

Leadership Lessons from Shakespeare's Plays

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By

GRK Murty

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PREFACE

Leadership is considered to be a ‘performance art’. Harry Davis, Professor of Creative Management at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business states that leadership is a ‘lived experience’. According to him, what a leader needs, more than knowledge, is a set of ‘action skills’ to accomplish his/her goals, and ‘insight skills’ to learn from his/her successes and failures. Obviously, developing mastery in this is a lifelong process.

To keep pace with today’s volatile, uncertain, complex and disruptive business environment, leaders need leadership skills and organizational capabilities different from those which helped them succeed in the past (Mihnea Moldoveanu and Das Narayandas 2019). But acquisition of new skills and putting them into practice, which entails significant behavioral change, is felt to be hard to accomplish through such didactic methods as lectures, exams, etc. This suggests a redesigning of learning experiences and invention of new platforms for leadership development which makes learning and doing less distinct from one another.

As executive education is shifting from episodic learning to constant lifelong learning, the use of literature, particularly the classics in leadership development programs has gained momentum. It is in this context that the idea of expositing Shakespeare’s heroes and heroines through the lens of leadership, to expound the modern concept of ‘leadership’ in real terms, has emerged.

Now, a question may arise: Why Shakespeare? *Bhagavadgītā* says that, “Whatsoever a great man does, the same is done by others as well. Whatever standard he sets, the world follows” (*Yad-yad ācarati śreṣṭhas tad-tad eve ’taro janaḥ / sa yat pramāṇam kurute lokas tad anuvartate*, 3.21). Great men, as Jesus said, are the ‘salt’, the ‘leaven’, the ‘light’ of humanity. They blaze a trail which the common people follow.

Shakespeare is one among those few great men. He could not only see the splendor of light over the mountains, but also presented it to us through his plays. He decocted man’s cosmic world into his writings. His characters emit the fragrance of greatness along with humility and frailty. Interestingly, they also demonstrate the gap between profession and practice, between thinking and doing, which is glaringly visible through their deeds, infusing harmony or disharmony. His characters, mingle good

and evil, each of them with their own separate identity and individual charm, and behave with a will of their own, like 'real human beings'. They are fair representations of general nature. Indeed, his plays so lucidly articulate the hidden processes of interiority of the protagonists that they remain a living force even today. Shakespeare's works, therefore, commend us to take leaves out of the books of his heroes/heroines in conducting ourselves as good leaders.

Driven by this philosophy, the combination and interlacing of the management and leadership theories of modern day with those of the experiences of various Shakespearean heroes/heroines for a perspective of what is and what is not effective leadership is presented in this book. Relying on what the great scholars of Shakespeare and management gurus have hitherto said, I have merely created a context for today's leaders to ponder over the ageless wisdom of the Bard of Avon and draw their own fresh insights into leadership.

Before I conclude, let me express my sincere gratitude to all those colleagues of mine, past and present, who have evinced keen interest in my bringing out this book successfully. I also fondly recall my association with late N.J. Yasaswy, founder-member, Board of Governors, ICFAI, who took active interest in this project.

I have taken quotes from the plays of Shakespeare from many sources as indicated in the references, and I thank all those editors and publishers profusely. Lastly, my thanks are also due to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for bringing out this edition so beautifully.

GRK Murty

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the leader and the led may have been in vogue since men started living in groups. Powerful and dominant individuals lording it over the rest of the group became a common feature among the primates. It was not that the dominant males became leaders merely because they were overpowering, but because they offered protection to the weak and the vulnerable of the group, from hungry predators, or other groups. Throughout history, there have been leaders all over the world—from ancient Egyptians to Hebrews, Chinese, Greeks, and Romans—exercising a disproportionate influence on society. It is also a well-known fact that history is made up of leadership acts—large and small—by chiefs of state and unsung heroes. And the philosophy and glory of leaders and leadership have, indeed, been transmitted to successive generations through classics such as Machiavelli's *The Prince*, biographies of great leaders, and comparative works, such as *Plutarch's Lives*.

Leadership is, thus, as old as our civilization. It has engaged the minds of the intelligentsia from time to time. Though many researchers have spoken of leadership, as Rost (1991),¹ Burns (1978),² and Bennis (1989)³ argued, no satisfactory definition of leadership is available, even today. It is often looked at from a 'great man' perspective. That aside, most modern researchers have looked at leadership from the perspective of their own disciplines—say from the perspective of anthropology, political science, the military, psychology, or, business administration. It was Max Weber, a German sociologist, who first wrote about leadership from a sociological perspective—bureaucratic, patrimonial, and charismatic leaders making the process of administration routine, just as the machine-made production routine, as early as the 1920s, paving the way for critical research on leadership. Indeed, his writings have influenced latter-day scholars' research on leadership.

Many theories of leadership have, thus, come into existence. In the 1900s, it was 'great man' theories; in the 1930s 'group theory'; in the 1940-50s 'trait theory'; and in the 1950-60s, it was 'behavior theory'. In the 1960s and 1970s a number of researchers defined leadership from the perspective of the influence that it exercises on the led. This was followed by some sociologists perceiving leadership as an attribute of a conjunction of events (Calder 1977,⁴ Hunt 1984⁵). Jacobs (1970),⁶ and Hollander

(1978),⁷ have, however, looked at leadership as a transactional phenomenon in which the 'led', having minds of their own, also influence the ultimate decision of the leader through their feedback. They indeed aver that leaders have to negotiate with the led to arrive at a plan of action. Then came Burns (1978) with his 'transformational leadership' theory, giving importance for the first time to ethical and moral values, ennobling both the leader and the led in their pursuits. According to Burns, "Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers ... in order to realize goals mutually held by both leaders and followers..." At about the same time, Greenleaf (1977)⁸ came up with the concept of 'servant leadership'; leaders who enhance followers' ability to reach their full potential as human beings.

