

## Act 1, Scene 2      The Earl of Gloucester's castle

(EDMUND, with a letter.)

EDMUND

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 moon-shines 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 a whole tribe of fops\* got\* 'tween asleep and wake?  
 Well then, legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.  
 Our father's 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!

(Enter GLOUCESTER.)

GLOUCESTER

Kent banished thus and France in choler\* parted? And the King gone to-night? All this done upon the gad?\*  
 Edmund, how now? What news?

EDMUND

So please your lordship, none.

(Putting up the letter.)

GLOUCESTER

Why so earnestly seek you to put up that letter?

EDMUND

I know no news, my lord.

GLOUCESTER

What paper were you reading?

EDMUND

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, I shall not need spectacles.

*stand...custom* - submit to diseased convention, *curiosity of nations* - nice distinctions of people, *lag* - younger than  
*composition* - robustness, *fierce* - thoroughbred, *fops* - fools, *got* - begot, *choler* - anger, *gad* - spur of the moment

EDMUND

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

GLOUCESTER

Give me the letter, sir.

EDMUND

I shall offend, either to detain or give it.

GLOUCESTER

Let's see, let's see.

EDMUND

I hope, for my brother's justification, he wrote this but as an essay\* of my virtue.

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.

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, EDGAR.'

Hum! Conspiracy? 'Sleep till I waked 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 this to you? Who brought it?

EDMUND

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?

EDMUND

If the matter\* were good, my lord, I durst swear it were his;

but in respect of that,\* I would fain\* think it were not.

GLOUCESTER

It is his.

EDMUND

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

GLOUCESTER

Hath he never before sounded you in this business?

*essay* - trial, *casement of my closet* - window of my room, *character* - handwriting, *matter* - contents, *respect of that* - considering the contents, *fain* - prefer to

EDMUND

Never, my lord.

But I have heard him oft maintain it to be fit that, sons at perfect age, and fathers declining, the father should be as ward to the son, and the son manage his revenue.

GLOUCESTER

O villain, villain! His very opinion in the letter! I'll apprehend him. Where is he?

EDMUND

I do not well know, my lord.

I dare pawn down my life for him that he hath writ this to feel my affection to your honor, and to no further pretence of danger.

GLOUCESTER

Think you so?

EDMUND

If your honor 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—

EDMUND

Nor is not, sure.

GLOUCESTER

To his father, that so tenderly and entirely loves him. Heaven and earth! Edmund, seek him out. I would unstate myself, to be in a due resolution.

EDMUND

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

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, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves.

Find out this villain, Edmund; it shall lose thee nothing; do it carefully.

And the noble and true hearted Kent banished! His offence, honesty! 'Tis strange.

*(Exit GLOUCESTER.)*

*meet* - appropriate, *auricular assurance* - proof heard with your own ears, *under the prediction* - included in these ill omens

EDMUND

This is the excellent foppery\* of the world,  
that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits\* of our own behavior,  
we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars;  
as if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion;  
knaves, thieves, and treachers,\* 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 whoremaster man, to lay his goatish\* disposition to the charge 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.  
Edgar (*Enter EDGAR.*)

And pat he comes. My cue is villanous melancholy.

O, these eclipses do portend these divisions! Fa, sol, la, mi.

EDGAR

How now, brother Edmund; what serious contemplation are you in?

EDMUND

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

EDGAR

Do you busy yourself with that?

EDMUND

I promise you, the effects he writes of succeed unhappily.

EDGAR

How long have you been a sectary astronomical?\*

EDMUND

When saw you my father last?

EDGAR

Why, the night gone by.

EDMUND

Spake you with him?

EDGAR

Ay, two hours together.

EDMUND

Parted you in good terms? Found you no displeasure in him by word or countenance?\*

*foppery* - foolishness, *surfeits* - excesses, *treachers* - traitors,  
*goatish* - lecherous, "*Dragon's Tail and...Ursa Major*" - constellations,  
*sectary astronomical* - believer in astrology, *countenance* - facial expression

EDGAR  
None at all.

