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Original Paper

Dementia as Madness in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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Abstract

In William Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear* madness, or what is presently referred to as dementia, is the cause of King Lear's calamitous decision making, mood swings and the misguided actions that occur throughout the play. Symptoms of dementia reveal themselves in Lear at different points in the play and they weaken his power and lead to a lessening in physical and mental well-being that will eventually result in his untimely death. Throughout the play's five acts one comes to understand how this disease can not only ruin the life of the one with dementia but also upend and destroy the lives of those affected by it.

Introduction

Dementia was called madness or being mad in William Shakespeare's time. Dementia attacks memory, concentration, and judgment. These symptoms often lead to bad decision making, emotional disturbance and personality changes. Serious cases lead to insanity, madness, and weakness in or total loss of thought and reason.

In Shakespeare's play *King Lear*, there is an extravagant shifting in mood by Lear, to such a degree that when it occurs it is abrupt, yet at the same time it feels continuous because it's going on for such long periods of time at certain intervals in the play[1)]. Lear, as a character, is of high interest not because of what he is but because of what he does[1)].

And there is justification for these demented or mad traits from Lear's point of view. He thinks his youngest daughter Cordelia doesn't love him enough. His elder daughters Goneril and Regan dump and disown him after he abdicates in their favor. This leads to Lear believing that he is a fugitive with nowhere to go. So he ends up exposed to the elements, and alone, except for the company of his Fool, on a storm-ridden heath. Later he is captured by enemy troops. It is indeed an unpleasant state to be in[2)]. The later acts especially manifest Lear's madness in the wildflower and wheel of fire scenes where Lear, desiring to be everything, fears greatly that he is nothing[2)].

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I

In the opening scene of Act I King Lear abdicates in favor of his three daughters and divides his kingdom amongst them. The reasons for giving up his thrown are straightforward:

> And 'tis our fast intent
> To shake all cares and business from our age,
> Conferring them on younger strengths, (I, i, 39-41)

"Cares and business" for a king include, "(rule, / Interest of territory, cares of state), " (I, i, 50-51)

As his two eldest daughters, Regan and Goneril, are married women, the Duke of Cornwall for Regan and the Duke of Albany for Goneril, Lear also addresses them. Again, Lear's explanation is easy to understand:

> Our son of Cornwall,
> And you, our no less loving son of Albany,
> We have this hour a constant will to publish
> Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife
> May be prevented now. (I, i, 42-46)

Lear's youngest daughter Cordelia is as yet unmarried, but is being pursued by the Duke of Burgundy and the King of France. Up to now everything Lear has said is directed toward a smooth transition, with terms stated plainly.

Things get strange when Lear adds a non sequitur:

> Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
> That we our largest bounty may extend (I, i, 52-53)

Until this point there has been no explicit mention of a greater share. The only hint of mischief came at line 37 in this scene when Lear mentioned, "our darker purpose". (I, i, 37) This may refer to the largest third of his bequest and for Lear's command to his daughters to flatter him with their verbal bouquets of love for him. "The play has deftly slid away from sanity and into a never-never land of utter foolishness[1]."

Upon judging Goneril and Regan's words of love for Lear to be sufficient to his needs Lear grants them their lands. Yet, "the profound emptiness of these vows is obvious[1]." Goneril and Regan play the game and are rewarded. "The 'opulence' lathered on him by Goneril and Regan is plainly what he wants[1]."

Now it is Cordelia's turn. Cordelia is the King's obvious favorite[1]:

> Now our joy,
> Although our last and least, to whose young love
> The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
> Strive to be of interest. (I, i, 84-87)

Lear calls Cordelia his "joy", (I, i, 84) as opposed to Goneril, whom he simply called "Our eldest born", (I, i, 55) and Regan, whom he calls the everyday polite form of address "our dearest". (I, i, 70) Lear openly offers the

best part of his bequest to Cordelia: "What can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters?" (I, i, 87-88)

Cordelia tells the truth. She is honest. There is no flattery: "I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less." (I, i, 94-95) She does in fact say that she loves, obeys and honors her father. But it is not enough. Goneril and Regan say that they love Lear so much that there is no room to give love to another. Cordelia says that she cannot do this if she were to marry. Cordelia is literal and true. These are feelings that Lear doesn't want to hear from his favorite. In disbelief he says as much: "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery." (I, i, 125-126)

Without stating openly and for everyone to hear that her love for her father is the paramount thing, Cordelia is left with nothing and Lear tells her to leave. If Lear has been lost in a fantasy world, reinforced by Goneril and Regan's over the top flattery, Cordelia swings Lear starkly to the other extreme. Lear erupts into an unbalanced rage[1].

