

Edgar's Cliff: The View from a Height in *King Lear*

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Gloucester's journey to the cliffs of Dover – arguably an imaginary excursion – begins in the closing lines of Act 4, Scene 2: “There is a cliff, whose high and bending head/Looks fearfully in the confinèd deep./Bring me but the very brim of it, . . . From that place/I shall no leading need.” (4.2.72–7). This is a contraction of Gloucester's request to be led to the precipice; a contraction used in Richard Eyre's 2018 production of *King Lear* (1:15:05–1:15:17) and the only descriptive construction of the cliff retained from the original. Shakespeare's loco-descriptive practice, through Edgar's trickery in Act 4, Scene 6, is at the heart of this discussion. More specifically, how this scene is literalized in Eyre's production, and the consequence of replacing Edgar's description with a real cliff-top. This scene, found in the penultimate act of *King Lear*, is perhaps the most morbidly comic and touching of the play, as it charts Gloucester's metaphorical fall and, symbolically, the vulnerability of aged characters to the manipulations of a younger generation – even as Edgar promises rather to “cure” Gloucester's despair than to merely “trifle” with his blinded father.

Edgar, as Poor Tom, follows Gloucester's instruction, at least in imaginative terms, by convincing the blinded man that he is on the precipice of the cliffs and could, if he so chooses, end his life. Shakespeare employs topographical description to build the precipice in both Gloucester's and the audience's imaginations. For example, Edgar illustrates the precarity of the situation: “. . . Stand still. How fearful/And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low” (4.6.11–12) and “I'll look no more;/Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight/Topple down headlong.” (4.6.22–24). The “confinèd deep” is populated by an enumeration of objects that seem frightfully small compared to their normal scale, as choughs and crows are reduced to beetles picking samphire from the cliff face, and “The fishermen, that walk upon the beach,/Appear like mice” (4.5.13–20). While the presence of a version of a cliff-top onstage seems debatable (Schleiner 337–8, Hatchuel 65), Edgar's words are significant. In fact, I concur with Stephen Orgel's assertion that the audience is complicit in Edgar's trickery as they understand the cliff-top to be fictitious (556). But that by no means renders the scene unimportant in terms of the transformative potential of a view from a height. As Jonathan Goldberg notes, “Edgar's description of Dover recasts a version of illusionistic representation upon which Renaissance painting depends. The lines offer a perspective on perspective” (541). This scene is particularly important when read alongside later topographical poetic traditions from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries (Kroeber 85) as it is characterized by sublimity and order. The question I will later raise in relation to Eyre's 2018 production, is whether such verbal construction might be successfully omitted.

From the precipice, Gloucester, who was earlier blinded by Cornwall and Regan, cannot see to corroborate Edgar's vision, but he does intend to feel it, or rather to experience it as he falls from the cliff-top.¹ The hopeless intent of an already tortured man struggling to sense space has been read as tragic, dramatic and morbidly farcical (Cavell 55, Hatchuel 65). “O you mighty gods!/This world I do renounce, and in your sights/Shake patiently my great affliction off.” (4.6.34–36). Following his prayer and a final message to his lost son, Edgar – the very son who has led him in disguise – Gloucester falls. But this is not a literal fall from a height. According to stage directions, Gloucester and Edgar are in “The countryside near Dover,” not necessarily the cliff's edge, and after the nobleman “falls forward” from his knees, he “remains prone” (107).² His position is perhaps laughable. Indeed, as Stanley Cavell

observes in this scene, we witness a scene of “mutilating cruelty” (54) and “grotesquerie” enacted by Edgar on his father, perhaps as a demonstration of “how radically implicated good is in evil” (55).

Gloucester, awakening from his attempted suicide, is convinced by his son (now acting as a bystander) that he did indeed fall, like “gosmore, feathers, air,/(So many fathom down precipitating),” (4.6.49–50). The blind man is apparently spared of the plummet, landing alive and well, and “bleed’st not” (4.6.52). So begins a second construction of the view, instead of using the high vantage of the cliff-top, Edgar begins from below:

GLOUCESTER: But have I fall’n, or no?

EDGAR: From the dread summit of this chalky bourn.

