

The Tragedy of King Lear

1.2

Enter Edmond the bastard

EDMOND

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 or fourteen moonshines 5
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'±± 10
Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed
Go to th' creating a whole tribe of fops
Got 'tween a sleep and wake? Well then, 15
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmond
As to th' legitimate. Fine word, `legitimate'.
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed
And my invention thrive, Edmond the base 20
Shall to th' legitimate. I grow, I prosper.
Now gods, stand up for bastards!

Enter the Duke of Gloucester. Edmond reads a letter

GLOUCESTER

Kent banished thus, and France in choler parted,
And the King gone tonight, prescribed his power,
Confined to exhibition±±all this done 25
Upon the gad?±±Edmond, how now? What news?

EDMOND So please your lordship, none.

GLOUCESTER Why so earnestly seek you to put up that letter?

EDMOND I know no news, my lord. 30

GLOUCESTER What paper were you reading?

EDMOND Nothing, my lord.

GLOUCESTER No? What needed then that terrible dispatch of it into your pocket? The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see. Come, if it be nothing 35 I shall not need spectacles.

EDMOND I beseech you, sir, pardon me. It is a letter from my brother that I have not all o'er-read; and for so much as I have perused, I find it not fit for your o'erlooking. 40

GLOUCESTER Give me the letter, sir.

EDMOND I shall offend either to detain or give it. The contents, as in part I understand them, are to blame.

GLOUCESTER Let's see, let's see.

EDMOND I hope for my brother's justification he wrote 45 this but as an assay or taste of my virtue.

He gives Gloucester a letter

GLOUCESTER (*reads*) `This policy and reverence of age makes the world bitter to the best of our times, keeps our fortunes from us till our oldness cannot relish them. I begin to find an idle and fond bondage in the oppression 50 of aged tyranny, who sways not as it hath power but as it is suffered. Come to me, that of this I may speak more. If our father would sleep till I waked him, you should enjoy half his revenue for ever and live the beloved of your brother, 55 Edgar.'

Hum, conspiracy! `Sleep till I wake him, you should enjoy half his revenue'±±my son Edgar! Had he a hand to write this, a heart and brain to breed it in? When came you to this? Who brought it? 60

EDMOND It was not brought me, my lord, there's the cunning of it. I found it thrown in at the casement of my closet.

GLOUCESTER You know the character to be your brother's?

EDMOND If the matter were good, my lord, I durst swear 65 it were his; but in respect of that, I would fain think it were not.

GLOUCESTER It is his.

EDMOND It is his hand, my lord, but I hope his heart is not in the contents. 70

GLOUCESTER Has he never before sounded you in this business?

EDMOND Never, my lord; but I have heard him oft maintain it to be fit that, sons at perfect age and fathers declined, the father should be as ward to the son, and the son manage his revenue. 75

GLOUCESTER O villain, villain±±his very opinion in the letter! Abhorred villain, unnatural, detested, brutish villain±±worse than brutish! Go, sirrah, seek him. I'll apprehend him. Abominable villain! Where is he? 80

EDMOND I do not well know, my lord. If it shall please you to suspend your indignation against my brother till you can derive from him better testimony of his intent, you should run a certain course; where if you violently proceed against him, mistaking his purpose, it would make a great gap in your own honour and shake in pieces the heart of his obedience. I dare pawn down my life for him that he hath writ this to feel my affection to your honour, and to no other pretence of danger. 85

GLOUCESTER Think you so? 90

EDMOND If your honour judge it meet, I will place you where you shall hear us confer of this, and by an auricular assurance have your satisfaction, and that without any further delay than this very evening.

GLOUCESTER He cannot be such a monster. Edmond, seek him out, wind me into him, I pray you. Frame the business after your own wisdom. I would unstate myself to be in a due resolution. 95

EDMOND I will seek him, sir, presently, convey the business as I shall find means, and acquaint you withal. 100

GLOUCESTER These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction: there's son against father. The King falls from bias of nature: there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, 110

hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves. Find out this villain, Edmond; it shall lose thee nothing. Do it carefully. And the noble and true-hearted Kent banished, his offence honesty! 'Tis strange. 115

Exit

EDMOND This is the excellent foppery of the world: that when we are sick in fortune±±often the surfeits of our own behaviour±±we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, 120 and traitors by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence, and all that we are evil in by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whore-master man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge 125 of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the Dragon's tail and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows I am rough and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing. 130

Enter Edgar

Pat he comes, like the catastrophe of the old comedy. My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o' Bedlam.

[He reads a book]

±±O, these eclipses do portend these divisions. Fa, so, la, mi. 135

EDGAR How now, brother Edmond, what serious contemplation are you in?

EDMOND I am thinking, brother, of a prediction I read this other day, what should follow these eclipses.

EDGAR Do you busy yourself with that? 140

EDMOND I promise you, the effects he writes of succeed unhappily. When saw you my father last?

EDGAR The night gone by.

EDMOND Spake you with him?

EDGAR Ay, two hours together. 145

EDMOND Parted you in good terms? Found you no displeasure in him by word nor countenance?

EDGAR None at all.

EDMOND Bethink yourself wherein you may have offended
him, and at my entreaty forbear his presence until 150
some little time hath qualified the heat of his
displeasure, which at this instant so rageth in him that
with the mischief of your person it would scarcely allay.

EDGAR Some villain hath done me wrong.

EDMOND That's my fear. I pray you have a continent 155
forbearance till the speed of his rage goes slower; and,
as I say, retire with me to my lodging, from whence I
will fitly bring you to hear my lord speak. Pray ye, go.
There's my key. If you do stir abroad, go armed.

EDGAR Armed, brother? 160

EDMOND Brother, I advise you to the best. I am no honest
man if there be any good meaning toward you. I have
told you what I have seen and heard but faintly,
nothing like the image and horror of it. Pray you,
away. 165

EDGAR Shall I hear from you anon?

EDMOND I do serve you in this business.

Exit Edgar

A credulous father, and a brother noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty 170
My practices ride easy. I see the business.
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit.
All with me's meet that I can fashion fit.

Exit