

Education to leadership: Shakespeare's *exempla* and soft skills

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Abstract

This article comes from the proposal of an educational laboratory provided within the summer school program at the Department of Pedagogy of Innovation of the University of Turku (Finland). The laboratory is thought as an educational activity aimed at the improvement of transversal skills, specifically the competence of leadership. Through the study of two works by Shakespeare, *Richard II* and *King Lear*, the two plays and their protagonists are analyzed in order to explore leadership put into practice. This positive experience leads us to reflect and propose new educational models that place the study of the classics at the center of an integral education.

Keywords: Education, Shakespeare, *Exempla*, Leadership, Transversal skills.

Resumen

Educación de liderazgo: los exempla de Shakespeare y las habilidades transversales

Este artículo se ha originado de la propuesta de un laboratorio educativo provisto dentro de la Escuela de Verano en el Departamento de Pedagogía de Innovación de la Universidad de Turku en Finlandia. El laboratorio se propone como una actividad educativa orientada a la formación de habilidades transversales, específicamente a la competencia de liderazgo. A través del

estudio de dos obras de Shakespeare, *Ricardo II* y *El rey Lear*, se analizan los textos y los protagonistas para explorar la competencia puesta en práctica. La experiencia positiva nos lleva a reflexionar y proponer nuevos modelos educativos que colocan el estudio de los clásicos en el centro de una educación integral.

Palabras clave: Educación, Shakespeare, *Exempla*, Liderazgo, Habilidades transversales.

One of the Jesuits' mottoes in the *Ratio Studiorum* (their "educational guide") reads: "*Praecepta pauca, exempla multa, exercitatio plurima*"¹ (few precepts, many examples, and lots of exercises).

The use of *exempla* in literature and in the practice of education is not new, but a new emphasis is given to the disorientation that characterizes our time. The search for enlightened people, people "similar" to us but who have made it, acts as a mechanism of projection-identification that allows us to get inspired and leads us to virtuous behavior. The role of *exempla* is also used in the educational field as a simpler way to explain concepts and suggest actions, in a context where, among the many indicators (such as the collapse of reading rates), the use of this technique makes it possible to understand reality, to gain experience, to demonstrate authenticity and therefore validity and generalization. All this is similar to the mechanism of metaphor, which allows that one speaks about and represents forms and concepts in an accessible way².

¹ Cfr. F. Mattei, C. Casalini, Jesuitica Instituto. *Figure e temi di una modernità pedagogica*, Roma, Anicia, 2014.

² Cfr. V. Caggiano, *Educación emprendedora y el uso de la metáfora: un camino hasta la felicidad*, in «Educazione. Giornale di pedagogia critica», 4(1), 2015, pp. 107-118.

It is urgent to exercise leadership, and it is crucial to define the role of the pedagogical examination of models to be imitated³. Specifically, not only are *exempla* of leaders useful because imitation is a natural human attitude (as the discovery of mirror neurons reiterated) and because it shows that those behaviors are “humanly possible”, but also because the desired characteristics are not simply enunciated; they are “seen in their work”, and are illustrated under different angles and in different contexts. In this article, we are dealing with the educational contribution of negative *exempla*, the models not to be imitated.

My contribution comes from a study for the presentation of a laboratory activity presented during the North Summer School⁴: the Shakespeare and Soft skills Lab. The proposed topic focuses on the analysis of soft skills, transversal skills, which have a pivotal role in contemporary educational literature and which indicate directions the third level education must take.

Among the soft skills considered strategic for the purpose of employability and professional exercise, a considerable role is given to leadership, not only intended as a recognizable and transformative power, but also as a competence that comes from exercise and practice⁵. The proposed laboratory wants to bring to light the virtuous behavior that a good leader must have through the presentation of negative *exempla* in some of Shakespeare's plays.

³ Cfr. J. Bruner, *La cultura dell'educazione. Nuovi orizzonti per la scuola*, trad. it. di L. Cornalba, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2004.

