## Act III: Scene 1

Summary

The setting is the heath in a raging storm. Conversing with a gentleman — a character conveniently placed to enlighten Kent and the audience — Kent learns that Lear and his Fool are out in the storm. Kent relates that Albany and Cornwall are pretending amicability. Kent also divulges that the king of France has been apprised of this information and is moving with an invasion force to offer assistance to Lear. Kent instructs the gentleman to go quickly to Dover, and when there, to make known the treatment that Lear has suffered. Kent gives the messenger a ring for delivery to Cordelia. This signet jewelry will disclose Kent's identity. Kent leaves to search for Lear.

Analysis

The previous scene opened with the lines "Who's there, besides foul weather?" (III.1.1), and now in this scene, we are presented with an image of Lear on the heath, his despair and rage clearly equaling the fury of the storm. The king's appearance, reflecting the turmoil of a familial tragedy, is as ravaged as the natural landscape under the assault of the storm. It is clear from the description that the storm is fierce, but so too is Lear's grief. However, Lear is not alone, and so, we also learn that the Fool shares his master's fate, to be cast out into the storm. In the Fool's earlier appearances, he functioned much as a Greek Chorus would, commenting upon the action and pointing out to Lear when he has erred. But in this scene, there is a new reason for the Fool's existence. As he attempts to ease his king's plight, it becomes clear that the Fool's new purpose is to protect Lear until Cordelia can arrive to help her father.

This scene answers the lingering question from Act II Scene 2: How does Cordelia learn so quickly of her father's tragedy? Kent tells the gentleman that spies have been sent from France to observe the treatment of the king. Kent's story is somewhat vague and suggests an improbable timeframe because word of the past few days' events could not have traveled to France so rapidly. However, Shakespeare often manipulates time in his tragedies to move the play along purposely. In this case, the expectation of an invasion and the prospect of Cordelia's arrival provide hope that Lear's situation will soon improve.

Kent also mentions a possible crack in the alliance between Albany and Cornwall, although they have sought to keep the information private. The audience has heard hints that Albany might not be as ruthless as Cornwall, but at this time, we have no reason to believe that Albany would spare Lear. If the two dukes are trying to conceal a possible rift, they may be working closely together — making Albany equally untrustworthy.

Glossary

**snuffs**disputes; squabbles.

**bemadding** maddening.

**plain** to complain.

**out wall**outside; exterior.

## Act III: Scene 2

Summary

The storm continues on the heath. Lear's mood matches the intensity of nature's turbulence as he rages against his daughters' abusive treatment. The Fool attempts to reason with his king, noting that the shelter of a dry house, even one gained by losing face, is superior to a stay in the storm's fury. But Lear will have no part of submission, especially before his daughters. Kent arrives and points to a nearby hovel, which promises some protection, while he returns to Gloucester's castle to ask that they admit the king. The Fool, alone, remains on stage to proclaim a prophecy.

Analysis

Once again, the audience observes how Lear copes with the swell of problems besieging him. The scene opens on Lear in the midst of wind, rain, and personal despair. As he calls upon the storm to unleash its fury on the world, he also cries out for the destruction of ungrateful man: "Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once / That make ingrateful man!" (III.2.8-9). By destroying the molds that nature uses to create men, the genetic code of life will be lost. In this instance, Lear is without hope; his despondency is so great that it approaches nihilism, a belief in nothing.

Lear continues to wallow in self-pity as he labels himself "A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man" (III.2.20). Lear willingly submits to the strength of the storm rather than seek shelter or fight for his sanity. He has fallen so far from the strong monarch who began the play that he has strength only to wish for utter destruction. And yet, Lear remains a sympathetic character, one who fears for his own mental balance — "My wits begin to turn" (III.2.68) — and one also who can express concern for his companion's comfort — "How dost my boy? Art cold?" (III.2.68).

In spite of his pitiful state, Lear is revealed as a complex man, one whose punishment far exceeds his foolish errors, and thus, Lear is deserving of the audience's sympathy. The Fool's final speech presents a contrast between the reality of the world he and Lear are experiencing and a utopian world, where justice and goodness replace evil.

Glossary

**cataracts** floodgate (of heaven).

**vaunt-couriers**a forerunner; precursor.

**fire** extreme suffering or distress that tries one's endurance; tribulation or ordeal.

**punder** confusion; excitement.

## ct III: Scene 3

Summary

The setting is Gloucester's castle, where Gloucester and Edmund are conversing. Gloucester tells his son that when he asked Regan and Cornwall to leave, so that he might offer aid to Lear, they seized his house. Now Gloucester is little more than a prisoner in his own home, forbidden to even speak to the king. Gloucester also tells Edmund that he has heard of a plan to revenge the king's injuries, unaware that he is divulging the plans to a traitor. Gloucester exits. Alone, Edmund plans to gain Cornwall's favor by revealing the plan to aid the king.

Analysis

At the beginning of the play, Gloucester appears weak and foolish, easily fooled by Edmund. In Act I, his boasts about easy conquests misleads the audience into dismissing Gloucester as a silly old man; but in this scene, the earl seems worthy of the king's allegiance. Gloucester proves that he is willing to sacrifice his own life for the king by disobeying Regan and Cornwall. This genuinely heroic behavior sets Gloucester apart from Edmund. An opportunist, Edmund takes advantage of his father's trust, seizing the chance to win Cornwall's favor. Betraying his father will provide Edmund with the position and wealth he craves. Acting without hesitation, Edmund sets out on a course that belies his breeding; a triumph of conscience is not a likely prospect in his unfolding treachery.

Glossary

**footed** secured.

## Act III: Scene 4

Summary

Although Kent directs Lear to a hovel for shelter, the king refuses to protect himself from the storm.

The Fool runs from the hovel, exclaiming that a spirit has taken possession of the shelter. The spirit, who soon emerges, is Edgar disguised as Poor Tom, pitiful pauper. The king tears off his own clothing, making himself look more like the unclad Poor Tom.

Gloucester enters the scene, carrying a torch. He has found both warm shelter and food for the king, but Lear declines, claiming that he needs to talk more with the Bedlam beggar. The disguised Edgar complains of the cold and everyone moves into the shelter.