In 1985, Bennis and Nanus⁹ opined that leaders lead by pulling rather than pushing; by inspiring rather than ordering; by creating the achievable, though challenging expectations and rewarding progress towards them, rather than by manipulating; by enabling people to use their own initiative and experiences rather than by denying or constraining their experiences and actions. In 1995, Boyett and Boyett¹⁰ revisited the concept of servant leadership, saying that leaders are servants first, they lead by listening to their followers, help people articulate their own goals, inspire trust and take people and their work seriously by exhibiting commitment to employee growth, development, and ability to be self-led. Later, in 1996, Kotter¹¹ came up with the idea that leadership means: "...establishing direction, aligning people, motivating and inspiring them to change by satisfying basic, but often unfulfilled human needs." Then, as the icing on the cake, Collins (2005)¹² came up with the idea of Level-5 leadership, that: "builds enduring greatness through [a] paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will." We thus have a stream of leadership theories emanating from different quarters from time to time.

Yet, leadership—that "grunt[s] and sweat[s]" in its eternal paradox of "To be or not to be"—appears to be precluding the scholars from capturing it into a few comprehensible words. It is, however, often perceived as a 'role' played by a leader. And, 'role-play' simply varies from player to player, for each actor is known to 'lead' and 'act' in his/her own way. Though these two—"leading" and 'acting"—are yoked together, their transformation into shared meaning squarely rests with the actor, i.e., the leader. Like actors, leaders differ from each other in enacting their roles. It is perhaps, the subtle differences in acting between leaders, and their success thereof, that is constraining our ability to define leadership in

a precise fashion. Nonetheless, from time to time, researchers have been offering transcendent elements, such as “envisioning, articulating a compelling vision, setting high expectations, modeling consistent behavior, energizing, demonstrating personal excitement, expressing personal confidence, seeking, finding and using success, enabling, expressing personal support, empathizing with others, expressing confidence in people” (Nadler and Tushman 1990),¹³ which are supposed to have been shared by successful leaders.

Marvin Bower, McKinsey’s managing partner from 1950-67, in his exploration about the attributes of successful leaders in his book, *The Will to Lead*,¹⁴ identified that anyone who aspires to lead must develop certain qualities—elements of character or personal makeup that are typically difficult (but not impossible) to learn, and attributes, which are more like skills which can be learnt easily. He also said that attributes, fortunately, far outnumber the skills that a leader has to have to successfully exercise his leadership role. Such essential attributes, which can be easily learnt by every leader, are: trustworthiness, fairness, unassuming behavior, capacity to listen, open-mindedness, sensitivity to people, sensitivity to situations, good judgment, broadmindedness, flexibility and adaptability, the capacity to make sound and timely decisions, the capacity to motivate, sense of urgency, and initiative, initiative, and initiative.

Jamie Dimon, CEO of JP Morgan Chase, “America’s least-hated banker”, in a conversation with Adi Ignatius, Editor in Chief of *Harvard Business Review*, answering Ignatius’ question, “What’s the secret to great leadership?” said: “You need humility and heart. You don’t have to be that good at all the analytical stuff. But if you don’t get the best out of your people, you won’t succeed. People want to be treated with respect. They have ideas. They want to contribute. So you have to include them and not hold ‘the meeting after the meeting’, where decisions are actually made in dark rooms by a small group of friends. Managers need to understand that they don’t have all the answers. A bank teller often has better answers than I do”¹⁵ That perhaps, sums up what leadership is all about.

Now the question is: How are organizations to nurture such essential attributes/transcendental elements among prospective leaders? More, in the context of newer technology and globalization-driven functioning of firms from different countries and cultures, the question of grooming effective leaders in organizations to sustain the successful running of businesses becomes critical. These questions become more crucial when one juxtaposes them with the observations of Warren Bennis: “The world is least aware of the ‘quiet crisis’ of leadership that is all-pervading today. We don’t yet know what will happen with the walking away of the present

generation of leaders, nor do we know how to nurture the next generation of leaders with an enduring character exhibiting new capabilities needed for navigating through the 'changing times' safely." There is, of course, no single answer to these lamentations. This obviously causes businesses to look off-center to find a best-fit framework for developing leaders in organizations.

Normally, it is the senior leaders who are supposed to take upon themselves the task of turning out leaders of character and capability, because classroom lessons cannot produce leaders of future generations. It is the lessons of experience of senior leaders in an organization, watched from the sidelines, that are more likely to mould young leaders. It is the relationships between a leader and his successors that enable the younger generation to experience the impact of practical leadership capability and shape themselves in the very crucible of reality. It is always the senior leader who, by acting as an exemplar, a coach, a mentor, or a teacher, helps the juniors in the organization to experience the meaning of, and learn about leadership.

But the question is, what if there is no scope for such relationships and experiences existing in an organization? There is, of course, an alternative: communicating real-life experiences to leaders in-the-making, in the form of stories. Stories, as Chartier et al. (2005)¹⁶ observed, are perhaps the best way to, "let people know what is important to us: our struggles and our life lessons, our beliefs, our values, our traditions, our hopes and our dreams. Telling stories is a way to honor our past, describe our present, and shape our future." And stories of great leaders do constitute such importance. Tom Peters, co-author of *In Search of Excellence*, said, in a 1996 seminar broadcast: "If people management is the key to the productivity of work for the 1990s, then managers should stop reading technical journals, business case studies, and management textbooks, and start reading novels." Warren Bennis (1996)¹⁷ observed that leadership successes can be better transmitted in the story format from one generation of leaders to the other, for they "capture minds and win hearts" of the leaders in the making.

