

## 'Eye(s)' and 'Seeing' in *King Lear*

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In *King Lear* the words 'eye' and 'eyes' are used fairly frequently (45 times). Statistically speaking, it is one of the top five Shakespearean plays in which the words are used. The other plays are *Love's Labours Lost* (66 times), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (60), *Troilus and Cressida* (51), and *King John* (51).<sup>1</sup> The similarity of *King Lear* and *King John* is easy to see. In the former there is the blinding of Gloucester. In the latter Arthur is nearly blinded by Hubert, though saved from it at the last moment. In *King John*, however, the use of the words 'eye' and 'eyes' is mostly limited to the physical one and it does not develop into symbolic use nor does it cast much light on the themes of the play. *King Lear* shows little similarity to the other plays. The word is used most frequently in *Love's Labours Lost*. It is employed mainly as the eyes of ladies or those of lovers and centres around Berowne's long harangue:

From women's eyes this doctrine I derive.  
They sparkle still the right Promethean fire.  
They are the books, the arts, the academes  
That show, contain, and nourish all the world,  
Else none at all in aught proves excellent. (4. 3. 326-30)

Here 'women's eyes' is used symbolically, meaning that life teaches you as much as bookish learning. When the lords and the ladies meet

for the first time towards the end of Act 2, the 'eyes' are used often to imply the importance of looking. Boyet describes how hard the King of Navarre looked at the Princess, showing his love to her. This serves as a piece of stage direction for the actor playing the King. Further Berowne speaks as follows: 'Behold the window of my heart, mine eye.' (5.2.825) Seeing is one of the important issues of the play, but is not necessarily the central one in spite of the frequent references to 'eyes' and it does not form a scene unlike the encounter of mad Lear and blind Gloucester. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the words are used as those of the lovers as well as those of the other characters and are connected to the problem of reality and illusion. Hermia wants her father to see her lover with her eyes, Helena wishes her eyes were like Hermia's, Oberon drops love juice into Titania's eyes and the poet's eye glances from heaven to earth and earth to heaven and creates a poem or a play. Again it points toward one of the important aspects of the play, yet there is not a scene which makes use of the word thematically on stage. In *Troilus and Cressida* the author makes use of 'eye(s)' in various ways just as the play itself lacks the concentration of themes, or rather I should say it is difficult to set the work into any genre. Sometimes it is lovers' eyes, sometimes the eyes of Greek and Trojan lords, and sometimes it is other people's eyes to judge someone else. Achilles says in his speech, 'Nor doth the eye itself, / That most pure spirit of sense, behold itself,' (3.3.10-2), but eyes can be mistaken, as are Cressida's when she betrays Troilus and accepts Diomed's love in Act 5 Scene 2. The focus on 'eyes' occurs in Act 4 Scene 5 where the Greek lords look at Hector in turn just as they kissed Cressida one by one. In this scene the subjects of love and war are put side by side. Nevertheless all these mentions of eyes do not centralize into a theme, and they do not help us much to understand the play. Whereas in *King Lear* to see and/or not to see is a significant factor in the play.<sup>2</sup> The mention of 'eye(s)' closely corresponds to it,<sup>3</sup> and the related words are also heavily charged. It is difficult to separate one issue of a play from another, as Rosalie Colie

puts it,<sup>4</sup> but since seeing and/or not seeing is one of the important and central issues of the play, I intend to concentrate on it, touching on other aspects when necessary.

The scene of the blinding of Gloucester in Act 3 Scene 7 is the one case where the brutality and violence of the wicked party is shown physically and suddenly. Cornwall and Regan are the actual agents, but Edmund and Goneril are also behind the scene and it is Goneril who suggests to them that they should pluck out Gloucester's eyes. However it is ironic that Lear is the very first person to mention the plucking out of eyes. (1. 4. 281-4) When this scene of the blinding is acted with realism on stage, it is the most shocking sequence and we feel like averting our eyes from it. The wilfulness and lawlessness of the new rulers becomes apparent since they punish Gloucester arbitrarily. Their disorder becomes obvious when a nameless servant revolts and tries to stop them. His act seems outrageous to them, but it is an attempt to check their violent unruliness and an appeal to a higher order—humanity. It gives the audience or a reader a moment's relief and hope that the old Earl can be saved from losing his other eye, but the expectation is dashed soon when the servant is killed brutally and Gloucester loses his second eye. The blinding of Gloucester not only shows physical violence on stage but also attains a symbolic meaning—the disorder of the new regime. I need hardly mention that there are many references to 'eye(s)' or related expressions in this scene.

