



Skenè Texts DA • 7

SENS: Studies • 1

*“Within the book and volume of my brain”:
Reflections on the Eudaimonic Value
of the (Shakespearean) Text*

Edited by Bianca Del Villano



Edizioni ETS

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SENS: SHAKESPEARE'S EUROPEAN NARRATIVE SOURCES



Although Shakespeare's sources have long been identified and extensively studied, their early modern editions have not been thoroughly examined in relation to their European dissemination, translation, and adaptation. While we tend to take for granted the textual stability of the sources, compared to the radical instability of Shakespeare's plays, a closer exploration of the actual editions that may have been available at the time shows relevant textual differences bearing upon their reception. What did Shakespeare and his contemporaries actually read? To what extent do cultural differences emerge from a comparison of these texts?

The SENS volumes offer not only guides to the circulation of narratives related to Shakespeare's plays, but also pathways into, and across, the wider European storytelling traditions to which his drama belongs, enabling readers to trace how motifs, scenes, and conceptual patterns migrate, transform, and resurface across languages, cultures and genres.

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Foreword

JAMES O. PAWELSKI

We are living in times of rapid and profound change. Political, technological, economic, and environmental realities are shifting faster than we can fathom. Culture, of course, is always in flux, but fundamental assumptions about the purpose of education, the value of the humanities, and even what it means to be human are being deeply questioned today. A key accelerant for this upheaval was the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected nearly every aspect of our lives, disrupting educational, economic, and political systems, cutting social ties, overburdening health networks, and causing heartbreaking loss of life.

As severe as the COVID-19 pandemic was, however, it was not the worst pandemic in history. That distinction belongs to the Black Death, which struck Europe, Asia, and North Africa in the 14th century. The Black Death is estimated to have killed up to 200 million people in total, including perhaps half of the European population. Living during this time, the Italian poet Petrarch lost dozens of colleagues and friends – and even his own son – to the pandemic and experienced first-hand the social collapse it caused. Seeking consolation, stability, and guidance, he found the universities to be of little help, as they were following a scholastic curriculum focused on logic and linguistic analysis, more interested in techniques of abstract thinking and the resolution of textual contradictions than on the improvement of human lives (Proctor 1998; Celenza 2017). So he turned directly to the Greek and Roman classics, renewing the ancient project of education for the purpose of learning to live

life well. The value of Petrarch's approach inspired contemporaries, such as Boccaccio, to take up a similar study. Petrarch's followers began calling themselves humanists, and they eventually succeeded in replacing the scholastic curriculum of the universities with one in the humanities, focusing less on the mechanics of textual analysis and argumentation and more on the ways texts can support human flourishing through the exploration of wisdom and virtue, a clarification of the nature of happiness and its relation to virtue, and the provision of sound guidance for how to live life well (Celenza 1998).

In the years since Petrarch and his immediate followers, the closeness of the connection between the humanities and the goals of human flourishing has fluctuated. In our contemporary world, the humanities tend to be thought of less as a comprehensive program of study in support of flourishing and more as a collection of disciplines pursued in our academic institutions, particularly in our colleges and universities (Pawelski 2022). The practical aims that initially inspired humanistic study are thus often eclipsed by the institutional demands required for professional success in academia. In this context, humanities scholars have become professional academics, whose success depends on selecting a particular area of specialization within their discipline and then spending most of their time and energy writing books and articles whose primary audience is other scholars with the same or a similar specialization. And there is no requirement that they link their work to human flourishing; in fact, it may count against them if they do. For students, the study of the humanities has all too often become 'academified', with an emphasis on grades (and thus on the presentation of material in terms of easily assessable facts), course credits, grade point averages, and majors that are likely to result in lucrative employment. All too often, the emphasis is on learning *about* the humanities and not, as Petrarch as his followers insisted, on learning *from* them (McDaniel, in press).

I believe we are in need of a shift today similar to the change Petrarch and his colleagues catalysed at the beginning of the Renaissance. Just as Petrarch initiated a return to an engagement in the humanities for the purposes of human flourishing, so I think we need a similar return today. The good news is that I believe

such a return – a eudaimonic turn – is already underway (Pawelski 2013; 2022). And just as the disruptions of the Black Death helped to bring about that shift in Petrarch’s day, the COVID-19 pandemic has helped to advance today’s eudaimonic turn.