Analysis

Much of this scene focuses on Lear's mental disintegration. Once again, Lear deals with his personal tragedy in a variety of ways. For the first time, Lear focuses his attention on others' lives, those who are as wretched as the king himself:

Poor naked wretches, wherso'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loo'd and window'd raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? (III.4.28-32).

These words are regretful, remorseful, empathetic, and compassionate for the poor, a population that Lear has not noticed before. Lear recognizes the parallels between their lives and his current situation. In a real sense, his pity for the poor is also a reflection of the pity he feels for his own situation. He finally feels compassion for the poor, only because he has become one of them.

With this extension of pity comes a new social awareness. Lear realizes that he has done nothing to aid the poor people in his kingdom. Instead, he has contributed their demise. He chastises himself saying:

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. (III.4.32-36).

Lear acknowledges that justice comes from man and heaven. Lear is the anointed king, God's representative, and thus, shares the responsibility for dispensing justice on earth. He recognizes that he bears responsibility for both his own problems and for those of others, who suffer equally. Once again, Lear is revealed as a complex and sympathetic figure, one who defies easy definition.

With his new knowledge, Lear would be a more effective king. But because he has given up his royal position, he can take responsibility only for his present situation. His inability to right the wrongs he has inflicted upon his people contributes to his fall into madness. The turmoil in Lear's mind makes him oblivious to the weather storm that surrounds him, and his waning lucidity also provides an escape from the reality of his plight.

When Poor Tom emerges from the hovel, Lear sees a mirror image of himself. Lear identifies with Poor Tom because both men have lost everything. Lear imagines that Tom is also the victim of deceitful and cruel daughters. Lear's identity with Tom is absolute when he removes his clothing to join Tom in near-nakedness. This inability to distinguish himself from Tom is a symptom of Lear's madness. This scene reminds the audience that very little separates man from beast. The fragility of man is inescapable, because only a fine line divides civilized and uncivilized states.

Although parallels can be drawn between Gloucester's situation and Lear's circumstances (as both men are being manipulated by their children), one notable difference remains: Gloucester retains his sanity. Gloucester is aware of how easily he might lose his mind, and he fears it may happen yet (III.4.62-63), but he has an inner strength that Lear does not have, which permits him to survive.

Paradoxically, Gloucester fails to recognize his own son, Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom. This scene builds upon Scene 3 by showing Gloucester's determination to help the old king, but it also reveals a father in as much pain as the king. Gloucester is not aware that his own situation will turn disastrous soon.

Glossary

**taking** contagious; infectious.

**out-paramour'd** having more lovers or mistresses.

**plackets** pockets, especially in a woman's skirt or a petticoat.

**lendings** things that one has let another have use of temporarily and on condition that they, or equivalents, be returned.

**first cock** midnight.

**green mantle** a surface covered with scum or froth.

## Act III: Scene 5

Summary

The setting is Gloucester's castle. Edmund betrays his father and wins Cornwall's approval by releasing the details of France's plan to aid the king. As reward, Edmund gains Gloucester's title and lands.

Analysis

In this scene, both Edmund and Cornwall pretend to be virtuous, as each attempts to justify his disloyalty. Clearly, Gloucester and Lear are both victims of two self-serving men — Edmund and Cornwall. Edmund, feigning regret for having betrayed his father, laments that his nature, which is to honor his father, must now be subordinate to the loyalty he feels for his country. Thus, Edmund makes excuses for betraying his own father. Cornwall's presence serves to reinforce Edmund's choice, when he suggests that perhaps Edgar is justified to seek his father's murder. Cornwall sees Gloucester's actions as treasonous, and describes him as having a "reproveable badness" (III.5.6). This pronouncement from Cornwall endorses Edmund's treachery toward his father, and also provides Edmund with a sort of self-righteous justice.

Glossary

**apprehension** capture or arrest.

**blood** parental heritage; family line; lineage.

## ct III: Scene 6

Summary

Gloucester sets out to find food, leaving the king and his party in a farmhouse next to the castle.

The Fool and Edgar take part in Lear's mock trial of Regan and Goneril. Gloucester enters and reveals that he has learned of a plot to kill the king. The group prepares to take Lear to Dover, where friends can come to his aid.

Analysis

Edmund's gibberish about foul fiends certainly fits both Edgar and Lear's circumstances, since both have been victims of deceit and wickedness. Once they all come in out of the storm, Lear abandons his plans for seeking physical revenge, and instead, decides to place Goneril and Regan on trial. The audience might consider a mock trial as further evidence of Lear's madness; but a trial is typically a search for the truth — and, often, a search for the motive or reason for an action. Lear, like so many victims, needs to know why this tragedy has happened. Did he deserve such abuse from his daughters? Did his actions contribute in some way to their evil attitudes? To Lear, gaining a grasp of the truth may lead the way to restoring his sanity.

Lear appoints the disguised Edgar and the Fool as judges, and begins the trial of Goneril, whom Lear accuses of kicking him. But the blow Goneril gave to her father was not physical; her injury was to his heart and soul. Lear urges the judges to "anatomize Regan, to see what breeds about her heart" (III.6.74-75). Lear's words are pointed and painful. Edgar cannot continue to participate, and even the Fool falls silent. Finally, Lear is so exhausted by the strain of the mock trial that he decides to pause for a much-needed rest.

This is the last appearance of the Fool. In his final line, he predicts his death: "I'll go to bed at noon" (III.6.83). The play never reveals whether the Fool actually dies, since the lines in Act V Scene 3 — "And my poor fool is hang'd" (V.3.304) — refer to Cordelia's death. The Fool has fulfilled his role, stepping in to take Cordelia's place after her banishment and disappearing as she reappears. Both Cordelia and the Fool are caretakers for Lear, and when one is present, the other need not be.

Lear and his allies heed Gloucester's warning that the king must flee to Dover. With the king and his forces gone, Gloucester is left alone to face Cornwall's wrath. After Gloucester also exits, Edgar is left alone on stage. His soliloquy ties together the two parallel plots and points to the similarities between his situation and that of the king's: "He childed as I father'd!" (III.6.108). The king has cruel children, while Edgar has a cruel father, but Edgar realizes his situation is insignificant compared with that of the king, who has lost both his rule and his mind.

