Scene 2, while sitting in the stocks at Gloucester's castle, Kent recognized that the wheel of fate turns constantly, promising a better day even when life appears darkest. Edmund, mortally wounded by his own brother, remarks that "[t]he wheel is come full circle" (175). And Edgar, having once told Gloucester that "ripeness is all," now admits that "[t]he weight of this sad time we must obey" (324). The image we should see here is the weighty Wheel of Fortune; its underside seems hard to bear, but at its worst it promises the comfort of continual change.

The Biblical book Ecclesiastes provides a possible key to the fundamental ideology of this play. In Ecclesiastes 1:9, we read that "the thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done, and there is no new thing under the sun." These lines describing the constant turning of life — a cycle that parallels the play's Wheel of Fortune — teach us that both good times and bad will be our lot in life, and whatever suffering or gladness we may experience, someone somewhere has experienced the same thing before.

King Lear also brings to life a specific passage from Ecclesiastes 3:3, which assures us that for everything in life, there is "[a] time to kill, and a time to heal: a time to break down, and a time to build up." The play is rife with killing and death — of persons, titles, and identities. But the play also allows for healing: Lear's mind is at least temporarily healed after his reunion with Cordelia, and the break between Gloucester and Edgar is mended as well. Even though we see a broken kingdom in chaos at the close of the play, we see also a commitment to build up and sustain "the gored state" (321).

The play also teaches lessons about wisdom and foolishness: the foolishness of those who should be wise, and the wisdom of those thought to be fools. Recall the ironic wisdom in the remarks of both the Fool and Poor Tom; remember, too, the foolish acts of the noble and supposedly wise Lear and Gloucester.

Divine justice

To our eyes, Gloucester and Lear suffer excessively for their relatively trivial offenses, and Cordelia's death seems to serve no purpose at all. Yet Shakespeare seems to make a comment in this play about divine justice, which differs from other forms of justice. All secrets are finally revealed in *King Lear*, and all things come to judgment. No one is left untouched by the tragedy in this play; all the major characters suffer incredible pain and loss. Though we have a difficult time understanding divine justice in such tragic form, it does have biblical precedents. For example, Exodus 34:7 indicates that the sins of the father are passed to his children, and even to a third generation. In light of this concept, Cordelia's death may make more sense.

Finally, *King Lear* speaks to us repeatedly about fate and chance, destiny and the gods. Is human life like a casino game, completely random, with the house odds stacked against us? What vision of justice do we get, and what picture of loving divinity? *King Lear* reminds us that humanity has free will and choice; as a result, humanity can and does prey upon itself, often blocking the path of virtue and morality so that evil succeeds. But free will can also overcome darkness and restore the light, and we must carry that hope away from the play. If we dwell on the pessimism, we may all end up as mad as Lear.

As noted in the "Introduction to *King Lear*," this final scene of death and crushing sadness prompted a man named Nahum Tate to create a version of this play that has a happy ending. The effects of that change were far-reaching; for more than 150 years, Tate's revision was played before audiences. How fortunate we are that the original ending has been restored to us, despite its vision of woe. So much of Shakespeare's meaning is compromised or lost otherwise. Of Tate's ending, Charles Lamb has written: "A happy ending? As if the living martyrdom that Lear has gone through — the flaying of his feelings alive, did not make a fair dismissal from the stage of life the only decorous thing for him. . . . As if the childish pleasure of getting his gilt robes and sceptre again could tempt him to act over again his misused station — as if at his years, and with his experience, anything was left him but to die." Indeed, after the pure agony of Cordelia's death, Lear has nothing left to do but die.