⁴ The North Summer School, an educational format verified in several editions, is characterized by the presentation of research themes and laboratory activities and this year it will held at the University of Turku (Finland) from 3rd to 9th September 2018.

⁵ Cfr. M. Baldacci, *Curricolo e competenze*, Milano, Mondadori, 2010.

The innovative aspect of the proposed laboratory activity is not given by the use of Shakespeare's plays for educational purposes; instead, it is given by its presence within a university environment. In this sense, it represents a challenge and an example of a new educational perspective.

Shakespeare and leadership

At the time of Shakespeare, the senior executives and CEOs were called leaders and they had the task of leading a nation, a clan or a county⁶. Leaders could be kings, queens, dukes or lords⁷. Most of Shakespeare's works deal with politics, authority and power; stories of leadership are told much more frequently in his dramas than love stories⁸.

Shakespeare's historical and political plays emblematically reflect a set of ideological and historical transformations, with the coexistence of Elizabethan modernity and medieval tradition. Moreover, his stories very rarely concern sovereignty or authority considered as abstract notions.

During the Elizabethan age, power was personified: few possessed it and their personalities were of great importance. We have chosen two characters from two Shakespearean works, as we believe they represent the modalities

⁶ Cfr. G. Baldini, *Manualetto shakespeariano*, Torino, Einaudi, 1964, pp. 331-332.

⁷ Vedi, in proposito: AA.VV., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988; A. Tenenti, *La formazione del mondo moderno, XIV-XVII sec.*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1980; A.L. Rowse, *The Elizabethan Renaissance*, London, Ivan Dee, 2000.

⁸ Cfr. M. Giosi, «Teatro delle passioni e teatro della politica. Il mito di Roma antica nel *Giulio Cesare* di Shakespeare», in «Educazione. Giornale di pedagogia critica», 3(1), 2014, pp. 63-84.

chosen by Shakespeare to deal with leadership and how he manages to make doomed leaders coherent with their royal position, since they believe that power and authority are inextricably linked to their persona. These leaders, as it happens today to many who occupy managerial roles, believe that just possessing a monarchic status gives them enough authority to govern.

Specifically, my analysis has taken into account two different plays:

1. *Richard II*: for Richard II being a king is enough to reign. Owning the title gives him the belief that everyone will automatically obey him;
2. *King Lear*: for King Lear, the enormous authority he has developed in his function as king should remain even after foolishly dividing and giving away the lands from which he derived his power.

In both cases, the two monarchs believe that leadership can be individualized and separated from the organization of their kingdoms. Both are destined not only to death, but first to humiliation.

Richard II

This history play constitutes the first chapter of the so-called “War of the Roses cycle”. It is a group of eight different histories – in historical chronological order (not in order of composition): *Richard II*, *Henry IV* parts 1 and 2, *Henry V*, *Henry VI* parts 1, 2 and 3, and *Richard III* – dedicated to the famous civil war between the houses of York and Lancaster (1455-1487).

Richard II is usually portrayed as a capricious character, a non-definite identity⁹, undecided in his choices,

⁹ Cfr. J. Winny, *The Player King: A Theme of Shakespeare's Histories*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1968, pp. 48-49; L. Hakola, *In One*

and weak, without any strong sense of leadership. At the beginning of the play, Richard appears to be very powerful, but at the end of his parable he reveals all his weaknesses: his body politic¹⁰ has crumbled. These attributes reflect the way in which Richard II interprets his right to govern. As a king, he moves from a position of great power, as a consecrated sovereign, to a simple subject deprived by his authority. He risks all his power by focusing on the insane conviction that possessing the title of king is sufficient. He loses his wager when his belief clashes with the materialism of his contemporary world.

For much of the play, Richard is besieged by his own cousin Bolingbroke, the future king Henry IV. This latter is undoubtedly a more modern character, who struggles to impose a different conception of authority on the kingdom of England. At that precise moment when his authority is attacked by armed men and not by abstract ideas, Richard defines what he thinks is the origin of his power:

[...] for God's substitute,
His deputy anointed in His sight,
Hath caus'd his death; the which if wrongfully,
Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift
An angry arm against His minister.¹¹

Person Many People: The Image of the King in Three RSC Productions of William Shakespeare's King Richard II, Helsinki, Werner Söderström, 1988, p. 14.

