



SECOND AGE
THEATRE COMPANY

Journeys in King Lear

A Director's Perception

By
Alan Stanford

In attempting to establish a precise concept for the production of any play, the actor must search out an image or series of images which he or she can follow through the play and use to demonstrate the playwright's theme.

There are many repeated images in King Lear but the one we wish to follow for the purpose of this discussion is that of the journey. It is an image constantly repeated for each of the major characters and used in many different ways to allow both the characters and the plot to develop.

There are many kinds of journey referred to in the text. There are physical journeys - emotional journeys - intellectual journeys and even the journey of Goneril's letter to Edmund. But primarily; Lear, all his allies and protagonists are on a journey of self discovery.

Blindness is another of the often repeated images in the play. Each of the major characters suffers from a form of blindness - physical - emotional - intellectual, each must undertake a journey in order to gain or regain their sight. In other words - to find themselves.

At the start of the play Edgar does not 'see' his true value of the true horror of life and his journey will bring him to a point where he despairs of life itself.

Edmund Regan and Goneril do not realise their own potential and will discover with disastrous consequences for all they come into contact with.

Gloucester, at the start of the play, is blind to the true nature of those most close to him and must lose his eyes in order to gain true insight

And for Lear himself, the journey is even more arduous and more destructive. He must travel from total self-delusion to total self-awareness. It will be a journey through purgatory which will cost him his kingdom, his friends, his daughters, his sanity and eventually his life.

He must learn to answer his own question

"Who is that can tell me who I am"

At the start of the play, Lear is in truth King. Absolute and all powerful monarch. He is the centre of his own world. A god king.

He believes that he can see all but, in truth, his is only a subjective view. He has no true perspective of himself.

He sees only that which he wants to see. Himself as King.

Shakespeare starts the play fast. No long tedious introduction. Merely a conversation between two Lords and the King is on. Significantly his first line is an order.

*“Attend the lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester.
Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.
Give me the map there. Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom; and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unberthened crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall,
And you our no less loving son of Albany,
We have this hour a constant will to publish
Our daughters several dowers, that future strife
May be prevented now. The Princes, France and Burgundy,
Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,
Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn,
And here are to be answered. Tell me my daughters
(Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state),
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.”*

In this opening speech, Lear attempts to do three impossible things: first, to divest himself of power, while still retaining authority; secondly, to dictate, control and plan a future in which he will have no part to play; and finally - and possibly most importantly, to bargain with power, land and authority against declarations of love.

And it is with Cordelia's refusal to play his game of land for love that Lear begins his journey.

LEAR *Now, our joy,
Although our last and least; to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interest; what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.*

CORDELIA *Nothing, my lord.*

LEAR *Nothing?*

CORDELIA *Nothing.*

LEAR *Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.*

CORDELIA *Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty
According to my bond, no more nor less.*

LEAR *How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little,
Lest you may mar your fortunes.*

CORDELIA *Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all. Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all.*

LEAR *But goes thy heart with this?*

CORDELIA *Ay, my good lord.*

LEAR *So young and so untender?*

CORDELIA *So young, my lord, and true.*

LEAR *Let it be so, thy truth then be thy dower!
For by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate and the night,
By all the operation of the orbs*

LEAR Dost thou call me fool, boy?

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

And just a little later

LEAR How now, daughter? What makes that frontlet on?

Methinks you are too much of late i'th'frown.

FOOL Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning, Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now: I am a Fool, thou art nothing.

The Fool is quite accurate in calling Lear a Fool, for only when Lear comes to think and talk as the Fool, to perceive with the Fool's insight, can he really begin to understand himself.

FOOL If thou wert my fool, I'd have thee beaten for being old before thy time.

LEAR How's that?

FOOL Thou shouldst not have been old before thou hadst been wise.

LEAR O let me not be mad, not mad sweet heaven! Keep me in temper. I would not be mad!

Lear is afraid of madness. The Fool understands that madness is the journey that Lear must take. He also knows that the inevitable will happen. He understands human nature better than most. It is his function.

This question of true nature is important. Shakespeare tells us that only when we can discover our true nature do we begin to progress. Were Edmund to accept the social order, which proclaims him bastard and of no prospect, he would remain nothing in the world. But he rejects this and declares himself. He breaks down social order by refusing to believe in it. He is a child of nature, a natural rather than legitimate child and nature is his goddess.