Glossary

**yokefellow**a companion, partner, or associate.

**minikin** very small and delicate; diminutive.

**joint-stool** a stool made with jointed parts.

**trundle-tail** a dog with a curled tail.

**portable** bearable; endurable.

## Act III: Scene 7

Summary

The setting moves back to Gloucester's castle. Cornwall is dispatching Goneril with a letter to Albany, telling him of the invasion by the King of France. Cornwall orders that Gloucester be found and brought to him.

Edmund is told to accompany Goneril so that he is not present for Gloucester's punishment. Before Edmund and Goneril can leave, Oswald enters with news that Gloucester has warned the king and aided his escape to Dover.

As soon as Gloucester appears on the scene, Cornwall orders him bound to a chair. Regan viciously plucks at Gloucester's beard, calling him a traitor.

Intensifying the torture, Cornwall gouges out one of Gloucester's eyes. When a servant tries to stop the torment, Regan draws a sword and murders the steward. Cornwall gouges out Gloucester's other eye.

When the old man calls out to Edmund for help, Regan reveals that it was Edmund who betrayed his father. At this, Gloucester finally understands that he has misjudged Edgar. After throwing Gloucester out to find his own way to Dover, Regan helps Cornwall, who was wounded in the fray, and both leave for Dover.

Analysis

The full impact of this scene cannot be felt in a reading of the play text. The brutality of Gloucester's blinding must be seen and heard on stage for the audience to fully appreciate the evil being manifested by Cornwall and Regan. Both Goneril and Regan are especially cruel and bloodthirsty, as they call for Gloucester's punishment: "Hang him instantly. [Regan] / Pluck out his eyes [Goneril]" (III.7.4-5).

Having heard these two vultures call out for his father's blood, Edmund must have understood how harsh a punishment Gloucester is about to endure. And yet, Edmund willingly and easily leaves on his errand. This scene illustrates Edmund's wickedness; he must appreciate the true measure of Cornwall's evil and his father's vulnerability in the face of Cornwall's anger.

Cornwall's villainy in this scene is not unexpected. His anger earlier in Act III builds to the brink of losing control; in this scene, the audience sees Regan's husband refusing any attempts at civility. He has become the beast that is lurking just beneath the veneer of civilization. Cornwall appears to recognize that he lacks the authority to put Gloucester to death:

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. (III.7.24-27)

Still, Cornwall argues that he is provoked and must gratify his wrath. When Gloucester is brought to him, Cornwall makes no attempt to control himself. Although Gloucester reminds Cornwall that they are guests in his home, neither Cornwall nor Regan has any interest in maintaining the rules of hospitality. Regan's plucking of Gloucester's beard reinforces the point that she has no basic respect for age or rank. Gloucester is an earl and an elderly statesman, and Regan's pulling of his beard further rejects the structure of nature, which provides that the older members of a society be revered for their age and wisdom. Gloucester recognizes the insult saying, "'tis most ignobly done" (III.7.35).

Gloucester has faith in divine justice, just as Lear has implored the gods for justice. Nonetheless, justice appears to be lacking at several points throughout *King Lear*, and the plucking of Gloucester's eyes is certainly one instance. Gloucester has made many errors in judgment, but in this case, as with Lear, the punishment is surely in excess of his mistakes. When Regan reveals Edmund's treason, Gloucester is quick to recognize his folly, much quicker than Lear.

The plucking out of Gloucester's eyes is so brutal that not even Cornwall's servants can stand by without acting. Regan, Goneril, and Cornwall's brutal natures have been evident all along, with each act of wickedness building upon the previous. And so, the audience is not totally unprepared for these events. But in spite of the hints, no one can be ready for Cornwall ripping out Gloucester's eyes and stomping them under his boot. This is a scene of particular brutality, matched only by the bloodthirsty brutality of certain scenes in Shakespeare's Latin plays, especially *Titus Andronicus*.

Interestingly, Regan shows some real humanity, though briefly, when Cornwall is wounded. Her solicitous question — "How is't my Lord. How look you?" (III.7.92) — reveals that she is not totally self-serving or incapable of love and compassion — virtually the only instance where Regan appears human.

Glossary

**festinate** hurried.

**questrists** seekers; pursuers.

**ruffle** to disturb, irritate, or annoy; to take away the smoothness of; wrinkle; ripple.

**dearn** gloomy; bleak.

## Act IV: Scene 1

Summary

The setting is the heath. A blinded Gloucester is led by an elderly man, one of his tenants. The ailing earl laments that he treated Edgar badly and wishes for the opportunity to once again touch his son, since he can no longer see him. Gloucester hears Edgar's voice and remembers Poor Tom from the night of the storm. In an act of humanity, Gloucester sends his tenant for some clothing so that the Bedlam beggar might be covered.

Gloucester is concerned that the Old Man might suffer for having given assistance, so he dismisses him and asks Tom to be his guide to Dover, where he seeks the highest cliff. Tom agrees to take Gloucester to the cliff.

Analysis

Edgar's opening soliloquy reveals his belief that having survived the worst that fortune can throw at him, nothing more terrible can happen; but in fact, Edgar's acceptance of fortune is tested when the blinded Gloucester is led in. When he sees his father's condition, Edgar is forced to admit that his situation has disintegrated even further. Gloucester is being led by a tenant, who refuses to leave although his own life is at risk. Their conversation supplies a paradox:

You cannot see your way. [Old Man]  
I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; [Gloucester]  
I stumbled when I saw. (IV.1.17-19)

These lines illustrate Gloucester's failing. When he had his vision, he could not see the deceit fabricated by his younger son, and thus, vision has not helped him see his way in the past. Now that he has lost his vision but finally seen the truth, Gloucester can envision no way in which he can regain the elder son, who is lost to him. For Gloucester, the disadvantage of lost sight has become an advantage (IV.1.20-21), and his only wish is that he might "live to see thee [Edgar] in my touch" (IV.1.23).

In many ways, Gloucester's response to his tragedy parallels Lear's. Like Lear, Gloucester feels despair and questions gods who can "kill us for their sport" (IV.1.37). And like Lear, Gloucester finds his humanity in the midst of his tragedy. The blinded old man who asks that clothing be brought, so that Poor Tom might be covered, is a very different man from the Gloucester of Act I. In the play's opening scene, the earl boasted about the good sport to be had at Edmund's illegitimate conception. Instead of a thoughtless braggart, Gloucester is filled with compassion for Poor Tom (IV.1.63-70).