The cruelty of the new rulers is also turned against Lear both verbally and physically. They set Kent—the King's messenger—in the stocks and refuse to give Lear comfort, reducing the numbers of his followers and driving him away into a storm to go mad. Having accepted what Lear has given they now reject his conditions. In his case their cruelty builds up gradually. As Geoffrey Bullough suggests, 'the wicked sisters are responsible for the double horror of "madding" Lear and blinding Gloucester.'<sup>5</sup>

As shown above, Lear and Gloucester have parallel experiences and their stories are often treated as a double plot. The word applies to

this play very well. Among their similar experiences if there is one thing which is related to the word 'eye(s)', it is their mental blindness before they fall into misery.<sup>6</sup> Lear does not see what Cordelia and Kent see in the opening scene. It is made clear in Kent's speech: 'See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye.' (1. 1. 158-9)<sup>7</sup> He opposes the King because he thinks it dangerous for Lear to abdicate and give all his dominion to his elder daughters, who get it by flattery. He is the only one among his followers to recognize it and because of that he calls himself 'the true blank of thine eye'. But Lear does not understand that what Kent says is correct nor does he see it either when he has fallen into madness. There are speeches to show that he chose the wrong daughters to give his dominion to and that he has done wrong to Cordelia, but there is not a speech to suggest that he thinks he erred in abdicating or dividing his kingdom except that he says that he would regain his former state (1. 4. 288-90). For that matter, *Gorboduc* and *Lochrine*, earlier tragedies, state the danger of dividing a kingdom more straightforwardly. Still even though Lear does not recognize it, Kent does. Later on Gloucester admits that Kent was right about the elder sisters—'Ah, that good Kent, / He said it would be thus, poor banish'd man!' (3. 4. 153-4)—ironically to the face of disguised Kent, who did not actually prophesy that Goneril and Regan would try to kill their father but only said that what they expressed should be followed by their deed. The danger of abdication and division of the kingdom is described in a roundabout and understated way.<sup>8</sup>

What about the spiritual blindness of Gloucester? He is not present when Lear imposes the love contest on his three daughters, but in Act 1 Scene 2 he seems to be upset and/or indignant about the banishment of Kent and the disowning of Cordelia by Lear (1. 2. 23-5, 108-9).<sup>9</sup> So he is perceptive enough about the error of the King. As for the judgement about his sons, however, he was utterly wrong. He drives out his good son and decides that his bad son should be his heir. He is also mentally blind before he falls into a wretched state.

This is made obvious to the audience by the fact that Gloucester is deceived by Edmund. The trick of a false letter is a good example of his blindness and his illegitimate son's deception: 'The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see. Come, if it be nothing I shall not need spectacles.' (1.2.34-6) When Cordelia says 'nothing' to Lear—such a simple word and yet it is highly charged—her heart is full of love to her father, but here 'nothing' is really nothing, that is, the letter is forged by Edmund and its content may express Edmund's idea but not Edgar's. Only because it is hidden away quickly, it provokes Gloucester's suspicion. The latter half of the quotation is ironical, since the Earl does not realize the truth even if he puts on spectacles. Through him and Lear we learn how erroneous eyes can be. The eyes are sources of information and judgement. But since they can be misled, seeing becomes ambiguous. In this case Gloucester does not see through his younger son. Their relationship can be compared to that of Othello and Iago. A conscious villain tricks a good person. However, the trick of Edmund is more blatant than that of Iago, who is more subtle in his plotting and lying. Edmund's first thought is to get Edgar's portion of inheritance. His attitude contrasts strikingly with that of the Bastard in *King John*. Falconbridge chooses to be the illegitimate son of Richard Coeur-de-lion, getting the title fortuitously, and loses the inheritance of his legal father. He follows King John through thick and thin like Kent,<sup>10</sup> whereas Edmund escalates his object from becoming a legitimate heir through depriving his father of his title and estate to aiming at the kingdom. However his purposes are cursorily described, except the first one and he seems to enjoy being evil like Iago, whose motive for deceiving Othello or Roderigo is ambiguously sketched, or like their precursor Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*. Edmund is the chief active schemer in the play.

