

## ***King Lear* and the Grounds of Government**

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**The play is invested in land and who owns and governs it, first from a far and abstract distance (the map) and then through close up, ground level experience – largely through suffering.**

The map there. Know we have divided/In three our kingdom. (Lear, scene 1, l.37-8.

All quotations are taken from *King Lear*, ed. Stanley Wells, Oxford UP)

Of all these bounds even from this line to this/ With shady forests and wide-skirted meads/We make thee lady. (Lear to Goneril, sc. 1, l.57-9)

O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars/Are in the poorest things superfluous.  
(Lear, sc. 7, l.422-3)

GLOUCESTER

Alack, the night comes on, and the bleak winds

Do sorely rustle. For many miles about

There's not a bush.

REGAN O sir, to willful men

The injuries that they themselves procure

Must be their schoolmasters. Shut up your doors.

He is attended with a desperate train,

And what they may incense him to, being apt

To have his ear abused, wisdom bids fear.

CORNWALL

Shut up your doors, my lord. 'Tis a wild night.

My Regan counsels well. Come out o'th'storm. (Sc. 7, 456-465)



**Lear's increasing sensitivity to inequality comes from his experience not only of being reduced in circumstances, particularly in terms of all the things that "troop with majesty" but also of being outside, cold, and unhoused.**

LEAR

My wit begins to turn.

Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?

I am cold myself – Where is this straw my fellow?

The art of necessities is strange,

That can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel. – (Lear, sc. 9, l. 68-72)

Poor naked wretches, whereso'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. (Lear, sc. 11, l. 25-33)

Is man no more than this?/Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare,  
forked animal as thou art. (Lear, sc. 11, l. 96-7)

**Note how Lear becomes increasingly associated with the British landscape (all the named weeds below are native to Britain)**

Alack, 'tis he! Why he was met even now,

As mad as the racked sea, singing aloud,

Crowned with rank fumitor and furrow-weeds

With burdocks, hemlock, nettles cuckoo-flowers,

Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow



In our sustaining corn. The centuries send forth.  
Search every acre in the high-grown field,  
And bring him to our eye. (Cordelia, sc. 18, l. 1-8)

**Note as well how Lear registers those on the lowest steps of the social ladder (here, a human scarecrow) and develops a critique of social inequality and hypocrisy.**

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, in the air. (Lear, sc. 20, l. 86-91)

KING LEAR

Read.

GLOUCESTER

What, with the case of eyes?

KING LEAR

O, ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light; yet you see how this world goes.

GLOUCESTER

I see it feelingly.

KING 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 yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places; and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?



GLOUCESTER

Ay, sir.

KING LEAR

And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst  
behold the great image of authority. A dog's obeyed in office.

Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand.

Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back.

Thy blood as hotly lusts to use her in that kind

For which thou whip'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.

Through tatter'd clothes small 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.] (sc. 20. l. 140-158)

**As is the case with Lear, Gloucester undergoes a radical reduction in bodily comfort and privilege that results in a greater awareness of social inequality**

Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell/His way to Dover. (Regan on Gloucester, sc. 14, l. 91-2)

I'll fetch some flax and whites of eggs/To apply to his bleeding face. (Third Servant, on treating his master with natural resources, sc. 14, l. 104-5)

Here, take this purse, thou whom the heavens' plagues

Have humbled to all strokes. That I am wretched

Makes thee the happier. Heavens, deal so still.

Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,

That slaves your ordinance, that will not see

Because he doth not feel, feel your power quickly.

So distribution should undo excess,

And each man have enough. Dost thou know Dover? (Gloucester to "Poor Tom", sc. 15, l. 62-69)



**Embedded in the landscape at the lowest level, “Poor Tom” (really the son of a Duke) articulates the experiences of the most dispossessed members of society. (Bedlam was a hospital for the indigent and mad.)**

I heard myself proclaimed,  
And by the happy hollow of a tree  
Escaped the hunt. No port is free, no place  
That guard and most unusual vigilance  
Does not attend my taking. While I may scape  
I will preserve myself, and am bethought  
To take the basest and most poorest shape  
That ever penury in contempt of man  
Brought near to beast. My face I'll grime with filth,  
Blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots,  
And with presented nakedness outface  
The winds and persecutions of the sky.  
The country gives me proof and precedent  
Of Bedlam beggars who with roaring voices  
Strike in their numbed and mortified bare arms  
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary.  
And with this horrible object, from low farms,  
Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes, and mills,  
Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,  
Enforce their charity. “Poor Turlygod! poor Tom.”  
That's something yet. Edgar I nothing am.  
(Edgar as Poor Tom, sc.7, l. 167-186)

Poor Tom, that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt, and the water; that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cowdung for salads, swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog, drinks the green mantle of the standing pool; who is whipped from tithing to tithing, and stock-punished, and imprison'd (Edgar as Poor Tom, sc. 11, l. 115-120)



**Later, when Edgar leads his blinded father to the cliffs of Dover, he offers a vision that includes a still more vulnerable worker: one who collects “samphire,” a kind of edible seaweed, from the cliffs themselves.**

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 wing the midway air  
Show scarce so gross as beetles. Halfway down  
Hangs one that gathers samphire—dreadful trade;  
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.  
The fishermen that ⟨walk⟩ upon the beach  
Appear like mice, and yond tall anchoring bark  
Diminished to her cock, her cock a buoy  
Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge  
That on th’ unnumbered idle pebble chafes  
Cannot be heard so high. I’ll look no more  
Lest my brain turn and the deficient sight  
Topple down headlong.

**Cornwall and Regan and Albany and Goneril become increasingly unjust and tyrannical governors as the play progresses. (Note as well the differences between Cornwall and Albany, and between Goneril and Albany.)**

Though we may not pass upon [Gloucester’s] life  
Without the form of justice, yet our power  
Shall do a curtsy to our wrath, which men  
May blame but not control. (Cornwall, sc. 14, l. 22-5)

ALBANY (To Regan)

For this I hear: the King is come to his daughter,  
With others whom the rigour of our state



Forced to cry out. Where I could not be honest  
I never yet was valiant. For this business,  
It touches us as France invades our land;  
Yet bold's the King, with others whom I fear.  
Most just and heavy causes make oppose.

EDMUND

Sir, you speak nobly.

REGAN

Why is this reasoned?

GONERIL

Combine together 'gainst the enemy;  
For these domestic poor particulars  
Are not to question here. (sc. 22, l. 23-33)

As for his mercy  
Which he intends to Lear and Cordelia,  
The battle done, and they within our power,  
Shall never see his pardon; for my state  
Stands on me to defend, not to debate. (Edmund on Albany, sc. 22, l. 69-73)