Bennis and O'Toole (2005)¹⁸ also argued that fiction could be the best instructor of leadership and organizational behavior. In their opinion, leadership can be better understood with a solid grounding in the humanities. In this context, they have cited the example of Professor James March, the hard-nosed behavioral scientist, who, by drawing parallels from imaginative fiction, *War and Peace*, attempted to exemplify and explain the behavior of people in today's businesses. Seeing strength in what the late Sumantra Ghoshal said about problems with today's

management education—“The task is not one of delegitimizing existing research approaches, but one of relegitimizing pluralism”—the authors argue for recruiting professors who hold “a variety of skills and interests that cover territory as broad and as deep as business itself.” The authors also say that they are impressed by former provost of the University of Dallas, Thomas Lindsay’s argument: “[B]usiness education in this country is devoted overwhelmingly to technical training. This is ironic, because, even before Enron, studies showed that executives who fail—financially as well as morally—rarely do so from a lack of expertise. Rather, they fail because they lack interpersonal skills and practical wisdom; what Aristotle called prudence. Aristotle taught that genuine leadership consisted in the ability to identify and serve the common good. To do so requires much more than technical training. It requires an education in moral reasoning, which must include history, philosophy, literature, theology, and logic...”

Joseph L Badaracco, Jr. (2006),¹⁹ a business ethicist from Harvard Business School, in his conversation with *HBR* senior editor, opined that today’s education in business schools suggests that one can treat executives like lab animals and can control their behavior by creating the right environment: “right pellets, like stock options, will produce right behavior.” This kind of behaviorism is not enough, avers Badaracco, Jr., for he strongly believes that leaders should reflect. He cites serious fiction which suggests that leaders should learn more about themselves if they want to succeed. This, according to him, is an unnatural act for action-oriented people, and hence takes time. He also draws our attention to Sophocles’ teaching that leaders cannot escape their flawed humanity, and from it infers that to lower the risks of error and tragedy, a leader should practice sound reflection—a dialog with others too, for solitary, self-designated geniuses are a prescription for disaster. That is where serious literature, which is unsparingly realistic, makes its entry into leadership education. He is of the opinion that when business leaders, “read the struggle of literary characters, they can better understand their own conflicts.” Literature, according to Badaracco (2009), with its questions and lessons that are hard-won and real, helps readers acquire a deeper and enduring kind of encouragement.

The *summum bonum* of these arguments is that prospective leaders, or leaders aspiring to perform better, must acquaint themselves with the Classics to broaden their horizon of imagination and visualization of complexities embedded in leadership, and acquire insights to handle them from the experiences encountered by the fictional leaders. It is, perhaps, in order here, to examine critically what Classics stand for. Aulus Gellius²⁰ uses the word ‘classicus’ figuratively to describe: “a writer of worth and

distinction, *classicus assiduusque* scriptor, a writer who is of account, has real property, and is not lost in the proletariat crowd.” In the hands of a classic writer, it is said that words become, “the most energetic in expressing ‘thought’—they not only represent the outward appearance of things but also their inward significance.” And, when words are composed into poetry—metrical composition—pleasure and truth sail together (Samuel Johnson).²¹ Poetry, as Coleridge (2009)²² said, has the potential, “to awaken the mind’s attention to the lethargy of custom, and to direct it to the loveliness and wonders of the world before us—an inexhaustible treasure—but for which in consonance of the familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes that see not, ears that hear not and hearts that neither feel nor understand.” It is said that a true classic writer enriches the human mind, increases its treasure, and causes it to advance a step, by discovering some moral and unequivocal truth. A classic work reveals some eternal passion in that heart where all seemed known and discovered. It offers a thought, observation, or invention, in no matter what form, but it is broad and great, refined and sensible, sane and beautiful in itself. At the same time, it speaks to all in its own peculiar style—a style akin to the whole world, a style new without neologism, new and old, easily contemporary with all time.

Such art, “the solidest and sincerest expression of human thought and feeling” (Hudson 1872),²³ is wonderfully set to fire our imagination about people and the dynamics of the leadership. Interestingly, what pundits say about art, “The reaction of reality on the creative faculty of man is Art and, its reaction on his understanding is Science”, highlights the relevance of literature for bettering our understanding of the undercurrents of the relationship between the leader and the led. Secondly, works of art are known to respect the laws of natural proportion, “The art itself is nature”, and only such works are known to last long. It reminds us of the aphoristic saying of Burke: “Man is a most unwise and most wise being: the individual is foolish; the multitude is foolish for the moment, when they act without deliberation; but the species is wise.”²⁴ And anything that represents the species in its canvas becomes a classic.

As though to answer our question as to why leaders should read classics, Calvino (2001)²⁵ opines that classics are books that exert a peculiar influence, both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind, and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious. Every rereading of a classic is said to be as much a voyage of discovery as the first reading; they come down to us bearing the traces of readings previous to ours, and bringing in their wake the traces they themselves have left on the culture

or cultures they have passed through. They are the books that take the form of an equivalent to the universe, on a level with the ancient talismans. They are books which, upon reading, we find ever fresher, and they never finish saying what they have to say.

Simply put, as Matthew Arnold²⁶ said, classical literature possesses “pathos, moral profundity and noble simplicity” and it is this loftiness in them that is rightly supposed to educate the reader appropriately. It is precisely for these reasons that we often hear people unwittingly saying that they are ‘rereading’ classics. It is no exaggeration to say that one’s classic author is the one to whom one cannot feel indifferent, who helps one to define oneself in relation to him, even in dispute with him.

Among such classics, William Shakespeare’s (1564-1616) plays are in a class by themselves, for he, aided by his catholicity of vision, reflects on human life both in its exaltedness and its degeneration, with equanimity. His plays give us a feeling that life is essentially meant for loving and experiencing its bliss. His comedies portray a festive mood in sylvan forests and seacoasts that brings together happy reunions and rejoicings. His tragedies expose us to the darker side of life; the good suffering in the realm of flourishing evil. Our journey through his tragedies makes us wonder if we are in a ‘stale, flat, and unprofitable world’, where man’s inhumanity to man, the conflict of good and evil, and of free will and predestination, are in free flow, crushing us to death.

