SHAKESPEARE AND THE BURDEN OF LEADERSHIP

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Note

Dr Ismail Serageldin always liked Shakespeare, finding in him a multi-layered complexity that speaks to us beyond the beauty of words and the power of the poetry.

Being a great admirer of the genius of Shakespeare, he decided, that as a trend, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina would hold an Annual Shakespeare Conference to discuss and analyze one or more of his plays and the different facets of the characters.

The greatness of Shakespeare is attested to by his ability to speak to us through space and time. Indeed, he was "not of an age but for all time".

Shakespeare has addressed the burdens of leaders in many of his plays, whether power, justice or responsibility.

He deals with the humanity of the leaders, not just the humanity of the led. Leaders are people and people are never perfect.

Dr Serageldin was requested by many to record these lectures and make them available. Accordingly, he has re-read Shakespeare and the Burden of Leadership at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina Studio, in Alexandria, Egypt, on 28 July 2013.

SHAKESPEARE AND THE BURDEN OF LEADERSHIP

I. Introduction: Leadership in a changing world

Our world is one of change and upheaval. In the midst of such upheavals, things fall apart. The upheavals may themselves be an undeniable good, including the revolutionary overthrow of despotic monarchs in Europe, or of racist colonialism in Africa, but the change itself may result in destructive tendencies and even civil wars…

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

— William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)
The Second Coming

Or things may even slide into chaos and civil war… As we see in Syria today, as we saw in Lebanon a generation ago, and as the whole world lived through in the past and especially in the 20th century when the scale of destruction and annihilation reached an unsurpassed crescendo…. Then the warnings of the Bard are particularly prescience, when he gives us this horrible image of war, death and destruction:

Blood and destruction shall be so in use
And dreadful objects so familiar
That mothers shall but smile when they behold
Their infants quarter'd with the hands of war;
All pity choked with custom of fell deeds:

— Julius Caesar, III.i.263–267

Horrors so unimaginable that only the numbness of familiarity will enable us to endure them; "The custom of fell deeds" shall choke out even the pity of mothers watching their children die.

Cry 'Havoc,' and let slip the dogs of war;
That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
With carrion men, groaning for burial.

— Julius Caesar, III.i.274–276

> "Carrion men, groaning for burial"? Who could have imagined the horrors of the holocaust, the killing fields from the Somme and Verdun in WWI to the wholesale slaughter of WWII to the massacres of Cambodia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia and beyond…

Only the language of literature can cope with such a challenge.

Only the language of literature can allow us to bear witness, marshal our moral outrage and, in the immortal phrase of Yeats, to "hold in a single thought reality and justice"…

So turning to literature when confronted with social challenges in our own times, it is not difficult to find both insight and wisdom from the past that feeds our needs in the present.

One of those things we get from reflecting on the past and its inheritance is the need for understanding change and leadership.

We yearn for a clear vision and a firm hand. But we want to be guided, not ruled. We need to be convinced, not forced. We need to be inspired, not intimidated. We want leadership, not administration. Leaders stand out

from the crowd, and we all recognize their greatness. But what makes a leader?

> *"… some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them".*
>
> —Twelfth Night, II.v

What motivates leaders? What are the burdens that such leaders must bear? That is my theme today. And to address this theme as it appears in the work of Shakespeare, I would like to make a few propositions about the burdens of leadership, and show that Shakespeare addressed each and every one of them in interesting ways.

First *Power*: Generally speaking, Leaders must seek and exercise power in ways that are consonant with a system of values, not through absolute tyranny. Ultimately human values insist on respect for human dignity, and reject negative things from torture to mendacity.

Second *Justice*: Justice is not only to enforce the law equally, but also to ensure that the law itself is fair to all. This means that legalism without justice is not an exercise in leadership. And in more subtle ways that exclusion of minorities and discrimination against them is inherently unjust. Also that justice towards women is an essential part of societal justice.