These changes in the humanities are part of a broader eudaimonic turn across a number of domains – including psychology, economics, neuroscience, psychiatry, medicine, sociology, law, political science, education, organizational studies, and government – where there is a growing commitment to human flourishing as a core interest and overarching goal. The eudaimonic turn is perhaps nowhere more visible than in psychology, where it has resulted in the rapidly-growing field of positive psychology, the “scientific study of what enables individuals and societies to thrive” (International Positive Psychology Association 2007, 1). Although the eudaimonic turn has been slower to develop in the humanities than in some other areas, it is now taking shape as an increasing emphasis on the centrality of human flourishing as a theme of study and as a practical goal of culture. It has given rise to the positive humanities, a new field of academic scholarship, scientific inquiry, creative practice, and engaged pedagogy that focuses on the connection between culture and human flourishing. More expansively, the positive humanities are “the interdisciplinary, multi-industry, and cross-sector examination and optimization of the relationship between the experience, creation, and study of human culture and the understanding, assessment, and cultivation of human flourishing” (Pawelski 2022, 33).¹

To advance the positive humanities, we are in need of new and creative approaches and perspectives. The eudaimonic turn is not simply a return to the past; it is a renewed emphasis on the questions and concerns that initially gave rise to the humanities and that have been at their core for much of their history. But this renewed emphasis must be informed by new knowledge, new perspectives,

¹ For more information on the positive humanities, see the Oxford book series on The Humanities and Human Flourishing, *The Oxford Handbook of the Positive Humanities*, and the website of the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project I direct at the University of Pennsylvania: www.humanitiesandhumanflourishing.org.

and new cultural realities that can help generate new approaches, fitting for our times, to these perennial concerns (Pawelski 2013).

This is why I am so intrigued by the work of the Italian scholars presented in this volume. They are undertaking a project on *Shakespeare's Narrative Sources: Italian Novellas and Their European Dissemination* (SENS). Supported by post-COVID-19 recovery funding, they are working with the Shakespearean plays that draw on Italian novellas, creating an online archive of digital editions of both the plays and the novellas. It would be easy to treat this project as an academic exercise, simply posting the texts, with perhaps some erudite commentary on how they are connected. But the SENS scholars have rejected this easy approach in favor of an exploration of methods more supportive of the eudaimonic turn and based on the positive humanities. Understanding that the humanities are for human flourishing, these scholars have thought carefully about the impact their work can have on those visiting the archive. Cognizant that it is not only the content (the 'what') of the humanities that is important for human flourishing, but also the manner (the 'how') and the reason (the 'why') they are engaged (Shim et al. 2019), these scholars have turned to creative formats for the presentation of their archive. In particular, they have turned to gamification.

Gamification may seem like a misaligned or even irreverent way of approaching Shakespeare and his Italian source texts. But the goal is not to turn *Romeo and Juliet* into Mario Kart. The goal is not to use gamification as a means of entertainment, but rather as a means of engagement. And this engagement is intended to support both learning and well-being. In contrast to academification, which uses extrinsic motivation to encourage engagement, gamification relies on intrinsic motivation. Emphasizing clear goals, immediate feedback, and a balance between challenges and skills, for example, gamification provides prime conditions for the experiencing of flow, a highly rewarding and beneficial state of complete absorption (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). As the authors point out, when gamification is done well, when it is designed to support the primary goals of learning and well-being, it can invite far deeper and more transformative engagement than many more traditional academic approaches.

I can attest to the truth of this claim based on my own experience. In college, I took a course on Shakespeare, and I also played the role of Proteus in a production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Although I certainly valued the course, being in the production allowed me to engage much more deeply and interactively with Shakespeare's text – which, of course, is called a *play*. As the authors indicate, the ludic element underlying plays and gamification is not a shallow distraction from serious humanistic engagement, but rather an important element of it. The humanities do not best support human flourishing by being a mausoleum for old ideas to be gazed at in hushed tones or a storehouse of facts about bygone cultures to be memorized, but rather by inviting us to engage interactively with them, to explore them as fundamentally human endeavors, and to bring them to new life in the context of present realities. It is in this way that they are most likely to be transformative, allowing us to become better versions of ourselves, to connect deeply with others, and to add our own perspectives to the human experience, perspectives that can be enriching to generations yet to come.

It can certainly be difficult to live in times of rapid change. There are real losses in the disruption of systems that have been in place for decades. But change also brings possibilities for improvement. So many of the elements that enrich our lives, including the humanities themselves, are improvements that were made in times of upheaval. I applaud the authors of this volume for leaning into the possibilities afforded by present circumstances, for committing themselves to the deep purpose of the humanities as a support for human flourishing, and for bringing creative new approaches to their work that invite not just a learning *about* the humanities but a learning *from* them.

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