¹⁰ Cfr. E.H. Kantorowicz, *The Two Bodies of the King. A Study in Medieval Political Theology*. In this well-known paramount study, the researcher uses this expression to distinguish the political function of the king (his body politics) from his tangible human body, whose union forms an indivisible unity, being each of the two bodies fully contained in the other.

¹¹ *Richard II*, act I, scene II, vv. 37-41, p. 16.

These are marvellous images which illustrate Richard's convictions about the source of his authority. Moreover, the lines quoted above highlight also the analogy between individual and society,¹² the difference between *langue e parole*¹³; the king's identity includes a social norm that is not shared: it is imposed.

Being the first in line of succession, after his father's and brother's deaths, Richard is the rightful king chosen and consecrated by God. In terms of hierarchy, it is this process that makes a king a "vicar" of God. In Richard's medieval society concerned with religious issues these powerful images lead to the concentration of a great authority around the sovereign. As a substitute for God and a person directly connected to Him, the king holds almost unlimited power.

For every man that Bolingbroke hath press'd
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel. Then if angels fight,
Weak men must fall; for heaven still guards the right¹⁴.

¹² As stated by the Shakespearean scholar David Lucking, "the singularity of the individual [...] depends on his being essentially social. The paradox is only an apparent one, of course, because even on a comparatively superficial level most people would be prepared to acknowledge that the individual and the society to which he belongs are mutually dependent. On a somewhat less superficial level, the paradox might be resolved by suggesting that the relation between the individual and the social environment within which he is constituted as a subject is analogous in certain respects to that between parole and langue in Saussurean linguistics". D. Lucking, *The Shakespearean Name: Essays on Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest, and Other Plays*, Bern-Berlin-Bruxelles-Frankfurt am Mein-New York-Oxford-Wien, Peter Lang, 2007, p. 159.

¹³ Cfr. F. de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, Paris, Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1995, pp. 36-39.

¹⁴ *Richard II*, act III, scene II, vv. 58-62, p. 18.

Using an extraordinary image, Richard illustrates his beliefs regarding the authentic origin of his power. A battle is approaching against a very powerful enemy army; to win and keep his crown Richard needs a better army. To be truly effective, his power must win his rival on the battlefield. This is the decisive place. Therefore, for every man who “raises the pernicious sword” God will pay an angel for Richard, an angel who will defeat the “weak mortals”. This is inevitably part of his conception of power. He is convinced that if an army attacks a king who is God’s substitute, then the enemy will find himself fighting against God’s mercenaries, His Angels paid to fight. It is an image that shows great strength and self-confidence, since Richard believes he is right.

Richard was a victim of his almost divine nature, as well as of his faith in the efficacy of his name. The power of a king, as Mahood specifies¹⁵, derives from a verbal authority, not from a material force. *Richard II* is a play that underlines the importance and effectiveness of a king’s words. For Mowbray, the Duke of Norfolk whose dispute against Bolingbroke Richard is asked to judge at the beginning of the play, the name is not just a name; it is the most intimate part of a person. As he affirms, “my honor is my life, both grow in one”¹⁶ and the word is not just a verbal act; for him it is life:

Is not the king’s name twenty thousand names?
Arm, arm, my name! A puny subject strikes
At thy great glory. [...] ¹⁷
What must the King do now? Must he submit?

¹⁵ M.M. Mahood, *Shakespeare’s Wordplay*, London & New York, Routledge, 1988, pp. 73-74.

¹⁶ *Richard II*, act I, scene I, v. 182, p. 27.

¹⁷ *Richard II*, act III, scene II, vv. 85-91, p. 49.

The King shall do it. Must he be deposed?
The King shall be contented. Must he lose
The name of king? A God's name, let it go¹⁸.