Third *Responsibility*: Leaders must take responsibility for their actions, and shall be judged accordingly. Those who are in a position of leadership and try to evade their responsibilities will ultimately lead their societies to disastrous results.

But reality is that every leader deals with these three main topics in many different ways, succeeding in some and failing in others. People are never perfect. So how does Shakespeare deal with the humanity of the leader, not just the humanity of the led?

In Shakespeare's times, leadership was usually reserved for kings and nobles and the powerful church. Religious and secular power had been intertwined. England had been subjected to its share of problematic rulers, popular rebellions and civil wars, notably the wars of the roses. Parliament was still embryonic, and the revolution against Charles the first was still to come. Even discussion of the possible limits of the divine right of kings – beyond the limited framework of the *Magna Carta* – was considered seditious.

So how did the bard address the issue of leadership, its burdens and its woes, its successes and its failures, its ethical responsibilities and its involvement with the people?

II. Painting on the canvas of history

Shakespeare painted on the canvas of history. Many of his most powerful plays are historical plays, treating of the kings of England and how they exercised power and how they met the burden of leadership.

When he took historical events and characters as the basis of his plays, he still constructed complex characters that defied the popular myths surrounding them in both the historical record and in the popular imagination. Invariably, such myths tend to be uni-dimensional and stilted, all good or all bad. Thus Henry V is the conquering hero who defeats the French at Agincourt and wins the throne of France for his son. Yet Shakespeare shows him committing war crimes and casts doubt both about the integrity of his motives and the value of his achievements. Richard III is the murderous hunchback who has the princes killed in the tower and who schemes and plots his way to the throne of England until he is undone. While the murder of the two princes in the tower may or may not be laid at his door, there is no doubt that he was on the whole a villain of the first order. Yet Shakespeare endows him with a surprising eloquence. Richard II is a difficult character who is generally seen as a failure, yet Shakespeare endows him with the soul of a poet.

It is this multi-layered reality of Shakespeare's work that intrigues us to this day. It is the ambiguity, so human, that the supreme craftsman injects into his plays and his characters that have helped his work transcend space and time.

So let us now look at those three aspects of leadership one at a time, starting with the issue of Power and Ethical Values.

III. On Power and Values

Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

— Lord Acton

How true!

To look at the path to power, we find many who are corrupted just by their lust for it. Here we could usefully discuss Julius Caesar and Richard III. But I would rather look at a few passages from *Macbeth*.

Indeed for such times as ours, the particular message of Macbeth has special relevance. We need to be reminded of its basic theme that selfish egotism, shorn of any redeeming value, will destroy all that it touches. Macbeth is encapsulated in this famous line :

"For mine own good
All causes shall give way ..."

III.iv.134–5

This is but a more elegant formulation of the commonly heard views in today's society: "Me first", "what's in it for me", "Look out for number one" or "every man for himself" or the Egyptian colloquialism "that which you win with, play with". It is the same loss of spiritual content and moral compass that was powerfully captured by the culture of greed in the 1980s, and again at the time of the great crash of 2007–2008.

Such a credo, Shakespeare shows us, results in nothingness and leaves one empty, shallow and wandering...

"Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow
creeps at this petty pace from day to day to the last
syllable of recorded time
And all our yesterdays
lighted fools the way to dusty death
out, out brief candle. Life is but a walking shadow
a poor player who frets and struts
his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more
'Tis a tale told by an idiot
full of sound and fury – signifying nothing."

V.v.22–31

But even in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare never gives us just cartoon characters, and this play too, has its multiplicity of layers and subplots.[1] But that is a discussion for another day.

Ethics

In the pursuit of Power, not all avenues are acceptable. And to maintain himself or herself in power, a leader is not justified in employing any means possible. Frequently ideological claims for the unity of the nation or the unity of the country or of the religious community require the sacrifice of the individual for the benefit of the nation, which – of course – the leader embodies and defines.

