

**Principles of Leadership in the Middle Ages: The case of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar**  
**Benjamin Smith, PhD**  
**Department of Languages and Cultures**  
**Minnesota State University Moorhead**

## **I. Introduction**

The premise of this paper is not unlike the successful books on management and leadership, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey or *Leadership secrets of Attila the Hun* by Wess Roberts. Much has been written on the textual, folkloric or linguistic precedents to the Cantar of mio Cid, but little has been said of the leadership models and precedents. Nor has anyone (to my knowledge) situated Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar in a context within the worthies of his time. Colin Smith writes that he outshined any other epic protagonist in France up to and including Roland and Charlemagne, but based on what qualities? The man, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar's characteristics were habits of his personality that made him the charismatic leader he became. There are seven principle traits outlined here that not only make him stand out as worthy of following to medieval soldiers, but that have ensured the poem's longevity and popularity despite the passing centuries.

### **a. Canon Formation**

There is much to be said here about Canon creation and longevity and it's relationship to content. This paper will be more about what constitutes a national canon than what constitutes a successful leader. The belief that one work is perhaps fated to not only survive, but thrive while another work exists in the margins is central to the issue of what makes a Canon. The Cantar of Mio Cid is a part of the Canon because of the character of the protagonist and yet the work's successful canonic plot relies on the fact that the protagonist has character.

Some would argue that the Caballero Zifar has no place in the Spanish Canon or that Tirant lo Blanc or the Libro de Aleixandre are outside the scope of the great key works that proceed from the Iberian Peninsula. Why? Why is the CMC there? Why is the Conde Lucanor there? Does it have to do with the content? The protagonist? The plot-line? The style? The availability of the manuscripts at the time? The availability of the manuscripts in our time?

### **b. Seven Qualities of Leadership**

While all these questions were great fodder for a semester-long course, we cannot answer all of them today. Today, I will focus on content. I will highlight the virtues of an every-day man literally enlarged by the way he applied seven principles of leadership. In fact, not only was this every-day protagonist a man of integrity, the seven principal qualities he possessed were valued by the society in which he lived and continue to be valued by subsequent readers today.

## **II. The case of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar away from the feudal mindset**

What did feudal vassals value in a Lord? In order to command respect in the Middle Ages, one either had to exert great power or flaunt great wealth. Or so it is believed. In the case of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, it seems it was possible to bypass the traditional lines of authority and establish respect and fellowship by means of integrity, magnanimity and being willing to make a decision when others seem powerless or unwilling to do so on their own.

Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar was not always the mio Cid. This was a title of honor – not unlike “Sir” in England (though not bestowed by a King or Emir) or modern “don”. He probably had several characteristics that earned him this recognition which, upon admiration and reflection, caused admirers to no longer refer to him as “Rodrigo” or “Ruy” or even Señor Díaz. Consider

Rodrigo as a sentient being, capable of inspiring a detour in the coerced chain of respect imposed by feudal practice. These are aspects not typically considered when speaking of the protagonist of the *Cantar de Mio Cid*. Usually one writes of Honor, Valor or *Mesura* (that word whose translation into English causes enough problems to warrant the continual reference to Old Spanish).<sup>1</sup> These characteristics are grandiose characteristics worthy of the aspiration of every aspiring national hero, but as a mortal leader, he was deeper than these qualities. Perhaps defining *mesura* requires assembling a cadre of traits that in sum make up what the Cid has come to be known for. There are enough poems and *romances* to show that the whole of all his qualities was greater than the sum of those parts. Their synergy created the legacy. These traits alone are manifest as: Vision, Humility, Integrity, Loyalty, Charity, Mercy and Patience.<sup>2</sup> The people of Medieval Spain valued these characteristics so much that they inspired deviance from the system. How else would a man in the ignominy of exile, be able to muster an army loyal enough to leave their homes, brave enough to fight enemies renowned for their skill and finesse and then humble enough to lay down the treasure won in battle at his feet in stead of running off with it on their own?

Allow me to touch upon each of the characteristics individually with specific examples from the CMC and the romances. I conclude that the same virtues that established him as a leader among his own people; the same virtues that won him the respect of the King (even after exile); the same virtues that made him a leader worthy singing and writing about; are the same virtues that have sealed the CMC at the summit of the Spanish literary canon.