"Lear is a blind king, who knows neither himself nor his daughters[2]."

Remember that Cordelia is not married and that the Duke of Burgundy and the King of France are here at Lear`s court and have been watching what is going on. Marriages are political and dowries are expected. Love is secondary, if it exists at all. Since Lear pulls Cordelia's inheritance, she no longer has a dowry. Burgundy soon leaves. France, however, breaking all the norms of the time, is in love, agrees to marry her without dowry or titles, a fantastic outcome.

Kent, an earl and one of Lear's closest supporters, is the first to openly call Lear mad: "Be Kent unmannerly, / When Lear is mad." (I, i, 147-148). But everyone can see the mood swings and bad judgment. Why give away your kingdom at all? And to the two daughters that have resorted to mere flattery for material gain? Lear's emotional turbulence and reckless actions are directed toward the one he had expected the most fealty from, Cordelia. When she refuses to give him what he wants, Cordelia goes from most loved and favored to banishment.

Only towards the end of Act I is Lear in some cognizant, tactile way made to understand his mistake. He goes to stay with his eldest Goneril but she will not put up with him and his riotous retinue of followers and lays down new rules she knows he will never obey. This includes a large reduction in the number of his knights, "A little to disquantity your train,"(I, iv, 226) They have been striking Goneril's people and Lear's, "disordered rabble / Make servants of their betters." (I, iv, 233-234) By "betters" Goneril is referring to her people now that she has "kingly" power and Lear does not. Lear cannot accept this and rides off in a fit to Regan but will meet with the same welcome.
Regan had remarked earlier that her father, "hath ever but / slenderly known himself." (I, i, 293-294) This makes one think that actions taken and emotions displayed by Lear in the time before this play begins were obvious to those close to him and that they are now not worth indulging anymore since Lear no longer has any kingly power.

II

In Act II, Lear's demented state accelerates. Lear's Fool sums up the king's predicament at this point in the play:

Fathers that wear rags

Do make their children blind,
But fathers that bear bags
Shall see their children kind.
Fortune, that arrant whore,
Ne'er turns the key to the poor. (II, iv, 46-51)

The first two quoted lines of the Fool refer to Lear after giving up his crown; just another irascible old man in need of care like any other parent.

In the middle two lines, "bags" refers to money and the Fool is making a comment on Lear's elder daughters' kindness when there is money to be had.

And the final two lines are about Lear and the vagaries of self-inflicted fortune. Now that Lear provides no monetary or kingly reason for them to conform, his eldest daughters want him either gone or obeying them[3].

Lear, after a spat with Goneril over the terms of his stay at her castle, approaches Regan's. She tries to hide from him at Gloucester's, an earl like Kent and another supporter of the king.

Lear manages to find Regan at Gloucester's. Lear, still concerned with his own upkeep, pleads with Regan to let him stay with her. But she takes Goneril's side, agrees with the new restrictions on Lear and tells him to go back to Goneril's for the agreed upon month.

Lear, incapable of guile, lets out a verbal torrent toward Goneril in front of Regan, invoking first the wrath of the god Jupiter and then disease:

You nimble lightnings, dart your blinding flames
Into her scornful eyes! Infect her beauty,
You fen-sucked fogs, drawn by the powerful sun,
To fall and blister! (II, iv, 161-164)

Seeing Lear spit forth his wrath in person, Regan better understands Goneril and thinks of Lear: "So will you wish on me, when the rash mood is on." (II, iv, 165)

Then Goneril appears and the sisters together agree harsher terms for their continued funding of his lifestyle and his overall care. Lear, exasperated, tells them that he would rather,

abjure all roofs, and choose
To wage against the enmity o'the air,
To be comrade with the wolf and owl — (II, iv, 204-206)