His familiarity with men, as that of a gardener with flowers, enabled Shakespeare to write about human beings in a way which was true to their nature. We witness his characters growing and unfolding before us, driven by varied motives and impulses, passion alternating with passion, purpose alternating with purpose, train of thought with train of thought—all representing the underlying dynamics of human nature that a leader encounters in the context of leading people in an organization. Shakespeare’s plays, and the characters in them make a reader realize one truth about mankind: “No man, either a hero, or saint, ever acted from an unmixed motive; for let him do what he will rightly, still Conscience whispers ‘it is your duty’”. We often come across his heroes, who are endowed with human dignity and mighty potentialities, turning into unscrupulous self-seekers once the bug of self-aggrandizement bites them. For instance, his King Richard III is an ambitious king for whom nothing matters except self-good. Loyalties, moral scruples, and human feelings—all these are made subservient to one interest; his own interest. Interestingly, using the same brush, he also portrays a leader in Henry V who, with devout optimism, perceives “some soul of goodness in things evil”, and with his incurious trust in God, conquers the dark outlying

region that engulfs the knowable and the practicable. He thus puts before us a true picture of men—sans a doctrine—to free, arouse, and dilate our thoughts of them. This is the universality of his plays—whether the thought is disgusting or delightful, cruel or gracious, less or high, obscure or plain, Shakespeare has successfully employed his ability to see both sides of every question, and to view with sympathy all sorts and conditions of men, and communicate the aesthetic emotion that is common to the humanity.

We encounter Shakespeare expounding four key concepts all through his plays: order, civility, humanity, and rhetoric, which have equal importance for modern day leaders. Here, order refers to the order in the universe, order in society—maintenance of harmony in the universe. He exhibits his solid concern for degree, or order, in essential human relationships—between a king and his subjects, between father and children, husband and wife, man and society—by demonstrating that its absence results in disaster. His immense faith in these Elizabethan concepts—not to be transgressed in order or degree—is put across through Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, thus:

Oh, when degree is shaken,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick. How could communities,
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenity and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, scepters, laurels,
But by degree stand in authentic place?

(I, iii, 101-108)

In play after play, Shakespeare demonstrates that tragic consequences will follow when order is violated—a breach in harmony. No matter how reputable, brave, and noble his leaders are, once they become victims of their own weaknesses, such as overconfidence, doubt, vaulting ambition, jealousy, emotional outbursts, or absurdity/stupidity, which are lying dormant waiting for right circumstances to surface, they commit ignoble crimes, which ultimately destroy their own reputations and lives. Of course, Shakespeare's leaders—Caesar, Coriolanus, Macbeth, Lear, Othello—do undergo internal turmoil, owing to the battle between their hitherto-known greatness and the momentary mental digression thereof. But by the time they realize their follies, it is too late to retreat from the consequences of their evil deeds, and hence they perish. And it is no

exaggeration to say that these human weaknesses are as common in today's corporate world as they were during Shakespeare's time.

Paradoxically, we also come across instances where Shakespeare's characters suffer the worst fates even after steadfastly observing order in their disposition. For instance, Desdemona, heroine of the play, *Othello*, loves Othello, the Moor, with so much passion that she marries him, deserting her father saying: "My noble father, ... I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband, and so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father, so much I challenge that I may profess due to the moor my lord" (*I, iii, 182-191*). Her heroism reflects in her belief that a wife should seek protection in her husband. Indeed, Othello loves her equally fondly. But, carried away by what a subordinate of his says about the infidelity of his wife, he strangles her to death. But Desdemona, being an ever-loving and ever-obedient wife, and with a constrained abstinence from evil deeds, can neither resist nor resent the wrong being inflicted on her by Othello. Instead, when her maid asks "Oh, who hath done this deed?" she replies: "Nobody; I myself. Farewell. Commend me to my kind lord. Oh, farewell!" (*V, ii, 128, 129*), and she dies.

No human being, other than those with integrated soul, would ever have been able to say those few words of immense 'might'—"Commend me to my kind lord"—after what she had undergone. What today's leaders need to realize from the scene is: Desdemona's faith in 'order' is unquestionable. Her death suggests that her moral code is too rigid, because of it, she not only gave up a chance to fight for her life, but also kept the suffering inflicted upon her as a secret. Or, it may be that Shakespeare's concern for morality is sterner than morality itself, in that it prevented Desdemona from breaching the wifely faith or modesty of a woman, and enabled her to say: "To die is so exceedingly comfortable." Now, the question is: Can today's business leaders follow such rigid moral codes in times of change? It is perhaps true that there is no one answer for such paradoxes in life, but what Desdemona's death suggests is, that to see beyond the leader's own agenda of truth, change, and human development, permits Aristotle's prescription for a leader—to do the 'common good.' Indeed, a leader has to bear in mind that he is meant to provide answers for many such unusual questions which one encounters in real life, for, "our wishes, like to those make public feasts, are not to please the cooks' tastes but the guests'", as Jonson (2004)²⁷ said.

Next in line is civility, which Shakespeare treats as an essential ingredient for lubricating human relations to roll on smoothly. In his opinion, it is a concept of hospitality—a sort of order in everyday

manners—which is evident from what he makes Bassanio say to Gratiano in reply to his request to go with him to Belmont, in the play, *The Merchant of Venice*:

Why, then you must. But hear thee, Gratiano;
 Thou art too wild, too rude and bold of voice—
 Parts that become thee happily enough,
 And in such eyes as ours appear not faults,
 But where thou art not known, why, there they show
 Something too liberal. Pray thee, take pain
 To allay with some cold drops of modesty
 Thy skipping spirit, lest through thy wild behavior
 I be misconstrued in the place I go to
 And lose my hopes.

(II, ii, 171-180)

The practice of hospitality might have undergone changes over time, but the importance of civility *per se*, is not lost even in today's corporate world. Contrarily, it has become more relevant for business leaders to observe civility meticulously while operating in today's globalized economy across countries and cultures.