Ethical values must guide the actions of the leader: The ends do NOT justify the means. It is interesting to read Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, for the terrible atmosphere that prevailed in totalitarian regimes in eastern Europe. Arthur Koestler's powerful indictment of the Moscow trials of the

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[1] See how in one contemporary reading of the play, Susan Snyder in her essay "Macbeth, A Modern Perspective", effectively brings out the complexities inherent in the play, and concludes: "Viewed through various lenses, then, the black and white of Macbeth may fade towards shades of gray. The play is an open system, offering some fixed markers with which to take one's basic bearings but also, in closer scrutiny, offering provocative questions and moral ambiguities". Susan Snyder's essay is provided to round out the presentation.

1930s, *Darkness at Noon*, remains pertinent to this day, and also shows that totalitarian ideology is the same whether it is applied by atheistic communists or by religious zealots as he quotes in this epigraph[2], where you could substitute "State" or "Nation" or "Party" for the word "Church" in the opening sentence:

> When the existence of the Church is threatened, she is released from the commandments of morality. With unity as the end, the use of every means is sanctified, even cunning, treachery, violence, simony[3], prison, death. For all order is for the sake of the community, and the individual must be sacrificed to the common good.
>
> Dietrich Von Nieheim
> Bishop of Verden:
> *De schismate libri III*, A.D. 1411

All these totalitarian regimes have subverted some values, such patriotism, sense of wanting to defend the

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[2] Epigraph cited in Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, Translated by Daphne Hardy: The Macmillan Company 1941, edition used: F. H. K. Henries 1968, p.97.

[3] Simony is the act of paying for sacraments and consequently for holy offices or for positions in the hierarchy of a church, named after Simon Magus, who appears in the Acts of the Apostles [VIII.9–24].

community to justify torture. Shakespeare attacks that problem head-on in one of the most powerful scenes ever written, especially when you consider the social context of his time. The Torture scene in King Lear.

In a magisterial exposition of that scene[4], Greenblatt shows how sadistic rulers, using collaboration with the enemy as an excuse, want to torture a political enemy, and how the act is shown stripped of its legalistic coverings, and so injurious is it to anyone's sense of decency is it that a servant attacks a duke, and the political rationale is set aside by our obvious sense of a common humanity. Let's review the scene in some detail with Stephen Greenblatt.

In a remarkable and profound discussion of the torture scenes in *King Lear*, Greenblatt shows how completely and effectively Shakespeare denounces the practice of torture, and how completely and effectively he destroys any instrumental argument in its favor. Although the religious wars of Catholicism and Protestantism were rampant in the Europe of his time, his powerful dramatic scenes serve to reject torture and to challenge the authority of those who would use it. The relevance of this is obvious,

[4] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's freedom*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. pp 88-91

whether we are discussing "The Lord's Army" in Uganda or waterboarding in the USA prisons, or the more immediate and cruel forms of torture elsewhere in the world.

In the treatment he gives it in *King Lear* Shakespeare contrived to represent the practice of torture in such a way as to make it utterly recognizable—the urgent questioning of someone who has been caught conniving with a foreign power to topple the established regime—but Shakespeare also makes it utterly unacceptable.

He did so by collapsing the hygienic distance that separated the monarch and the privy councilors, cloaked in the mantle of moral authority, from the vicious underlings who carried out their orders. Torture in *King Lear* is conducted directly by the rulers, Cornwall and Regan, who are depicted as reptilian monsters. Moreover, Shakespeare subtly uncoupled the infliction of torture from the search for information and hence undermined any simple instrumental rationale. Before Cornwall even gets his hands on the high-born traitor, he declares his intention to injure him, quite apart from the outcome of the process of interrogation:

> *Though well we may not pass upon his life*
> *Without the form of justice, yet our power*

Shall do a courtesy to our wrath, which men
May blame, but not control.

III.vii.24–27

What is at once horrible and familiar about this declaration is its nauseating blend of legalism, sadism, and public relations, as if Cornwall were already thinking about how he will excuse the fact that there were certain regrettable excesses in his otherwise legal treatment of the prisoner[5].

