



2013-04-13

I'd Say I Had Eyes Again: Redeeming Shakespeare's Gloucester for the Blind

Nyssa Silvester
nyssa.silvester@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Intensive reading, discussion, and (in some sections) viewing of plays from the comedy, tragedy, romance, and history genres.

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Silvester, Nyssa, "I'd Say I Had Eyes Again: Redeeming Shakespeare's Gloucester for the Blind" (2013). *All Student Publications*. 88.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub/88>

This Class Project or Paper is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Student Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Nyssa Silvester

Dr. Gideon Burton

ENGL 382:004

12 April 2013

“I’d Say I Had Eyes Again”: Redeeming Shakespeare’s Gloucester for the Blind

The Dover Cliff scene of *King Lear* has spent at least several decades under the puzzled scrutiny of scholars. In the midst of a tragedy, why does Shakespeare insert such a supposedly comical scene, in which a blind man is tricked into thinking he’s jumped off a cliff? With the rise of disability studies, though, this feeling of head-scratching has developed into discomfort. Gloucester’s identity as a blind man becomes important in that scene, and readers of *King Lear* are faced with difficult interpretive questions: what are we supposed to make of comedy at the expense of a blind man? Does Gloucester become yet another blind stereotype as he falls on level ground, tricked by a sighted man who would of course know better? In answer to these questions, I propose a radical rereading of the Dover Cliff scene, one which might present *King Lear* to blind studies with fewer interpretive complications: this scene need not be read as comical. Gloucester and the people around him show enough acceptance of his blindness as a lifestyle, and Gloucester shows enough awareness of Edgar’s trickery as he describes the imaginary cliffs, that this scene can be read as Gloucester fooling his sighted helper, cooperating in the charade that gives him new hope for his life ahead. With this interpretation, the discomfiting comedy falls away, as does Gloucester’s blindness as symbolic shorthand for sin or imperceptiveness.

Previous references to *King Lear* in the context of blind studies have been especially dismissive of the Dover Cliff scene. Kenneth Jernigan, for instance, in his clarion call for more

positive representations of the blind in literature, scoffs at Shakespeare's take on blindness in *King Lear*, saying, "He makes the blinded Gloucester in 'King Lear' so thoroughly confused and helpless that he can be persuaded of anything and deceived by any trick." Though Jernigan has right to be concerned about this interpretation of Gloucester's gulling, he is far too staunch in his condemnation of the classics. Says Jernigan, "To the question IS LITERATURE AGAINST US, there can be no unqualified response. If we consider only the past, the answer is certainly yes." Though American culture generally represents blindness as a completely debilitating event even when it is mostly social stigma that makes life challenging for the blind in an age of technology (see Barbara Pierce), other literary critics have taken a much more moderate and thoughtful stance than Jernigan. For instance, professor Georgina Kleege, while trying to come to terms with blindness in literature, specifically examines Oedipus, the long-lasting trope of blindness as punishment for sin who still seems to hold his symbolic power after thousands of years. Kleege points out how harmful the Oedipus trope can be for the blind because the "whole point" of Oedipus is that he can't "[get] used to the idea of his lost sight"; otherwise, his blindness as punishment would lose its effect (74). So while Shakespeare's *King Lear* might get roped in to the literary tradition of making the blind merely helpless, instructive symbols, Jernigan's dismissal is not the only way to respond; in fact, the play can be rehabilitated. Following Kleege, readers can find ways that the blind in literature adapt and take control of their lives. If Gloucester is not read as fooled during the Dover Cliffs scene, Shakespeare's great tragedy could lead the way for depicting the life after blindness that scholars like Kleege search for in classic literature.

The traditional reading of Gloucester's blindness capitalizes on blindness as a reductive literary symbol. Harold C. Goddard presents a typical reading of the blind Gloucester in his