Lear is also deceived by his elder daughters. They do not plot evil in the beginning but use flattery, saying what they do not feel. Their deception is not so overt as Edmund's at this stage and they move

according to their desire: they are opportunists. At the end of the first scene, however, we learn that they can plot as well, once they are given scope to do what they want. So Lear's primary error is not only to abdicate and divide the kingdom but also to give free rein to such wicked daughters and to evil men like Cornwall and, through Cornwall's patronage, Edmund.

We have different kinds of deception in Kent and Edgar. They are driven to disguise themselves by the blindness of Lear and Gloucester. Kent puts on the clothes of a minor servant to serve his master. However his service is futile in the end.<sup>11</sup> When he takes active steps to help or serve his superiors, he makes the situation worse for himself or even for those he tries to help. In the opening scene he intervenes with Lear on behalf of Cordelia, makes the King angrier, gets himself banished and cannot save the youngest daughter from banishment. As a messenger of the King, Kent in disguise starts a quarrel with Oswald and angers Cornwall and Regan to the extent of putting him in the stocks, thus making the matter worse for Lear on his arrival. The King and Cordelia are captured in spite of him, or possibly because he is absent when it happens. He does not come in time to save her from her death. Probably it is the dramatist's intention to make him an honest and blunt fellow lacking in policy and with a hot temper.

Edgar's disguise is to take off his clothes and become almost naked. He deceives the people around him just as his brother does without disguise and in that he has some resemblance to his brother, but he is driven to it by his father and brother. Later on when he puts on peasant clothes his purpose becomes that of saving his father from his despair. His object of deception is opposite to Edmund's. Edgar is also blind to his brother, but when he becomes a beggar he learns a truth about humanity and gains wisdom—'Ripeness is all.' Both Kent and Edgar are driven to adopt low social status. Kent belongs to the marginal area of established society and Edgar is outside it as a beggar and later in a position of low status as a peasant.

All these events are caused by Lear and on a limited scale by Gloucester and the two plots converge into one in the scene where mad Lear and blind Gloucester meet. For both plots the scene is a climax. R. B. Heilman puts it as follows:

In IV. vi we have the climax of the Gloucester plot and the climax of the Lear plot; Gloucester, won from despair by Edgar, reaches his philosophic heights, and Lear comes to his most penetrating vision. Not only are their experiences parallel, but the men are then brought together physically—a dramatic indication of the unifying function of the scene.<sup>12</sup>

The action does not advance in this passage, but this is one of the most revealing sequences in the play. In that sense it can be called 'a mirror-scene' as H. T. Price termed it.<sup>13</sup> However the meeting is preceded by the attempted suicide of Gloucester and followed by Oswald's attempt to kill the blind man when, as a result of fighting and killing the steward, Edgar gains the knowledge of the plot to kill Albany, so that the scene as a whole advances the action.

The encounter of the two old men shows the immediate result of their errors and their children's violence. This is the first meeting of Lear and Gloucester since they have gained belated wisdom. Ironically both the old men get out of their spiritual blindness and utter deep truth in their sufferings. Their insights are mostly concerned with the general human condition. They still do not realize immediate facts in front of them: they do not know that Caius is Kent and Mad Tom is Edgar and Lear is also ignorant about Edmund. As I wrote above, Lear does not realize his responsibility for the confusion in his kingdom brought by his abdication and division of the kingdom. Gloucester is not strong enough to face the world bravely even though he has been rescued by Edgar from his attempted suicide. When his life is in danger because of Oswald, he offers it to him readily. Edgar has to encourage his father occasionally to make him survive.

Still in spite of these weaknesses they reach philosophic heights and a clarifying vision which they would never have attained without their tragedies. Lear sees through social phenomena and shows compassion to the poor naked wretches in his misery. He realizes his own pathetic truth: he admits that he is 'a poor, infirm, weak and despised old man'. What a contrast this shows from the confident and strong monarch at the beginning of the play who would not let his inferior interfere with his own decision! When mad Lear talks to blinded Gloucester he utters truth about justice.

See how yon justice rails upon yon simple thief. Hark in thine ear: change places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?