As the scene continues and the battle gets closer and closer, a good number of the king's earthly allies do not come to his aid. Some have changed faction and others have been killed. Richard begins to reckon that God's angels might not be enough to win the battle against his enemy. He is forced by harsh reality to complain about the loss of his royal troops, but once again he returns to the divine foundation of his authority:

Well you deserve. They well deserve to have,
That know the strong'st and surest way to get¹⁹.

[...] I have no name, no title;
No, not that name was given me at the font,
But 'tis usurp'd. [...]
And know not now what name to call myself!²⁰.

[...] But whate'er I be,
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
With nothing shall be pleased till he be eas'd
With being nothing²¹.

The scene continues and an increasingly larger number of "royal troops" deserts, thus not helping the king. Richard quickly understands that there will be no army, a royal army, to fight for him. In a few minutes this awareness shatters the fragile world of the king. In the blink of an eye, absolute strength becomes absolute frailty.

¹⁸ *Richard II*, act III scene III, vv. 143-146, p. 56.

¹⁹ *Richard II*, act III, scene VI, vv. 200-201, p. 62.

²⁰ *Richard II*, act IV, scene I, vv. 254-258, p. 64.

²¹ *Richard II*, act V, scene IV, vv. 38-41, p. 66.

Shakespeare represents Richard as someone who suddenly realizes the limits of an order of ideas that until then had seemed solid to him. Richard quickly passes from being an invincible king, who dominates an entire country, to a sovereign who possesses only a piece of land, barely sufficient for his survival; from being consecrated by God, to sit on bare soil. Therefore, Richard realizes he has lost the battle even before it takes place. Shakespeare's Richard teaches his audience and readers the limitation of traditional thinking when dealing with authentic material power. Nonetheless, Richard is the winner of the battle between material authority and ideal authority, and this reveals all the modernity of Shakespeare's work.

King Lear

King Lear is a complex play, "a descent into the profound disturbances of the unconscious"²². In this work, the dominant point of view is that of Lear: authority derives from his position as a king and personal power. All other characters have been excluded from any participation in this power so far, and when Lear sits on the throne they are set aside. Even *King Lear* is a difficult text to interpret because the protagonist's first scene – the famous "love test" which sets the scenario for the rest of the drama – is placed at the very beginning of the play²³ with no prologue, as it is typical of Shakespeare's *in-medias-res* openings. In addition to

²² S. Wells, *Shakespeare: The Poet and His Plays*, Methuen, London, 1994, p. 273.

²³ E.M. Jackson, *King Lear: The Grammar of Tragedy*, in «Shakespeare Quarterly», 17, 1966, pp. 25-40; D. Williams, *On producing King Lear*, in «Shakespeare Quarterly», 2, 1951, pp. 247-252.

Holinshed's *Chronicles*, the Shakespearean *King Lear* is essentially a "remake" of the anonymous Elizabethan play *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*. In this case, Shakespeare's sources are represented by two distinct groups, one for the main plot – that is the story of Lear and his three daughters, mainly taken from Holinshed's *Chronicles* and the above-mentioned *Leir* – and one for the subplot – that is the story of Gloucester and his two sons, inspired by, among other works, Philip Sydney's *Arcadia*.

Lear was a legendary ruler of Britain, although it is obvious that his story is part of the folk heritage of different cultures. The 'historical' Lear would have lived just before the time of the foundation of Rome, i.e. in the eighth century BC. According to Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, Lear, approaching old age, decided to divide Britannia among his three daughters and their husbands, while maintaining his royal authority.

It is at this point that Shakespeare let his story begin.

Give me the map there. Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom: and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age;
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthen'd crawl toward death. 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
[...]And here are to be answer'd. Tell me, my daughters,--
Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state,--
Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.²⁴

²⁴ *King Lear*, act I, scene I, vv. 35- 55, pp. 41.

At the beginning of the play, Lear holds absolute power. He is the king. The country is his and he can arrange it as he likes; so, he draws a map to divide his kingdom into different parts. This leads to the division of his kingdom, thus generating that chaos where subjects are forced to live throughout the course of the tragedy²⁵.