chapter on *King Lear*. Goddard points out the theme of sight and perception throughout the play: “The scene in question [the Dover Cliff scene] . . . is centered on the eyes and eyesight of Gloucester. But consider *King Lear* as a whole: does not practically everything in it turn on this subject of *seeing*? Darkness and light; blindness and vision—visions and blindness, indeed, of every kind” (143). Goddard is assuredly right to draw attention to the focus on sight that pervades the text—there is ample evidence and justification to bring up these parallels—but, published in 1960, his work comes from a critical tradition that does not problematize representations of disability in literature. His writing is on especially shaky ground by today’s standards of criticism when he says, “In this, his version of *The Last Judgment*, Shakespeare has demonstrated that hatred and revenge are a plucking-out of the human imagination as fatal to man’s power to find his way in the universe as Cornwall’s plucking out of Gloucester’s eyes was to the guidance of his body on earth” (170). Goddard has gone so far in his textual analysis that blindness has become a mere symbol for him, abstracted so much that it represents the *Final Judgment*, with no mention of the Gloucester, the actual blind character, except to say that his lack of sight equates to a lack of guidance. Even more recent and informal looks at blindness in *King Lear* do not push back against the purely metaphorical meaning of blindness. Sylvia Morris, an academic Shakespeare blogger, says, “The most striking [references Shakespeare makes to eyes and sight] occur in *King Lear* where the physical act of seeing is a metaphor for understanding and self-awareness. Sometimes words aren’t enough, and then Shakespeare translates the metaphor into action.” Even when blindness is enacted onstage, Morris chalks this action up not to character but to an extension of metaphor. It is just these types of analyses that Georgina Kleege rebuffs in her own work as “merely another version of the old story—the blind man as instructive spectacle, useful to everyone but himself” (90). Kleege seems, in essence, to

want the blind in literature to be instructive in a different way, to learn how to live without sight and thus, by implication, to serve as a model for blind readers. To be able to read blind role models into classic literature, we have to suspend, at least for a moment, our sighted focus on the symbolism of blindness and explore the character presented on the page without this imposed interpretive weight.

The basic way to read against the comedy at the expense of Gloucester in the Dover Cliff scene is to focus more on how Gloucester operates in the scene. While Edgar is leading Gloucester along and falsely describing their surroundings, Gloucester periodically protests, almost impatiently, to Edgar's words: "Methinks the ground is even" (IV.vi.3), he insists, and "Methinks you're better spoken" (line 14). Tellingly, the scene starts not with an assertion from Edgar but from a perhaps suspicious question from Gloucester: "When shall I come to th' top of that same hill?" (line 1). Though this opening line would seem to frame the scene almost from Gloucester's perspective, most scholars focus so much on Edgar's ekphrasis in his imaginary creation of cliffs that they wind up automatically dismissing Gloucester's lines to a merely functional role. Jonathan Goldberg, for instance, implies that Gloucester's protests to Edgar's descriptions are only present to definitively establish for the audience the scene's setting—which is not, in fact, at the Cliffs of Dover. Says Goldberg, "Still, an audience would also know that we were to witness a scene at Dover Cliff, Shakespeare's stage would have no way of representing the event save in the language available to those onstage who could testify to such an arrival; in this scene, only Edgar could report the evidence of sight" (539). This last line of Goldberg's analysis is particularly confusing. Though he insists that Edgar is the only reliable reporter of the scene, it should be clear to the reader or viewer that it is Gloucester, in fact, who is providing the correct topography. If Gloucester is capable of discerning his surroundings despite Edgar's

words to the contrary, it seems inaccurate to give Edgar the privileged position as the only one who could report “the evidence of sight.” Edgar does not report what can be seen, but Gloucester does. This commentary from Gloucester should not be cast aside as it is by so much scholarship: significantly, it conveys details of the scene through sound instead of vision. After all, Shakespeare’s original manuscripts did not have that many stage directions, and, as professor Hannah Thompson points out, neither did the works of some other playwrights during the early modern period. She describes audio cues given in a play by Racine and the importance they have to blind studies: “What I like most about this early modern predecessor of audio description is the way that it does not take sight for granted. Our modern oculocentric world is obsessed with the primacy of vision. It would never occur to modern playwrights that spectators might have difficulty seeing what is happening on stage. Audio description is an extra feature which is added after the fact (if indeed it is added at all). It is not considered an integral part of the work (although perhaps it should be).” Shakespeare, however, does include this audio description of the scene, and it significantly comes from the man who supposedly cannot know his surroundings for certain.

David Richman, a blind director who has staged *Lear*, also attempts to play into the supposed disorientation of Gloucester in this scene: “I know from personal experience how easy it is for a sighted guide to fool a blind person into thinking he is climbing up or down when he is in fact traveling over an even surface. The blind Gloucester, walking a step behind Edgar, his hand grasping Edgar’s elbow, will adjust his attempts to ascend and descend according to the motions of his guide’s body” (158–59). In other words, says Richman, if Edgar were to lean forward while pretending to go up the hill, Gloucester might be sufficiently disoriented to believe him. That interpretation, however, does not fit with the candid assertions Gloucester

makes about the reality of the scene. Though Goldberg's and Richman's points are received—that Gloucester does not have the sight that the audience depends so much on in their own lives and that he could still be fooled by the physical movements of Edgar—Gloucester's accurate knowledge of the situation undercuts these arguments and shows in particular Goldberg's bias for the sighted at the expense of the blind. Gloucester does not need sight to perceive the same evidence that sight would deliver to him, and yet Edgar is still interpreted as the necessary viewpoint character for the audience.