EDMUND  
Bethink yourself wherein you may have offended him;  
and at my entreaty forbear his presence till 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.

EDMUND  
That's my fear.  
I pray you 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?

EDMUND  
Brother, I advise you to the best.  
I have told you what I have seen and heard but faintly, nothing like the image and horror of it.  
Pray you, away.

EDGAR  
Shall I hear from you anon?

EDMUND  
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.  
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 EDMUND.)*

*allay* - be appeased, *meet* - proper; acceptable

## Act 4, Scene 1 The heath

*(Enter EDGAR.)*

EDGAR

Yet better thus, and known to be contemned,\* than still contemned and flattered.  
To be worst, the lowest and most dejected thing of fortune, stands still in esperance,\* lives not in fear.  
Welcome then, thou unsubstantial air that I embrace.  
The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst owes nothing to thy blasts.  
But who comes here?

*(Enter GLOUCESTER, led by an OLD MAN.)*

My father, poorly led? World, world, O world!

OLD MAN

O my good lord, I have been your tenant, and your father's tenant, these fourscore years.

GLOUCESTER

Away, get thee away. Good friend, be gone. Thy comforts can do me no good at all; thee they may hurt.

OLD MAN

You cannot see your way.

GLOUCESTER

I have no way, and therefore want\* no eyes; I stumbled when I saw.  
O dear son Edgar, might I but live to see thee in my touch, I'd say I had eyes again!

OLD MAN

How now? Who's there?

EDGAR

*(Aside.)* O gods! Who is it can say 'I am at the worst'? I am worse than e'er I was.

OLD MAN

'Tis poor mad Tom.

EDGAR

*(Aside.)* And worse I may be yet. The worst is not so long as we can say 'This is the worst.'

OLD MAN

Fellow, where goest?

GLOUCESTER

Is it a beggar-man?

*contemned* - despised, *esperance* - hope, *want* - need

OLD MAN

Madman and beggar too.

GLOUCESTER

He has some reason, else he could not beg.

In the last night's storm I such a fellow saw, which made me think a man a worm.

My son came then into my mind, and yet my mind was then scarce friends with him.

I have heard more since.

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.

EDGAR

Bless thee, master.

GLOUCESTER

Is that the naked fellow?

OLD MAN

Ay, my lord.

GLOUCESTER

Then prithee get thee gone.

If for my sake thou wilt overtake us hence a mile or twain on the way toward Dover,  
bring some covering for this naked soul, who I'll entreat to lead me.

OLD MAN

Alack, sir, he is mad.

GLOUCESTER

'Tis the times' plague, when madmen lead the blind.

Do as I bid thee, or rather do thy pleasure. Above the rest, be gone.

OLD MAN

I'll bring him the best 'parel\* that I have.

*(Exit OLD MAN.)*

GLOUCESTER

Sirrah, naked fellow—

EDGAR

Poor Tom's a cold. *(Aside.)* I cannot daub\* it further.

GLOUCESTER

Come hither, fellow.

*parel* - clothing, *daub* - act the part

EDGAR

*(Aside.)* And yet I must.

Bless thy sweet eyes, they bleed.

GLOUCESTER

Knowest thou the way to Dover?

EDGAR

Both stile\* and gate, horse-way and foot path.

Poor Tom hath been scared out of his good wits.

Bless thee, master!

GLOUCESTER

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!

Dost thou know Dover?

EDGAR

Ay, master.

GLOUCESTER

There is a cliff, whose high and bending head looks fearfully in the confined deep.

Bring me but to the very brim of it, and I'll repair the misery thou dost bear with something rich about me.

From that place I shall no leading need.

EDGAR

Give me thy arm. Poor Tom shall lead thee.

*(Exeunt.)*

*stile* - a set of steps used to climb over a wall