Plate sin with gold,

And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;

Arm it in rags, a pygmy's straw does pierce it.

None does offend, none, I say none. I'll able 'em.

(4. 5. 147-50, 161-4. In the modern conflated version this is Act 4 Scene 6.)

The quotations describe the present state of the kingdom. The rulers violate justice by inflicting vengeance on Gloucester without following the lawful procedure. The weaker people like Edgar are pursued. The latter quotation shows that Lear has become broad-minded and fair. I follow the modern spelling edition of the Folio version of *King Lear*, so the mock trial of Goneril and Regan by the King is absent.<sup>14</sup> Yet the point about justice is made even without the passage. After hearing the news of the death of Cornwall, Albany says, 'This shows you are above, / You justicers, that these our nether crimes / So speedily can venge.' (4. 2. 46-8) Edgar reminds his brother after the duel:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices

Make instruments to plague us.

The dark and vicious place where thee he got

Cost him his eyes.

(5. 3. 161-4)



In the view of Edgar and Albany, even if human justice fails, there is still heavenly justice to settle accounts. As we see from above, the views of Lear and Edgar differ greatly. After hardship Edgar still believes in gods and justice. Lear, on the other hand, changes his belief, as William R. Elton shows in his erudite work.<sup>15</sup> In the beginning the King is an undoubting pagan believing in several gods, but through his mishaps he begins to doubt their existence. When he loses Cordelia at the end he blasphemes against the gods. This end does not suggest Christian redemption. If there is any relief to come in this play with such a bleak ending, it is the fact that the only survivors—Edgar and Albany—are firm believers in gods.

Gloucester also realizes his own truth and other people's after he becomes blind—'I stumbled when I saw,' 'As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods; / They kill us for their sport.' (4.1.19, 37-8) He does not make this kind of observation before his blindness, so he attains philosophical height and awareness in his wretched state.

In the sequence mentioned above, there are various references to 'eye(s)' and the related words. When Edgar sees Lear at the height of his madness, he says, 'O thou side-piercing sight!' (4.5.85) He is an observer and gives some comments which direct the response of the audience. Since Lear realizes something is wrong with Gloucester's eyes and is concerned about them and yet he does not recognize his blindness until after painful dialogues, his speech includes some mentions of seeing.

Lear: O ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head, nor  
no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your  
purse in a light; yet you see how this world goes.

Gloucester: I see it feelingly. (4.5.141-5)

In this exchange it looks as though Lear has taken over the role of the Fool.<sup>16</sup> He hits upon the truth both about eyes and money without knowing that Gloucester has given a purse to poor Tom during their pilgrimage. He gives pungent advice to Gloucester:

Get thee glass eyes,  
 And, like a scurvy politician, seem  
 To see the things thou dost not. (4. 5. 166-8)

This is what they did before their misery taught them otherwise, though they are not 'scurvy politician(s)'.

Irony deepens, since the last quotation shows what the schemers, namely Edmund, Goneril and Regan, do in the play. They seem to be more clear-sighted than all other characters except Cordelia and Kent and yet they fall down in the end, caught in the intrigue they themselves are responsible for. Edmund falls in the combat with Edgar, after the latter learns of the plot on Albany's life and the truth about his own misery from his father. Regan dies from the poison given by Goneril, and the eldest sister kills herself when she is caught by Albany. They do not see beyond what their desires urge them towards.

But the story does not end here as a happy one like *King Lear*, one of Shakespeare's sources. Not only the bad characters, but the good must die. Gloucester dies between the extremes of joy and grief. Cordelia is killed by the order of Edmund. Lear dies from deep grief over her death. Kent also means to die following his master's death.

Just before Lear's death there are some passages in which 'seeing' is involved. When he enters with Cordelia in his arms, he utters words of despair.

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O you are men of stones.  
 Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so  
 That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.  
 I know when one is dead and when one lives.  
 She's dead as earth.

