

Act 3

Scene 5

Scene Summary

- Edmund talks with Cornwall after alerting him to the fact that Gloucester is trying to help Lear. Edmund has just shown Cornwall the letter that proves Gloucester is in touch with the French forces.
- Edmund pretends to be upset that he informed on his father and tells Cornwall that he feels torn between loyalty to his father and his duty to Cornwall.
- Cornwall rewards Edmund by making him Earl of Gloucester.
- Edmund swears allegiance to Cornwall. In return, Cornwall offers to act like a father to Edmund from this point on.

Gloucester's Castle.

Enter CORNWALL and EDMUND

CORNWALL

I will have my revenge¹ ere I depart his house.

EDMUND

How, my Lord, I may be censured, that nature thus gives way to loyalty, something fears me to think of.²

CORNWALL

I now perceive, it was not altogether your brother's evil disposition made him seek his death, but a provoking merit, set a-work by a reprovable badness in himself.³

EDMUND

How malicious is my fortune that I must repent to be just!⁴
This is the letter he spoke of, which approves⁵ him an intelligent party⁶ to the advantages of France. O heavens!

10 That this treason were not, or not I the detector!

CORNWALL

Go with me to the Duchess.

EDMUND

If the matter of this paper be certain,⁷ you have mighty business in hand.

CORNWALL

True or false, it hath made thee Earl of Gloucester. Seek out where thy father is, that he may be ready for our apprehension.⁸

¹ **my revenge:** i.e. his revenge on Gloucester

² **How, my Lord...think of:** How, my Lord, I will be thought of, if I place my loyalty to you over my duty to my father, frightens me somewhat

³ **I now perceive...in himself:** I now see that it was not just your brother's evil nature that made him look to murder Gloucester, but he was encouraged by a sense of his own worth ('provoking merit') and enticed by Gloucester's reprehensible bad nature

⁴ **just:** i.e. righteous to reveal his father's disloyalty

⁵ **approves:** proves

⁶ **intelligent party:** spy

⁷ **certain:** true

⁸ **apprehension:** arrest

EDMUND

[Aside] If I find him comforting the King, it will stuff his suspicion more fully. *[Aloud]* I will persever⁹ in my course of loyalty, though the conflict be sore between that and my blood.¹⁰

20

CORNWALL

I will lay trust upon thee, and thou shalt find a dearer father in my love.
[Exeunt]

⁹ **persever:** continue / persist

¹⁰ **my blood:** 1 my family 2 my feelings for my father

Commentary

- **Edmund's ruthless, self-serving nature is illustrated in this scene** as he betrays his father. Without scruples, Edmund tells Cornwall about Gloucester's efforts to help Lear and about the letter which proves Gloucester has been in contact with the French forces. Edmund is motivated by the pursuit of power, and his treachery is rewarded when Cornwall awards him the title Earl of Gloucester. Having previously framed his brother, Edmund now betrays his father as he ruthlessly pursues social status.
- **Edmund's manipulative and devious nature is evident in his conversation with Cornwall.** To avoid suspicion and to increase Cornwall's regard for him, Edmund pretends to be conflicted in exposing Gloucester: 'O heavens! That this treason were not, or not I the detector!'

Questions

1. Do you agree that Edmund is very crafty in the manner in which he deals with Cornwall in this scene?
2. What is your impression of Cornwall from this scene?
3. Comment on the use of dramatic irony* in this scene.

*Dramatic irony: When the audience know something that the characters on stage are unaware of.

Act 3

Scene 6

Scene Summary

- Gloucester brings Lear and the others to find shelter in a farmhouse on his estate.
- Lear conducts a mock-trial of Goneril and Regan. The Fool and Edgar (as Poor Tom) act as assistant judges to Lear.
- Gloucester tells of a plot to assassinate Lear. He urges Kent to bring Lear to safety in Dover. Kent reluctantly agrees but worries that Lear needs rest to soothe his frayed nerves.
- The scene ends with Edgar in soliloquy. He acknowledges that Lear's suffering is greater than his own. Edgar decides that he will reveal his true identity when his name has been cleared.

*A chamber in a farmhouse adjoining Gloucester's Castle.
Enter GLOUCESTER, LEAR, KENT, FOOL and EDGAR*

GLOUCESTER

Here is better than the open air; take it thankfully. I will piece out the comfort¹ with what addition I can. I will not be long from you.

KENT

All the power of his wits have given way to his impatience.² The gods reward your kindness!

