

# King Lear: Dementia, Ageism, Stigma

“Dementia is a major cause of disability amongst older people and constitutes one of the most serious challenges facing the older population, their families and health and social care services in the developed world (Care Services Improvement Partnership, 2005).”

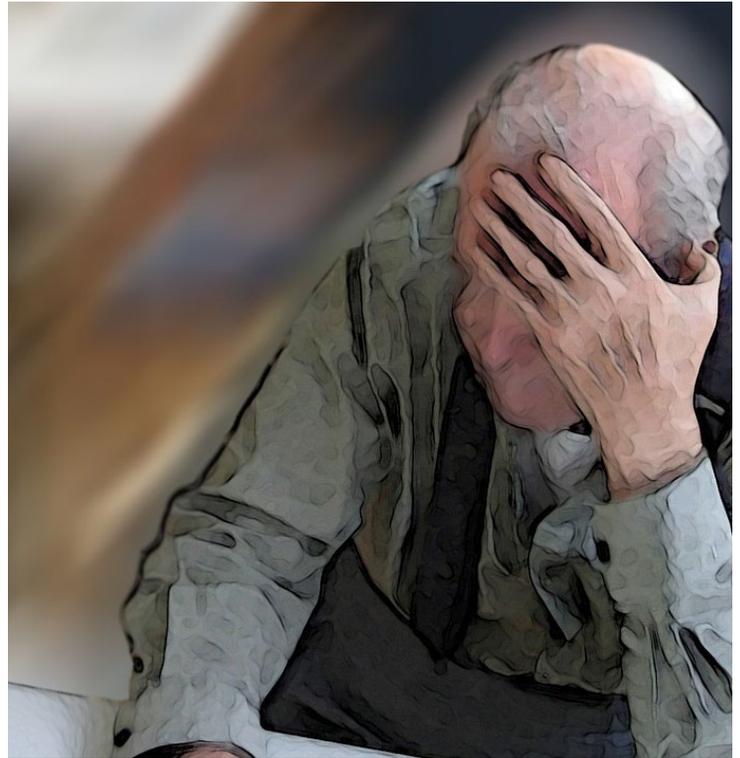
Although *King Lear* is not specifically diagnosed with dementia in the play, many mental health professionals suggest that the symptoms of his “madness” point to a form of dementia.

“The combined impact of the dementing illness itself—cognitive decline and memory loss—and the negative responses to diagnosis and symptoms, profoundly undermine psycho-social well being and quality of life. Loss of independence, roles and identity, and feelings of low self esteem, value and worth are widely noted in research with people with dementia (Husband, 1999).”

Can you find specific examples throughout the text of *King Lear* that might suggest he is suffering from dementia? How does his cognitive functioning and memory decline throughout the play? Try tracking how the quality of his life changes from the beginning of the play to the end.

“As an age-related disorder older people with dementia are thus exposed not only to the stigma associated with mental illness but to age discrimination as well—the so-called “double whammy” (Godfrey et al., 2005). Age discrimination represents an important element of the way in which older people experience later life and gain access to socially-valued roles and resources. It functions to reinforce age-related norms and perpetuate assumptions about old age and ageing as a process. (Bytheway, 1995). Old age stereotypes are almost universally negative and are associated with dependency, limited social and sexual lives, and incapacity to exercise autonomy and self determination (Victor, 2005).”

Find places in the text where people treat King Lear differently because of his perceived madness or because of his age. Do you think Goneril and Regan would have been so keen to take advantage of him if he were younger? How do the stereotypes imposed on Lear reinforce his own perception of himself or influence his behavior?



“Recent attempts to re-conceptualize dementia as a disability and to locate it inside the social model of disability has helped to provide a “new” way of understanding the condition and challenge stigma (Gilliard et al., 2005). As a framework, this is wholly consistent with the promotion of personhood and acceptance that it is our approach to people with dementia—the language we use to describe the condition and people with it, and the service environments we create for them, that disempower, dehumanize, marginalize and ultimately stigmatize, not the condition itself (Cantley & Bowes, 2004).”

If Lear were treated differently throughout the course of the play, how do you think his personal progression would be different? How much of Lear’s deterioration is worsened by his mistreatment? ♦

**QUOTES SOURCE:** The ‘D’ word: Reflections on the relationship between stigma, discrimination, and dementia by Alison Milne. Publication: Journal of Mental Health, 2010.