This compassion for his fellow man indicates that Gloucester regrets the behavior of his past, as he seeks to make amends by sharing with those he never noticed before. This action parallels the self-awareness that moved Lear to suddenly consider the poor and disadvantaged in Act III, Scene 4. Like Lear, Gloucester questions divine justice, feels despair, evokes nihilism (the belief that life is without reason or purpose), and discovers his own humanity. This scene demonstrates dramatically the parallelism between the primary plot and the subplot.

Glossary

**daub it further** disguise it further.

**horse-way** horse path.

**superfluous**extravagant; prodigal.

**bending** overhanging; prominent.

## Act IV: Scene 2

Summary

The setting is just outside the Duke of Albany's palace, where Goneril and Edmund are now present. Oswald enters with news that Albany is a changed man. The steward relates that Albany was pleased to learn of the proposed invasion by France and displeased when he learned that Gloucester had been replaced by his younger son Edmund, who had betrayed his father. With this announcement, Goneril takes command of her forces and orders Edmund to return to Cornwall while she deals with Albany. As they part, Goneril gives Edmund a favor of her affection and a farewell kiss. After Edmund leaves, Goneril remarks on the favorable impression he makes compared with her weakling husband.

Albany enters and angrily accuses Goneril of being an unnatural daughter. He also accuses Goneril and Regan of being like tigers, who have attacked their aged father. A messenger enters with the announcement that Cornwall has died of the wounds he suffered after blinding Gloucester. Albany is aghast at the news of Gloucester's torture and calls Cornwall's death divine justice. Albany vows revenge against Edmund for leaving Gloucester at the mercy of Cornwall.

Analysis

Goneril is attracted to the young, handsome, and obedient Edmund. Such qualities make him more attractive to her than her own husband. Goneril expects obedience from a man, but she also wants strength and a willingness to take what he desires — characteristics that match her own. The fact that Goneril is married does not appear to be a concern. The steward's news that Albany's political and personal alliances have changed only make Edmund more appealing to Goneril.

Albany's initial remarks to Goneril reveal how much he has changed from the beginning of the play. Albany's previous hesitation to confront his wife is now replaced by direct address of her wickedness: "You are not worth the dust which the rude wind / blows in your face." His attack on Goneril's integrity shows that Albany is a highly moral and humane individual, the antithesis of his wife, and an individual the audience has not witnessed earlier in the play. In his attack on Goneril, Albany's view of nature is the opposite of his wife's. Where Goneril has created chaos, Albany endorses nature's design and a view of nature's work within an organic framework:

That nature, which contemns it origin,  
Cannot be border'd certain in itself;  
She that herself will sliver and disbranch  
From her material sap, perforce must wither  
And come to deadly use. (IV.2.32-36)

Albany accepts that nature's pattern is essential for survival. The hierarchy of father to child, king to subject, God to king, is essential to eliminating chaos of the world. Goneril has reversed that natural order in her treatment of Lear, and the resulting chaos and anarchy has turned man against himself.

Albany points out that the news that Cornwall is dead is evidence of divine justice, and this event should provide a warning to Goneril, but she ignores Albany's words to focus on the greater concern — Regan as a widow is now available to marry Edmund. Goneril on the other hand, does have a husband, one whom she expects to control. Goneril is heir to one-half the kingdom, and she expects Albany to remember that this was her dowry; but he is stronger than Cornwall. And although Albany hesitated earlier to confront Goneril when he thought she was wrong, he is not the willing participant in evil that Cornwall has shown himself to be. Albany is genuinely shocked when he learns of Gloucester's blinding, while Cornwall easily succumbed to this perversion.

With this new resistance to his wife, Albany joins the ranks of characters who have undergone dramatic change during the course of the play, growing and evolving into a stronger and more compassionate individual. As the highest-ranking nobleman remaining, Albany will have no choice but to defend England against the French invasion. But this scene signals that Albany's loyalties will not be with his wife but with those who defend Lear.

Goneril's role, here, is in contrast to that of most Elizabethan women. In this period, women were totally subordinate to their husband's desires. The chain of authority was from God to king, king to subject (always male) and male to women and children. Elizabeth I refused to marry rather than be subject to any man's authority. Goneril, however, sees herself as the ultimate authority, and this contradicts the reality of this historical period.

Glossary

**cowish**timid; cowardly.

**answer**any act in response or retaliation.

**sliver**to cut or break into slivers.

**bending** to turn or direct.

**justicers**legal officials; judges.

## Act IV: Scene 3

Summary

The setting is the French camp near Dover. Kent hears that the king of France has been forced to return to his own country. Kent asks a Gentleman if, upon reading his letters, Cordelia revealed any emotion, and learns that she did manage to keep her feelings under control. Kent responds by acknowledging the stars' influence, which have made Cordelia so different from her sisters. Kent, who is still disguised, states that he will bring the Gentleman to Lear in Dover, and at the proper time, he will reveal his own identity.

Analysis

The King of France must return to his own country because a French invasion of England would be far too offensive for an audience still sensitive about a Spanish intrusion in recent years. The reason for the king's return is unimportant, and hence the vagueness in this scene's opening lines. The critical point is that Cordelia could not have her husband present to cloud the reunion with her father or to intrude on the final scene of the play. While the Marshal of France has been left to command the forces, the point is understood that Cordelia, who is English, will lead the defense of her father.

At Kent's request, the Gentleman reveals Cordelia's response to news of her father's treatment. Her tears and pensive retreat prove her compassion and establish that she is, indeed, the opposite of her sisters. Kent takes the difference one step further by pointing to the stars, which he says have made sisters so different from one another. Deferring to the stars effectively absolves Regan and Goneril of any responsibility for their actions and credits fate with determining one sister's virtue and the other's vice. This conversation is important in understanding the role of divine justice in the events that occur later. Albany believes in divine justice, but both Lear and Gloucester have questioned whether such justice exists. The role of fate in understanding God's justice creates some complex issues to consider, since if Kent's words are to be taken literally, Cordelia's death lies with fate and not with divine justice. Divine justice, indeed any concept of God's intervention, cannot co-exist with a reliance on fate to explain events. Of course, it is important to remember that Shakespeare sets his events in the pre-Christian era, while both Shakespeare and his audience exist in a Judeo-Christian world. This creates a paradox and adds to the tension of the text.