The plucking out of the Earl of Gloucester's eyes seems to have appalled even hardened Jacobean spectators, and the language of the play cunningly anticipates the act, so as to intensify its horror. This pattern of anticipations culminates in Gloucester's response to the repeated question, "Wherefore to Dover?" "Because I would not see thy cruel nails/Pluck out his poor old eyes" [III.vii.56–58]. Cornwall's response—"See 't shalt thou never" [III.vii.68], he says, gouging out the first of the prisoner's eyes—provokes a reaction that may, for contemporary audiences, have been more shocking than the act of torture.

[5] Here Greenblatt reflects that perhaps Cornwall is thinking about how he will justify torturing an aristocrat, something that was against English practice, but he points out that Gloucester, however, is not at all Cornwall's equal.

Here Shakespeare undertakes a bold and powerful development. It is not the aristocrats that are present that intervene to stop that monstrous torture, it is a nameless servant who steps forward and orders—please note: *orders* —his master to stop what he is doing:

> *Hold your hand, my lord:*
> *I have served you ever since I was a child;*
> *But better service have never done you*
> *Than now to bid you hold.* [III.vii.73–76]

The servant's masters are astounded and then exclaim in disbelief [III.vii.77–81]: Regan's ("How now, you dog!") and Cornwall's ("My villain!") both reflect incredulity at the fact that the servant is one of their own and not one of the servants from Gloucester's household, where they are at that moment.

In the ensuing scuffle, Regan grabs a sword and stabs the underling in the back—"A peasant stand up thus!" [III.vii.83]—but not before the peasant has fatally wounded the duke. And the audience is manifestly invited to endorse this radical act: the murder of a ruler by a serving man who stands up for human decency.

Greenblatt underlines the importance of that dimension and rounds out the power of the scene:

Though his act has important political consequences, the servant is not acting out of party allegiance, and still less out of personal ambition. He has an ethically adequate object—the desire to serve the duke his master by stopping him at all costs from performing an unworthy action. He does not seek power for himself, nor is there anything to indicate that he supports the French invaders. His dying words to Gloucester—"My Lord, you have one eye left/To see some mischief on him" [III.vii.84–85]—suggest that in his last moments of life the servant has shifted his allegiance from Cornwall to Cornwall's victim, but this attempt at consolation only leads to further disaster. "Lest it see more," rages the mortally wounded Cornwall, turning back to Gloucester, "prevent it. Out, vile jelly!" [III.vii.86][6]

[6] Greenblatt, op.cit, p90, notes that: "In the folio text of *King Lear* the scene ends with Regan driving the eyeless earl out of his own house with words almost fantastic in their cruelty—"Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell/His way to Dover" [III.vii.96–97]—while the bleeding Cornwall orders underlings to dispose of the corpse of the servant: "Throw this slave/Upon the dunghill" [III.vii.100–101]. The quarto text has an additional brief exchange between two other nameless servants, who, like their slain fellow, have no large political agenda or ambition but express a fundamentally ethical attitude towards authority: "I'll never care what wickedness I do," says one, reflecting on Cornwall's action, "If this man come to good" (History of King Lear, XIV.96–97)".

The ruler thus serves as an exemplar or test case: if he allows himself terrible actions, and these actions go unpunished, then, to paraphrase Dostoevsky, everything is permitted. Shakespeare was obviously conscious of this and wanted to denounce such actions, still very common by rulers in his time, and regretfully still being practiced by some in the twenty-first century.

IV. Justice and legality

Applying an unjust law may be legal but it clearly demands redress. It is the responsibility of true leaders to recognize where that is the case and where the need is for mercy to temper justice in a particular case, or when the law itself needs to be changed. Let me turn to the first argument and show how Shakespeare underlined that in his handling of the second act in *Measure for Measure*.

