

David Henry Wilson

LEAR'S FOOL

All enquiries to elaine@hopecorner.net

LEAR'S FOOL

Introduction

“And I’ll go to bed at noon,” says the Fool, in Act III Scene 6, and he is never seen again. What became of him? The only clue we have is a controversial line right at the end of the play, when Lear says: “And my poor Fool is hang’d!” I have never understood why this line should be controversial, but since it is, and since it has crucial relevance to my play, we must examine the arguments.

The editor of the Arden edition states categorically that it refers to Cordelia, and “fool” is a term of endearment. He also quotes Bradley, who thought that Lear’s mind was wandering and that he was confusing one “affectionate dependent” with another. If it is a term of endearment, it’s a very strange one. Goneril calls her despised husband a “moral fool” and a “vain fool”, and complains that “my fool usurps my bed”. Why should a term of abuse suddenly become one of endearment? The Bradley interpretation entails an extraordinary mental process in which Lear thinks he’s looking at the Fool but knows he’s looking at Cordelia. Why must this line take on so many complications? There is one word which makes Lear’s thought processes clear and utterly logical: “And” means in addition, and as he gazes at the body of his hanged daughter - his mind totally absorbed by this appalling tragedy - it would be absurd for him to say that in addition his daughter is hanged. The addition, I would suggest, is that the Fool has suffered the same fate, of which Lear is reminded by the sight of his daughter’s mutilated neck. This would be dramatically consistent (both “affectionate dependents” and truth-tellers die the same death), would tie up a loose end in the play, and would dispense with all the linguistic and psychological anomalies. Let us, then, henceforth give the word its capital F.

This, however, is only our starting-point. How does Lear know that the Fool was hanged, since he and Cordelia were taken straight to prison after the battle? The answer can only be that the Fool was in prison, too. And this in turn offers a solution to the mystery of his disappearance after Act III Scene 6. When we next see Lear, in Act IV Scene 6, he has somehow been separated from the Fool, but it is unthinkable that the latter would abandon his master:

But I will tarry, the Fool will stay,
And let the wise man fly:
The knave turns Fool that runs away;
The Fool no knave, perdy.

The idea that the separation came about through the capture and subsequent imprisonment of the Fool seems to me to be irresistible.

This leads us to two fascinating areas of focus. Firstly, with the Fool now cut off from his master’s all-consuming passion, we have a chance to get to know one of Shakespeare’s most enigmatic characters in his own right. Secondly, when he is eventually joined by Lear and Cordelia in the prison, they will all have the opportunity to look back over their own actions as well as each other’s, and to reassess what has happened.

These, then, are the basic premises of my play, and if it gives pleasure plus a few insights into its parent masterpiece, it will have justified the writing.

Characters:

John, a guard
The Fool
The Captain
King Lear
Cordelia

The scene: a prison cell in Dover

LEAR'S FOOL was first performed at Christ's Hospital Theatre, Horsham, on 4 November 1994, and subsequently at the Mill Studio, Guildford with the following cast:

John	Nick Fawcett
The Fool	Stephen Chance
The Captain	Ben Totterdell,
King Lear	Richard Owens
Cordelia	Amanda Beard

Director	Michael Friend
Designer	David Myerscough-Jones
Lighting	Leigh Porter
Prod. Manager	Amanda Jameson

The first London production was at the Jermyn Street Theatre on February 6 1995, with the following cast changes:

The Fool	Andrew Wheaton
King Lear	Joe James

LEAR'S FOOL

Scene One

A cell in Dover. THE FOOL enters, followed by JOHN.

JOHN: In you go then, Fool.
FOOL: Is this where you live?
JOHN: No, sonny, no. This is where you live.
FOOL: Will you keep watch over me?
JOHN: Yes.
FOOL: Then you must live here, too. Whither I go, thou goest, and where I lodge, thou lodgest. Welcome home, Fool.
JOHN: You'll be inside, and I'll be outside.
FOOL: So the dog chained to the kennel is free. Lucky dog!
JOHN: I'm not a dog.
FOOL: It's a metaphor.
JOHN: A what?
FOOL: If I say the Duchess of Albany has a heart of stone, it doesn't mean she has a heart of stone.
JOHN: No?
FOOL: It means her heart is hard.
JOHN: What's that got to do with me being a dog?
FOOL: Forget it. Let's bark up other trees.
He sits on the floor.
Ah! This must be what's called a hard cell.
JOHN: What's it like being a Fool?
FOOL: Tell me.
JOHN: What?
FOOL: Well, you have to wear a uniform.
JOHN: So do I.
FOOL: Do you indeed? And you have to do as you're told.
JOHN: I'm the same.
FOOL: And if you do the wrong thing, you're punished.
JOHN: We get punished, too.
FOOL: There seems to be no difference between us.
JOHN: I wouldn't call that a uniform.
FOOL: Underneath it's the same as yours.
JOHN: What's underneath, then?
FOOL: Skin. Dost know the difference between a Fool's skin and a soldier's skin?
JOHN: No.
FOOL: Nor do I.
JOHN: I know the difference between a Fool's job and a soldier's job.
FOOL: Oh teach me, Solomon, teach me.
JOHN: A Fool has to entertain people.
FOOL: And a soldier?
JOHN: A soldier has to fight.

FOOL: And keep guard.

JOHN: Yes.

FOOL: Hm, I don't think that riddle will ever get to the top twenty. What's the difference between a soldier and a drunkard?

JOHN: I don't know.

FOOL: A soldier goes to battle, and a drunkard goes to bottle. What's the difference between a soldier and a glutton?

JOHN: I don't know.

FOOL: A soldier runs to fight, and a glutton runs to fat. What's the difference between a Fool's death and a soldier's?

JOHN: I don't know.

FOOL: A Fool dies laughing, and a soldier dies crying. That's nonsense. Nobody dies laughing.

JOHN: You served the King, didn't you? Is it true that he's gone mad?

FOOL: Mad as the sea and wind, when both contend which is the mightier.

JOHN: It's a shame. He was a good king. Not that I knew him personally. But he was kingly. A kingly king. Old age, was it?

FOOL: What?

JOHN: That got to his brain?