Glossary

**imports** to mean; signify.

**smilets** small smiles; half-smiles.

**question** communication; an asking; inquiry.

**sovereign**above or superior to all others; chief; greatest; supreme.

**dog-hearted** ferocious; cruel; pitiless.

## Act IV: Scene 4

Summary

The setting remains the French camp near Dover. Cordelia is now responsible for leading the French army in its defense of her father. Having learned of her father's deteriorating mental condition, Cordelia quickly sends an officer to search for Lear. She asks the doctor if there is any way the king's mental acuity might be restored and prays that her father's sanity is not lost forever. Within moments, a messenger arrives with news of the English army's arrival, and Cordelia prepares to use the French forces to help defend her father.

Analysis

The opening lines of this scene, which describe Lear's appearance, show how far from his royal state the king has descended. In Act I, Lear assumed the mantel of royalty with accustomed ease, and now he appears covered in weeds. Lear's choice of weeds for raiment, rather than the equally available flowers in the fields, is significant. The king's temperament is as wild and ungoverned as the weeds, which grow so freely, and which represent the unplanned chaotic state of nature.

Royalty should be cautious, planning carefully for the possibility of insurgent "weeds" — or their human equivalents — gaining a foothold in the landscape. Lear's physical self represents the results of the king's unwise abdication of authority and his negligence in tending to his kingdom. Instead of appearing like a carefully designed English garden, Lear and his kingdom show signs of neglect, and both are now infested with a wild outbreak of weeds. Lear, covered in weeds, metaphorically represents the reality of his realm. With the messenger's entrance, Cordelia's role of savior is emphasized. She is present, not as the head of a French invasion, but as a rescuer and defender of her father.

Glossary

**rank**growing vigorously and coarsely; overly luxuriant.

**century**a military unit, originally made up of 100 men.

**simples** a medicinal herb; a medicine made from a plant.

## Act IV: Scene 5

Summary

The setting is Gloucester's castle. Oswald reveals to Regan that Albany's forces have been deployed, but with much reluctance. Regan is more interested in the letter that Oswald carries from Goneril to Edmund. Regan insists that the letter be given to her, because she is aware of Goneril's amorous glances toward Edmund. Regan tells Oswald that Edmund is to be reserved for her, since she is now a widow. Regan also directs Oswald to kill Gloucester if he finds him.

Analysis

Albany's reluctance to support his wife's cause is clear as he reluctantly leads his army in defense of the kingdom. Oswald responds to Albany's hesitation by asserting that Goneril is the better soldier, which subordinates Albany's masculinity to his wife's powerful will. Oswald, however, is not accustomed to thinking about the morality of issues. As Goneril's servant, he accepts her orders without question.

Ironically, Regan expresses concern that Gloucester be relieved of his misery, especially since she is directly responsible for that misery. Her "pity of his misery" (IV.5.12) indicates that she is cognizant of public opinion and interested in her subjects' support of her actions. But, Regan does not devote much attention to this consideration; after all, she has already dispatched Edmund to kill his father. Instead, she is concerned with the letter that Oswald is carrying from Goneril to Edmund. Obviously, Regan suspects Goneril of having feelings for Edmund, and the attempts to force Oswald into surrendering the letter lack any subtly. Regan implies that she and Edmund have an understanding, and she hints that their relationship is more than casual.

By the end of this scene, the audience knows that Goneril and Regan are no longer working partners; instead, they have become rivals, engaging in hidden truths and plots. The sisters' competition for Edmund indicates that he is no longer simply the bastard son of Gloucester. Two royal princesses are vying for Edmund's attention, thus legitimizing his new position. At the conclusion of their meeting, Regan, who has already sent Edmund to kill Gloucester, now tells Oswald to kill the old man. She clearly does not want to take a chance that Gloucester might survive to reveal what happened to him.

Glossary

**nighted** made dark; black.

**belike** quite likely; probably.

**of her bosom** have her trust or confidence.

## ct IV: Scene 6

Summary

The setting is the country near Dover. Edgar is leading his father to an area, which Edgar assures the suffering earl, is near the cliffs. After Edgar describes the harrowing view of the beach below the cliffs, Gloucester thanks his guide and gives him a jewel as reward for having fulfilled his service. Delivering a final prayer, Gloucester falls forward and loses consciousness. When Gloucester awakens, Edgar easily convinces his father that he has somehow survived the fall from the cliffs and that the poor beggar who was guiding him was really some kind of fiend. According to Edgar, instead of allowing his death, the gods have saved Gloucester. Accepting this explanation, Gloucester vows to be more accepting of the afflictions that he endures.

Lear enters. Gloucester recognizes Lear's voice, whose simple babbling invokes Gloucester's sympathy. Lear's dialogue with Gloucester explores the role of justice, but at its end, the king dissolves into madness.

A Gentleman and attendants arrive, having been sent by Cordelia to find Lear. But the king is frightened and runs from his rescuers. Before he leaves to follow Lear, the Gentleman tells Edgar that the battle is imminent, as both forces are nearby. As Edgar prepares to lead Gloucester to safety, Oswald enters. When he sees Gloucester, Oswald exclaims that Gloucester is the prize he sought and that he will kill the old man. Edgar interferes; the confrontation ends in a fight and Oswald is slain. The dying steward asks Edgar to take his letters to Edmund.

Analysis

Edgar is still disguised as Poor Tom, but he is now better dressed — as a peasant rather than a pitiful soul covered only in a blanket. More importantly, the manner in which he addresses his father indicates compassion, understanding, and an acceptance of his father's flaws. Edgar has forgiven Gloucester, and his voice reflects the sentiment. Shakespeare signifies the change by having Edgar speak in verse, so the audience is also aware that Edgar is not the same man he was earlier in the play.