Lear tells Goneril, "do not make me mad." (II, iv, 214) and proceeds to call her all kinds of names, "a disease that's in my flesh", (II, iv, 218) and "a boil, / A plague sore, an embossed carbuncle." (II, iv, 219-220)

Lear now knows that any expectation that he had that his eldest daughters would keep to the original terms of the inheritance agreement are no longer possible, and with the Fool, his only companion, makes for the heath. But before he goes he warns Goneril and Regan, calling them, "unnatural hags" (II, iv, 274) and says:

I will have such revenges on you both,
That all the world shall — I will do such things —
What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be
The terrors of the earth! (II, iv, 275-278)

After Lear and the Fool are gone and a storm comes onto the heath, Gloucester entreats Regan to take Lear in but she will not:

O sir, to willful men
The injuries that they themselves procure
Must be their schoolmasters. (II, iv, 298-300)

III

In Act III, Lear goes into the storm scene on the heath burning with an anger that is combined with a deepening madness. But he comes out of the ordeal full of paternal love and concern for others.

Heavy rain and wind engulf Lear on the heath. There is thunder and lightning. In ordinary times no one but Lear and the Fool would be out there taking the storm on. But Kent is still loyal. He finds them and manages to get Lear into a semi-lucid phase, "My wits begin to turn." (III, ii, 64) Lear then agrees to Kent's suggestion that they shelter out the storm, "Come, bring us to the hovel." (III, ii, 76)

Scene iv finds Lear at his most manic. This is brought directly on by the discovery of Edgar (Gloucester's son) already sheltering in the hovel. Edgar has been forced to disguise himself as a madman in order to escape from a sentence of death brought down on him by his father Gloucester. Gloucester's bastard son Edmund has tricked Gloucester into believing that Edgar seeks to take over from his father all his wealth and titles while Gloucester is still alive.

Edgar, pretending to be mad, jabbers on about what he calls "the foul fiend". (III, iv, 43) Lear extrapolates from this that he must mean ungrateful daughters, "Didst thou given all to thy two daughters? And art thou / come to this?" (III, iv, 46-47) And:

What, have his daughters brought him to this pass?
Couldst thou save nothing? Didst thou give them all? (III, iv, 59-60)

And in a nadir of demented thought brought about by listening to and looking at Edgar's abject state, Lear tries to outdo the madman in his poverty of mind and person:

Unaccommodated man is no more but
such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you
lendings! Come unbutton here. (III, iv, 98-100)

Lear tears off his clothes, the Fool keeps him from running naked out into the fields bordering the heath and Lear is only calmed by the approach of a new person into the hovel, Gloucester (who fails to recognize his son). Gloucester is going against Goneril and Regan's order to have nothing to do with Lear anymore: "My duty cannot suffer / T' obey in all your daughters' hard commands." (III, iv, 135-136)

Gloucester, like Kent, still harbors loyalty to Lear the person. He cannot leave him exposed to the elements:

"I ventured to come seek you out, / And bring you where both fire and food is ready." (III, iv, 139-140)

And Gloucester advises Kent of a plot against the life of Lear and urges them to leave now before Goneril and Regan can end Lear's life:

I have o'erheard a plot of death upon him.
There is a litter ready, lay him in't,
And drive toward Dover, friend, where thou shalt meet
Both welcome and protection. (III, vi, 49-52)

IV

In Act IV, Cordelia, her husband the King of France and his army are Lear's protection. Cordelia knows of her father's predicament and is using all of her power and influence to find and save him. Early in scene iv Cordelia pledges to give her all in order to alleviate Lear's suffering:

What can man's wisdom,
In the restoring his bereave'd sense?
He that can help him, take all my outward worth. (IV, iv, 8-10)

And she professes her determination to bring him back to his former self:

O dear father,
It is thy business that I go about.
Therefore great France
My mourning and important tears hath pitied.
No blown ambition doth our arms incite,
But love, dear love, and our aged father's right.
Soon may I hear and see him! (IV, iv, 23-29)

Cordelia had caught a glimpse of Lear at the beginning of scene iv, "singing aloud" (IV, iv, 2) and crowned with flowering weeds. This mock-crown is ironically related to the crown that Lear wore in Act I, scene i and yet it somehow bestows upon Lear regality even in madness[4].