*“Thou Nature art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve of fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous and my shape as true
As honest madam’s issue? Why brand they us
With base? With baseness? Bastardy? Base, base?
Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed
Go to the creating of a whole tribe of fops
Got ‘tween asleep and wake? Well then
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
Our fathers love is to the bastard Edmund
As to the legitimate. Fine word legitimate.
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top the legitimate. I grow. I prosper.
Now Gods stand up for bastards”*

Just as Lear has destroyed social order by his abdication, so has Edmund by his refusal to accept a social order that denies him his nature.

Lear and Edmund have both started on their journeys.

Lear’s journey will now proceed with a series of shocks that will propel him into madness.

First comes Goneril. Although we can view Goneril and Regan simply as archetypal wicked sister they are in fact more complex than that. Goneril is only following her true nature. She believes in herself and is the victim of a world dominated by weaker men, principally her father and her husband. In this world, where men rule, she must use all her wits to survive. If what she says of Lear and his Knights is true, and we have no reason to suppose it isn't, then her request to reduce his followers is not unreasonable.

*“Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires.
Men so disorder'd, so debosh'd and bold,
That this court, infected with their manners,
Shows like a riotous inn; epicurism and lust
Makes it more like a tavern or a brothel
Than a grac'd palace. The shame itself doth speak
For instant remedy. Be then desir'd
By her that else will take the thing she begs,
A little to disquantity your train,
And the remainders that shall still depend
To be such men as may besort your age,
Which know themselves and you”*

It is Lear's response that is far more unreasonable. And far crueller.

*“Hear Nature, hear! Dear goddess hear.
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility,
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her. If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen, that it may live
And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her.
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,*

*With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,
Turn all her mothers pains and benefits
To laughter and contempt, that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child! Away, away!"*

It's worth noting that she does not throw him out. He chooses to leave. But in a sense, they are both only playing their parts - they have no choice - they are following their nature.

At the start of the play Goneril and Regan had little enough regard for him.

REGAN *'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly
known himself.*

GONERIL *The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash.*

And now Regan will begin to show her true nature. She will not even let Lear into her home. She meets him at Gloucester's castle. She joins forces with her sister to reduce her father's train even more.

REGAN *If you will come to me
(For now I spy a danger), I entreat you
To bring but five-and-twenty. To no more
Will I give place or notice.*

LEAR *I gave you all.*

REGAN *And in good time you gave it.*

LEAR *Made you my guardians, my depositaries,
But kept a reservation to be follow'd
With such a number. What, must I come to you
With five-and-twenty? Regan, said you so?*

REGAN *And speak't again, my lord. No more with me.*

.....

GONERIL *Hear me my lord;
What need you five and twenty, ten, or five*

*To follow in a house where twice so many
Have a command to tend you?*

REGAN

What need, one?

“*What need one?*” It may be the cruellest question in the play. To Lear, at this moment he only exists as a King. His is Lear because of what he has, what he possesses, what he needs. Goneril and Regan see him as just a foolish old man. They are prophetic. Lear will say it of himself to Cordelia, but not yet. He still has a long journey to go. For now he still thinks that being Lear means being King. But that its not much good if nobody else does.

It is at this moment that Lear makes one of the most heart-rending pleas in all of drama down the ages, and it comes out of a complete misconception of himself.. And it is now that a new word comes into his vocabulary. The word is ‘*need*’. At this moment he believes that he needs more than he does. That to be Lear he needs his horses, knights, pomp and splendour. It is a plea to be confirmed in his own view of the world and it ends in an acceptance that all the world, all nature, all gods are against him.

*“O, reason not the need. Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing, superfluous
Allow not nature more than nature needs -
Man’s life is cheap as beast’s. Thou art a lady;
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why nature needs not, what thou gorgeous wear’st
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But, for true need -
You Heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!
You see me here you Gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!
If it be you that stirs these daughters’ hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,*

*And let not womans weapons, water drops,
Stain my mans cheeks. No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall - I will do such things -
What they are yet I know not; but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep.
No, I'll not weep.
I have full cause of weeping but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I'll weep. O fool. I shall go mad!*

The daughter's response is harsh to say the least. Lear can rant and rail as he did when he was indeed a King, when his words brought fear and obedience; but now he is just a foolish old man and only he fails to see that.