[Exit GLOUCESTER]

EDGAR

Frateretto calls me; and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness.³ Pray, innocent, and beware the foul fiend.

FOOL

Prithee, nuncle, tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman?⁴

LEAR

¹⁰ A king, a king!

FOOL

No, he's a yeoman that has a gentleman to his son; for he's a mad yeoman that sees his son a gentleman before him.⁵

LEAR

To have a thousand⁶ with red burning spits
Come hissing in upon 'em!

¹ **piece out the comfort:** make it more comfortable

² **impatience:** 1 passion / lack of self-control 2 inability to endure

³ **Frateretto...darkness:** More of Tom's ramblings. Frateretto: a dancing devil (name taken from Harsnett). Nero: Roman Emperor who apparently played fiddle as Rome burned. Angler: 1 fisherman 2 fiddler

⁴ **yeoman:** A free man who owned his own farm but did not have a coat of arms

⁵ **No...before him:** The Fool is saying that only a mad yeoman would allow his son to become a gentleman before him as the yeoman would then be his son's inferior. This parallels Lear's situation

⁶ **thousand:** i.e. thousand devils

EDGAR

The foul fiend bites my back.⁷

FOOL

He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health,⁸ a boy's love, or a whore's oath.

LEAR

It shall be done; I will arraign⁹ them straight.

[To EDGAR] Come, sit thou here, most learned justicer;¹⁰

20 [To the FOOL] Thou, sapient¹¹ sir, sit here. Now, you she foxes!

EDGAR

Look, where he¹² stands and glares! Want'st thou eyes¹³ at trial, madam?

[Sings] *Come o'er the bourn, Bessy, to me* —¹⁴

FOOL

[Sings] *Her boat hath a leak,
And she must not speak*

*Why she dares not come over to thee.*¹⁵

EDGAR

The foul fiend haunts Poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale.¹⁶ Hoppedance¹⁷ cries in Tom's belly for two white¹⁸ herring. Croak not,¹⁹ black angel; I have no food for thee.

30

KENT

How do you, sir? Stand you not so amazed.
Will you lie down and rest upon the cushions?

LEAR

I'll see their trial first. Bring in their evidence.

[To EDGAR] Thou robed man of justice, take thy place;

[To the FOOL] And thou, his yoke-fellow of equity,²⁰

Bench by his side. [To KENT] You are o' the commission;²¹
Sit you too.

EDGAR

Let us deal justly.

Sleepest or wakest thou, jolly shepherd?

40 *Thy sheep be in the corn;*

And for one blast of thy minikin mouth,

*Thy sheep shall take no harm.*²²

Purr! The cat is grey.²³

7 **The foul...back:** Edgar imagines the devil as a biting louse

8 **horse's health:** horses were thought to have poor health

9 **arraign:** bring to court. Lear now holds a mock trial for his daughters. This episode is not included in all versions of the play

10 **justicer:** judge

11 **sapient:** wise

12 **he:** i.e. an imaginary devil

13 **eyes:** spectators. Possibly Poor Tom is asking the imaginary daughter of Lear if she would like the devil as an audience

14 **Come o'er...to me:** A line from an old song in which a lover invites his sweetheart across a river ('bourn') to meet him

15 **Her boat...to thee:** The Fool's response is invented and carries possible obscene meanings

16 **nightingale:** Possibly, Edgar is referring to the Fool's singing

17 **Hoppedance:** The name of a devil

18 **white:** unsmoked

19 **Croak not:** Don't grumble

20 **yoke-fellow of equity:** 1 judicial partner 2 Possibly, a reference to the Courts of Chancery which settled disputes according to natural justice

21 **o' the commission:** appointed a Justice of the Peace

22 **Sleepest...no harm:** A fragment of a song in which a shepherd's sheep are in danger if they eat too much corn but one whistle from his delicate ('minikin') mouth and they will return from the cornfield

23 **Purr!...grey:** Devils were thought to take the form of witches' cats. 'Purr' is the name of a devil in Harsnett (see p.98)

LEAR

Arraign²⁴ her first; 'tis Goneril. I here take my oath before this honourable assembly: she kicked the poor King her father.

FOOL

Come hither, mistress. Is your name Goneril?

LEAR

She cannot deny it.

FOOL

Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool.²⁵

LEAR

50 And here's another,²⁶ whose warped²⁷ looks proclaim
What store²⁸ her heart is made on. Stop her there!
Arms, arms, sword, fire!²⁹ Corruption in the place!
False justicer, why hast thou let her 'scape?

