

Responding Blindly? A Reading of a Scene in *King Lear*

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How does an audience respond to a play in performance? In this essay I want to explore the question through an analysis of a scene widely regarded as the most brutal and disagreeable Shakespeare ever wrote, the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear* (III. vii). The conventional wisdom about an audience faced with the scene is that they respond with horror and disgust and consequently condemn the perpetrators of such violence. This response may then be viewed in terms of the larger values the play explores. S. L. Goldberg offers a representative comment: "The sheer fact of the blinding and our sheer horrified rejection of it as unendurable lie at the very centre of the play."¹ If this is true, is it only a matter of propriety that caused a series of critics to suggest that in presenting the blinding Shakespeare had gone too far? "What can I say of this scene? My reluctance to think Shakespeare wrong, and yet . . ."² Coleridge was by no means alone in his unease, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century the scene was frequently condemned. Dr Johnson's comment is representative: "the extrusion of Gloucester's eyes . . . seems an act too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition, and such as must always compel the mind to relieve its distress by incredulity."³ Dr Johnson had never seen the blinding performed, but he had realized that it is the audience who must endure what amounts to a direct attack upon their senses. In the nineteenth century they didn't get the chance, because the scene was cut in performance. A. C. Bradley approved of the omission: "the mere physical horror of such a spectacle would in the theatre be a sensation so violent as to overpower the purely tragic emotions." While reading he could control these emotions, but thought the scene "a blot upon *King Lear* as a stage play."⁴ All three critics recognize that Shakespeare is attacking their sensibilities and their emotions: he demands they respond, but they refuse.

What precisely makes this scene, in Johnson's words, "too horrid to be endured"? Obviously the audience witness a horrible thing—a man having his eyes put out—and the fact that they actually *see* this seems enough to account for the response. However, in this scene Shakespeare does not deal in the obvious, indeed, he does not have both Gloucester's "eyes" put out together. Instead he shows us Gloucester blinded in one eye and only after a lengthy interruption is the blinding completed. I would suggest that an audience has a different response⁵ to these two separate acts of

1 S. L. Goldberg, *An Essay on King Lear* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 82.

2 Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (London, 1960), p. 50.

3 Dr Johnson on *Shakespeare*, ed. W. K. Wimsatt (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 126.

4 A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1904; repr. 1969), p. 205.

5 I will admit there is always a danger in speaking about "audience response" with any certainty. Not only does the response differ from person to person, from moment to moment, but each performance generates a different set of effects. Richard David tells a story of a group of spectators who, immediately after a performance, couldn't agree on the colour of a costume (*Shakespeare in the Theatre*, Cambridge, 1978, p. 19). At least next night the question could have been resolved (if the lighting was the same!), but an effect is difficult to check. I have avoided the continual tentative qualifications of "may", "might" etc. in the text in favour of more positive verbs to describe audience response, but there can be no certainty and my suggestions remain just that, suggestions.

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violence. Perhaps the "horror" stems not so much from the violence as from the fact that, once one eye is out, Gloucester is not saved and so must lose his other eye.

To examine the effects of the blinding in detail we need to place it in context, because an audience's response is conditioned by the preceding scene (III. vi). In this Lear has come in from the storm and the tempest within is abating, soon he will fall into an exhausted sleep. Gloucester has brought the King to a place "Better than the open air" and he leaves him to "piece out the comfort with what addition" he can. When he returns he brings word of a plot against Lear and arranges his escape. The scene demonstrates Gloucester's loyalty and humanity and the fact that he is the only active member of the "good" party, secures the audience's sympathy. All this emphasizes the injustice of his later blinding as a "traitor". While he is off-stage the word "justice" rings in the air as Lear holds a mock trial of an imaginary Gonerill and Regan. The scene that follows will provide an ironic reversal when Gloucester is the accused at a real trial in which Cornwall and Regan play the "False justicers". The imaginary Gonerill and Regan escape from the mock trial and the scene itself ends with Lear and his followers escaping from Cornwall. The escape of others heightens the tension of the blinding, and the cuts in the Folio text of this preceding scene seem designed for exactly this purpose. Kent's final speech and Edgar's long concluding soliloquy are omitted from the Folio and the scene thus ends with Gloucester announcing the plot against Lear. The repetitions in his speech—"take him in thy arms" (l. 87),⁶ "Take up thy master" (l. 91), "Take up, take up" (l. 94)—chart his mounting anxiety and the scene ends on a note of rising intensity: "Come, come, away." The mock trial incident is also absent from the Folio text and Kenneth Muir suggests this was because it had made the audience laugh,⁷ but an equally likely reason for the cut is that, taken with the others, it redefines the balance of the scene. What in the Quarto is a coda to the storm, a fairly static scene focussed on Lear, becomes in the Folio a fast-moving change of focus from Lear to Gloucester, an introductory passage to the blinding—the calm leading into another storm.