Moving on to humanism, we must first trace its meaning. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, humanism is “a belief or outlook emphasizing common human needs, and seeking solely rational ways of solving human problems, being concerned with humankind as responsible and progressive intellectual beings.” Shakespeare has, however, expounded it more from a philosophical perspective—as a philosophical product of renaissance that rejected the mediaeval scholasticism. It represents a social world in which men of action turned away from morbid religious prescriptions of the time towards measures that were expedient in the light of the circumstances. In the play, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, we notice Shakespeare's appreciation for humanism reflected in the way Hamlet, in his concern for being rational in avenging the death of his father as sought by his ghost, requests Horatio—with respect for his stoicism—to observe the King, his uncle, intently, while he watches the play, to check if “his occult guilt” reflects in his face, so that they can decide to act upon the ghost's request:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
 And could of men distinguish her election,
 Sh' hath sealed thee for herself, for thou hast been
 As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
 A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards

Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those
 Whose blood and judgment are so well commeddled
 That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
 To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
 That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
 In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
 As I do thee.

(III, ii, 62-73)

Shakespeare's concern for humanism and stoicism, as reflected in two of his Roman plays—*Titus Andronicus* and *Timon of Athens*—teaches modern day leaders that they should not be guided by dogmas or untested beliefs, but instead use human faculties to act rightly; and secondly, that they must remain indifferent to pleasure and pain, just like Horatio, to serve the cause of humanity justly.

Lastly, turning to Shakespeare's fourth element, rhetoric, we must first realize that the earlier articulated concepts, namely, order, civility, and humanism, call for an appropriate arrangement of words to communicate the intended feelings, so as to ensure that their listeners become attracted to the ideas being articulated, and thus maintain order. It is a way of expressing, ordering, and perhaps concealing, one's true feelings, the flavor of which one could gauge from the following conversation between Isabella and Angelo in the play *Measure for Measure*. Isabella comes to Angelo, the lord, to plead for the life of her brother, exclaiming "O just but severe law!":

Isabella: Yet show some pity.
 Angelo: I show it most of all when I show justice;
 For then I pity those I do not know,
 Which a dismissed offense would after gall,
 And do him right that, answering one foul wrong,
 Lives not to act another. Be satisfied;
 Your brother dies tomorrow. Be content.
 Isabella: So you must be the first that gives this sentence,
 And he that suffers. Oh, it is excellent
 To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous
 To use it like a giant.
 Lucio: [aside to Isab.] That's well said.
 Isabella: Could great men thunder
 As Jove himself does, Jove would never be quiet,
 For every pelting, petty officer
 Would use his heaven for thunder,
 Nothing but thunder. Merciful heaven,
 Thou rather with thy sharp and sulfurous bolt

Splits the unwedgeable and gnarlèd oak
 Than the soft myrtle; but man, proud man,
 Dressed in a little brief authority,
 Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
 His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
 Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
 As makes the angels weep; who, with our spleens,
 Would all themselves laugh mortal.

(*II, ii, 104-128*)

We indeed come across such rhetoric—the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing—being put to profitable use by many Shakespearean leaders in different plays. It hardly needs to be stressed here how important rhetoric is in today's corporate world, for leaders who are managing businesses that are operating from different corners of the world under different cultures, but with a single vision and mission statement, to align their staff with the corporate goals. For, “language creates what it conveys!”

There is another beauty with Shakespeare's leaders: they appear as “the genuine progeny of common humanity.” Nothing of them is unknown to the reader: they simply act and speak under the influence of those circumstances in the same way as every other agitated mind would have reacted. A character in a Shakespeare play is not an individual, but a species which the world can witness constantly. They are simply unalienable from the readers. They speak the same language which a reader would have spoken, had he been placed in a similar situation. His characters keep their dialog, even with the supernatural agencies, in line with life. His plays exhibit the ‘real state of sublunary nature’; good and evil, joy and sorrow, flow, mingled in different proportions and varied combinations simultaneously. His plays are a mingled yarn, a mixture, a joy and grief. We also witness his leaders' ‘passions’ playing an exorbitant role in ruining or enhancing their credibility. In the same vein, Shakespeare also warns us that merely being good, or doing good, is no defense against the predatory world, as Lady Macduff reveals in the play *Macbeth*: “Whither should I fly? I have done no harm. But I remember now, I am in this earthly world, where to do harm is often laudable, to do good, sometime accounted dangerous folly. Why then, alas, do I put up that womanly defense to say I have done no harm?” (*IV, ii, 75-81*). Shakespeare's characters portray that mercy is “nobility's true badge,” as Isabella says in so many words in *Measure for Measure*: “No ceremony that to great one longs not the king's crown nor the deputed sword, become them with one half so good a grace as mercy does.” Simply put,

his plays—to borrow what Brooks Atkinson, the famous *New York Times* theater critic said—are, “a vivid and vibrant expression of truths and ideas. It helps to make life whole.” The characters in many of his plays encounter many bizarre trials and tribulations that are akin to what is being witnessed by today’s leaders in their corporate jungle, but the reaction of Shakespeare’s leaders thereof can certainly help today’s leaders to reconfigure themselves. The beauty with the Swan of Avon is that he does not weigh us down with trials and tribulations alone, but also leaves a line of heroic courage—“the world’s mine oyster, which I with sword shall open”—for us to explore and enjoy.

As Kames (1762)²⁸ and Richardson (1788)²⁹ observed, Shakespeare’s characters explore “the operations of the mind [that] are more complex than those of the body: its motions are progressive; its transitions abrupt and instantaneous; its attitude uncertain and momentary...” They offer excellent philosophical scrutiny by “fixing the position of the mind, in any given circumstances,...till it was deliberately surveyed...the causes which alter its feelings and operations could be accurately shown, and their effects ascertained with precision”. Shakespeare’s characters are thus an excellent display “of many passions and affections, and of many singular combinations of passion, affection and ability.” An accurate study of the sentiments and actions of Shakespeare’s characters, their agreement and disagreement, and their aim or their origin, facilitate a thorough understanding of the truth behind their representation of mankind that ultimately enables one to decipher why a man—be he a leader or the led—behaves the way he does. As William Richardson commented, such is the treatment of human nature in his plays that every reader is certain to realize that, “the formation of our characters depends considerably upon ourselves; for we may improve or vitiate every principle we receive from nature”. Indeed Shakespeare, being a humanist, expounds that the key to wise action is, “the knowledge of our selves and our human condition.” If only leaders of today’s organizations imbibe this spirit, they are sure to manage themselves justly and mightily well for the good of their organizations.