EDGAR

Bless thy five wits!³⁰

KENT

O pity! Sir, where is the patience now
That thou so oft have boasted to retain?

EDGAR

[Aside] My tears begin to take his part so much
They mar my counterfeiting.³¹

LEAR

The little dogs and all,
Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart,³² see, they bark at me.

EDGAR

60 Tom will throw his head³³ at them. Avaunt, you curs!³⁴

*Be thy mouth or black or white,
Tooth that poisons if it bite;
Mastiff, grey-hound, mongrel grim,
Hound or spaniel, brach³⁵ or lym,³⁶
Or bobtail tike or trundle-tail,³⁷
Tom will make them weep and wail:
For, with throwing thus my head,
Dogs leap the hatch,³⁸ and all are fled.*

Do de, de, de.³⁹ Cessez!⁴⁰ Come, march to wakes⁴¹ and fairs

70 and market towns. Poor Tom, thy horn is dry.⁴²

²⁴ **Arraign:** Bring before the court

²⁵ **Cry you mercy...joint-stool:** i.e. Pardon me, I didn't notice you

²⁶ **another:** i.e. Regan

²⁷ **warped:** distorted

²⁸ **store:** abundance. Lear is being ironic here

²⁹ **fire:** In Lear's imagination the courtroom has become hell

³⁰ **five wits:** common wit, imagination, fantasy, estimation and memory

³¹ **mar my counterfeiting:** ruin my performance (as Poor Tom)

³² **Tray...Sweetheart:** The names of pet dogs. Some commentators see these names as suggesting the names of Lear's daughters: Tray – Goneril in that she be'tray'ed her father; Blanch – Regan in that she made Lear pale with fear; Sweetheart – Cordelia in that she is Lear's darling

³³ **throw his head:** Unexplained, possibly means 'shout at'

³⁴ **Avaunt...curs!:** Get out here, you dogs!

³⁵ **brach:** bitch hound

³⁶ **lym:** i.e. liemer, a type of bloodhound

³⁷ **bobtail...tail:** a terrier with a docked tail or one with a long tail

³⁸ **hatch:** bottom part of a split door

³⁹ **Do...de:** Tom's teeth are probably chattering

⁴⁰ **Cessez!:** Stop!

⁴¹ **wakes:** parish festivals

⁴² **thy horn is dry:** 1 A beggar's cry for drink 2 Edgar may mean that he can no longer play the part of Poor Tom

LEAR

Then let them anatomize⁴³ Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts? [*To EDGAR*] You, sir, I entertain⁴⁴ for one of my hundred, only I do not like the fashion of your garments. You will say they are Persian attire,⁴⁵ but let them be changed.

KENT

Now, good my Lord, lie here and rest awhile.

LEAR

Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains: so, so, so. We'll go to supper i' the morning. So, so, so. [*Sleeps*]

FOOL

And I'll go to bed at noon.⁴⁶

[*Re-enter GLOUCESTER*]

GLOUCESTER

80 Come hither, friend; where is the King my master?

KENT

Here, sir; but trouble him not; his wits are gone.

GLOUCESTER

Good friend, I prithee, take him in thy arms. I have o'erheard a plot of death upon⁴⁷ him. There is a litter⁴⁸ ready; lay him in't, And drive towards Dover, friend, where thou shalt meet Both welcome and protection. Take up thy master: If thou shouldst dally⁴⁹ half an hour, his life, With thine, and all that offer to defend him, Stand in assured loss. Take up, take up,

90 And follow me, that will to some provision Give thee quick conduct.⁵⁰

KENT

Oppressed nature sleeps:

This rest might yet have balm'd thy broken sinews,⁵¹ Which, if convenience will not allow,⁵² Stand in hard cure.⁵³ [*To the Fool*] Come, help to bear thy master; Thou must not stay behind.

GLOUCESTER

Come, come, away!

[*Exeunt all but EDGAR, with the FOOL supporting LEAR*]

43 **anatomize:** dissect

44 **entertain:** take into service

45 **Persian attire:** Persians were thought to wear luxurious clothes; Edgar is dressed in rags

46 **I'll go to...noon:** Proverbial i.e. I'll act the fool too

47 **upon:** made against

48 **litter:** a frame made of sticks used to carry a sick person

49 **dally:** wait / delay

50 **will to some provision...quick conduct:** will bring you quickly to some supplies for your journey