On the open stage at the Globe as Gloucester hustled the "good" party out by one door, Cornwall and his allies would have poured on to the stage from the other. The pace of the action continues to accelerate. France and England are at war, and Gonerill must "post speedily" home, but she has time to suggest a punishment for Gloucester: "Pluck out his eyes." The emphasis immediately shifts from blinding to things which must not be seen: "not fit for your beholding" is how Cornwall describes to Edmund the revenge he is planning. When Gloucester appears, verbal and physical violence rise to a crescendo. The stage business is made quite clear in the text: "Bind fast his corky arms" (l. 32); "To this chair bind him" (l. 38): "'tis most ignobly done/To pluck me by the beard" (ll. 39-40). The tempo of speech increases as words are shouted back and forth:

Cornwall Cunning.
Regan And false.
Cornwall Where hast thou sent the King?
Gloucester To Dover.

6 References are to the Challis Shakespeare edition, ed. E. A. M. Colman (1982).

7 Introduction to the New Arden Edition (London, 1952; repr. 1967), p. xlviii.

Regan Wherefore to Dover? Wast thou not charg'd at peril—
Cornwall Wherefore to Dover? Let him answer that.

(III.vii.53-6)

Then, abruptly, the rhythm slows for the scene's longest speech which goes to Gloucester. He begins with another reference to something that must not be seen, "I would not see thy cruel nails/Pluck out his poor old eyes", and ends with the reference to Divine justice Cornwall will make so ironic: "but I shall see/The winged vengeance overtake such children."

In the intimacy of the Globe, the furthest spectators were less than sixty feet from the stage business that the text makes unusually clear: "Fellows, hold the chair./Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot." Gloucester is tied to a chair which is tilted with its back to the ground. On each side it is held by a servant and Cornwall crushes out the eye with his heel⁸ (probably as in recent Stratford productions, by Peter Brook in 1962 and Trevor Nunn in 1968, supporting his weight on the servants' shoulders). At the Globe, with the audience around three sides of the stage and with many overlooking it, Shakespeare needed the two servants for masking purposes. The audience did not literally "see" the blinding. They heard Gloucester's agonized shriek, "O cruel! O you Gods!", perhaps they saw the servants' heads turn away in revulsion, and they saw the terrible spasm of pain in the arched body.⁹ What was the effect?

Considering his own expression of horror, Dr Johnson's answer may come as a surprise: "our author well knew what would please the audience for which he wrote."¹⁰ The implication is that in weaker moments the playwright ignored artistic integrity in favour of box-office receipts and this idea remained close to the centre of critical orthodoxy for over a hundred years. It was even adopted by Bardolaters since it allowed the blame for any faults to be placed elsewhere. Thus in 1907 Robert Bridges could still deplore the blinding as the result of the depraving influence of Shakespeare's audience on his art.¹¹ More recent criticism has justified the scene's violence in terms of dramatic and thematic structure, but those earlier critics had a point when they remembered the audience and their insight provokes two questions. Firstly, if Shakespeare was giving the paying customers what they wanted, why did he do it here? Through-out *King Lear* he plays upon the audience's desires and expectations only to confound them by presenting the opposite to what they expect and desire¹² (a point singularly borne out by the ending which Nahum Tate rewrote so it would fit those desires). Is the blinding a rare exception? The second question is more important. Is any audience really pleased to see Gloucester blinded?

