

Catch-up with Shakespeare

(Transcript of video resource)

Hi, I'm Dr. Nick Walton from the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and I'm going to be looking at an extract from 'King Lear' with you.

Now, whenever I look at an extract from one of Shakespeare's plays, I always try to keep in my mind the fact that Shakespeare was writing for a theatre audience first and foremost, rather than for an audience that was sat reading his plays. Why is this important? Well, I think it helps me keep a focus on what Shakespeare is trying to achieve from line to line. It helps me focus on the techniques that he's using, and makes me think about the sort of impact that he wants to have upon his audience as they listen to and watch his play.

We're going to be looking at an extract from act three, scene seven, which is the blinding of Gloucester. But before we look at the extract in some detail, I think it's quite useful for you to hear the scene spoken aloud. I think reading Shakespeare's works aloud can really just help bring it off the page for you instantly.

And while you're listening, I think a useful exercise for you is to imagine yourself being an audience member in Shakespeare's original playhouse listening to this scene. And I want you to take note of words that you feel Shakespeare really wants you to hear. I want you to think about the mood of the scene and how Shakespeare is achieving that. What are some of the techniques that Shakespeare is using to grab your attention and make you want to stay in the theatre watching this moment on stage?

So, let's have a little listen to the extract itself and think about a few of those things while you listen.

Gloucester

I am tied to the stake, and I must stand the course.

Regan

Wherefore to Dover?

Gloucester

Because I would not see thy cruel nails
Pluck out his poor old eyes, nor thy fierce sister
In his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs.
The sea, with such a storm as his bare head
In hell-black night endured, would have buoyed up
And quenched the stelled fires.
Yet, poor old heart, he help the heavens to rain.
If wolves had at thy gate howled that stern time,
Thou shouldst have said 'Good porter, turn the key;
All cruels I'll subscribe.' But I shall see
The winged vengeance overtake such children.

Cornwall

See't shalt thou never. - Fellows, hold the chair. -
Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.

Gloucester

He that will think to live till he be old
Give me some help! - O cruel! O you Gods!

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Regan

One side will mock another; th'other, too.

Cornwall

If you see vengeance -

Servant

Hold your hand, my lord.
I have served you ever since I was a child,
But better service have I never done you
Than now to bid you hold.

Regan

How now, you dog!

Servant

If you did wear a beard upon your chin
I'd shake it on this quarrel. What do you mean?

Cornwall

My villein!

Servant

Nay then, come on, and take the chance of anger.

Regan

Give me thy sword. A Peasant stand up thus!

Servant

O, I am slain. My lord, you have one eye left
To see some mischief on him. O!

Cornwall

Lest it see more, prevent it. Out vile jelly!

So let's try and put this scene into some context. Well, what do we know? We know that the Duke of Gloucester is an ally and friend of King Lear's. And since King Lear divided his Kingdom and fractured his relationship with his daughters, who no longer wish to have him and all of his retinue, his army staying in their homes, have left the King to go wandering out onto the heath in the pouring rain and storm.

Gloucester has wanted to protect his friend, has wanted to actually take him into his own home. He also has letters from France that are suggesting that Cordelia is going to try to avenge the wrongs that have been done to the King since she was banished from the country.

So what you have at the start of this scene is Cornwall, Regan, Goneril are furious at the fact that Gloucester is trying to help Lear, that he's trying to help him get away to Dover where hopefully he will be safe and protected.

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So right at the start of the scene, you hear Gloucester being spoken of as a traitor. He is a traitor simply for the fact that he is trying to protect and help King Lear. The two women, Goneril and Regan, are frenzied; calling for him to be hung or his eyes to be plucked out.

Gloucester hasn't yet entered the scene, so we're having this information given to us in anticipation of what is about to happen. And when Gloucester is brought on, he's bound to a chair:

'...bind fast his corky arms.'

- says Cornwall, and at that moment, Gloucester is uncertain of what is about to happen to him:

'What will you do?'

- he asks.

And that's the moment that we join this extract, where Shakespeare has built the anticipation of what is surely going to be a scene of violence and of torture.

So let's have a look at the extract itself. When I look at an extract, I find it quite useful to break it into smaller pieces, and I'll often underline things that instantly jump out to me.

So we'll have a look at some of those things I've highlighted here. The first thing I've highlighted is Gloucester's first line:

'I am tied to the stake...'

It's a visual image that Gloucester is emphasising there. We can picture him with his 'corky arms' tied to the chair. He's immobile; he's static; he is a prisoner; he's a hostage.

Why is Shakespeare having him say that? Well, in part, I think it's the case that it's a reminder for the actors. It's almost like a stage direction. The actors wouldn't have had very long at all to rehearse these plays so very often what you'll find, and it happens a number of times in this extract, the actors will actually say things that they are doing on stage. It's almost a sense of choreography.

So we just have Shakespeare picturing this scene with Gloucester tied to the chair. And of course there's also an illusion there, perhaps, to the martyrs who would have been tied to the stake before being burned, or also perhaps a bear in a bear baiting pit. Think of those bear baiting pits that stood next to Shakespeare's open roof, playhouses. What is happening to Gloucester in this scene is really very similar to the sport that people would have watched when watching bear baiting. A figure, tied, who is being taunted and eventually overcome by these predatory type figures of Regan and Cornwall.

Next thing I've highlighted there in yellow, the 'cruel nails' plucking out 'his poor old eyes' - that seems to foreshadow what's going to happen in this scene. Gloucester is actually talking about King Lear. He doesn't want Goneril and Regan and Cornwall to get close to Lear because he fears that they would pluck out his eyes. Little does he realise that that's exactly what is going to be happening to him in just a few moments time.