FOOL: Only before he went mad.

JOHN: What about this French invasion? Know anything about it?

The Fool shakes his head, and subsides into melancholy.

Well, there's a French invasion. That means the French are invading. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want to be governed by the French. They eat funny things, the French. Frogs. And snails. With garlic. And they talk a funny language. If they give me orders in French, I shan't understand them. I have enough trouble coping with English. So if there's going to be a battle, I hope we win. Not that I'm keen on our present government, but at least they speak English.

Pause.

For a Fool, you don't do much entertaining, do you?

FOOL: I'm off duty.

JOHN: When do you come on again?

FOOL: When my master calls.

JOHN: He's not here.

FOOL (*looking around:*) It's a lovely place to spend a holiday.

JOHN: You're lucky. I never get a holiday.

FOOL: Handy dandy, which is the prisoner, and which is the guard?

JOHN: Do you know why they took you prisoner? Normally they kill people they don't like. You must be important, even if you are a Fool.

FOOL: Oh yes, I am important. No-one is more important to myself than me. Why did they choose you to guard such an important person?

JOHN: I'm reliable. And I'm too old to fight.

FOOL: How strange! I'm also reliable and too old to fight. We were made for each other.

JOHN: Tell me a funny story.

FOOL: Once upon a time there was an old King who gave away his kingdom. He gave half to a bitch and half to a vixen, and kept nothing for himself. One day he was hungry, and asked the bitch for a crust of bread, but instead she gave him a kick in the teeth. Then he asked the vixen for a drink of water, but she gave him a slap in the face.

JOHN: Then what did he do?

FOOL: He went mad.

JOHN: You mean the old King, don't you?

FOOL: Lightning moves not faster.

JOHN: I wouldn't call that a funny story.

FOOL: It has its moments. If you gave me your sword and complained when I stabbed you, wouldn't that be funny?

JOHN: No.

FOOL: One man's gain is another man's loss.

JOHN: If the King's mad, why would the French want to put him back on the throne?

FOOL: Because the French think that all the English are mad. Who said they want to put him back on the throne?

JOHN: That's what I've heard. Isn't it true, then?

FOOL: I don't know. I wasn't consulted.

JOHN: They say the King of France has come over with his wife - that's the old King's youngest daughter - to conquer us and make the old King King. That's what I've heard.

The Fool does not react.

So what have you heard?

FOOL: I've heard that the King of France has come over with his wife to conquer us and make the old King King.

JOHN: Ah! So it's true.

FOOL: I don't know.

JOHN: Why not?

FOOL: I can't be sure my source is correct.

JOHN: Who's your source?

FOOL: You.

JOHN: Oh!

Pause.

Are you hungry?

FOOL: Yes.

JOHN: If you promise not to escape, I'll get some food.

FOOL: I shan't escape.

John goes out. The Fool takes off his coxcomb. He has grey hair. He leans back wearily, closes his eyes for a moment, then opens them again as he cries out:

Nuncle!

He stands up, goes to the door of the cell, looks out and shakes his head. Now he addresses the audience:

He that has a little tiny wit

Must make content with his fortunes fit.

Even the job of a Fool is better than no job. I didn't run away from my master -

the Fool no knave, perdy. My master ran away from me. It's been an exhausting time, and after our journey to Dover I slept and slept and slept. When I awoke, the King had gone. How could he do that to me? Except that he's mad, and knows not what he does. Then along came Gloucester's bastard son and had me pinioned and brought here. This honest fellow at least untied my arms, praise be for human kindness, and here I am. That's my story, and you are dissatisfied. A Fool must entertain. Very well, then. Gods, Gods, I swear 'tis strange, 'tis passing strange. As I did travel through England's weedy fields, accompanied by my weak-headed master-slave the King, I did perceive in myself a heaviness of eye and limb such as cometh upon a man who hath not slept for many a night, being bestressed and bestrained as for instance when he be to deliver a script full of funny jokes ere morning yet by cock crow hath not thought of one that might be worthy of a giggle.

Then I did sleep upon the grass,
Without a bed for head nor arse.
No silk or cotton, hair or hide,
Nought but a king to warm one side.
Hast had a royal snore in the ear,
Been bumped in the back by a royal rear,
Or heard the beat of a royal heart,
Or smelt the whiff of a royal fart?
There on the grass we dreamed our fill.
I was in a show. I was top of the bill.
I heard folk laugh, cheer and applaud,
And then was given a gold award.
The title was strange, and not quite clear,
But I think 'twas Albion Fool of the Year.
Something after my time, so it would seem.
Amazing the sort of things you dream.
What did the King dream? Could he perchance
Have been on holiday in France?
Or back on the throne - with the harm undone
That he wreaked on us in Act One Scene One.
Whatever it was, when he oped his eyes,
There was me beside him, surprise, surprise.
So up he got and off he ran.
What a way to treat your fellow man.
There was I, in this massive hall,
Being idolised by one and all.
Got the biggest ovation I've ever known,
Woke up - and I was on my own.

John re-enters, with food and drink.

JOHN: Come on then, while there's still time.

FOOL: Time for what?

JOHN: You'd better hurry. I've got some bad news.

They eat and drink.

FOOL: When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions.

JOHN: I've got a confession to make.

FOOL: There's another man.

JOHN: What? You remember I asked you about the French invasion?

FOOL: Yes.

JOHN: Well, I was told to.

FOOL: Told to?

JOHN: And I had to report to the Captain what you said.

FOOL: But I said nothing.

JOHN: Yes. And the Captain wasn't too pleased. He said nothing would come of nothing,
and you should speak again.

FOOL: What should I say?

JOHN: He's given me a few minutes to find out what you know, and then he's going to try other methods.

FOOL: You've found out what I know.

JOHN: Oh? What's that?

FOOL: Nothing.

JOHN: But he wants something.

FOOL: Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my nothing into a something. What sort of man is this captain?

JOHN: He's a brute. Worse than a brute. He's a brutish brute. You'd better eat up, because you won't feel like eating when he's finished with you.

FOOL: I don't feel like eating before he starts with me. I'm no lover of pain. It undermines my stoicism.

JOHN: Then just tell me.

FOOL: Tell you what?