*REGAN This house is little; the old man and's people
Cannot be well bestow'd.*

*GONERIL 'Tis his own blame; hath put himself from rest
And must needs taste his folly.*

.....

*REGAN The injuries that they themselves procure
Must be their schoolmasters. Shut up your doors.*

Out onto the heath he goes. He is not fully broken yet. He is still fighting himself, commanding the elements and ordering the storm to punish him. He calls the wind, rain and thunder '*servile ministers*'. But the elements pay no head. They relentlessly pursue him. He has no power, no authority. Out there on the heath there is no king. Just an old man and a Fool who need nothing more than a hovel to shelter in.

Now comes the final shock. The realisation that he has failed to show humanity. His experience of suffering the elements demonstrates to him his

own inadequacy as a King. No one cares for him because he cared for nobody.

*“Poor naked wretches, weresoe'er you are
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, Pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.”*

It is perhaps this realisation that tips him into madness. Now he feels pity. Now he wants to help, without the ability to do so.. He has realised humanity in himself. He, like all others, is ‘*a man more sinned against than sinning*’ And at this moment Shakespeare shows him ‘*man*’ in his lowest form. A mad, naked, beggar.

“Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on's are sophisticate. Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, fork'd animal as thou art.”

If there were a central moment in the play, this would be it.

“Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, fork'd animal as thou art.”

The irony is that Lear sees for the first time the true nature of man in the form of a mad beggar who is really another man, hiding his true identity.

Lear's mind has cracked, and in one of the most pitiful scenes we see him put his daughters on trial with only a fool and a madman to judge them.

LEAR I'll see their trial first; bring in the evidence. (to EDGAR) Thou robed man of justice, take thy place. (to FOOL) And thou, his yolkfellow of equity, bench by his side. You are of the commission, sit you too.

*EDGAR Let us deal justly.
Sleepest or wakest thou, jolly shepherd?
Thy sheep be in the corn,
And for one blast of thy minikin mouth
Thy sheep shall take no harm.
Pur, the cat is grey.*

LEAR Arraign her first. 'tis Goneril! I here take my oath before this honourable assembly, she kick'd 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.

*LEAR And here's another whose warp'd looks proclaim
What store her heart is made on. Stop her there!
Arms, arms, sword, fire! Corruption in the place!
False justicer, why hast thou let her scape?*

EDGAR Bless thy five wits! (aside)

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

*EDGAR My tears begin to take his part so much
They mar my counterfeiting.*

*LEAR The little dogs and all -
Trey, Blanch and Sweetheart - see, they bark at me.*

*EDGAR Tom will throw his head at them. Avaunt you curs!
Come, march to fairs and wakes and market-towns.
Poor Tom thy horn is dry.*

LEAR Let them anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts? You sir

I retain for one of my hundred. Only I do not like the fashion of you garments. You will say they are Persian; but let them be chang'd.

KENT *Now, good my lord, lie here and rest awhile.*

LEAR *Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains.*

So, so. We'll go to supper in the morning.

FOOL *And I'll go to bed at noon*

"And I'll go to bed at noon"

The world has been turned upside down. The King has journeyed from the top to the bottom and chaos rules. Civilization is humanities way of putting order into the natural chaos of things. Take away the order and chaos will always ensue.

The Fool is gone. We don't need him any more. From this point on, Lear becomes his own Fool.

Now, in his madness, he sees clearly with the Fools eyes.

"Thou would'st make a good Fool"

When the mad Lear meets the blind Gloucester, he speaks of seeing with a clarity of vision that he could never have achieved before the storm. He almost sounds like the Fool.

LEAR *No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am the King himself.*

EDGAR *O thou side-piercing sight!*

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

EDGAR Sweet marjoram.

LEAR Pass.

GLOUCESTER I know that voice.

LEAR Ha, Goneril with a white beard! They flatter'd me like a dog and told me I had the white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there ... Go to, they are not men o'their words. They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie. I am not ague proof.

GLOUCESTER That trick of voice I do well remember.

Is't not the king?

LEAR Ay, every inch a king.

When I do stare see how the subject quakes.

I pardon that mans life. What was thy cause?

Adultery?

Thou shalt not die. Die for adultery? No.

The wren goes to it, and the small gilded fly

Does lecher in my sight.

Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son

Was kinder to his father than my daughters

Got tween the lawful sheets.

To't, luxury, pell-mell, for I lack soldiers.