Suffice it to say, when so much is made clear by so few plays—the plays that are each a step forward in our understanding of leadership—radiating “Beauty, truth, and rarity, grace in all simplicity”, one can hardly put Shakespeare aside without reading him and meditating upon him.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE: BEING A LEADER IS A MATTER OF ROLE-PLAY

Kelly and Nadler (2007)¹ are of the opinion that senior managers—the so-called CEOs, COOs, CFOs—are “hamstrung by the demand for immediate results”, and hence, “any change in the way companies operate often depends on leadership from below.” According to their study, spread over a period of seven years, on the process of leading from below in hundreds of companies around the world, most of the managers were found performing either a service or a governance role. It also revealed that a majority of them wanted to take on more of a leadership role, but did not know how to proceed. Their study also found certain common threads that ran through each of the successful managers which transformed them into leaders. Based on their findings, they recommended that a manager who wants to perform the role of a leader must: “make the decision to be a leader; focus on influence, not control; make his, or her, own mental organizational chart horizontal, rather than vertical; work on his, or her, ‘trusted adviser’ skills, and not wait for the perfect time, just find a good time.” All the managers, whom Kelly and Nadler found successful in their leadership role, had made a conscious decision to move beyond their governance role, without waiting to be told to do so.

This, incidentally, reminds us of Shakespeare’s play, *The Merchant of Venice*, in which we come across Portia, a beautiful woman of wondrous virtues, a rare and harmonious blend of intellect, energy, reflection, and feeling, whom Bassanio wants to marry. But, not having money to present himself to her in a fashion befitting her riches, he requests Antonio to lend him three thousand ducats. Antonio, having no money at that time, arranges to borrow it from a Jewish money-lender, Shylock, by subjecting himself to the condition that if he fails to pay back the money in time, Shylock will have the right to cut a pound of flesh from any part of Antonio’s body.

Having thus acquired the money, Bassanio sets out for Belmont, and succeeds in winning Portia’s love, in the casket test, and ultimately her

hand in marriage. At this happy moment, a messenger comes from Venice with a letter from Antonio narrating the misfortunes that have happened to him. Sensing that, “there are some shrewd contents...that steals the color from Bassanio’s cheek,” Portia enquires about the news that distressed him so much. Bassanio reads Antonio’s letter aloud: “Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit; and since in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I, if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure. If your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.” Empathizing with Bassanio and his friend’s woes, Portia at once says: “O love, dispatch all business, and begone!” She urges him to “deface the bond before a friend ... shall lose a hair through Bassanio’s fault.” Bassanio rushes to Venice with money given by Portia. There he finds his friend in prison. He offers the money to the Jew, but the Jew refuses to accept it.

Merchant of Venice: Storyline

Once, there lived two good friends in Venice: Antonio, a merchant, and Bassanio, a young man about town. Bassanio is desperately in need of money to go to Belmont and court Portia, a wealthy heiress. He therefore asks Antonio to lend him three thousand ducats.

Antonio is, however, short of funds, as all his money is tied up in merchandise at sea. Hence, he asks Bassanio to secure a loan from Shylock, a wealthy Jewish moneylender of the town, naming him as guarantor for the loan. Antonio and Shylock dislike each other: Antonio, because he dislikes the usury that Jews, including Shylock, practice, and Shylock because Antonio lends money with no interest, which he considers detrimental to his own lending business. However, on this occasion, Shylock agrees to lend money without charge, but with a peculiar condition: should the loan go unpaid, he will be entitled to a pound of Antonio’s flesh. Despite Bassanio’s protest, Antonio agrees to the condition and takes the loan.

Bassanio then leaves for Belmont with his friend, Gratiano. In Belmont, suitors from four corners of the world—including a Prince of Morocco and a Prince of Aragon—try their luck to win Portia’s hand at the casket test, which her father had set in his will, by choosing the right casket in which Portia’s picture is placed. However, they fail. Finally, Bassanio succeeds in choosing the right casket, thus winning the bride. Portia rejoices at the success of Bassanio, and presents him with a ring as a token of her love, making him swear that he will never part with it. Gratiano confesses his love for Nerissa, the maid of Portia, and takes her

as his bride. She too presents a ring, to Gratiano.

Back in Venice, Shylock's daughter, Jessica, elopes with her lover Lorenzo, a Christian, taking with her the money and jewels of her father. Unexpectedly, they join Portia and Bassanio in Belmont.

Meanwhile, news comes that Antonio has lost his ships. Hearing this news, Shylock, distressed at the loss of his daughter and the constant berating of Jews by the Christians, decides to demand payment of the forfeit. When Bassanio and Gratiano come to know of this, they cut short the wedding celebrations and rush to Venice with the money Portia has given to pay off Antonio's debt and set him free. Portia decides to go to Venice with Nerissa, disguising themselves as a male lawyer and his clerk respectively, to save Antonio.

As the trial, presided over by the Duke of Venice, takes place, Portia, now in the disguise of a young man of law, enters the court to defend Antonio. Portia first pleads with Shylock to show mercy. When that is not forthcoming, she asks him to accept double the amount. But Shylock remains stubborn in his demand for his rightful pound of flesh. Then, examining the bond, Portia declares that Shylock is entitled to Antonio's flesh and asks Antonio to be prepared for it. This pronouncement of Portia makes Shylock praise her wisdom, all in ecstasy. As he is getting ready to collect his due, Portia reminds him that he must collect his pound of flesh without causing Antonio to bleed, for the contract offers no right to his blood.