Just before he intends to jump, Gloucester acknowledges the strength of the gods, whose justice he earlier questioned, and he prays that Edgar will be blessed. This scene is heart-rendering because Edgar does not reveal his identity. Instead, he permits the deception to continue so that Gloucester can be healed. When Gloucester awakens, he immediately questions if he actually fell, but then quickly resigns himself to his survival. Gloucester then accepts his afflictions and promises to endure until such time as the gods determine that he has suffered long enough.

Edgar states prior to Gloucester's "fall" that he will not disclose his true identity so that his father might still be cured, but there is ample opportunity after Gloucester awakens to divulge the secret, and yet, Edgar fails to tell Gloucester the truth. Gloucester's ignorance may be necessary for his continuing self-discovery. If Edgar reveals himself in Act IV, Gloucester's opportunities for growth will be cut short, and a major element of the play is the manner in which each character evolves in response to the circumstances that test his/her beliefs, values, and strengths. Gloucester must continue to learn about himself; his movement toward self-truth would be halted if he resolves his conflict with Edgar at this point.

Lear enters once again with the exclamation that "I am the / king himself" (IV.6.83-84). Although he has no kingdom and is no longer the image of a king, the gods made Lear a king and only the gods can revoke his anointed state. When he hears Gloucester's voice, Lear begins a lengthy monologue that reveals all that he has learned since his daughters betrayed him. Lear finally understands that flattery is a hazard to someone in a high position, and thus, he makes sense even in his madness. Lear believed what he knew to be lies because he accepted his older daughters' flattery: "They flattered / me like a dog, and told me I had the white hairs in my / beard ere the black ones were there" (IV.6.96-98).

His understanding of his complicity in the events that followed is a major step in accepting responsibility and in acknowledging that he is not infallible. Lear's words — "Goneril, with a white beard!" (IV.6.96) — might be interpreted as meaning that Lear mistakes Gloucester for Goneril. But more likely, Lear is addressing Goneril and not greeting someone whom he thinks to be Goneril. By portraying her with a white beard, Lear is asserting that his eldest daughter has inverted nature by assuming the authority of her father, and thus, the white beard, which represents knowledge, becomes the guise of his eldest daughter's rule.

Next, Lear moves to a digression on adultery and sexuality, which fits the notion that both Regan and Goneril have fallen victim to excessive desires — something that is closely aligned with excessive sexuality. Thus the reference to Centaurs, which symbolize the complexity of man's intellectual ability joined to the baser desires of animals, accurately describes man's vulnerability to his more animal instincts.

As he continues, Lear moves to another subject: justice. The king has learned that those who profess honesty are often not honest, and even judges can be corrupted and bribed, and so, he advocates a turn to anarchy and a change of the rules of justice. Lear fears that justice cannot or does not exist amid so much dishonesty (IV.6.154-165).

Lear's knowledge that all men must accept their frailty and their humanity parallels Gloucester's own earlier discoveries. Because of his own suffering, Lear has also learned that even he is not above God's justice. At the end of his speech, Lear shifts to a desire for his sons-in-law's deaths, and a clearer picture of his madness emerges. Lear sees himself as a victim of Fortune, a "natural fool of Fortune" (IV.6.189). Finally, consumed with fear, Lear runs away from the Gentleman and attendants who have appeared and are searching for him.

The Gentleman reminds Gloucester and Edgar that Lear has one daughter who is in harmony with nature and who will redeem him from the misery created by Goneril and Regan. His speech also reminds the audience that the battle is drawing near. Lear's appearance and demeanor have shaken Gloucester, and in response, he prays for the gods to save him from despair and promises that he will not try to kill himself again.

Oswald's entrance in this scene results in his death. Although he is warned, he refuses to abandon his orders to murder Gloucester. Oswald is a servant for whom obedience and position are everything. At the beginning of Act IV Scene 2, Oswald was clearly confused that Albany rejected everything that Goneril had accomplished, and here, he expects the peasant who is accompanying Gloucester to simply move out of the way and allow the old man's murder. His sense of obedience is so great that he even asks the man who has killed him to deliver Goneril's letter to Edmund.

Glossary

**cock**a small boat propelled by oars, esp. one used as a ship's tender.

**idle** having no value, use, or significance; worthless.

**opposeless** irresistible.

**conceit** a flight of imagination; fancy.

**bourn** a limit; boundary; a domain.

**welk'd**r idged or twisted.

**gauntlet 1**a medieval glove, usually of leather covered with metal plates, worn by knights in armor to protect the hand in combat.**2 throw down the gauntlet** to challenge, as to combat.

**trick**a personal habit or mannerism.

**fitchew**lewd woman; prostitute.

**squiny**to squint.

**benison**a blessing; benediction.

**ballow** a short, thick stick or club.

## Act IV: Scene 7

Summary

The scene opens in a tent in the French camp. Cordelia is expressing her gratitude to Kent for the services he has tendered. Within moments, a sleeping Lear is brought into the tent, where Cordelia welcomes him with characteristic gentleness. As his senses return, the confused king asks if he is in France, and Kent assures Lear that he is in his own kingdom. Lear, Cordelia, and the doctor exit, leaving Kent and a Gentleman to discuss the most recent military developments.

Analysis

Cordelia speaks with insight and appreciation when she tells Kent that his goodness is immeasurable. Although Kent's plans are inexplicit and the reason is unclear as to why revealing his identity would interfere with those plans, his devotion to Lear has been evident all along. At the end of this scene, Kent says, "My point and period will be thoroughly wrought / Or well or ill, as this day's battle's fought." (IV.7.96-97).

Kent's destiny is irrevocably connected to that of the king's, with the full meaning of these words manifest in the final scene of the play.

Since his rescue, Lear has been sleeping, and he continues to sleep even as he is brought to Cordelia. When he awakens he thinks he is in hell, having been rescued by an angel:

You do wrong to take me o@th@ grave;  
Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound  
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears  
Do scald like molten lead. (IV.7.45-48)

The wheel of fire is a traditional metaphor for hell, deriving from the medieval period. Envisioning hell is not surprising for Lear, since Cordelia has only recently rescued him from a hellish existence on earth.

