

Will Dingee
Exercise – King Lear 4.6.60–74

Passage:

Gloucester:

Alack, I have no eyes.
Is wretchedness deprived that benefit
To end itself by death? 'Twas some comfort yet
When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage
And frustrate his proud will.

Edgar:

Give me your arm.
Up, so. How is't? Feel you your legs? You stand.

Gloucester:

Too well, too well.

Edgar:

This is above all strangeness.
Upon the crown o'the cliff what thing was that
Which parted from you?

Gloucester:

A poor unfortunate beggar.

Edgar:

As I stood here, methought his eyes
Were too full moons. He had a thousand noses,
Horns whelked and waved like the enraged sea.
It was some fiend. Therefore, thou happy father,
Think that the clearest gods, who make them honors
Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.

Choreography:

A person slowly covers their eyes with their hands. They are to focus mentally on the deliberate, coordinated motions of the arms while doing this. Then, without opening their eyes, they are to rise from a seated position. While doing this, they are to focus on feeling the fact that they have legs. Finally, they let their hands fall from their wide-open eyes and breathe in deeply through the nose.

Comment:

My starting point for thinking about this assignment was the provocation offered by the Johnson reading, which I found engaging but potentially troubling. Thinking of Foucault, I wondered what sort of desirable truths could be produced by a discourse in which mind and body are distinct, and what sort of undesirable truths might be produced by the idea of the unity of body

and mind. A medical discourse prescribing the unity of the mind and the body has long co-existed with a Platonic/idealizing conception of the body as separate from the mind. As Foucault might point out, this sort of medical discourse can have the effect of establishing normative ideas of the body and connecting them with normative ideas of the mind: *mens sana in corpore sano*, “sound mind = sound body.” One thing at stake in freeing the body from the mind is advocacy for the equality of all our minds given the obvious inequality of our bodies. I realize that Johnson is trying to think beyond this sort of medical discourse, but if, as he argues, embodied experience is the main source of the metaphorical processes which form our conceptual apparatuses, our ability to articulate abstract thought, then what does this mean for the condition of disability? If the abilities to run, skip, jump, see, hear, feel, are essentially to constructing our perceptual and linguistic worlds, what of those who cannot do these things?

In thinking about these questions, I wanted to focus on 4.6.60–74, the lines in which Edgar helps Gloucester up after tricking him into thinking he has fallen off the cliffs. These lines deal explicitly with issues of embodied experience and with ability/disability. However, as I understood this assignment, I needed to design some kind of movement that is “about” the language, not simply about what the language is about. Obviously the tendency to slip into interpretation is very difficult to resist here, and I was reminded of the difficulty of the assignment for the “sound” week. I began by asking how Shakespeare activates and comments on embodied experience in language, and how this can be translated into movement which is not acting. I decided to focus on how the passage refers to various body parts and conceives of them as instruments or objects of observation. The goal of this exercise is to enhance the performer’s sense of what ways of being in the body Shakespeare’s language points to here.

The passage begins with Gloucester telling Edgar that he cannot look: “I have no eyes.” The eyes are so normalized as the fundamental instruments of apprehension or misprision, and this passage could be said to dramatize the way in which blindness forces a displacement of language onto parts of the body that would normally be neglected as instruments of knowledge about the self and the environment. As Edgar helps Gloucester up, he must proceed in embodied terms, without recourse to the visual terms in which language normally describes the world. Setting him right with: “Give me your arm. Up, so.” This “so” could be called a adverb of embodied deixis – “do this in that way in which you can now feel that I am leading you to do this.” Edgar begins to realize how blindness as a state foregrounds the too-often ignored ability of the body to feel itself being. He asks: “Feel you your legs? You stand.” The juxtaposition of “you” and “your” here seems to stress the odd reflexivity implied in the verb “feel” as used in this sense: What feels the legs? The legs themselves. It is curious that by the end of this passage, when Edgar, acting as Gloucester’s eyes, returns to eyes and noses as more traditionally central organs of sense, they are figured as somehow excessive or monstrous, a sign of fiendishness. He is, of course, lying. Even as eyes seem to be connected to madness, their centrality to observation of truth cannot be entirely displaced. Gloucester’s blindness forces the play’s language to focus on types of embodied experience other than the corporality of the eyes, which is often so normalized as to become ignored, but to what extent can this alternative language of the body compensate for the loss of the visual, the sense which seems most connected to the abstract, the conceptual, the non-embodied?