51 **This rest...sinews:** Rest may have brought relief to your frayed nerves

52 **if convenience...allow:** if it isn't convenient

53 **Stand in hard cure:** are unlikely to be cured

EDGAR

When we our betters see bearing our woes,
 We scarcely think our miseries our foes.⁵⁴
 Who alone suffers, suffers most i' the mind,
 Leaving free things and happy shows behind.⁵⁵
 100 But then the mind much sufferance doth o'erskip,
 When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.⁵⁶
 How light and portable⁵⁷ my pain seems now,
 When that which makes me bend makes the King bow,
 He childed as I fathered!⁵⁸ Tom, away!
 Mark the high noises;⁵⁹ and thyself bewray⁶⁰
 When false opinion,⁶¹ whose wrong thought defiles⁶² thee,
 In thy just proof, repeals and reconciles thee.⁶³
 What will hap more tonight, safe 'scape the King!⁶⁴
 Lurk, lurk!⁶⁵
 [Exit]

- ⁵⁴ **When we our betters...our foes:** When we see our superiors bearing our own troubles, we find it easier to endure our own sufferings
- ⁵⁵ **Leaving...shows behind:** leaving carefree thoughts and happy displays behind
- ⁵⁶ **But then...fellowship:** But then the mind can avoid much suffering, even when grief multiplies if the ability to endure it does also
- ⁵⁷ **portable:** bearable
- ⁵⁸ **He childed...fathered!:** i.e. He has unkind children just like I have an unkind father
- ⁵⁹ **Mark...noises:** i.e. Listen to the rumours about the feuding Dukes
- ⁶⁰ **thyself bewray:** reveal yourself (by disposing of the disguise of Poor Tom)
- ⁶¹ **false opinion:** i.e. Gloucester's incorrect opinion of Edgar
- ⁶² **defiles:** tarnishes (your reputation)
- ⁶³ **In thy...reconciles thee:** proof of your innocence will undo your banishment and reconcile you to your father
- ⁶⁴ **What will hap...King!:** Whatever happens tonight, may the King escape!
- ⁶⁵ **Lurk, lurk!:** Stay hidden!

Key Quotations

KENT *All the power of his wits have given way to his impatience.*

EDGAR *When we our betters see bearing our woes,
 We scarcely think our miseries our foes.
 Who alone suffers, suffers most i' the mind,
 Leaving free things and happy shows behind.
 But then the mind much sufferance doth o'erskip,
 When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.
 How light and portable my pain seems now,
 When that which makes me bend makes the King bow*

Commentary

- **The mock-trial dramatically illustrates that Lear still blames Goneril and Regan for his intense suffering.** During the mock-trial he imagines arraigning Goneril and Regan, and then calls for Regan's heart to be dissected to find the source of her cruel nature: 'let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?'
- **The mock-trial points to the absurdity of human justice.** The mad nature of the trial combined with its inability to successfully apportion blame offers a jaundiced view of human justice.
- **The depth of Kent's and Gloucester's love for Lear is clear from this scene.** They both act to protect Lear: Gloucester brings him to the farmhouse and then moves to protect Lear from a potential assassination attempt. Kent urges Lear to rest and only reluctantly agrees to bring Lear to Dover so worried is he about Lear's fraught nerves.
- **Edgar shows his deeply empathetic and compassionate nature.** He is moved to tears by the pitiful sight of Lear acting out the mock-trial: 'My tears begin to take his part so much / They mar my counterfeiting.'
- **Edgar's loyalty to Lear is readily apparent.** When faced with the suffering of Lear, Edgar dismisses his own pain: 'How light and portable my pain seems now, / When that which makes me bend makes the King bow'. Edgar puts concern for Lear ahead of concern for himself.
- **This is the last scene in which the Fool appears.** He is neither heard from nor discussed again in the play. Some critics suggest that this is because the same actor would play the parts of both the Fool and Cordelia. Both roles are also symbolically linked in that they hold a mirror up to Lear, directing his journey towards self-awareness. The Fool's disappearance is also important thematically. **As Lear grows in compassion and learns to recognise his own flaws, there is no more need for the Fool.** In earlier scenes the Fool acted as Lear's conscience; Lear now has to see his own faults and mistakes himself.

Questions

1. Gloucester, Kent and Edgar all show their love for King Lear. Find examples of this in the scene.
2. Think about the Fool's role in the earlier scenes of the play, how has his function on stage changed?
3. In his soliloquy, Edgar acts as a foil (a contrast) that deepens our understanding of Lear. Explain how this is true.
4. Some versions of *King Lear* contain neither the mock-trial nor Edgar's soliloquy. Make the case for retaining both of these in a production of the play.