Realizing that he has been outwitted, Shylock hurriedly agrees to take the money offered by Bassanio. But Portia insists that Shylock must take what the bond offers or nothing at all. Then, she pleads with the court that since Shylock is guilty of conspiring against the life of a Venetian citizen, he must pass on half of his wealth to the state, and the remaining half to Antonio. The Duke, spares his life and takes a fine instead of his property. Antonio too forgoes his half, but subject to Shylock converting to Christianity and willing his entire estate to his daughter Jessica and her husband Lorenzo. Agreeing to the conditions, Shylock leaves the court.

Bassanio then thanks Portia profusely for saving his friend's life and entreats her to accept a fee. She refuses, and instead asks for the ring on his finger. Eventually, persuaded by Antonio, he gives the ring that he promised never to part with, to Portia. So is the case with Gratiano. Then, both the ladies rush back to Belmont.

When Bassanio and Antonio arrive at Belmont the next day, the women ask for the missing rings, and also accuse the men of giving them faithlessly to some other women. However, before it goes too far, they reveal the truth of Portia's participation in the trial. Ultimately, the play ends happily with the news that Antonio's ships have arrived at the dock safely.

Back in Belmont, Portia wonders if she can, by any means, help save the life of her dear Bassanio's friend. Quickly thinking it over, and foreseeing that Shylock will no longer accept money, and having immense faith in her own judgment and in her own power, Portia at once decides to go to Venice and argue for Antonio's life. Interestingly, it is the same Portia, who, while accepting Bassanio for her husband, presents herself—all in the grace of a wife anxious to honor her husband—as:

... an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticèd;
 Happy in this, she is not yet so old
 But she may learn; happier than this,
 She is not bred so dull, but she can learn;
 Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
 Commits itself to yours to be directed
 As from her lord, her governor, her king.
 Myself and what is mine to you and yours
 Is now converted. But now I was the lord
 Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
 Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
 This house, these servants, and this same myself
 Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring,
 Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
 Let it presage the ruin of your love
 And be my vantage to exclaim on you.

(III, ii, 159-174)

Portia decides to go to Venice and save her husband's honored friend, "For never shall you [Bassanio] lie by Portia's side, with an unquiet soul." What an assertion of self! Such actualization is possible only when one empathizes with the trauma of others.

Another interesting thing to be taken note of here, is that once having decided to argue Antonio's case in the court, Portia does not just jump at it blindly, all in a sort of romantic exuberance. She first figures out the demands of the role of an advocate, then seeks the blessings of a seasoned lawyer, and procures from him the necessary dress and a letter of introduction to present herself in the court, as any other professional participating in the world of court proceedings.

While the case is being heard, Portia, dressed as a male Doctor of Law (Balthazar), enters the court of justice and presents her credentials to plead the case of Antonio. The same is granted by the Duke. And thus begins the trial—the real trial of her role-play. Like a seasoned counselor, she looks around the hall and notices the Jew and Bassanio, who stands beside his dear friend Antonio—all in distress. She then boldly addresses herself to

Shylock, first enquiring if he is Shylock. Then, with a brilliant dash of self-confidence, she, admitting his right to have the forfeit as expressed in the bond, earnestly appeals—true to the spirit of a wise counselor, eager to be articulate, rational, logical and persuasive—for Shylock’s mercy. “On what compulsion must I?” asks Shylock. In her eagerness to awaken his relenting spirit by playing on his temper and feelings, she gives her reasons for the Jew to be merciful:

The quality of mercy is not strained.
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
 ‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
 The thronèd monarch better than his crown.

(*IV, i, 182-187*)

Of course, her appeal matters little to Shylock. He continues to insist on the penalty for a breach of contract.

She then questions Shylock: “Is he [Antonio] not able to discharge the money?” Bassanio then rushes to the Jew saying: “Yes, here I tender it for him in the court, yea, twice the sum. If that will not suffice, I will be bound to pay it ten times o’er ... And I beseech you, wrest once the law to your authority. To do a great right, do a little wrong” (*IV, i, 207-214*). Then Portia, true to the role she is enacting, nonchalantly admits: “It must not be. There is no power in Venice can alter a decree established. ’Twill be recorded for a precedent, and many an error by the same example will rush into the state. It cannot be” (*IV, i, 216-220*). Hearing this, Shylock feels that Portia is pleading in his favour and hence praises her saying “A Daniel come to judgment!”

Portia then looks at the bond, with the consent of Shylock, and admits: “This bond is forfeit, and lawfully by this the Jew may claim a pound of flesh.” In the same breath, she appeals to Shylock’s avarice and pity, saying, “Be merciful. Take thrice thy money; bid me tear the bond.” But Shylock continues to insist on Antonio’s pound of flesh.

Thereafter, she makes certain calculated moves, such as delays and circumlocution, perhaps to give a chance for any latent feeling of commiseration from the Jew to surface on its own. Turning to Antonio, Portia, in a matter-of-fact tone, asks him to be prepared for the knife, and to be ready to sacrifice a pound of flesh from his bosom. On hearing this, Shylock gets busy sharpening his knife. From now on, all that Portia says appears as though it were meant to strike suddenly, and baffle Shylock. As a part of this premeditated exercise, she enquires of the Jew if he is ready

with the balances. “I have them ready”, replies Shylock. Then she asks Shylock to have a surgeon on hand to stop Antonio’s wounds, “lest he do bleed to death.” Shylock, of course, brushes it off saying that it is not in the bond.

Then, turning to Antonio, Portia, in a composed manner, enquires if he has anything to say. Antonio says that he is resigned to his fate to “pay it instantly, with all my heart.” Hearing which, Bassanio utters haplessly:

Antonio, I am married to a wife,
Which is as dear to me as life itself;
But life itself, my wife, and all the world
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

(IV, i, 280-285)

Undisturbed by her husband’s so strongly expressed love for a true friend like Antonio, Portia displays the strength of her determination to play her chosen role with élan, by airing her wonderfully plain, but pointed, remark, as a wise-counsellor: “Your wife would give you little thanks for that, if she were by to hear you make the offer.”