[*He lays her down*]

Lend me a looking-glass.  
 If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,  
 Why, then she lives. (5. 3. 232-8)

Lear wavers between the knowledge of the death of Cordelia and the hope of her survival. His order to lend him the looking-glass is not usually followed in a theatre as far as I have seen the performances of the play. Even so, the death of Cordelia is more ambiguous on stage than when we read the modern conflated texts.<sup>17</sup> Particularly in the Folio version he dies centring his attention on her—'Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips. / Look there, look there.' (286–7), so a theatre-goer who experiences the play for the first time cannot know the outcome until later when Albany orders to bear the bodies out. Derek Peat suggests three possibilities concerning Lear's recognition about Cordelia at his death:

There are two distinct possibilities: either Lear dies believing Cordelia lives, or his heart breaks as he realises the shattering reality of her death . . . . There is, of course, a third possibility, that Lear dies uncertain whether his daughter is alive or dead.<sup>18</sup>

I incline to follow the view of Peat who thinks that the play is full of uncertainties referred to by Marvin Rosenberg and that moreover 'they are generated within the audience.'<sup>19</sup> In his delirium Lear does not recognize Kent at once—'This' a dull sight. / Are you not Kent?' (256–7) This short dialogue shows how much Lear weakens towards the end. His physical decay is described in terms of his eyesight. In the beginning he was mentally blind and now as his death approaches him he becomes as if actually blind. The play not only points out through its characters the ambiguity of seeing but also makes us experience it.

The only good characters likely to survive are Albany and Edgar, but the kingdom is completely shaken to the ground. The last speech spoken by Edgar seems to me suitable to him, since he is the one who has suffered himself and watched both Lear and Gloucester in their plight and attains wisdom through his pilgrimage. Also he is the very character who brings about the destruction of Edmund and Goneril,

as is pointed out by Ann Thompson: 'Unknown to himself, Edgar singlehandedly reverses the outcome of the battle which has just given the evil forces the upper hand.'<sup>20</sup> It is significant that there is a passage concerning 'to see'.

The weight of this sad time we must obey,  
 Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.  
 The oldest hath borne most. We that are young  
 Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

(5. 3. 299-302)

The second line seems to show what the good characters adhered to in the play. Cordelia spoke what she felt when she answered 'nothing' to Lear, while her elder sisters told what they ought to say. Kent also spoke what he had in mind. So the speech may be the manifesto of the party of the good. As to the last line, the survivors of the play will not experience what Lear and Gloucester have undergone, although Edgar has seen his father during their journey. This concluding line is appropriate to the play in which there are so many mentions of 'eye(s)' and the related expressions, and 'seeing' or 'not seeing' plays such an important role.

### Notes

I wrote this essay under the supervision of Professor G. Richard Proudfoot. The quotations are from *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.

- 1 The numbers of the quotations of 'eye(s)' are taken from *The Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare*, Marvin Spevack, (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1973).
- 2 Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972, this edition, 1974), p. 6.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 210.

- 4 Rosalie L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 466.
- 5 Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 7 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, this edition, 1978), p. 294.
- 6 Kenneth Muir (ed.), *King Lear*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1972, this edition, 1982), p. liv.
- 7 Rosalie L. Colie, p. 477.
- 8 see William R. Elton, *'King Lear' and the Gods* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988. The original edition, first published in 1966 by The Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery), p. 293.
- 9 cf. Marvin Rosenberg, pp. 87, 89.
- 10 see Emrys Jones, *Scenic Form in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 169.
- 11 see Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Tragic Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 154.
- 12 Robert Bechtold Heilman, *This Great Stage* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1948), pp. 197-8.
- 13 Hereward T. Price, 'Mirror-Scenes in Shakespeare', *Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies*, ed. James McManaway (Washington: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1948), pp. 101-13.
- 14 In the 1990 production of *King Lear* by the Royal Shakespeare Company they followed Folio version and yet they put in this mock trial scene. It seems they could not do without the long cherished scene. (Nicholas Hytner, dir. *King Lear*. Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. 30 June 1990.)
- 15 William R. Elton, pp. 171-3, 176, 178, 189-90, 200, 254.
- 16 Marvin Rosenberg, pp. 110, 209, 274, 276, 356. Kenneth Muir, p. lvii. E. A. J. Honigman, *Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1976, this edition, 1978), p. 119.
- 17 Derek Peat, "'And That's True Too': 'King Lear' and the Tension of Uncertainty", *Shakespeare Survey*, 33 (1980), p. 49.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 44.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 46.
- 20 Ann Thompson, 'Who Sees Double in the Double Plot?', *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 20 (1984), p. 57.