Behold yond simpering dame

Whose face between her forks presages snow,

That minces virtue and does shake the head

To hear of pleasures name -

The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't

With a more riotous appetite.

Down from the waist they are centaurs,

Though women all above;

But to the girdle do the gods inherit,

Beneath is all the fiend's: there's hell, there's darkness,

There is the sulphurous pit - burning, scalding,

Stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie, pah, pah!

Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary,

To sweeten my imagination.

There's money for thee.

GLOUCESTER O, let me kiss that hand!

LEAR Let me wipe it first. It smells of mortality.

*GLOUCESTER O ruin'd piece of nature! This great world
Shall so ware out to naught. Dost thou not know me?*

*LEAR I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squiny at me?
No, do thy worst blind cupid. I'll not love.*

Read thou this challenge. Mark but the penning of it.

GLOUCESTER What with the case of eyes?

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

GLOUCESTER Ay sir.

*LEAR And the creature run from the cur? There mightst thou behold
the great image of authority: a dog's obey'd, in office.
Through tatter'd clothes great vices do appear;
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.
None does offend, none. Get thee glass eyes,
And like the scurvy politician, seem
To see the things thou dost not. Now, now, now, now!
Pull off my boots. Harder, Harder - so.*

*EDGAR O, matter and impertinency mix'd,
Reason in madness!*

*LEAR If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.
I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester.
We must be patient; we came crying hither.
Thou knowest the first time we smell the air
We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee - mark!*

GLOUCESTER Alack, alack the day!

LEAR When we are born we cry that we are come

*To this great stage of fools. - This 's a good block.
It were a delicate stratagem to shoe
A troop of horse with felt. I'll put't in proof;
And when I have stolen upon these son-in-laws,
Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill! ' ENTER SOLDIER*

*SOLDIER
O, here he is: lay hand upon him, Sir,
Your most dear daughter -*

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

*GENTLEMAN
You shall have anything.*

*LEAR
No seconds? all myself?
Why, this would make a man a man of salt,
To use his eyes for garden water-pots,
Ay, and laying autumn's dust.*

*GENTLEMAN
Good sir –*

*LEAR
I will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom.
What!
I will be jovial: come, come; I am a king;
Masters, know you that?*

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

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

We will leave Lear being chased around the heath by Cordelia's servants, while we take a brief look at Gloucester's journey.

Gloucester has been deceived by one son, wrongly condemned the other, been misled, confused and has become bewildered by events over which he has no control. He has seen his family breakdown, the King he loyally supports go mad, and his world turn upside down. In an act of tremendous

courage, he goes to the aid of his King, is betrayed by the son he trusted and as a reward his eyes are plucked out.

He ends up, a blind beggar on the road, being led about by a mad beggar.

“Tis the time’s plague when mad men lead the blind”

He does not realise it is his true son. As ever in his life, he cannot see the truth. And he has yet to gain insight.

He wants now to die. He fervently believes in order and feels that the gods have unjustly treated him.

*“As flies to wonton boys are we to the Gods
They kill us for their sport”*

He asks the mad beggar to lead him to a cliff top that he might throw himself off. But the beggar is his son Edgar, who uses a trick to convince the old man that the God’s have spared him.

GLOUCESTER When shall I come to the top of that same hill?

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

GLOUCESTER Methinks the ground is even.

EDGAR Horrible steep.

Hark, do you hear the sea?

GLOUCESTER No, truly.

*EDGAR Why then your other senses grow imperfect
By your eyes’ anguish.*

GLOUCESTER So may it be indeed.

*Methinks thy voice is alter’d, and thou speak’st
In better phrase and matter than thou didst.*

*EDGAR Y’are much deceiv’d. In nothing am I chang’d
But in my garments.*

GLOUCESTER *Methinks y'are better spoken.*

EDGAR *Come on, sir; here's the place. Stand still! How fearful*
And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!
The crows and choughs that wink the midway air
Show scarce so gross as beetles. Halfway down
Hangs one that gathers sampire - dreadful trade!
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
The fishermen that walk upon the beach
Appear like mice. The murmuring surge
That on th'unnumber'd idle pebble chafes
Cannot be heard so high. I'll look no more,
Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight
Topple down headlong.

GLOUCESTER *Set me where you stand.*

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

GLOUCESTER *Let go my hand. Go thou further off.*
Bid me farewell; and let me hear thee going.