Even the other characters in *Lear* do not treat Gloucester as a helpless blind stereotype. Immediately after Gloucester is blinded, for instance, the servants around him start trying to treat him. As soon as Cornwall and Regan leave the room of the torture, one of the servants says, "Go thou. I'll fetch some flax and whites of eggs / To apply to his bleeding face" (III.vii.128–29). My Folger edition of Shakespeare glosses this line with this explanation: "prescribed (in the Renaissance) for wounded eyes" (166). This note provides a hint that Gloucester's life is not to be abandoned as Oedipus's was. Even after witnessing Gloucester be violently blinded, the servants are willing to help him heal; and healing Gloucester implies at least some hope for his future. Also, the text and characters of *Lear* make clear that sight is not the only way of interacting with the world and thus don't allow Gloucester to fall into abject hopelessness in his new condition. Says scholar Robert Pierce,

Sight as a vehicle of understanding is juxtaposed with the other senses in a way that jumbles the traditional hierarchy that places sight at the top. Edgar, of course, recognizes the old king by sight, and Gloucester is fairly quick to recognize his voice by hearing, for all the bizarre circumstances. Gloucester tries to reestablish their old relationship by

touch, kissing Lear's hand. His gesture embodies the loyalty that has cost him so much, while reestablishing connection through another sense that is still left to him.

Robert Pierce is right to point out the emphasis on the other senses. Even while Lear is talking to Gloucester, he tells him with dismay, "A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears" (4.vi.165). Though this exchange could be read as stereotypical compensatory powers for the blind, it seems instead to question the idea that knowledge can only be gained by sight, similar to the way that the Cliffs of Dover scene has the blind Gloucester providing the real scene-setting information for the audience.

In addition, Gloucester himself has some hope that he'll adapt to his blindness. Despite the violation and violence he has suffered, Gloucester is not immediately suicidal like our literary sensibilities tell us he might be. In the first appearance of Gloucester onstage after his blinding, he says, "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" (IV.i.22–25). This last couplet does not sound like a man who has given up on his life. Instead, it seems to indicate that Gloucester has accepted that he will not get his sight back: notice that he says that perceiving Edgar with his touch would be just as good as being able to see the whole world with his eyes. To compound upon this idea, Gloucester says to Lear, who has just discovered his blindness, "I see it [the world] feelingly" (IV.vi.164). This line gains more resonance in light of what Gloucester said earlier: "Heavens, deal so still: / Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man, / That slaves your ordinance, that will not see / Because he does not feel, feel your power quickly" (IV.i.76–79). He attributes some measure of knowledge of the world to tactile (even if emotionally tactile) instead of visual senses. Therefore, the double meaning of "I see it feelingly" comes to the surface. Gloucester has

come to terms with this new way of interacting with the world, and he now finds his emotions to be more in tune with the situation of the world around him.

Of course, this reading gets complicated when we realize that Gloucester does, in fact, touch Edgar. Before, he said that if he could touch his son, he would “say [he] had eyes again” (IV.i.22–25), but he still wants to commit suicide. Instead of feeling restored, Gloucester seems determined to do away with his life. This conundrum shows pretty definitively that Shakespeare was steeped in the blind stereotypes prevalent throughout literary history; nevertheless, we should be puzzled when we see Gloucester in such utter despair. This dark and abject misery just doesn’t seem to fit with the hope and surety that Gloucester displays throughout the act. It seems incongruous that the same man who wants to cast himself off the Cliffs of Dover would contradict his guide and say almost impatiently that they are, in fact, on level ground and not at the cliffs. In this moment of uncertainty, however, we have the option of reading Gloucester as purposeful: maybe, since he does “see [the world] feelingly” (IV.vi.164), he knows that Mad Tom is his son. And perhaps he chooses the liminal setting of the Dover Cliffs, in a very Shakespearean way, to transform his relationship with his son, to experience cleansing renewal through the love of Edgar. Interestingly, though, Edgar does not take Gloucester to the actual liminal space of the Cliffs of Dover. This could be interpreted in a variety of ways: since Dover is the symbolic entryway to England, maybe Edgar’s rejection of this site shows his commitment to his father’s sense of identity, blind or no. In other words, it is possible that Edgar is not letting Gloucester approach this liminal space because he doesn’t want his father’s core identity to change as a result of his blindness. Whatever this symbolism, Edgar thinks he takes control over the setting by directing his father away from the cliffs. Ultimately, though, Gloucester’s comments about the topography around him indicate that he has not fully given up his control of