In the previous scene, Lear related many of the things he has learned during this painful period, but in this brief scene, he clearly shows that he has learned other equally important lessons. In his speech to Cordelia (IV.7.60-69), Lear makes no mention of royalty or of tests to determine the depth of love, as performed in Act I. Lear no longer sees himself as infallible, and he fully expects Cordelia to hate him. When he finally says "I think this lady / To be my child Cordelia" (IV.7.69-70), Lear is finally once again sane.

The music that greets Lear's return to wakefulness signals a return to harmony and replaces the sounds of the storm and the thundering disharmony between Lear and his older daughters. With the inclusion of music, order has returned to Lear's world, as he is reunited with Cordelia. The contrast between Cordelia and her sisters is especially dramatic in this scene. Cordelia has no desire for revenge, nor any need to make her father suffer for having misjudged her. Her virtue and purity make it easy to see why so many critics and scholars described Cordelia as Christ-like or representative of God's goodness.

Glossary

**clipp'd**inaccurate through omission.

**white flakes** white hair.

**arbitrement** an absolute and final decision.

## Act V: Scene 1

Summary

Regan, Edmund, and members of their army gather in the British camp near Dover. Regan quizzes Edmund about his feelings for Goneril. Edmund promises Regan that he will not be intimate with her sister.

Goneril and Albany enter. Albany states that he intends to defend the kingdom against the French invaders. Goneril asserts that the fight is not a domestic quarrel, but a defense against an outside enemy.

Edgar, still disguised as Poor Tom, appears and hands Albany the letter he removed from Oswald's body, the letter Goneril wrote ordering Edmund to kill her husband. Edgar leaves, and Edmund enters with news that the opposing forces are near.

Analysis

The opening of this scene reveals that Regan remains very concerned about the relationship between Goneril and Edmund. Regan wants to know the truth or says she does, but she wants to know the truth only if it is what she wants to hear. And so, Edmund obliges with his version of the truth. His relationship to Goneril is only an "honour'd love" (V.1.9). Edmund adopts the language of nobility, just as he has since he first hatched his ambitious plot to rule the kingdom.

Edmund's promise to not form a liaison with a married woman is unconvincing. Certainly, adultery is a sin, but that fact would not stop Edmund, who has demonstrated a propensity for far greater sins. When Goneril enters, her aside indicates how infatuated she, too, is with Edmund. Up to this point, having power has been most important to Goneril; now, quite suddenly, she is willing to lose the battle, and thus the kingdom, rather than lose Edmund. How far her infatuation will extend becomes clear in Scene 3.

As soon as Goneril and Albany enter, he seeks to establish his position regarding the coming battle. Albany's lines demonstrate that he is an honest and just man (V.1.24-27). The king and his supporters are not enemies of the kingdom, but the French invasion is of sufficient purpose to lead his men into battle. Albany's intent is not to treat Lear and his defenders as enemies but only to defend the country against an outside invader. The others agree with Albany to appease him and ensure his cooperation.

The rift between Goneril and Regan becomes more evident, and their competition for Edmund more obvious in this scene. Regan does not trust Goneril and will not allow her to be alone with Edmund, even for a moment. Regan's insistence that Goneril not remain behind with Edmund makes clear how far apart the sisters have moved from their earlier relationship.

In Act I, Goneril and Regan acted as one, both voicing agreement in their flattery of Lear. They again were united in Act II, when they joined together to reduce Lear's forces. But with the inclusion of Edmund into their circle in Act III, they are now completely divided, each mistrusting the other. In turn, Edmund is busy with some plotting of his own. Edmund's growing ambition leads to a hope that Goneril will kill Albany, and in turn, be killed by Regan, who will be free to marry Edmund. With Lear and Cordelia dead, Edmund will be left to rule as king. He has come a long way from the bastard son of Act I.

Glossary

**alteration** change (of mind).

**forfended**prohibited; forbidden.

**convenient**appropriate; suitable.

**avouched**asserted; affirmed.

**greet the time** hurry; meet the emergency.

## Act V: Scene 2

Summary

The setting is a field between the British and French camps. Cordelia, Lear, and their forces move toward the battle. Edgar enters, looking for a safe place for Gloucester to wait out the conflict. After placing Gloucester in a sheltered spot, Edgar leaves, and the sounds of battle are heard. In a few moments, Edgar returns and orders Gloucester to follow him to a more secure spot because Lear's forces have lost, and the king and Cordelia have been taken prisoner.

Analysis

Edgar echoes a common belief of Shakespeare's period when he says "Men must endure" (V.2.9). Patient suffering was a key part of seventeenth-century life, a fundamental belief of Christian doctrine. Within this context, the Book of Job was not just a part of the larger biblical text; it was instead, an element of every man's life. Job's trials were thought to be an actual historical account, written by Moses and designed by God to facilitate the acceptance of suffering as necessary for a later reward with God. In short, a belief in patience through suffering created the way to greater happiness and glory with God.

Job's suffering increases with his willingness to suffer; and still, he only responds, "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:9). Even when Job can bear his suffering no longer, he refuses to curse God. Instead, he curses the day of his birth. Job's patience with his loss and pain is tremendous, and clearly this serves as a model for Edgar, who has borne his trials with patience. Eventually, even Job begins to question why he must suffer, and in turn, he is chastised by God and reminded of God's glory: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:4). The reflective man, willing to suffer, reminded by patience of the reward from God, finds an expression of his glory in Job's text. Although the setting for King Lear is pre-Christianity, its influences are clearly seen in the way Edgar reminds his father that they must endure.

Glossary

**good host** shelterer, entertainer.

## Act V: Scene 3

Summary

The scene opens on the British camp near Dover. Lear and Cordelia are led in as prisoners, with Edmund as their jailer. As the two are led off to prison, Edmund gives a note to an officer and orders that the note's instructions be followed immediately.

Albany, Goneril, and Regan join Edmund. Albany demands that the two prisoners be turned over to him. Edmund resists, saying that Lear and Cordelia will be held in safekeeping so that their presence does not divide the soldiers' loyalty. Albany orders Edmund and Goneril arrested for treason.

Albany requests any man who is willing to support the charges against Edmund to appear. Edgar enters, and although he will not identify himself, he assures Albany that he is as noble as Edmund. With this statement, the brothers begin to fight, and Edmund falls. When Goneril announces that Edmund has been betrayed, Albany reveals the letter, which she does not deny. Instead, Goneril flees.