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We've also got those underlying emphases of the animality, the cruelty, the savagery of the sisters -

'...fierce sister...'

'...boarish fangs...'

- this is savage behaviour that they are displaying. And it's also set in contrast to King Lear, who is made out to be something of quite a pitiful character:

'...poor old heart...'

- you have Gloucester saying. He is trying to make us feel sympathetic for Lear. Lear is no threat; Lear is no danger; Lear is no competition for his daughters who, in their power and in their force, are starting to treat him with disrespect that could never be expected of one's children.

What you find at the close of that extract there, is that Gloucester is actually trying to have an emotive appeal to Regan and Cornwall. He's using his rhetoric, his persuasive language, to try to make them feel that perhaps they should be doing things differently. What if you'd have had a wolf crying at your door all night? Surely you might've felt that you would have wanted to let that wolf in?

Well it wasn't a wolf, it was your father and you decided to keep him out in the storm, and out in the cold. How barbaric and how inhuman. "Where is your heart?", Gloucester seems to be saying to them both.

And he ends there by saying -

'...But I shall see
The winged vengeance overtake such children.'

Seeing; sight; blindness - it's a word that is repeated many, many times through the course of this play. And this here is just one of those moments where Gloucester is talking about seeing something and the irony, of course, is this is an extract in which he is actually going to be made blind.

Cornwall picks up the use of Gloucester's word 'see' and repeats it right at the start of his next sentence:

'See't shalt thou never.'

There's an incredible cruelty contained within that line considering what is about to happen in the blinding of Gloucester that's about to take place.

'Fellows, hold the chair.'

- that's another of those stage directions that I was suggesting that Shakespeare sometimes almost incorporates into his writing. It's as though the actor who is playing Cornwall is reminding those other figures on stage of what they need to be doing right now. It would be a very strange scene if they didn't hold the chair at that moment. It's an instruction and it requires choreography. So Shakespeare's building in actor-friendly moments that help his play have a sense of movement and choreography to it.

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And I say movement - it sounds as though there's going to be some movement from Cornwall right at this moment, because he says -

'Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.'

Well, how exactly is he going to do that? Is he talking about stamping on the eyes once they're out, or is he actually going to do it with his foot?

If he's going to do it with his foot, well presumably the other actors need to turn the chair over so that Gloucester is on the stage with his face invisible to the audience whilst Cornwall takes out his eyes with his foot, the heel of his shoe perhaps.

'O cruel! O you Gods!'

- that's Gloucester calling for help at that moment.

Those explosive vowel sounds, 'O', on the page - simply one letter. But in the theatre Shakespeare's imagining, I'm sure, howls of pain at that moment from Gloucester, because this is exactly the moment that he's having his eye ripped from his head.

How do we know that? Well, because Regan responds immediately, talking about taking out the other eye:

'One side will mock another; th' other, too.'

It's a terrible thing that she says, I think it's really quite grotesque, dark black humour: "Don't leave him with one eye", she's saying, "that wouldn't look right; take both eyes out". So she's justifying her own cruelty in the most horrendous and vile ways.

We then have a moment that I think is particularly important in this extract. So far, we've been looking at Cornwall, at Regan, at Gloucester, and there's been the intensity and the focus of the scene of torture happening around Gloucester's body. But now we have the entrance of another figure. The first servant is making an interjection. He's trying to stop what is happening. And in some ways I think he is perhaps doing exactly what we, the audience, would want to happen at this moment.

Shakespeare is making us sit through a scene of barbaric torture. We want there to be some reprieve for Gloucester; we wish that somebody would help him - and here the First Servant does that. And importantly, again, he plays upon Cornwall's emotions. He tells him that ever since he was a child, he has been working for Cornwall; they've had a long relationship.

'But better service have I never done you / Than now to bid you hold.'

'Now' is a really powerful word in Shakespeare's plays; it's very immediate. And I think why Shakespeare uses it at this moment is to give you a sense of a juncture. Is Cornwall going to stop? Is Cornwall going to think better? See better, perhaps of his action? Or is he going to carry on through to its horrendous close?

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I've highlighted Regan's use of the word 'dog' here because it struck me as a bit strange. It seems strange that she should be using animalistic imagery to talk about the servant when the servant is actually being civilized; is trying to help; is showing loyalty at that moment. She seems to be labeling him in completely the wrong way. It's she who is a dog, and Cornwall, who are acting like animals, and savages, and beasts at this moment.

I think the servant is actually noting how unnatural Regan's behaviour is. He says to her that he wasn't going to fight her because she's a woman. He would fight her if she was a man, but how on earth is she showing such violence and such a taste for the torture of Gloucester that she seems to be showing during the course of this extract?

Regan really seems to be part of a double-act with Cornwall, her husband:

'Give me thy sword.'

- the imperative there, it's an instruction. She wants to be part of this scene, part of the action.

One of the things that I think is most terrifying about the way that Shakespeare builds this extract is the way in which Goneril, Regan, Cornwall seem to enjoy the sport. They seem to take pleasure from this power and from the violence. We really have a sense of a world that has been turned upside down and where loyalties have absolutely been divided, just like the kingdom.

And the last words that I've given you there underlined are -

'Out vile jelly!'

- that's as Cornwall takes the eye from the head of Gloucester. And that phrase in itself, 'vile jelly' - such a memorable, such a grotesque, such a horrendous image to have in your mind of somebody's eye. But a very powerful thing for an audience to hear when they are listening to this drama. People might have turned away by this point because they don't want to see what's happening.

If they don't see it, they hear it, 'Out vile jelly!'