JOHN: What you know about the French invasion.

FOOL: Well, the French invasion is...French. It's been organized by the French, and run by the French, and the French have landed with the intention of invading. Invading England. In a French way.

JOHN: I think he wants more details.

FOOL: I don't know any more details!

The Captain enters.

CAPTAIN: Well?

John leaps to attention.

JOHN: Captain, sir!

CAPTAIN: What have you found out?

JOHN: The prisoner was just giving me details, sir. Prisoner, attention when the Captain speaks to you.

The Fool does not move. John hisses to him:

Stand to attention!

FOOL (*also hissing:*) He hasn't spoken to me yet.

CAPTAIN (*to Fool:*) Tell me everything you know.

The Fool heaves himself to his feet.

How many men?

FOOL: Thirty-five.

CAPTAIN: What?

FOOL: Maybe thirty-six.

The Captain knocks the Fool down with a savage blow.

CAPTAIN: Fool you may be, but don't fool with me.

FOOL (*whining*): It's true. But then they left the King and joined the French.

CAPTAIN: Left the King?

JOHN: Sir, I think he means the King's knights.

CAPTAIN: I'm not interested in the King's knights. How many men do the French have? Stand up!

The Fool is badly frightened. He stands and cowers.

Well?

The Fool looks at John, who mouths: "Tell him!"

FOOL: A thousand?

CAPTAIN: A thousand? They think they can conquer England with a thousand?

FOOL: Curses! A thousand curses on the French! May they drown in their own bouillabaisse. They have a large army, sir. Ten thousand men.

CAPTAIN: Ten thousand! You're sure of that?

FOOL: As sure, sir, as I am of my own future.

CAPTAIN: How did they get them across? They must have a huge fleet. Ten thousand! This will be a bloody battle.

FOOL: Bloody Captain...bloody.

CAPTAIN: Is it true that the King of France has returned to France?

FOOL: You heard that, did you, sir?

CAPTAIN: I'm asking if it's true.

FOOL: Yes, sir.

CAPTAIN: Who has he left behind him general?

FOOL: Monsieur...Bonbon.

CAPTAIN: Never heard of him.

FOOL: He's a new general. Hard boiled.

CAPTAIN: Why not La Far?

FOOL: Why not indeed?

CAPTAIN: Has La Far gone back to France, too?

FOOL: Yes, sir. He wanted to get La Far away as possible.

CAPTAIN: No King and no La Far. Why did they go back to France?

FOOL: The King caught a chill, sir. You remember that terrible storm we had. The French have no nose for our climate - he was coughing and sneezing as only a Frenchman can. And he had no faith in our English doctors, so...

CAPTAIN: English doctors? They have English doctors with them?

FOOL: Yes, sir.

CAPTAIN: Doctors defecting.

FOOL: Defecting and infecting, sir. The health service, as in part I understand it, is to blame.

CAPTAIN: And La Far?

FOOL: A stomach upset, sir. What the French call “les trottes”.
CAPTAIN: So they left this Bonbon in charge. Why did you leave the French camp?
FOOL: Leave it? Ah, why did I leave it? I couldn’t stand the food, sir.
CAPTAIN: And the old King...
FOOL: I couldn’t stand him either, sir.
CAPTAIN: How mad is he?
FOOL: Mad enough to stay with the French, sir.
CAPTAIN: Could he rule England again?
FOOL: Oh sir, mad rulers are our speciality.
CAPTAIN: I want a direct answer, Fool. How mad is he?
FOOL: He is completely mad, sir. He is madness personified. He couldn’t be more mad, sir, if you cut off his head and emptied it down the jakes.

The Captain nods.

CAPTAIN: The Earl of Gloucester shall know of this.

He goes out. The Fool collapses in a heap. John takes him a drink.

JOHN: Here, get this down you.

The Fool drinks.

FOOL: What will he do when he discovers I was lying?

JOHN: Lying?

FOOL: I told you, I don’t know anything.

JOHN: Were you not in the French camp?

FOOL: Oh! I am a fool. I’d forgotten whose side you were on. Now what are you going to do?

JOHN: In wisdom, I should tell him. On the other hand, if the French have ten thousand men, I’ll need a friend.

FOOL: I don’t know how many men they’ve got.

JOHN: Then maybe I shan’t need a friend.

FOOL (*slapping his forehead:*) Fool twice over!

Pause, as John reflects.

JOHN: I’ll say nothing.

FOOL: Thank you, good friend.

JOHN: If we win the battle, you told me nothing, right? And if they win, I told the Captain nothing.

FOOL: Right. The Earl of Gloucester!

John leaps to attention, then sees there is no-one there.

JOHN: Where?

FOOL: The Captain has gone to see the Earl of Gloucester.

JOHN: Yes, he’s our general.

FOOL: The Earl? But he’d never fight against the King!

JOHN: Don’t you believe it. There’s talk that he might be the next king himself.

FOOL: But he helped the King escape! He loves the King!

JOHN: Ah, you’re thinking of the old Earl. I’m talking about the new Earl.

FOOL: The new Earl?

JOHN: Earl Edmund. Haven’t you heard what happened?

FOOL: Tell me.

JOHN: They caught the old Earl after he'd helped the old King, and they put out his eyes and took away his title. Gave that to his bastard son.

FOOL: Gloucester's eyes! Then where is he now?

JOHN: We thought he might be with the French as well. And the Duke of Cornwall's dead.

FOOL: What?

JOHN: Slain by one of his servants. Which leaves the widowed Duchess chasing after the bastard Earl. I don't know what the Royal Family's coming to.

FOOL: O poor Gloucester!

JOHN: Hey, you're not supposed to cry. Fools are supposed to laugh.

FOOL: The old Earl's blind,
The old King's mad.
The knave may laugh.
The Fool is sad.

JOHN: Make a joke out of it.

FOOL (*using two voices*): Mad King am I.
Blind Earl, that's me.
I can't think.
And I can't see.
What's the difference, my boy, between a madman and a blind man?

JOHN: I don't know.

FOOL: A madman ceases to know, and a blind man noses to see. O Nuncle, Nuncle, beat at the gate!

JOHN: Make me laugh, go on.