Look up a-height; the shrill-gorged lark so far

Cannot be seen or heard: do but look up. (4.6.56–59)

Now instead of choughs and crows, we imagine larks. But the song of the birds and their bodies are unheard and invisible. Gloucester can only respond to the ironic instruction to “look up” with “Alack, I have no eyes.” (4.6.60). There is another figure in this moment of the play, the Edgar of the cliff-tops (Poor Tom) is recast as a “fiend” with “Horns whelked and waved like the enraged sea” (4.6.71). The figure constructing the cliff is elemental, tempting Gloucester into the abyss. Edgar’s double construction allows Gloucester and the audience to understand the landscape as a monolithic structure fragmented by dramatic action – the fall of the blind man. From above, the scene(ry) and Edgar’s choices are cruel, from below they are redemptive.

Interestingly, while the dramatic action remains in Eyre’s 2018 production (1:13:50–1:18:00), as Gloucester attempts suicide, Edgar’s landscape description has been cut apart from briefest comments on the height of the cliff (4.6.11–12; and 4.6.22–25). The cinematic version of the play transforms loco-description into tangible reality, and as such, sharply contrasts the imaginatively constructed scenery in the play. The beetle-like choughs and crows are replaced with the sounds of birds and sea. Both the water and the precipice are proximate. Through the gray-scale landscape one sees the white cliffs, and the audience is no longer a conspirator with Edgar waiting on bated breath to see if his trickery will prove restorative. As Sarah Hatchuel puts it, “by bringing his father so close to the edge, Edgar is certainly taking a risk, and viewers may ask themselves if the distance is safe enough for Gloucester not to fall, even if inadvertently” (72). Herein lies an important question: is the audience meant to empathize with Gloucester based on his literal circumstances and the fear that he might be successful in his suicide attempt? If so, then Eyre’s production is successful, as we must speculate on real dangers rather than those we imagine. The audience is likewise tricked by the motions of the camera, panning from Gloucester on “th’extreme verge” (4.6.25) to a white screen (1:17:00–1:17:01). For the briefest of seconds, the elderly man’s suicide is a reality facilitated by Edgar, not a situation being prevented through rhetorical construction. But what if Shakespeare’s intention is not to evoke fear or dread?

Orgel describes Gloucester’s “chasm” as “emotional” (556), and in stagings “[w]e take the fall seriously, with none of Edgar’s detachment; we substitute a little fall for a great one, but we experience the scene from Gloucester’s point of view” (557). In the original, we believe in the cliff because it holds the possibility to think differently, it raises existential questions without literally threatening existence. Edgar’s cliff forces Gloucester into a remedial reflection on the necessity to live. The height, described from above and below, is a way to think through a transformative fall, not because it is real but because its effects are felt metaphorically. In Eyre’s 2018 production, Edgar only lies about the proximity of the edge and does not control his father’s sensory reality. The height is too credible, there is no imaginative construction required, and in the absence of nature description we are left with only fear. If, as Goldberg suggests, “[t]he moral meanings to be read in Edgar’s description derive precisely from the attempt at passing from representation to presentation” (542), then it stands to reason that without passing through representation, i.e. description, and instead

being brought to a cliff grounded in reality, moral messaging is likewise subverted. The cinematic literalization seems to miss the purpose of Shakespeare's landscape description and indeed the reason it comes from Edgar. The compression of this scene in the 2018 adaptation might explain Kate Wilkinson's statement: "Edgar's character is so far removed from much of what takes place that, quite possibly, the film could have managed without him" (417). Shakespeare's landscape is speculative and troubles Gloucester's resolution through the audience's complicity. Edgar demonstrates the vulnerability of the older generation that he will replace as the ruler named at the close of the play (Shakespeare 6.3.318–19, Cavell 55) while simultaneously demonstrating his capacity to (rhetorically) construct space. In Eyre's film, this scene in which Edgar provides multiple perspectives, from the "cliff-top," the beach and through asides, is fundamentally reduced.

Notes

1. Andrew Bozio writes on the ways *King Lear* "suggests that the embodied mind and its immediate environment are mutually constitutive of one another. Indeed, Gloucester's claim to see the world 'feelingly' and his multi-sensory navigation of that world depend upon this intimate relationship." (101–102). The intimacies of the cliff-top also bear consideration – this is an attempt at suicide, but Gloucester's walk to the edge is narrated from outside, by his son. It is also a moment meant to convince the blinded nobleman to live as he is reminded upon his miraculous survival from an unbelievable fall (one which he could not feel) to "Bear free and patient thoughts." (4.6.79)
2. I take this information from stage directions given in Cedric Watt's edited version of the play, which he notes is a "conflation" of quarto and folio versions of *King Lear* published in the seventeenth century and informed by various other critical editions (Watts in Shakespeare 27–30).

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