EDGAR *Now fare ye well, good sir.*

GLOUCESTER *With all my heart.*

EDGAR *Why I do trifle thus with his despair*
Is done to cure it.

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

EDGAR *Gone, sir. Farewell.*
And yet I know not how conceit may rob
The treasury of life, when life itself

*Yields to the theft. Had he been where he thought,
By this had thought been past. - Alive or dead?
Ho, you sir! Friend! Hear you Sir? Speak! -
Thus might he pass indeed. Yet he revives -
What are you, sir?*

GLOUCESTER *Away, and let me die.*

EDGAR *Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air,
So many fathom down precipitating,
Thou'dst shiver'd like an egg; but thou dost breath
Hast heavy substance, bleedest not, speakest, art sound.
Ten masts at each make not the altitude
Which thou hast perpendicularly fell.
Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again.*

GLOUCESTER *But have I fallen or no?*

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

GLOUCESTER *Alack, I have no eyes.
Is wretchedness depriv'd that benefit
To end itself by death?*

EDGAR *Give me your arm.
Up - so. How is't? Feel you your legs? You stand.*

GLOUCESTER *Too well, too well.*

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

GLOUCESTER *A poor unfortunate beggar.*

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

GLOUCESTER *I do remember now. Henceforth I'll bear*

*Affliction till it do cry out itself
'Enough, Enough', and die.*

By this grotesque parody, Gloucester learns that he must endure, he must accept the world, or rather accept what the world has become. Death will come in its own time and soon enough. There is no need to surrender to it before its time.

Lear too has reached his final realisation.

"I am even the natural fool of fortune"

We started the play with a King and his court. Lear, Gloucester, Edgar and Kent. All men with a misplaced sense of identity. Now we just have four beggars wandering around the heath. Their chance may have been sudden or slow, but the result has been the same for all of them. All titles, pomp, power, rank, possessions even names have been taken from them. Now they are just men.

But Lear's degradation is not yet complete. Once re-united with Cordelia - and now knowing himself for what he is -

"I am a very foolish fond old man"

- we might feel that he has finally achieved happiness. And we would be right. But it is here that the play takes its most grotesque turn.

A battle is fought and lost. Lear and Cordelia are prisoners. Lear does not mind this. He wants no power, no position now. He just wants peace and Cordelia - the love and contentment between a man and his child.

"Come, let's away to prison.

We two alone will sing like birds i'th cage;

When thou dost ask me blessing I'll kneel down

KENT *O my good master!*

LEAR *Prithee away.*

EDGAR *'Tis noble Kent, your friend.*

LEAR *A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!*
I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever.
Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little. Ha!
What is't thou sayest? Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle and low - an excellent thing in woman.
I kill'd the slave that was a-hanging thee
Did I not, fellow?

GENT *Tis true my lord, he did.*

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

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

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

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

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

KENT *No, my good lord; I am the very man -*

LEAR *I'll see that straight.*

KENT *That from your first of difference and decay*
Have follow'd your sad steps -

LEAR *You are welcome hither.*

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

LEAR *Ay, so I think.*

KENT *He knows not what he sees, and vain it is*
That we present us to him.

GENT *Edmund is dead, my lord.*

ALBANY *That's but a trifle here.*

*You lords and noble friends, know our intent.
What comfort to this great decay may come
Shall be appli'd. For us, we will resign,
During the life of this old majesty,
To him our absolute power. All friends shall taste
The wages of their virtue, and all foes
The cup of their deservings. O, see, see!
And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life;
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more;
Never, never, never, never, never.
Pray you undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her! Look, her lips!
Look there! Look there!*

LEAR

He faints. My lord, my lord!

KENT

Break, heart; I prithee break.

EDGAR

Look up, my lord.

KENT

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

EDGAR

He is gone indeed.

KENT

*The wonder is he hath enjur'd so long:
He but usurp'd his life..*

Lear has come to journey's end.

And with his death there is nothing left.

Kent will die and neither Edgar nor Albany have the will to rule. Unlike other tragedies, there is no new order to take over for there is nothing left to build on. It is the ultimate tragedy of despair. Nothing will ever be the same again.

ALBANY

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

KENT

I have a journey, sir, shortly to go.

My master calls me, I must not say no.

EDGAR

The weight of this sad time we must obey;

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

The oldest hath borne most; we that are young

Shall never see so much nor live so long.

*

© Alan Stanford 1980/2005