FOOL: I cannot even make myself laugh. What makes a blind man mad?

JOHN: I don't know.

FOOL: To see that he cannot see. What makes a madman blind?

JOHN: I don't know.

FOOL: Not to see that he can see. Dost know what nails a blind carpenter uses for eyes?

JOHN: No.

FOOL: Why, his fingernails. Dost know what tool made eyes unnecessary?

JOHN: No.

FOOL: The handsaw.

John does not react to any of this.
Thou art hard to please.

JOHN: Thou art hard to understand.

The Captain enters.

CAPTAIN: We're marching on the French.

JOHN: Oh! Good luck, sir.

CAPTAIN: You're marching too.

JOHN: Me, sir? But I'm too old to fight.

CAPTAIN: We need every man we can get

JOHN: But what about the Fool, sir?

CAPTAIN: Leave him. Or kill him. The Fool doesn't matter.

He goes out.

JOHN: I don't want to fight.
FOOL: And I don't want to be killed.
JOHN: I'm not going to kill you. It's me I'm worried about. You can go home, but what's going to happen to me?

CAPTAIN (*off*): John!

JOHN: Sir! (*To Fool:*) Goodbye.

FOOL: Good luck.

JOHN: And you.

He goes out.

FOOL: The Fool doesn't matter! Hath not a Fool eyes? Hath not a Fool hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. This speech Shylock shall make, for I live before his time. I can go home. But I have no home. The King was my home. (*To audience:*) There is nowhere to go, and nothing to do. When the battle's over, something will happen, but in the meantime shall I tell you a story? Once there was a yeoman with a son of strange disposition. He would laugh and joke the livelong day, and turn the rain to sun and the sun to birdsong. The men and women of the village would laugh too, but thought him mad though harmless. For only a madman would laugh and joke the livelong day. Of course, they did not know his secret: he was happy. One day, riding out of the woods, there came a young prince who was hunting with his knights. Of a sudden his horse was startled, reared and threw the prince to the ground. The knights dismounted and looked on, dismayed, while the men and women came running from the fields. All were silent and serious, until the strange one came, gazed upon the scene, and sang this song:

The prince rode through the forest,

And to the fields did come.

His horse did shy,

The prince did fly,

And landed on his bum.

No-one dared speak. This could be a case for beheading. And then the prince laughed. And everyone laughed. And the fields and forests echoed with the laughter of prince and knights and peasants. The prince was so taken with the young jester that he engaged him in service. And I have served him ever since. He's a mad yeoman that sees his son a gentleman before him, yet a yeoman's son would be mad to say no to a prince. Especially a prince like Lear. Say no to Lear and be split by a thunderbolt. I call him Nuncle. That too is a story. Everything is a story. Today's life is tomorrow's story. Lear's father loved women. He was a lusty king, and a lusty king takes women in a flood. The Queen his wife bore him only the one son, our Lear, after which he never soiled her bed again. She was a hard woman. Well, it was rumoured — no more than that, merely rumoured — that Lear's father once rode the same path as later his son would ride, and he came upon a pretty maid in the fields. He took her to the nearest tussock, and there he had his way with her. The maid gave birth to a son, who in due course grew up to be a yeoman. When

this yeoman had a son, it was me. Which would make Lear my uncle. But since we know not whether rumour be true or false, we know not whether Lear be my uncle or no. And so I call him Nuncle. Lear hated his father's heat, and equally he hated his mother's cold. For years he avoided women. You have seen how even lately he travelled only in the company of his knights — and made no allowance for them to have women with them. When his father died and he ascended the throne, his mother told him again and again to marry, and what was his reply? "Never, never, never, never, never." But marry he did. At the age of fifty, soon after his mother had at last relieved the world of her presence, he decided that perhaps he too was mortal and should provide the kingdom with an heir. His wife was a beauty, of sweetest, kindest nature, by name Cordelia. He loved her, in his own uncertain manner, and when she was with child, they prayed night and day that it would be a son. But out came Goneril. Then she conceived again. O let it be a son, prayed Lear, and out came Regan. And when for the third time the Queen grew round-bellied, the whole kingdom waited with an air of foreboding. It was another daughter. Her birth killed the good Queen — whether by force of nature, or by fear of her husband's disappointment. Great was Lear's sorrow when his Queen died, and to the new daughter he gave the Queen's name: Cordelia. He loved her most, and she was most lovable. Until, in one moment of rare blindness, she spoke what she should not have spoken. Nothing. Had she but said: Father, I love you with Cordelian love, we should all have lived happily ever after. Should she be blamed? Knaves flatter for gain. Yet it would not have been dishonourable to tell the truth. You are getting restless. The Fool's task is to entertain, and you are not being entertained. But can you be sure that I am the Fool? What makes you so certain? Why, the clothes I wear. But clothes are a hiding place. Supposing I told you I was not the Fool? Now listen to my voice: I am not the Fool. There was, you see, a plot to kill the King, and a king is a king while a fool is merely a fool. The King must be saved. And so the Fool puts on the King's clothes, and the King puts on the Fool's clothes, and hey ho, which is which and who is who? There is safety in poverty, for what can you take from a man who has nothing? I am the King. When I do stare, see how the subject quakes. (*He laughs.*) But I am not the King. I am the Fool you took me for, though not altogether the fool you take me for, since I am not altogether fool. Are you altogether watcher, clerk, priest, schoolmaster, mother, merchant, murderer...critic? Are we not all parts that play parts? I'll set you a riddle: Blow, blow, thou winter wind, Thou art not so unkind. As what? If thou knowest not, thou shalt learn, and if thou knowest, then spare a thought for my master. I will explain. The King is a kind man. Rash and swift-tempered, devilish if he get not his own way, but loving and generous to those who please him. He takes men to be honest that but seem so, and delights in delighting them. It is a fault, but not a vicious fault. What is most sad in this kind king's composition is that, although he loves, he knows not what it is to be loved. He does not understand women. You may ask: Who does? Now strangely, although he knows not what it is to be loved, he is loved. Many would endanger their own lives for love of him.