The hypocritical Angelo, though authorized by the Duke to be merciful as well as just, declares himself a mere agent of Law: "It is the law, not I, condemn your brother" [II.ii.80]. She pleads for time; he replies that the

law, having slept, is now awake; had it always been so, it would have served as a deterrent[7]:

> *The law hath not been dead, though it hath slept.*
> *Those many had not dar'd to do that evil*
> *If the first that did th' edict infringe*
> *Had answer'd for his deed. Now'tis awake,*
> *Takes note of what is done, and like a prophet*
> *Looks in a glass that shows what future evils,*
> *Either now, or by remissness new conceiv'd,*
> *And so in progress to be hatch'd and born,*
> *Are now to have no successive degrees,*
> *But here they live, to end.*
>
> Measure for Measure—II.ii.90–99

Here the function of judicial punishment is not so much to deter as to abort future crime. The tone is steady and assured.

[7] Kermode reflects that this speech is exceptionally powerful and that its imagery is familiar to us from the soliloquy of Brutus in Julius Caesar [II.i]…But the language has its own peculiar urgency in Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, first paperback edition, 2001. pp.158-159.

Isabella attacks the abuse of authority without denying its rights[8]:

> *O, it is excellent*
> *To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous*
> *To use it like a giant*
>
> Measure for Measure—II.ii.107–9.

But as we know from that play, and others, if Justice is not tempered by mercy, it is not just, it is mere legalism. Here the most powerful of all speeches is delivered by another of Shakespeare's amazing women characters, it is Portia in the *Merchant of Venice* who says:

> *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 throned monarch better than his crown.*
> *His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,*
> *The attribute to awe and majesty,*
> *Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;*
> *But mercy is above this sceptred sway.*

[8] Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, first paperback edition, 2001

It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

Merchant of Venice—IV.i.181–94

What more can anyone say?

V. Justice and the Inclusion of minorities

Today, most of us would accept that discrimination against religious or ethnic or other minorities is wrong. Even if not legally sanctioned, if discrimination is socially enforced and practiced it is wrong. If you are a leader, you must strive to create a sense of inclusion in the community you govern. You should not allow discrimination to create excluded minorities. Being an outsider in a society of insiders will tend to undermine the social order and create tensions far beyond the usual differences of opinions and of interests that shall always create struggles within a society. But racism is different. It is irreconcilable. It leads to hatred that is irrational and is not based on differences that can be mediated. It is inherently unjust.

Shakespeare was aware of the problem, and he gives us many powerful examples of that. I will draw upon some

of the most famous plays and show how the conventional criticism has tended to avoid confronting the power of that message.

The most famous of these is Shylock and anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice.* The conventional perspective of the run of the play is that of a stereotypical caricature of the evil Jew trying to do harm to the Christians. But suddenly this counter-voice erupts in the play in one of the most powerful statements ever written in English:

Shylock:

> *Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs,*
> *dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with*
> *the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject*
> *to the same diseases, healed by the same means,*
> *warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer,*
> *as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?*
> *if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison*
> *us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not*
> *revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will*
> *resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian,*
> *what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian*
> *wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by*
> *Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you*

teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

Merchant of Venice—III.i.59–73

With this speech there erupts into the play the full, protesting force of an irresistible egalitarian vision, whose basis in the shared faculties and needs of our common physical nature implicitly indicts all forms of inhuman discrimination. The speech provokes a radical shift of emotional allegiance, from which our perception of the comedy's Christian protagonists never recovers. Here I also agree with Ryan that the key line is "*The villainy you teach me, I will execute*". This is the definition of the rationale for Shylock's revenge, it is also the basis of so much of the endless actions by one community against another and the revenge and the cycle of action and reaction continues sometimes leading to civil war.

Look around you in the world today, and replace "Jew" and "Christian" with any oppressed and oppressor names and the timelessness of this plea comes through unimpaired.

