

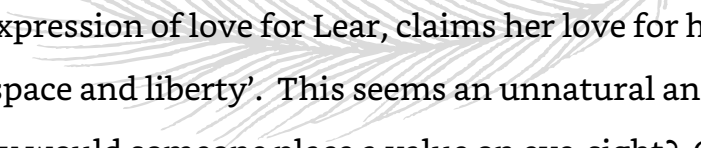


## King Lear – Sight and Blindness

There is literal and metaphorical blindness in *King Lear*. Sight is linked to good judgement and when Lear disowns Cordelia – ordering her ‘out of [his] sight’, and then disowns Kent too, Kent advises him to reconsider his rash action and urges him to ‘See better’. Lear’s blindness here is his inability to see that it is Cordelia who is the honest and natural daughter while it is Goneril and Regan who are not to be trusted. Lear takes the evil daughters’ words at face value, however, and as a result he sets in motion a chain of events which will ultimately lead to chaos and tragedy.

Lear’s blindness is not limited to his understanding of his daughters. By showing that he cannot see the difference between good and evil, he also shows us that he is not behaving as a king should and the audience may well wonder how he would deal with matters of state if he is so lacking in judgement. Of course, it is clear from Lear’s foolish decision to divide his kingdom between his daughters that he has no true understanding of what kingship entails and that he is unable to see that his power derives from his position rather than from any personal strength.

It is also worth reflecting that it was Lear’s blind love for Cordelia that led to his setting up the love test. He was so confident that his youngest daughter would declare her love for him openly and in flattering terms that he was blindsided by her refusal to do so and by her obvious distaste for her sisters’ vying for their father’s approval.



Goneril, in her expression of love for Lear, claims her love for him is 'Dearer than eye-sight, space and liberty'. This seems an unnatural and disturbing comparison: why would someone place a value on eye-sight? Goneril's words, therefore, ring false from the start.

When Goneril turns on Lear, ignoring his summons and telling him coldly to behave a little more wisely and appropriately, the old king is so shocked that he asks:

Doth any here know me? This is not Lear:

Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?

Either his notion weakens, his discernings

Are lethargied--Ha! waking? 'tis not so.

Who is it that can tell me who I am?

It is only when he is wandering in the storm that Lear begins to see how things really are. He realises now that Goneril and Regan only pretended to love him in order to get a large share of the kingdom and that they have no interest whatsoever in him now that he is of no further use to them. The Fool makes it clear in one of his rhymes:

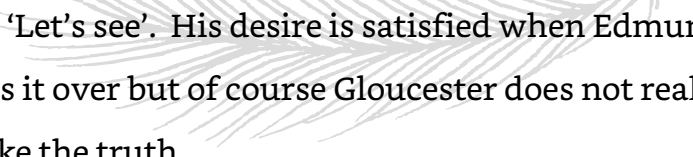
Fathers that wear rags

Do make their children blind;

But fathers that bear bags

Shall see their children kind.

Gloucester is also blind to the reality of his children's natures. Although Edgar has done nothing whatsoever to deserve suspicion, Gloucester immediately believes Edmund's forged letter and turns on his innocent and good son. Ironically, when asking Edmund to show him the letter, Gloucester



says three times, 'Let's see'. His desire is satisfied when Edmund, with feigned reluctance, hands it over but of course Gloucester does not realise that what he sees is nothing like the truth.

His cruel blinding shows Gloucester that he has made a terrible mistake. He tells the old man who leads him on the heath:

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;  
I stumbled when I saw: full oft 'tis seen,  
Our means secure us, and our mere defects  
Prove our commodities. O dear son Edgar,  
The food of thy abused father's wrath!  
Might I but live to see thee in my touch,  
I'd say I had eyes again!

Ironically, when Gloucester meets Edgar disguised as a madman he is willing to trust him and tells the old man who is leading him to leave him in Edgar's care: 'Tis the times' plague, when madmen lead blind'. He didn't trust Edgar when he could see and when he knew when he is, but now he seems to instinctively know he will not lead him astray.

*I have no way, and  
therefore want no eyes.  
I stumbled when I saw.*

When Gloucester is physically blinded by Cornwall it symbolises not just his own metaphorical blindness but also that of the other father figure in the play, King Lear. Both fathers are blind to the truth about their children and it is only when Gloucester loses his physical sight that he gains moral insight. Both men come together in Dover towards the end of the play and bemoan the fact that they have used such poor judgement and that their poor decisions have cost them so dearly.