But he cannot discern. When he gave away his kingdom, he thought to live in the sun, and only when the wind blew did he smell them out, the marble-hearted ones, whose ingratitude is unkindier than the winter wind. His fault then was not evil, but ignorance. Thus saith the Fool. I pined when Cordelia went away, for I love her more than word can wield the matter. I had hoped that this journey of ours would bring us to her again, so that winter might end. If the French were to win the battle, it might happen. But you and I know that the French will not win the battle. Why? Because when did the French ever beat the English?

John returns, very frightened.

JOHN: Oh!

FOOL: Oh!

JOHN: You still here?

FOOL: Yes. What's happened?

JOHN: I've deserted.

FOOL: What?

JOHN: When the Captain wasn't looking, I ran away.

FOOL: The better part of valour is discretion.

JOHN: The better part of life is life. Why should I be killed because the people up there are quarrelling? If they want to quarrel, let them kill each other.

FOOL: Then you don't mind if France conquers England?

JOHN: I'd rather they didn't, but killing me isn't going to make any difference either way.

FOOL: Such selfishness. Why, if every soldier did the same as you, there'd be no wars. And then what would mankind do?

JOHN: Oh there's always people willing to fight.

FOOL: Ah, then mankind is safe. Who was winning the battle when you left it?

JOHN: I never left it.

FOOL: Oh?

JOHN: You can't leave something you haven't joined.

FOOL: True, boy. Then simply, who was winning the battle?

JOHN: Doubtful it stood, as two spent swimmers that do cling together and choke their art.

FOOL: That's a fine image for a plain soldier.

JOHN: I heard it somewhere.

FOOL: Not in England, I'll wager. Then you don't know who's winning?

JOHN: No. But whoever wins, I'm in trouble. To the English I'm a deserter, and to the French I'm the enemy.

FOOL: Stick a feather in your cap and pretend you're German.

JOHN: I've got an idea. Why don't you and I swap clothes?

FOOL: How will that help us?

JOHN: No-one'll recognize me.

FOOL: Better to be hanged for a fool than hanged for a knave. Can you sing?

JOHN: No.

FOOL: Dance?

JOHN: No.

FOOL: Make jokes out of disasters?

JOHN: No.

FOOL: Ah, thou wouldst make a good fool.

JOHN: Come on, take off your clothes. I mean it.

FOOL: And what will they do to me if they catch me?

JOHN: I haven't got time to worry about you. Get them off!

They both undress.

FOOL: I'll take thy soldier's helmet

And armour rich and rare,

I'll take thy hose and take thy shoes,

But keep thine underwear.

They take each other's clothes.

Have you thought this through?

JOHN: What do you mean?

FOOL: If the English win, they'll take you for a traitor, and if the French win, the King will demand of thee that which thou canst not give.

JOHN: No-one'll take any notice of a fool. I'm not stupid.

FOOL: And not to be stupid is wisdom indeed. If I must be a soldier, then give me thy sword.

John hands over his sword.

JOHN: Here, soldier.

FOOL: Thanks, soldier. And now...(pointing to the sword)...take off my clothes and give them back to me.

JOHN: What?

FOOL: Take off my clothes, or thou shalt get a stabbing.

John realizes the situation, and disrobes.

Truly the sword is mightier than the word. One flash of the blade gains more territory than a hundred flashes of wit.

They are both in their underwear as the Captain enters.

CAPTAIN: What's going on here? Pederasty in the ranks!

JOHN: Sir!

CAPTAIN: John? Is it you?

JOHN: Yes, sir.

CAPTAIN: I thought you were dead.

JOHN: So did I, sir. He took my sword, sir.

CAPTAIN: Who is this?

JOHN: The Fool, sir.

CAPTAIN: Ah! Draw your sword on an officer, would you?

The Captain draws his own sword, and knocks the Fool's out of his hand.

CAPTAIN: Why are you both in your underwear?

JOHN: He was about to rape me, sir.

FOOL: What?

CAPTAIN: A Fool, a rapist, and a liar. You told me there were ten thousand Frenchmen under a General Bonbon.

FOOL: I may have been mistaken.

JOHN: He was lying, sir. I discovered it just after you left, and tried to warn you, but he overpowered me...

CAPTAIN: Be quiet, John.

JOHN: Yes, sir.

CAPTAIN: You also told me the old King was mad.

FOOL: That he is mad, 'tis true.

CAPTAIN: It's not true.

FOOL: What?

CAPTAIN: Some other time for that. (*To John:*) Get dressed. I have a task for you. (*To Fool:*) You too.

John and the Fool both get dressed.

We've defeated the French.

JOHN: Oh great news, Captain!

CAPTAIN: They'd barely sniffed our breakfast cereal before they threw down their weapons. Now we have other business to attend to. Can you be trusted not to give your sword away again?

JOHN: Yes, sir.

CAPTAIN: Here.

He flicks the sword towards John, who jumps out of the way.

Pick it up. Now, guard him. I'll be back shortly.

He goes out.

FOOL: Rape?

JOHN: I'm sorry. It's all I could think of.

FOOL: Well, at least he didn't kill us.

JOHN: I wonder what task he's going to give me.

FOOL: Why, to write the history of the battle.

JOHN: I don't know anything about the battle.

FOOL: Ignorance never stood in the way of historians. What you do not know, invent.

JOHN: I can't write either.

FOOL: Thou art the best o' the historians. Yet he's good that knows no history at all. If thou knowst none, thou art the nonpareil.

JOHN: I don't know much.

FOOL: Then take my coxcomb, for thou art a greater myself than myself. Tell me, why did the Captain say the King is not mad?

JOHN: I don't know.

FOOL: He's as mad as the vex'd sea. Unless...oh!

JOHN: What?

FOOL: My poor master. And mistress. too.

JOHN: What are you talking about?

FOOL: The French have been defeated. A dead king is not a mad king, a dead queen is no threat to the usurpers. Those devils would do it. Did heaven look on, and would not take their part?

JOHN: Cheer up. He never said they were dead.

FOOL: I know that the King is mad.

JOHN: Not being mad doesn't mean you're dead. I'm not mad, but I'm alive.