You can find many other passages in the *The Merchant of Venice* that would repay this effort of trying to imagine

the text applied to another minority being discriminated against today… As Greenblatt observes:[9]

> Now, more than ever, *The Merchant of Venice* has a weird, uneasy relevance, a sense at once fascinating and disagreeable that it is playing with fire. All my life I thought of the combustible material as anti-Semitism—or, to put it more carefully, Christianity's Jewish problem. "Go, Tubal, and meet me at our synagogue. Go, good Tubal; at our synagogue, Tubal" [III.i.107–8]. But the queasiness of Western cities no longer centers on the synagogue. It takes, as I hope I have shown, only a small adjustment to tap into current fears: "Go, Tubal, and meet me at our mosque. Go, good Tubal; at our mosque, Tubal."

The Merchant of Venice ends with the idea of a potentially happy ending if the Jews convert and disappear, assimilated into the Christian society. But is such an outcome possible? Shakespeare was not blind to the real depth of the hatred that racism and bigotry can engender, and he treats both with stunning power in another famous play, *Othello*.

Of all of Shakespeare's villains, Iago appears the one who has no redeeming feature, whose hatred is absolute,

[9] Stephen Greenblatt, op.cit. pp.88-91

and whose treachery and devious manipulation of Othello's weakness know no bounds, and that is because he represents the absolute hatred that racist bigotry engenders. But Shakespeare does not give us cardboard characters. Othello, though noble, is flawed. And Iago does bring him down through jealousy. But Racism is at the heart of Iago's hatred and it is the reason why the love of Othello and Desdemona is problematic. Othello is black, an outsider that even though he is assimilated as "The Moor of Venice" and has saved the Venetian Republic by his military feats, is still not accepted in Venetian society[10].

But even that aspect of the racism expressed in Iago's hatred is only one facet of the racist theme. A much more subtle one, and in my view a much more important one, is the problem of the alienation of Othello himself from both self and society.[11] It is the lot of all migrants that have tried to integrate into a society that would not in its heart of hearts assimilate them, or accept them as equals,

[10] This much richer and more profound dramatic content of *Othello* is much more satisfying than the simple and superficial interpretation of jealousy as the only line of argument in the play.

[11] This point has been made by a number of contemporary critics, especially those of the psycho-analytic school such as Andre Green. See Andre Green, "Othello: A tragedy of conversion: Black Magic and White Magic" in John Drakakis (ed) *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London and New York: Longman, 1992. pp. 316-352. See especially the section on 'The Psycho-analyst and Othello", pp. 317-319

no matter what their achievements have been. By their actions to integrate that alien society they become collusive accomplices in their self-denial, and they know it, even if they cannot easily accept it.

This is not a fanciful reading of contemporary problems into a centuries old text. Not at all. In a supreme dramatic achievement, grossly underrepresented in the critical literature, Shakespeare brings out the deeper cultural alienation at issue in the final suicide scene of Othello.

Here is the main character of the play about to commit suicide, turning to those around him, beseeching them to note his words carefully, and asking those responsible to report truthfully what has happened and why. Surely, no speech could have been given a greater build-up by an author. And what does Othello say? He conclude with these six lines:

> *Set you down this;*
> *And say besides, that in Aleppo once;*
> *Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk*
> *Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,*
> *I took by th'throat the circumcised dog,*
> *And smote him - thus.* — [V.ii.351–356]

And at that point he stabs himself!

This passage, after the build-up given it by Shakespeare must be given special attention, and it repays that attention by giving what Ryan calls "an elliptically compressed definition and explanation of the whole tragedy of Othello".[12]

This duality in the roles of Othello, one the social role of the "Moor of Venice", and the other being the innate person who has had to destroy himself to play the role of Othello, comes out also in the peculiar reply that Othello, a few moments before killing himself, gives to Lodovico's question "where is this rash and most unfortunate man?". Othello answers: "that's he that was Othello; here I am." [V.ii.283–4]. The rash and most unfortunate man is "Othello, the Moor of Venice", while the wretched man inside, about to end his life, having lost all he cared for, has been liberated from the duality and the falsehood and finally acknowledges the terrible truth of the lie he has lived, and he will tell it to those around him that they may record it and report it truthfully to those who were not present to hear his words.

[12] Ryan Kiernan, *Shakespeare*, New York: Prentice Hall, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, p.57.