In the lines from first scene quoted above, Lear has to decide how to divide his kingdom among his three daughters: he chooses to divide it according to their ability to demonstrate, with words, filial love for him²⁶. When Lear asks his daughters to declare their affection towards him, Cordelia, his youngest, disgusted by the cheeky adulation of her sisters Goneril and Regan, replies that her affection is due to the natural love each daughter must have for her own father:

Lear is furious at the response of his youngest daughter. Within a few lines, he disinherits her and split the kingdom in two, leaving everything to Goneril and Regan. Lear has absolute power and therefore has full control over the consequences of his actions:

To thee and thine hereditary ever
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom;
No less in space, validity, and pleasure,
Than that conferr'd on Goneril. Now, our joy,
Although the last, not least; to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy²⁷.

In his first important action, Lear demonstrates that he has full authority to do whatever he likes.

²⁵ H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, London, Sidgwick, 2007, p. 231.

²⁶ I. Morris, *Shakespeare's God: The Role of Religion in the Tragedies*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1972, pp. 365-98.

²⁷ *King Lear*, act I, scene I, vv. 80-87, pp. 44.

As the scene continues, the king's most loyal man, Kent, tries to discuss with him about the whimsical decision to disinherit his daughter Cordelia, insinuating that "Lear is mad" for taking such a decision, only because her daughter did not want to flatter him like Cordelia and Regan had done. Kent considers it his "duty" to speak when the authority bows to flattery. Lear's reply is immediate: it is Kent who should refrain from arguing with him since he dared to oppose the king. For Kent there is exile – exactly as for Cordelia who is sent to France with her future husband, the king of France.

Let it fall rather, though the fork invades
The region of my heart: be Kent unmannerly,
When Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man?
Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak,
When power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's bound,
When majesty stoops to folly²⁸.

The word 'fool' deserves special consideration. It means 'crazy', but it also indicates the Fool, the Court's buffoon, the 'madman' that accompanies Lear in all his vicissitudes until the third act of the tragedy. This figure is not found in any of Shakespeare's sources, and it is therefore to be thought that it is an invention by the English playwright to embody the symbolic word 'fool' in a character. In fact, the Fool becomes the personified metaphor of the king's folly, but also of his lost wisdom, as it represents his conscience. Act I, scene I focuses on showing that when power is centralized on one person the consequences can be disastrous.

King Lear's teachings are not limited to the first scene; in fact, there are other conflicts that intertwine its very complex plot.

²⁸ *King Lear*, act I, scene I, vv. 150-155, pp. 53.

In the following scenes, the main characters follow each other on stage and the result of their actions is Lear's and Cordelia's death. The analysis of the text is manifold and the metaphors contained in the work are many. We have chosen to proceed to the analysis of the first scene since, according to our reading, it focuses specifically on leadership and transversal skills. Not only does *King Lear* represent the folly of a leader who believes he has undisputed power on his kingdom, but it also represents the inability to adapt to change, a skill that is defined by Morin as the competence to live and manage the unknown.

Conclusions

Shakespeare's historical and political plays emblematically reflect the early modern complex of ideological and historical transformations, with its antinomies and contradictions, with the coexistence of Elizabethan modernity and medieval tradition. Moreover, his stories very rarely concern sovereignty or authority considered as abstract notions. In fact, these concepts are described through the individual personalities of those who hold power.

The story of the two doomed leaders gives us lessons of dramatic modernity. Organizations in the competitive market ask their leaders to manage them not following a preset 'natural order', but a disorder generated by complexity. In such a scenario it becomes imperative to think about an education to transversal skills where it is pivotal to exercise a leadership of context that takes into account people and the social context.

The above-mentioned plays by Shakespeare are not exhaustive of the entire author's works that deal with leadership; the plays introduced in our workshop want to

represent an educational model through negative *exempla*. The learning outcomes of this laboratory might make us understand the strength of a new methodology that speaks through Shakespeare's timeless works.

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