FOOL: Could he have been pretending? Why would he pretend to be mad?
 JOHN: There's beggars in the street pretend to be mad. They make a better living begging than they would working.
 FOOL: No, no, he's dead, and all's cheerless, dark and deadly. Gloucester too. He helped us escape. A kind, brave man, blinded for his compassion. World, world, O world.
 JOHN: I'm not staying in here if you're going to be a misery.
He goes out.
 FOOL: Take me with thee, Nuncle.
 Not a flower, not a flower sweet,
 On my black coffin let there be strown;
 Not a friend, not a friend greet
 My poor corse, where my bones shall be thrown.
 A thousand, thousand sighs to save,
 Lay me, O! where
 Sad true lover never find my grave,
 To weep there.
There are loud voices off stage.
 JOHN (*off:*) In you go, sir. You've got to go in.
He drives in King Lear and Cordelia. At the sight of the Fool, Lear immediately stops protesting, and the scene freezes for a moment.
 FOOL: Nuncle!
 LEAR: My boy! My pretty boy!
The Fool runs across the stage and kneels at Lear's feet. Blackout.

Scene Two

Later. Lear, Cordelia and the Fool. Lear is seated.

LEAR: Now, our joy, although our last, and least; to whose young love the vines of France and milk of Burgundy strive to be interest'd; what can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
 CORDELIA: Nothing, my lord.
 LEAR: Nothing?
 CORDELIA: Nothing.
 LEAR: Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.
A moment of tension, broken by a loud laugh from Lear.
 Everything comes of nothing.
 FOOL: And everything goes to nothing.
 LEAR: From nothing we come, to nothing we go.
 FOOL: And all between is a passing show.
 LEAR: Can you make no use of nothing, boy?
 FOOL: Why, no, Nuncle; nothing can be made out of nothing.
 LEAR: A kingdom can be lost for nothing. A daughter can be lost for nothing.
 FOOL: Why, then, you have no kingdom for nothing and no daughter for nothing, and so you have made nothing out of nothing.

LEAR (*rising and embracing Cordelia:*) And what lies now between daughter and father?

CORDELIA: Nothing.

LEAR: And from that nothing I will make my kingdom. I have caught thee.

FOOL: And they have caught us all. O Nuncle, I'd rather have my nothing in the tempest than in a prison cell.

LEAR: My good old friend, lay comforts to your bosom.

FOOL: The comforts to your good old friend's bosom will not loosen the noose around his neck.

LEAR: Let's have no misery here. Where love is, is joy. Now, sirrah, sing us a song.

FOOL: Since thou art joyful, thou shouldst sing the song.

LEAR: Images of revolt! Am I not still thy master?

FOOL: Since thou art master of nothing, thou art my master, but since nothing will sing of nothing, sing thou the song.

LEAR (*singing:*) Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
 Within his bending sickle's compass come;
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

FOOL: O master, with such a voice you make even the edge of doom seem welcome.

LEAR: A man must use the gifts he has been given.

FOOL: Then Nuncle, I pray thee, use them sparingly.

LEAR: Cordelia, will you not sing to us, and still this viperous tongue?

CORDELIA (*singing:*) Then is there mirth in heaven,
 When earthly things made even
 Atone together.
 Good King, receive thy daughter;
 The gods from heaven brought her;
 Yea, brought her hither,
 That thou mightst join thy hand with hers,
 Ere death his own cold hand bestirs..

LEAR: Why these sad faces?

FOOL: I am never merry when I hear sweet music.

LEAR: Cordelia? Why do you weep?

FOOL: Wert thou not in a prison, Nuncle, thou'dst well deserved to be set in a prison for that question.

LEAR: Why, boy?

FOOL: You lack soldiers.

Lear still does not understand.
 The lion that has no teeth will starve to death, for else
 The King of England
 And the Queen of France
 Could lead the people
 In a merry dance.

LEAR: No. They durst not do't. They could not, would not do't.

He goes to the door of the cell.

You there without, I must needs speak with thee.

John comes in.

What are your orders?

JOHN: To guard you, sir.

LEAR: Who gave the order?

JOHN: The Captain, sir.

LEAR: And who gave him the order?

JOHN: The Earl of Gloucester, sir.

LEAR: The Earl of Gloucester?

FOOL: The new and bastard Earl of Gloucester, Nuncle, not the old and legitimate one.

LEAR: Where are my sons-in-law?

FOOL: One's on his way to hell, and the other, being married to a devil, is there already.

JOHN: The Duke of Cornwall's dead, sir, and the Duke of Albany was somewhere else at the time.

Lear dismisses John.

LEAR: Albany is an honourable man. And we have no quarrel with Gloucester. So wipe thine eyes. Of comfort let us speak, and not of graves. We three are not the first of fortune's slaves, nor shall not be the last, and so with patience let's bear our own misfortune on the back of such as have before endur'd the like. (*Majestically to the Fool:*) Entertain us.

He sits close to Cordelia.

FOOL: I'll play a game with you, Nuncle.

LEAR: Ah!

FOOL: Question and answer. I ask you a question which my lady must answer, I say if her answer is true or false, and you say if I'm right or wrong. Then we each take it in turns. It's an entertaining game. I'll begin. Why did you give away your kingdom?

LEAR: I gave...

FOOL: No, no, Nuncle, the Queen of France must answer.

CORDELIA: He gave it away because he was tired.

FOOL: False. Now, Nuncle, you must say if I'm right or wrong. No lying, mind. And you lie, sirrah, we'll have you whipped.

LEAR: Thou art i' the right.

FOOL: Good, good, that's the spirit. Now you must ask her a question.

LEAR: Why wouldst thou not say that thou didst love me?

He waits for her answer.

FOOL: And the Fool must answer. Because she hates to flatter. Now you say if my answer's true or false.

LEAR: True.

FOOL (*to Cordelia:*) And you say if he's right or wrong.

CORDELIA: He's right.

LEAR: But to tell the truth is not to flatter!

FOOL: No cheating, Nuncle! Await your turn! Questions and answers only. (*To Cordelia:*) Ask away.

CORDELIA: Why did my father not see through the flattery?

FOOL: Oh clever, clever mistress - to ask me a question that he must answer.

LEAR: Because he was a foolish, fond old man. But wiser now.

CORDELIA: True.