The wildflower scene is scene vi of Act IV. It is, "Shakespeare's boldest effort of imagination and utterly lacking in merely *narrative* function[1]." Lear's disjointed speeches, representing his madness, resist explanation[4].

Lear enters the scene at line 81 with wildflowers encircling his head. Edgar comments on his appearance: "The safer sense will ne'er accommodate / His master thus." (IV, vi, 81-82)

The "safer sense" refers to a sane or healthy mind that would never allow oneself to look like Lear now does.

Edgar and Lear have a disjointed back and forth that ends with Lear asking for a password as if letting him into his guarded camp:

Lear: Give the word.
Edgar: Sweet marjoram.
Lear: Pass. (IV, vi, 92-94)

"'Sweet Marierome is a remedie against cold diseases of the braine and head', according to John Gerard's *Herbal* (1597), 540, so Edgar's password relates to Lear's madness and is not merely fanciful[4]."

At this point Lear hears the voice of Gloucester. He is now in Edgar's care, though doesn't recognize his son. (Gloucester was blinded by Regan's husband the Duke of Cornwall for being a traitor and expelled onto the heath to fend for himself.) Gloucester's voice allows for Lear to regain some idea of who he is, and though not completely lucid, Gloucester brings Lear back to his daughters at the time of the division of his kingdom. Lear knows that Goneril and Regan lied to him in the opening scene of the play:

> They flattered me
> like a dog, and told me I had the white hairs in my beard, ere
> the black ones were there. (IV, vi, 96-98)

Shakespeare often associates dogs with fawning or flattery. The juxtaposition in the color of Lear's beard refers to being called wise (white beard)[4] while in reality he was acting like a newly crowned king (black beard), making a huge mistake in believing what his daughters Goneril and Regan were saying to him before he divested himself of his kingly powers.

And Lear, in his current state, has taken what happened to him in the storm on the heath as some sort of trial, which overcoming, has opened his eyes even more to his daughters' treachery:

> When
> the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me
> chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding,
> there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not
> men o' their words, they told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie, I
> am not ague-proof. (IV, vi, 99-104)

Lear first references his inability to command the weather before collating that with his daughters' lies. He can command neither, and he realized this on the heath in the storm scene.

Yet, when someone recognizes his voice and asks if he is not the king, he can answer, crowned as he is in wildflowers, "Ay, every inch a king." (IV, vi, 106)

And Gloucester laments the mad king as nature's ruined masterpiece:

> O ruined piece of nature! This great world
> Shall so wear out to nought. (IV, vi, 134-135)

Lear's personal world, "ruined piece of nature", is combined by Gloucester with its whole, "this great world", to express a dystopian image of the play.

Edgar caps the wildflower scene with an aside: "O matter and impertinency mixed, / Reason in madness!" (IV, vi, 172-173)

"Matter and impertinency" stand for sense and nonsense, respectively[4]. Edgar observes, "that the 'safer sense' (sane mind) cannot accommodate itself to the vision of the ultimate paternal authority having gone mad[2]." (Bloom 203)

After the wildflower scene, Cordelia's attendant finds Lear and Lear mistakes himself as being captured, "Use me well, / You shall have ransom." (IV, vi, 189-190)

Lear asks the attendant if he knows that Lear is a king. The attendant says he knows and that he will obey him. Lear understands this to mean that he can run away, "Come, and you get it, / You shall get it with running." (IV, vi, 199-200)

By scene vii Lear has been found again. He was still in the rags he was left with after the storm on the heath. Asleep and in a doctor's care, Cordelia is lamenting Lear's madness, his time on the heath and the treachery of her sisters.

Cordelia, in camp with the French, has Lear changed into clean garments before he is brought to her. Lear awakes in Cordelia's presence. Still mad, Lear thinks he's dead, damned and in hell, forced into viewing a perpetual heavenly vision of his beloved Cordelia:

> You do me wrong to take me out o' the grave.
> Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound
> Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
> Do scald like molten lead. (IV, vii, 43-46)

Lear's mention of "a wheel of fire" has various antecedents for Shakespeare's contemporaries[4]. The mythological reference is to, "Ixion, punished by Jupiter for seeking to seduce Juno, and bound on an ever-whirling wheel in hell[4]." There is also an English reference, "with the sun, depicted as a wheel of fire worshipped in pre-Christian England, and linked to Lear[4]," where he invokes, "the sacred radiance of the sun," (I, i,111) and all the other heavenly bodies to disown his daughter Cordelia.