Making such a straightforward and matter-of-fact statement in such unromantic language, and at the same time keeping it down-to-earth, humane and lovable, is possible only when one conducts oneself as a mere *Sakshi*—a witness to the happenings—and that is the pinnacle of the role played by Portia, the wife of Bassanio. Indeed, the charming ease with which she moves around the court gives a feeling that she has little misgiving about the result, perhaps being so thoroughly acquainted with the facts of the case and the law thereof. That is what is called for—fair knowledge about the role, the expectations thereof, and the skill sets required to execute it—to be successful in a given role.

Incidentally, this kind of incredible performance—Portia’s assuming the status of a lawyer and even exerting influence—is, according to Galinsky and Kilduff (2013),² achievable by anyone with a right frame of mind at the right time. To understand this phenomenon, and put it into practice, let us first look at the underlying motivation systems of our behavior. Research indicates that there are two motivation systems: one, the avoidance or inhibition-system that pushes us to steer clear of threats and adverse outcomes; and two, the approach-system which drives us to stay focused on achieving positive outcomes and rewards. And it is the second system that is known to trigger the behavior which enables us to achieve higher status. Working on this concept further, Galinsky and

Kilduff have evaluated the effects of triggering three ‘approach-based’ psychological states, *viz.*, “promotion-focus, happiness, and a feeling of power.” The neurological, hormonal, and psychological effects caused by these three states are found to trigger behavioral changes. For instance, people primed to focus on promotion or happiness are found to offer more ideas in brainstorming sessions. Galinsky and Kilduff have also examined whether these mindsets would make people more proactive, and thus boost their status, in live interactions within a group. The priming method suggested, in order to get into these states of mind, involves: firstly, writing one’s ambitions, the things one hopes to achieve in life, on paper, in order to get into a promotion-focussed frame of mind; secondly, describing an incident where one had power over another person, in order to feel more powerful; and thirdly, writing about a time when one felt excited and joyful, to stimulate happiness. Based on the results of this study, they have concluded that it is pretty easy for anyone to push oneself into the kind of proactivity that marks one out as a person worthy of respect—someone others want to follow.

Coming back to the play, Shylock cries out impatiently at the wasting of time and prays for the pronouncement of the sentence. Soon, Portia regains her seriousness about the trial and declares in a majestic voice: “And you must cut this flesh from off his breast. The law allows it, and the court awards it.” Excited by her pronouncement, Shylock exclaims, “Most learnèd judge! A sentence!” Then, in a firm but composed voice, which is in direct contrast to the mood in the court, Portia says:

Tarry a little; there is something else.
 This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;
 The words expressly are “a pound of flesh.”
 Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,
 But in the cutting it if thou dost shed
 One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
 Are by the laws of Venice confiscate
 Unto the state of Venice.

(*IV, i, 303-310*)

Realizing its impossibility, Shylock asks for his money. When Bassanio rushes forward to pass it on, Portia, with a dash of confidence, stops him from doing so, saying that Shylock, an alien, having conspired against the life of one of Venice’s citizens, loses his wealth to the state, and his life now lies at the mercy of the Duke.

That is how Portia saves the life of Antonio through her nonlinear arguments—articulated as elegantly as any professional would have—with wit and wisdom, confidence and courage. The management of the trial is a

piece of consummate art, and Portia enacts it with perfect integrity of soul. The beauty of the whole scene can be appreciated only when one understands her concealed purpose, the underlying nobility of the cause, and the undercurrent of anxiety working on her mind. It is her mental endowments—acuteness, eloquence, and intelligence—that stand her in good stead all through the trial, and the trial of her role-play too.

Interestingly, there are two other lessons that Shakespeare teaches us as to how leaders should conduct themselves in their disposition towards the led. Once Antonio is freed from his obligations under the bond, Bassanio offers three thousand ducats to the young lawyer, Portia, hoping it will recompense the pains that he has taken. Then, Antonio hastens to say: “And stand indebted over and above, in love and service to you evermore.” Which otherwise means, that paying in kind for a service is not all that satisfying; it can, however, be adequately compensated for by conveying a feeling of appreciation: “...stand indebted ...in love and service.” What a magnificent disposition! That is Antonio: a sweet-mannered man with tons of liberal spirit; affable and generous; patient in trial; free and frank in airing his beliefs; modest in prosperity; and cheerful in adversity. No leader worth his salt today can afford to ignore the well-chiseled Antonio’s personality. Now, Portia too, being what she is—the unison of “ripeness and dignity of a sage”, wrapped in the best grace and sensibility of womanhood—responds in the most befitting way: “He is well paid that is well satisfied.” Isn’t that the kind of spirit that should lubricate the relations between the leader and the led in organizations, to ensure better results? Intriguingly, towards the end of the scene (Act 4, Scene 1), when Antonio and Bassanio insist that she should take a fee, Portia asks for the wedding ring that she presented to Bassanio as a reward for pleading Antonio’s case, as though to establish that she is an outsider, or to tease her husband and have fun as a loving wife for a while. In either case, it’s role-play at its pinnacle.

Now, the interesting question for us is, why does Portia take the risk of enacting the role of counselor, despite being a novice in that profession, and despite the fact that even the slightest error on her part could endanger Antonio’s life? The answer is obvious: Firstly, love—her love for Bassanio and his dear friend, Antonio; secondly, courage—she is bold enough to take that extra risk for a cause which is dear to her heart; and, thirdly, self-confidence—the immense belief in herself, her ‘can do’ spirit. Let us take a critical look at each one of them, for that is what matters most to practicing managers aiming to transform themselves into leaders.

It is, of course, hard to reduce love into words, for it is all-embracing and most conspicuous by its presence or absence. Love, as Fromm (1974)³