FOOL: And you are right! New rule: questions must not pertain to the person who gives the answer. My turn again. Why did you give away your kingdom?

LEAR: I...

FOOL: Ah, ah.
He points to Cordelia.

CORDELIA: If it was not because you were tired....I remember a phrase – it seemed strange then: ‘That future strife may be prevented now.’ Was that it?

FOOL: You mustn’t ask him.

CORDELIA: You thought that when you died, there would be civil war. By dividing the kingdom first, you would ensure peace.

FOOL: True! Am I right?

LEAR: Yes.

FOOL: There! The Fool triumphs again. Twice I’ve been right. Now, Nuncle, your turn.

LEAR: We need not play it as a game.

FOOL: Oh but we must, Nuncle, we must.
A lord and a dame
Would die of shame
If you stripped them naked
Except in a game.
But they’ll shiver all day
If they think it’s play.
Do as you’re told, Nuncle. In prison a Fool may be King.

LEAR: You would not flatter me, and yet you do love me. Couldst not have told me so?

FOOL: And the Fool must answer. It’s a difficult one, Nuncle, but the answer is...yes

LEAR: Then why didn’t she?

FOOL: Oh Nuncle, you’ll never get the hang of this game. Is my answer true or false?

LEAR: True.

FOOL: Is he right?

CORDELIA: Yes.

LEAR: Then...

FOOL: You must wait your turn. If kings cannot keep to the rules, then we shall have chaos. (*To Cordelia:*) Ask me a question about myself. I’m tired of being the outsider.

CORDELIA: When the wind blew, and the rain came, and the thunder would not peace at my father’s bidding, why did you stay with him?

They look at each other. Then the Fool turns to Lear.

FOOL: Answer.

Lear has been gazing at Cordelia, but now turns his eyes upon the Fool. He is deeply moved.

LEAR: My boy!

He embraces the Fool.

FOOL: Nay, but answer.

LEAR: Love.

CORDELIA: True.

FOOL: Right.

LEAR: My poor boy.

The embrace ends.

FOOL: Is it not a good game, Nuncle?

LEAR: O! thou art wise, 'tis certain.

FOOL: Then let us hear the answer to this: you gave away your kingdom to prevent future strife. If this English angel with French wings had obeyed you, how would the plan have worked?

LEAR: I...

FOOL: Nuncle!

CORDELIA: How would it have worked?

FOOL: Think of the shares!

CORDELIA: Goneril had the north, and Regan the south-west. I was to draw a third more opulent than my sisters - all the land between, keeping my sisters apart.

FOOL: True!

Lear nods.

Right.

LEAR: Right.

CORDELIA: Oh father. You said: 'I thought to set my rest...'

FOOL: No, mistress, you must wait. It's your father's turn, and he burns to ask his question.

LEAR: Thou couldst have said: 'I love you', and not flattered me. Why didst hold back what was true, preferring to say nothing?

FOOL: To thine own self be true.

LEAR: And it must follow, as the night the day...

FOOL: Thou canst not then be false to any man.

CORDELIA: I did you wrong!

The Fool holds up his hand to stop her.

FOOL: True or false?

LEAR: True.

FOOL: Right or wrong?

CORDELIA: Right.

FOOL: That's how the game is played. Question and answer, question and answer, lower the bucket into the well, and truth will come up shining. But take comfort, mistress, thou art the daughter of thy father, as I shall prove with my next question.

CORDELIA: But it's my turn. Art thou unhappy?

FOOL: Am I unhappy, Nuncle?

Lear gazes at him.

LEAR: Yes.

FOOL (to Cordelia:) True or false?

CORDELIA: True.

FOOL: Wrong! Truly I am the champion of this game, since I alone have been right every time.

LEAR (*puzzled but pleased*:) Art thou happy, my boy?

FOOL: Is the wheel to spin the other way? Well, if I'm the hub, let my mistress answer. (*To audience*:) It's nice to have a King and Queen concerned about your happiness.

CORDELIA: If thou art not unhappy, then must needs be happy.

FOOL: True or false, Nuncle?

LEAR: True.

FOOL: Wrong again! How absolute these knaves are! If a man be not a fool, is he then wise? If he be not poor, is he rich? If he be not thin, is he fat? Ha, ye have much to learn, my masters, but we have time and the Fool will teach you. Nuncle, I have a question to ask of thee, so let us restore the natural order, shall we? When thy sweet daughter did forbear to flatter, why didst thou give the rod to thy crab daughters, and put down thy breeches?

LEAR: My sweet daughter will answer.

CORDELIA: For the same reason that his sweet daughter did forbear to flatter.

FOOL: True!

LEAR: Right!

Fool (*singing*:) He is a wight of high renown,
And I am but of low degree:

'Tis pride that pulls the country down,
Then take thine owd cloak about thee.

The game is over, and I declare that the winner and undisputed champion of the cell is none other than...THE FOOL!

Enter John with food.

JOHN I've brought you some food.

FOOL: Thou art good.

JOHN: And some drink, too.

FOOL: We thank you.

JOHN: I'm sorry Your Majesties are being kept like this in prison.

FOOL: Our Majesties are sorry too. May we suggest that you set us free?

JOHN: I would if I could, but I have to obey orders.

FOOL: Then we order you to set us free.

JOHN: Not your orders. The Captain's.

FOOL: Set us free, good friend, and I'll see thee richly rewarded. I have contacts in high places.

JOHN: You know I can't.

FOOL: To do a great right, do a little wrong.

John shakes his head.

LEAR: Where should we go, boy? Make content with thy fortunes fit. Thou knowst the lesson, for thou didst teach it.

FOOL: I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching.

CORDELIA: Shall we not see these sisters and these daughters?

JOHN: I don't know, madam.

The Captain enters.

CAPTAIN: John!

JOHN: Sir!

The Captain motions to John to step outside. John hurries out. The Captain looks at each of the prisoners in turn, then leaves.

FOOL: Nuncle, I am afraid.

LEAR: What of, boy?

FOOL: Of dying.

LEAR: Be absolute for death; either death or life shall thereby be the sweeter.

FOOL: Ay, but to die, and go we know not where.

LEAR: Thy best of rest is sleep, and that thou oft provok'st, yet grossly fear'st thy death, which is no more.