This will seem an outlandish question to those who consider that a

8 While I agree that there is no reason why we must take Cornwall's lines literally, there is equally no reason why we should not. Although the scene uses "pluck out" twice, this may be as metaphorical as many take Cornwall's lines to be. Indeed, in this play of reversed expectations, the fact that the eyes are *not* plucked out may make a further point.

9 Marvin Rosenberg draws attention to this in a detailed examination of the scene in *The Masks of King Lear* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1972), p. 242.

10 *Dr Johnson on Shakespeare*, p. 126.

11 Quoted by J. I. M. Stewart, "The Blinding of Gloucester", *Review of English Studies*, 21 (1945), p. 267.

12 For a more extended discussion of the reversal and manipulation of audience expectations in the play see my " 'And that's true too': *King Lear* and the Tension of Uncertainty", *Shakespeare Survey* 33 (1980).

spectator's response to a performance is the same as the response to a similar "real" situation. That this is not the case has long been a source of ammunition to the opponents of theatre. St Augustine, who had been an avid playgoer in youth, made this point eloquently:

... when he [the spectator] suffers in his own person, it used to be called misery; when he compassionates others, then it is mercy. But what sort of compassion is this for feigned and scenical passions? for the auditor is not called on to relieve, but only to grieve: and he applauds the actor of these fictions the more, the more he grieves. And if the calamities of these persons whether of old times, or mere fiction be so acted, that the spectator is not moved to tears, he goes away disgusted and criticising; but if he be moved to passions, he stays intent, and weeps for joy.¹³

Augustine clearly did not approve of the way in which a spectator could luxuriate in his emotions and thus, in opposition to his usual responses, enjoy the misfortunes of others.

Dr Johnson's comment is striking because of the underlying assumption that an audience *could* be pleased by the scene, and he seems not so much disapproving as slightly superior. Almost as if secure in the cultural propriety and sensibility of his age, he could regard Shakespeare's original audience as crude and barbaric. It is dangerous to generalize about an "age". Johnson may have written with the refined tastes of his own, largely middle-class, theatre audience in mind, but at the time he wrote another cheaper dramatic spectacle, public hanging, was still drawing huge crowds. Today, in the West at least, such spectacles are no longer available, but audiences are still drawn by violence. When S. L. Goldberg suggests the blinding is "unendurable", perhaps he has forgotten that one of the most successful films of recent years, *A Clockwork Orange*, was advertised using the attractions of "ultra-violence". The audience endured very well. It would seem that in our own age, as in Johnson's and Shakespeare's, there can be a fascination in the horror of physical violence.¹⁴

Fascination and horror, I would suggest, are the component parts of our response to the blinding. Just before Cornwall acts, he answers Gloucester's image of vengeance: "See't shalt thou never. Fellows hold the chair./ Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot." The audience are horrified because something terrible is about to happen to a character whom they support. They have been led to expect extreme violence, but after this last of the series of references to things that cannot, must not, be seen, for a moment they don't believe it will happen. In this moment, fascinated by the prospect, they desire to see it. On stage Gloucester's shout for help is ignored and Cornwall grinds his heel in the eye. The reaction is immediate and intense. The spectators are appalled, not just because they have witnessed an appalling event, but because of their fascination and their resulting sense of complicity. In the upsurge of guilt that follows, they want desperately to save Gloucester to save their consciences and, as if in response to their wishes, a servant now steps forward to stop Cornwall. The action seems about to conform to the audience's wishes again as Shakespeare allows them a representative on the stage (at the Globe with the spectators standing close around the stage, perhaps even sitting on it, this moment must have seemed even more like direct intervention). The

¹³ *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, Book III.ii.2, tr. E. B. Pusey (London, 1913), p. 33.

¹⁴ At almost exactly the time A. C. Bradley was objecting to the blinding Joseph Conrad has his Marlow describe a similar response as "the fascination of the abomination" (*Heart of Darkness*, 1902; Penguin repr. 1976, p. 9).

servant fails, and perhaps this is the real horror. Repentance is not enough, there is no second chance, no turning back, no easy evasion of responsibility. Earlier in this scene Cornwall said: "our power/Shall do a court'sy to our wrath, which men/May blame but not control" and now the audience are forced to suffer, powerless, as he fights against exhaustion to complete his task. In some productions he is already so weak from his wound that he must crawl painfully across the stage to reach his victim. This time the scream and the spasm of pain *are* almost unbearable.