the situation. Though Edgar chose the locale, Gloucester does not surrender his reason and convictions. Thus, the renewal that Gloucester experiences after his fall may come not just from Edgar alone, but from the give and take that father and son have over the control of the space this renewal occurs in. Though Edgar leads his father to the scene, Gloucester confirms the setting for the play's audience. Both, in their own way, set the scene, and this collaboration leads to Gloucester's renewal. Instead of being a blind man hopelessly gulled, he makes meaning together with his son and reforges their relationship in the process.

Certainly there are all kinds of reasons to resist this rereading of Gloucester. For one thing, if he is not fooled by Edgar, the parallel stories of Edgar and Edmund get uncoupled, and Gloucester might seem untrue to the gullibility he displayed in the beginning of the play as Edmund deceived him turn after turn. However, by granting Gloucester more control in the Dover Cliff scene, we grant him a redemptive place alongside Cordelia. This way, his encounter with Edgar bridges the gap between his gullibility with Edmund and his Cordelia-like redemption. His collaborative redemption with Edgar transforms from a gulling to a redemption, and Gloucester transitions from the gulled to the redeemed. Though some of the parallelism traditionally imputed to Gloucester might have dwindled, Gloucester's trajectory, as set by this new interpretation, shows the possibility of human growth while still sticking to the template of tragedy. Like Cordelia, Gloucester, in the end, still dies. Changing the interpretation of the Dover Cliff scene does not make *King Lear* any less of a tragedy; it merely makes Gloucester's arc cut diagonally instead of running in the parallel lines of his interactions with Edmund and Edgar: this diagonal, instead of parallel, line slopes upward and lets Gloucester grow as he stops being the person fooled by Edmund and turns into the person as redemptive as Cordelia. All in all, though, reexamining the Dover Cliffs scene and the degree of control the Gloucester exercises

there helps carve out spaces in classic literature for blind role models with at least some hope and agency. We may dismiss Jernigan's comment that literature is undoubtedly against the blind, but it is difficult to ignore the message about disability and metaphor as explained by Amy Vidali: in a culture in which "it goes without saying . . . that metaphors impact the world, both figuratively and materially," it is a problem that most canonical literature represents blindness "as misunderstanding and disorder, while seeing is knowledge and coherence" (34). If we take seriously the effect metaphors can have in the material world and on people's experience, it becomes a pressing issue to present role models for the blind in literature, or at least to come up with interpretive strategies to help create them. Though Gloucester is not traditionally read as a character with much control or agency during the Dover Cliffs scene, there is justification that he should be, both in textual evidence and in the moral cause of creating new metaphor.

Works Cited

- Goddard, Harold C. *The Meaning of Shakespeare*. Vol 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960. Print.
- Goldberg, Jonathan. "Dover Cliff and the Conditions of Representation: *King Lear* 4:6 in Perspective." *Poetics Today* 5.3 (1984): 537–47.
- Jernigan, Kenneth. "Is Literature against Us?" Address delivered at the annual banquet of the National Federation of the Blind, Chicago, 3 July 1974.
- Morris, Sylvia. "Sight and Blindness in Shakespeare." *The Shakespeare Blog*. The Shakespeare Blog, 17 August 2012. Web. 11 April 2013.
- Pierce, Barbara. "No Such Thing as Blind Culture." *Braille Monitor* November 2008. Web. 21 March 2013. Web.
- Pierce, Robert B. "'I Stumbled When I Saw': Interpreting Gloucester's Blindness in *King Lear*." *Philosophy and Literature* 36.1 (2012): 153–65. Web. 8 April 2013.
- Richman, David. "Smelling Their Way to Dover: A Blind Director's Take on Blind Gloucester." In *Inside Shakespeare: Essays on the Blackfriars Stage*. Edited by Paul Menzer. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2006. 156–61. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Washington Square Press, 1993. Print.
- Thompson, Hannah. "Andromaque: Audio Description in the Seventeenth Century." *Blind Spot*. Blind Spot, 20 February 2013. Web. 11 April 2013.
- Vidali, Amy. "Seeing What We Know: Disability and Theories of Metaphor." *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 4.1 (2010): 33–54. Print.