FOOL: To lie in cold obstruction and to rot; this sensible warm motion to become a kneaded clod.

LEAR: Thou art not thyself; for thou exist'st on many a thousand grains that issue out of dust.

FOOL: From dust I come, but to dust I would not go.

LEAR: Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

FOOL: I joy to feel the warmth o' the sun,
And shelter from the winter's rages;
My worldly task is never done,
My body's home and life's my wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, hate the dust.

LEAR: Fear no more the frown o' the great,
Thou art past the tyrant's stroke:
Care no more to clothe and eat;
To thee the reed is as the oak;
The sceptre, learning, physic, must
All follow this, and come to dust.

FOOL: I joy to hear the laugh o' the great,
And feel my master's gentle stroke:
I love to clothe and love to eat;
Bend with the reed, stand with the oak;

The sceptre, learning, physic, must
Follow this, and hate the dust.

CORDELIA: Stop it, please.

FOOL: 'Tis but a game.

LEAR: All is but toys.

There is a trumpet call. They are all startled. A second, then a third, followed by one more distant. John reenters.

LEAR: What was that trumpet call?

JOHN: It was trumpets calling, sir.

LEAR: To what purpose?

JOHN: Someone's challenged the Earl of Gloucester to a duel. Listen, I've got to blindfold you all and tie your hands. I'd be grateful if you'd refrain from resisting.

LEAR: Why, soldier?

JOHN: I don't like nasty scenes.

LEAR: Why are we to be blindfolded and tied?

JOHN: Because those are the orders, sir.

LEAR: And if we refuse?

JOHN: Then the Captain won't be very pleased.

LEAR: And a King must bow to a Captain?

JOHN: Yes, sir. Well, no, sir. But yes, sir. May I proceed, sir?

LEAR: Men must learn now with pity to dispense; for policy sits above conscience. Obey your orders.

JOHN: Thank you, sir.

He blindfolds Lear and ties his hands.

LEAR: I stumbled when I saw. What has become of the old, blind Earl of Gloucester?

JOHN: I don't know, sir. He was last seen wandering along the cliffs with a mad beggar.

LEAR: A mad beggar? Poor Tom! I remember him. We talked about the cause of thunder. 'Tis the times' plague, when madmen lead the blind.

John now goes to Cordelia.

CORDELIA: Are we to be taken away?

JOHN: Yes, madam, I think so.

CORDELIA: Where are we to be taken?

JOHN: I don't know, madam. I was just told to blindfold you and tie your hands.

CORDELIA: No.

JOHN: Oh please, madam! If you refuse, I'll have to send for help, and others won't be gentle with you like I am. They'll beat you for sure. I'm sorry.

LEAR: We must endure our going hence, even as our coming hither. 'Tis better to go in peace than go with whipping.

Cordelia submits.

Where's my pretty boy?

The Fool weeps silently.

FOOL: I'm still here, Nuncle.

LEAR: Wilt thou not lighten our darkness?

FOOL: Mine is the darkness,
Thine the light,
For thou seest not
What's in my sight.

LEAR: What dost thou see, boy?

FOOL: I see the darkness,
Thou the light.
O do not seek
To share my night.

John moves to blindfold and tie the Fool.

JOHN: It's your turn now.

FOOL: I have done no harm.

JOHN: I'm only obeying orders.

LEAR: Cordelia.

CORDELIA: Here, father.

LEAR: Let me come close to thee.

JOHN: No, no, you have to keep separate.

LEAR: Why?

JOHN) Orders.

FOOL)

FOOL: He's sorry.

JOHN: I am sorry. I don't like this sort of thing. I'm a nice man - basically.

The Captain enters and surveys the scene. He is carrying two nooses and two pieces of cloth, as well as a cushion.

JOHN: Captain, sir.

CAPTAIN: Are the prisoners ready to be moved?

JOHN: Yes, sir.

He stares at the nooses, clearly distressed. The Captain gestures towards Cordelia and the Fool, indicating that they are to be hanged. John looks at the cushion. The Captain gestures towards Lear and presses the cushion over his own face.

CAPTAIN: Listen carefully, all of you. You're to be moved to a secret place. There's nothing to be afraid of.

As he talks, he sets up the nooses, placing a box beneath one of them.

We've tied and blindfolded you so that you won't cause trouble. We shall take you out one by one, and gag you to stop you calling. Don't be afraid. You'll soon be reunited. The Fool is to go first. Should he be discovered, no dog will bark.

He gags the Fool.

JOHN: Sir!

CAPTAIN (*through his teeth*): Men are as the time is; to be tender-minded does not become a sword. (*Loud*): Gag the others.

John hesitates, but gives way. The Captain grips the Fool by the arm and walks him round the stage.

LEAR: Sans speech, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

John gags him. The Captain leads the Fool to the box.

CAPTAIN: There's a step.

He mounts the box with the Fool. John gags Cordelia.

Stand still.

He puts the noose round the Fool's neck. The Fool realizes what is happening and tries to resist, but the Captain is too strong for him. He fixes the noose, jumps down from the box, and pulls it away. The Fool jerks, twitches, and then hangs limp. John is appalled, and turns his head away. The Captain places the box beneath the second noose, then pretends to re-enter.

The Fool is safe, and now attends the Queen of France. Madam, will you walk?

He leads her round the stage by the arm.

There's a step here, madam.

He mounts the box with her. John becomes increasingly agitated.

JOHN: No, sir!

LEAR: Mmmm?

The Captain puts the noose round Cordelia's neck. She struggles, but he is far too strong.

JOHN: No!

John unties Lear's hands, and Lear tears off the blindfold just as the Captain jumps down from the box and pulls it away. Cordelia is hanged. Lear seizes John's sword, and with a bellow leaps at the Captain and kills him. He cuts Cordelia's noose and catches her body.

LEAR: Cordelia! Cordelia! Cordelia! She's dead!

He holds her body in his arms, and walks towards the door. Only now does he see the hanging body of the Fool.

And my poor Fool is hang'd. Howl, howl, howl, howl, howl!

He goes out. John follows him. The lights remain for a moment on the body of the Fool. Then blackout.

The End