The blinding brings home the harshest of realities: it forces us to acknowledge our capacity for cruelty and it also forces a radical reassessment of our ideas about justice; the justice we require for ourselves and desire for others. Albany's later response to the news of Cornwall's death:

This shows you are above,
You justicers, that these our nether crimes
So speedily can venge! But, O poor Gloucester!
Lost he his other eye? (IV.ii.78-81)

provokes John D. Rosenberg to comment that "The question is absurd. Shakespeare again subverts the facile assertion of cosmic justice at the very moment it is made".¹⁵ An audience may realize the assertion is facile, but if they have responded in the way I suggest, Albany's question will appear far from absurd. It assumes a terrible logic. The learning of true compassion is a hard lesson: when we endure with Gloucester the blinding in the second eye, what we endure is, in a direct sense, our punishment. After such knowledge what forgiveness?

The servants' dialogue that closes the scene offers hope, but hope of a peculiarly tentative kind. Their idea of justice is simple, evildoers cannot prosper:

2 *Servant* I'll never care what wickedness I do
If this man come to good.
3 *Servant* If she live long,
And in the end meet the old course of death,
Women will all turn monsters.
(III.vii.102-105)

The construction of the lines is typical of the play's contradictory nature: while we hear the assertion, we respond to the qualification. If Cornwall and Regan go unpunished, morality is pointless and nature monstrous. However, this is not the final emphasis. The servants plan to help Gloucester and even though we cannot miss the irony in the concluding comment, "Now, heaven help him!" it sounds a note of compassion to close the scene.

Peter Brook cut the dialogue in his 1962 production and Charles Marowitz, his assistant director, describes what happened:

Gloucester is covered with a tattered rag and shoved off in the direction of Dover. Servants clearing the stage collide with the confused blind man and rudely shove him aside. As he is groping about pathetically, the house lights come up.¹⁶

Maynard Mack was among the many who objected. He cites this as a reductive reading based on sub-text which makes of the play a "diminished thing".¹⁷ I can't agree, though I think Brook overstated in creating the servants' active hostility to Gloucester. After all, earlier in the scene,

15 John D. Rosenberg, "King Lear and His Comforters", *Essays in Criticism*, 16 (1966), p. 141.

16 Charles Marowitz, "Lear Log", *Encore* (1963), pp. 28-9.

17 Maynard Mack, *King Lear in Our Time* (London, 1966), p. 40.

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Cornwall must repeat the order to bind him three times which suggests the servants' reluctance. Nevertheless, Brook's production may well have reproduced for a modern audience something akin to the effect on Shakespeare's contemporaries at the Globe, because the Folio also omits the servants' dialogue completely. Played using the Folio text, the scene preceding the blinding and the blinding itself work the audience to a high pitch of expectation, subject them to the agony of Gloucester and leave them with a feeling of unrelieved hopelessness. The irony of the sententious comments with which Edgar opens the following scene is then immense.

Yet better thus, and known to be contemn'd,
Than, still contemn'd and flatter'd, to be worst.
The lowest and most dejected thing of Fortune,
Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear:
The lamentable change is from the best;
The worst returns to laughter.

(IV.i.1-6)

The effect is usually lost in most modern productions, including Brook's, because the interval is taken after the blinding. In the light of this break in continuity, if for no other reason, Brook's overstatement seems partly justified.

In one sense, then, Dr Johnson was right to use the word "please", but rarely have an audience been forced to pay so dearly for the satisfaction of their desires. When S. L. Goldberg asserts that: "The sheer fact of the blinding, and our sheer horrified rejection of it as unendurable, lie at the very centre of the play" he fails to distinguish between "the sheer fact of the blinding" and our response to it. "Horrified rejection" is not the sole constituent of that response. It is, rather, the painful result of the total effect of the scene.