Shakespeare goes further and in some of his other writings likens those who would break the bonds that tie community and family together as vermin who chew and cut the bonds so necessary for society to function.

In *Lear*, Kent wants to attack the evil Goneril's steward Oswald, who has been told to insult the King. Prevented by Cornwall, he characterizes his opponent in words that apply to all the evil persons in the play and to many in anybody's acquaintance:

> *Such smiling rogues as these,*
> *Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain*
> *Which are t' intrinse t' unloose …*
>
> King Lear II.ii

The figure is of rats biting through the complicated knots that bind together families, friends, societies; they cannot be untied and are destroyed by the evil gnawing of vermin[13]. It is the duty of leaders to hold societies together.

VI. Justice and Gender Equality

Justice requires equality of women. I believe that contrary to the view of Shakespeare as a patriarchal misogynist,

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13 Frank Kermode, op.cit. pp. 184-185.

Shakespeare shows great sensitivity to the issue of gender equality, especially given the context of his times, and he introduces it in the great pays where he treats exclusion of minorities.

The theme is given voice by Emilia's long speech to Desdemona in *Othello*'s final scene of act IV, dealing with the consequences of the inequality and injustice built into the marriage of their time:

But I do think it is their husband's faults
If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties,
and pour our treasures into foreign laps;
Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us
Or scant our former having in despite:
Why, we have galls; and though we have some grace
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them; they see, and smell
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too. And have not we affections,

Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well; else let them know,
The ills we do their ill instruct us so.

IV.iii.86–103

What an amazing echo of the voice of the victim in Shylock's famous speech in *The Merchant*, especially the last line!

Yet, this same Portia, with all these innate abilities is socially oppressed. She is deprived of any meaningful choice in running her own life:

O me, the word choose!
I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike;
So is the will of the living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father.

I.ii.22–5

This same lady, who is so admirable in every way, is seen by Bassanio as a source of income and a means to clear his debts:

A lady richly left...[I.i.161]
To get clear of all the debts I owe...[I.i.135]

We are given three additional twists that leave no doubt as to Shakespeare's intentions on the gender issue: the episodes of the caskets, the rings and the finale. Let's reflect briefly on the significance of each of them.

The sequence of the caskets is essential to underline the difference between appearance and reality. It does so with some of the most famous passages in the english language:

" All that glistens is not gold,
Gilded tombs do worms enfold."

II.vii.65–66

A theme that obviously runs through the play at several levels : The apparent "civilised" character of the Venetian laws, the apparent superiority of the male...

"So may the outward shows be least themselves"

III.ii.73

But the sequence of the caskets also goes further. Portia clearly is allegorically imprisoned by the structure of the patriarchal social order just as her image is imprisoned in the casket. Hear her anguish in the line: "I am locked in one of them"

II.ii.40

The finale recasts the triangle of three persons with Antonio again vouching for his friend, with Portia in

the position of Shylock. Such perfect symmetry is not an accident, not in the hand of so accomplished a playwright as Shakespeare.

The witty, liberated Portia whom we see when she is disguised as the lawyer Balthazar, or when she is alone with her maid, is not allowed to exist. Instead, she must be the obedient daughter and the submissive wife. She has to be disguised as a man to save the day in the famous court scene where she delivers her great "Mercy" speech.

VII. Responsibility cannot be avoided

Those who are in a position of authority cannot avoid their responsibilities.

Shakespeare studied those who strive to conquer power and the price they pay and that their societies pay for how they rise to power: such as Julius Caesar, Richard III, Henry IV, Macbeth, and once in power, how they wielded power, as in Henry V. But Shakespeare also showed a great deal of interest in those who attempt to "pull back from power", to avoid their responsibilities. Those who assume power in society have a responsibility to society. They can neither ignore the problems and realities of that society, nor can they just walk away to enjoy the fruits of the good

life without attending to the needs of their flock. In every case, he shows that leadership, once assumed, comes with responsibilities that cannot be simply abandoned without catastrophic consequences.