Edmund admits that the charges against him are truthful. Edgar reveals his identity and tells his brother of recent events, including the news that after disclosing his identity to his father, Gloucester's heart proved too weak to survive the news. Edmund also reports that Kent has been in disguise, having been close enough to help his king during the recent period.

A gentleman enters with news that Goneril has killed herself, but not before poisoning Regan, who is also dead. When Albany discovers Goneril's plan to have both Lear and Cordelia murdered, he quickly orders an officer to intercede, but it is too late. Lear enters with a dead Cordelia in his arms.

Albany recognizes that Lear is king and will be served by his loyal subjects, but within moments, the king dies, his body covering that of his youngest daughter. Albany informs Kent and Edgar that they must now rule the kingdom together, but Kent replies that he will soon leave the world to join his master. Edgar is left to speak of the sad weight of these events, which everyone must now endure.

Analysis

This final scene brings resolution to both the plot and subplot. The scene opens with Lear and Cordelia held prisoner by Edmund. Cordelia's response to their capture evokes the same stoicism exhibited by Edgar and Gloucester: "We are not the first / Who, with best meaning, have incurr'd the worst" (V.3.3-4). While bravely facing these events, Cordelia recognizes they are also at risk. Unlike Cordelia, Lear fails to recognize the danger in which the two captives now find themselves. Lear is merely happy to be with Cordelia, unconcerned that the war is lost and they are prisoners. He is seemingly unaware that they are in danger from Edmund. Lear has only visions of their happiness (V.3.8-15).

Lear asks for nothing more than to be with Cordelia. He will close out the rest of the world and even exclude his oldest daughters. When Cordelia asks if they will see daughters and sisters, Lear's response is a resounding "No, no, no, no!" (V.3.8). His vision of the future excludes all others, except for Cordelia. But Edmund has other plans, as he makes clear after Lear and Cordelia are led to prison. Edmund orders his officer to stage Cordelia's death as a suicide. Without hesitation, the officer accepts Edmund's orders, seemingly unconcerned about killing the king and his daughter. Gaining Edmund's favor will assure the officer continued employment when the war is over. This officer's willingness to kill without question recalls Tyrrel's similar actions in *Richard III*.

Albany has undergone significant change from his initial, docile appearance early in the play. The audience has witnessed his personal growth, and in this scene, the culmination of change is clear when he assumes control following the battle's conclusion. Although he is initially complimentary of Edmund's success in battle, Albany is quickly angered at Edmund's assumption of authority when the illegitimate son has the king and Cordelia arrested and imprisoned.

Albany immediately reminds Edmund that he is a bastard, calling him a "Half-blooded fellow" (V.3.81). Regan's defense of Edmund moves Albany to order Edmund's arrest and to issue a challenge for someone to come forth and fight Edmund. The duel that ensues is quite different from the duel that ends *Hamlet*, which is staged as sport.

Christian tradition recalls several biblical battles between good and evil, as divine justice is an important component of trial by combat. The duel between Edgar and Edmund is really a conflict that replays this ongoing battle between good and evil, with Edgar's defeat of Edmund obviously signaling the triumph of righteousness over corruption. In the end, Edmund is defeated by being noble, by not being as ruthless as he should be — or was. The system of honor disarms him, and he agrees to a duel, although he recognizes that he does not need to agree to a fight with an unidentified stranger (V.3.140-144).

When fatally wounded, Edmund even adopts the rules of social snobbery claiming, "If thou'rt noble, / I do forgive thee" (V.3.164-165). But unlike Shakespeare's other great villain, Iago, Edmund does repent and tries to rescind his order to execute Cordelia and Lear. In this small measure, he proves himself worthy of Gloucester's blood.

As Albany has earlier prophesized, Goneril and Regan's evil has finally destroyed them. The audience learns early in this scene that Goneril has poisoned Regan (V.3.97), and with Albany's denouncement of Goneril's plotting, Goneril kills herself. Although Gloucester had earlier attempted suicide, ironically only Goneril, who initially appeared so strong, succeeds at ending her own life.

Albany's order to rescue Cordelia and Lear is given too late. When Lear enters with Cordelia's body, any immediate ideas about divine justice are destroyed. The deaths of Cornwall, Edmund, Regan, and Goneril have lulled the audience into a belief that the gods would restore order to this chaotic world. But Cordelia's death creates new questions about the role of divine justice.

Eighteenth-century audiences were disturbed enough by this ending that productions of *King Lear* included a new conclusion, one in which Cordelia lives. But Shakespeare never intended for his audience to escape the painful questions that Cordelia's death creates. The deaths of Gloucester and Lear are acceptable. Both have made serious errors in judgment, and although both came to recognize their complicity in the destruction that they caused, the natural resolution of this change was an acceptance of their future, whatever it held. But Cordelia is young and blameless. She, like Edgar, is completely good and pure. Her death plunges Lear back into madness, as he can find no other way but insanity to deal with such a tragedy.

As is the case in many of Shakespeare's tragedies, at the play's conclusion, the stage is littered with bodies, some deserving of death, and some the innocent victims of evil. Lear lies surrounded with the bodies of his three daughters, just as he was surrounded by them in Act I. Traditionally, the highest ranking individual speaks the last lines in a tragedy, but in this case Edgar is given the final lines, as he responds to Albany's request. Albany, whose rank places him above the rest, has appointed Kent and Edgar to restore order. But Kent intends to follow his master in death, and Edgar's final lines are ambiguous and may portend his own early death. Thus, *King Lear* ends without the clear resolution of many of Shakespeare's other tragedies. Audiences must decide for themselves if divine justice has prevailed.

Glossary

**take upon** be interested in.

**strain** ancestry; lineage; descent.

**quarrels**a cause for dispute.

**list**a wish; a craving, desire, or inclination.

**attaint**to prove guilty.

**cope** to meet, encounter, or have to do (*with*).

**maugre** in spite of.

**descent**the lowest point; here, the sole of a shoe.

**rings** the outer edge or border of something circular; rim, as of a wheel.

**tranc'd**a stunned condition; daze; stupor.

**fordone**destroyed, killed, ruined, etc.