Yet by Act II Kent previews reconciliation with a reference to the wheel of fortune: "Fortune, good night. Smile once more, turn thy wheel!" (II, ii, 170) This nod to fortune is said by Kent after receiving a letter from Cordelia. She knows what her sisters are up to and informs Kent that she is, "seeking to give / Losses their remedies." (II, ii, 166-167). Kent can imagine a future where fortune's wheel, so destructive to Lear at this point, may turn to his advantage thanks to the support of his youngest daughter.

And Kent appears here now in Act IV, scene vii. He fills in Cordelia on all of Lear's adventures on the heath, in the hovel and his general state of madness. When Cordelia asks Lear, "Sir, do you know me?" (IV, vii, 47) Lear answers, "You are a spirit, I know. Where did you die?" (IV, vii, 48)

Though as yet not knowing who Cordelia is, Lear has settled down and more calmly expresses his feelings of knowing that he is not in his right mind:

> Methinks I should know you, and know this man,
> Yet I am doubtful. For I am mainly ignorant
> What place this is. And all the skill I have
> Remembers not these garments. Nor I know not
> Where I did lodge last night. (IV, vii, 59-63)

Being now in a safe place, with people who care and love him, brings on recognition of Cordelia and

memory of what he did to her, "If you have poison for me, I will drink it." (IV, vii, 67)

But all Lear gets in return is help and patience. He can only end by saying:

Pray you now, forget and forgive,
I am old and foolish. (IV, vii, 78-79)

V

In Act V, scene iii, Lear and Cordelia are captured by those loyal to Goneril and Regan. Cordelia is hanged and Lear, having killed the man that hanged her, appears on stage carrying her body, "a deranged father trying to persuade his dead daughter to return to life[1)]."

Grief exacerbates Lear's madness and his emotions. Cordelia is dead, yet Lear swings back and forth in believing that it is so:

She's gone for ever.
I know when one is dead, and when one lives,
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass,
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why then she lives. (V, iii, 234-238)

It's unexplained in the play, but Lear abandons the looking-glass for a feather: "This feather stirs, she lives." (V, iii, 240)

But he soon reverts back to calling her dead: "I might have saved her, now she's gone for ever!" (V, iii, 245)

And again wildly swings the other way, imploring her to come back:

Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little. Ha!
What is't thou say'st? (V, iii, 246-247)

Juxtapose this strong feeling for Cordelia with his reaction to the news that his other two daughters are dead, "Ay, so I think." (V, iii, 267) That is it; no going back and forth about living and dying, no mourning or pleading.

Lear's closing lament is again focused on Cordelia: "Thou'lt come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never!" (V, iii, 281-282)

And a last plea: "Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!" (V, iii, 285-286)

With no more hope, and with nothing more to give, as Cordelia had become everything for him, he dies.

Conclusion

Lear's dementia manifests itself from the opening scene of the play. He unwisely divides up his kingdom and promises the most valuable third to the daughter who can declare her love for him the most. He believes the flattery and lies of his eldest daughters Goneril and Regan and rejects the common sense truths spoken by his youngest, Cordelia, banishing her from the kingdom. Once in power Lear's eldest

daughters reject the terms that he set for his upkeep.

Spiraling further into madness, Lear abandons all reason and with the Fool takes on the elements in the storm scene on the heath. His mental and physical state recover in fits and starts thanks to his loyal attendant the Earl of Kent and the love, patience and forgiveness of his daughter Cordelia. With Cordelia's help fortune looks as if it may be turning back in Lear's direction but this is shattered when they are captured by troops loyal to Goneril and Regan. When Cordelia is hanged by them Lear is crushed and his grief is the final emotion that brings upon his death. Lear's tragedy can be said to be, "the most remarkable instance of a representation of a human transformation[2]" in Shakespeare's entire corpus.

Note

All quotes from the play come from the 1997 Yale University Press edition of The annotated Shakespeare, *King Lear*, written by William Shakespeare and edited by Burton Raffel[5].

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