Indeed, Shakespeare's fascination with those who decide to abandon power gives us an enormous range of character studies: the spoiled dreamer, Richard II, who seems to embrace his fall from the throne; Marc Antony, who prefers the love of Cleopatra to ruling the Roman Empire; Coriolanus, who cannot abide the ordinary rituals of political life; and Lear, who hopes

> *To shake all cares and business from our age,*
> *Conferring them on younger strengths, while we*
> *Unburthened crawl towards death.*
>
> — King Lear, I.i.37–39

Greenblatt observes that "What all of these very different characters have in common—and we could add Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure* and Prospero in *The Tempest*—is the desire to escape from the burdens of leadership, to avoid the exercise of governing. In each case, the desire leads to disaster"[14].

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[14] Stephen Greenblatt, op.cit. p. 81.

VIII. Conclusions: On the Burdens of Leadership

I would like to conclude with a few reflections on the meaning of Leadership, and how the burdens of leadership require not only certain skills, but also certain values and ethical standards. Success in the pursuit of one's own program does not make a great leader.

Leadership is more than management. Peter Drucker famously stated that "management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." Great leaders possess dazzling social intelligence, a zest for change, and above all, vision that allows them to set their sights on the "things" that truly merit attention. Not a bad skill set for the rest of us, either. But even the best leaders are flawed men. Witness: Othello or Henry V. This is why we want to create systems that not only allow brilliant men and women to shine, but also that can check their weaknesses and their all too human impulses.

Artists have a major role to play in holding up mirrors to society and see ourselves as we really are, and to open windows for us to see the world as it could be, if only we strive to make it so. This combination of mirrors and windows is essential in every society where the notions of identity and

vision have a place. That is why the work of artists must be protected, and free speech is perhaps the most precious of all the freedoms we demand as our constitutional rights.

And what duties, if any, do artists have towards society in exchange for that right? What is the role of the artist such as Shakespeare in contributing to society? I think that an artist has the right to Autonomy, but he or she should follow their art wherever it leads them. Shakespeare certainly did.

Brecht, a very engaged artist, considered that those who would write the truth face difficulties:

> “Nowadays, anyone who wishes to combat lies and ignorance and to write the truth must overcome at least *five difficulties*: to have the *courage* to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the *keenness* to recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; The *skill* to manipulate it as a weapon; the *judgment* to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the *cunning* to spread the truth among such persons”[15].

[15] Bertolt Brecht, “Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties”, in *Unsere Zeit* VIII, Nos. 2/3, Paris, April 1935, pp.23-34. Edition used: Appendix A (translated by Richard Winston) given in pp.133-150 of Berthold Brecht, *Galileo*, English version by Charles Laughton, edited with an introduction by Eric Bentley, New York: Grove Press, 1966.

Shakespeare certainly met those five conditions!

Those who believe that they are responsible to mobilize and use their art for some higher political or moral purpose, rather than remain faithful to their art, sometimes err in defending their political convictions. How many young idealists among the artists of the 20th century found themselves seduced by communism and ultimately excusing the horrors of Stalin? Some even denouncing friends inside the Party cabals…A few, who remained faithful to their art, and the principles that motivated that art, refused. These are worthy of a pause…

It takes a special consciousness, a maturity shaped by the horrors of the twentieth century; a sensitivity honed by exile, as in the case of Milan Kundera, to be able to favor loyalty to friendship over loyalty to political opinion; and to favor commitment to art over commitment to Party, and to State:[16]

> "… even with a prideful tone of moral correctness. It does take great maturity to understand that the opinion we are arguing for is merely the hypothesis we favor, necessarily imperfect, probably transitory,

[16] Kundera Milan, *Encounter*, Translated from the French (Une Rencontre) by Linda Asher, Harper Perennial, 2011, p.114

> which only very limited minds can declare to be a certainty or a truth".

Shakespeare was anything but a very limited mind! He was true to his art, and his art is an inspiration that survives to this day. Indeed He was "Not of an age but for all time".

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