### III. Principal Characteristics

#### a. Vision

First, **Vision**.<sup>3</sup> “Where there is no vision, the people perish” states a famous proverb.<sup>4</sup> The first line of the present copy of the CMC manuscript refers to his eyes and his vision. His look panned from the home he left behind, to the home he was to find. Yet, through the tears, he understands what King Alfonso VI has done and he makes specific plans to regain the King’s favor.<sup>5</sup> He quickly finds himself surrounded by men willing to stand by him even when he is down and he does not take their service for granted. He makes arrangements to provide for them (l. 80-88) and then goes to ensure his family is taken care of in his absence. Rodrigo Díaz is a

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Colin Smith (1983), the term *mesura* is a “creation of an author whose profession was the law...the hero is an amalgam of qualities which the poet admired, as a lawyer, in diverse men of his time: governors, administrators, churchmen, lords and also vassals” (94-95). In another work (1987), Smith breaks the term down further, *La medida es en parte ‘prudencia’, ‘buen sentido’, pero también ‘tacto’ y ‘consideración’ en el trato con los demás, y de modo particular una cierta gravitas en las maneras y en las palabras. Es una virtud más cívica que militar, proyectada al futuro—en relación con la ley, la familia y el estado—más que al pasado heroico, y es, quizá la cualidad mayor que el poeta aplica al Cid, cuando nos lo presenta como ejemplo.*”

<sup>2</sup> Other authors have proposed lists of qualities that characterize Rodrigo the man. Among them, Francisco Ugarte, “Como conviene a un héroe, es valiente en la batalla, hábil en la táctica, prudente en los aspectos más amplios de la estrategia, de una fortaleza física nada común; constante, generoso, considerado, totalmente confiable, afectuoso, cariñoso y tierno con su mujer e hijas, profundamente piadoso. Pero el poeta le dota también de cualidades más humanas—como el orgullo—, haciendo de él quizás el héroe épico más “realista” de la literatura mundial.” Of the “nine worthies” Dierdre O’Siodhachain points out the qualities that singled them out; “courtesy, loyalty, prowess, hardiness, largesse, frankness and let me add service to the Church and the community.”

<sup>3</sup> “*Begin With the End in Mind*...[This habit]...is based on imagination-- the ability to envision, to see the potential, to create with our minds what we cannot at present see with our eyes...”

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 29:18

<sup>5</sup> “ya lo vee el Cid” (l. 50)

man who moves with a purpose. He does not stand idly by waiting for life to happen to him. He fully plans on not only ensuring that his daughters are married into good families, he goes so far as to project himself one day making it all up to his wife Ximena (l. 282-4).

Rodrigo Díaz is keenly aware of what needs to be arranged to meet his future aims and goals. In his dealings with Rachel and Vidas, two local loan sharks, he states that with this capital he will build an army. He is confident enough to invest in his own success and promise to double the rewards for whatever sacrifices his men make (l. 303). He is so confident in his forward-looking style, he makes arrangements for the soldiers hoping to join his forces by telling the abbot don Sancho where to send them (l. 388). Part of the characteristic of “vision” carries with it his ability to have visions (e.g. Gabriel ll. 407-9) and to interpret these visions not as omens, but as confirmations of his already preconceived design.

Rodrigo Díaz has a keen military vision. Though medieval, his tactics were sharp and achieved their desired outcome. One such case was in the battle of Alcoçer where he implemented the *tornafuye* strategy. This consisted of making the enemy believe that his army was in retreat and then lead them away from their places of security. He even left the token tent still standing as evidence of their supposed hastened flight (l. 576). Once having brought the enemy out onto the open field, he turned to his men and said,

“¡Firidlos, cavalleros, todos sines dubdança!  
 ¡Con la merced del Criador, nuestra es la ganancia!”  
 Strike, men, fear not, for by God’s mercy, the victory is ours! (ll. 597-99)

Here Rodrigo Díaz demonstrated his vision in the heat of battle knowing what needed to be done to seize the day and finish the battle. In long-term plans and short-term plans, Rodrigo Díaz sees through the apparent obstacles and comes off victorious.

#### **b. Humility**

The second characteristic nature of Rodrigo Díaz is that he is a **humble** man. In his first night of exile, rather than forcing entry into a house where he can sleep in comfort and privilege, he camps on the banks of the river.<sup>6</sup> This, in his home town of Burgos! His humility trickles over to charity as he, in his impoverished state, is still willing to give Rachel & Vidas his own coat.<sup>7</sup>

#### **c. Integrity**

Third, Rodrigo Díaz is a man of **integrity**.<sup>8</sup> Beyond *mesurado*, he is even keeled, level headed, controlled and cool. He is resolute to the point that in the situation with the arcas de arena, he clearly states his schedule to pay them back. Even in this situation, where in order to secure a loan he finds it necessary to suspend their trust by intentionally deceiving them, the Cid redoubles his efforts to come good on his word and live up to his debt. He is moved to such desperate measures at a time when his ability to reinstate himself as a citizen in good standing is

---

<sup>6</sup> “en la glera” (l. 59)

<sup>7</sup> “Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood: . . . Seek First to Understand’ involves a very deep shift in paradigm. We typically seek first to be understood. Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They’re either speaking or preparing to speak. They’re filtering everything through their own paradigms, reading their autobiography into other people’s lives.”

<sup>8</sup> “Sharpening the Saw . . . This is the habit of renewal . . . It circles and embodies all the other habits. It is the habit of continuous improvement . . . that lifts you to new levels of understanding and living each of the habits.”

being watched up-close by several hundred soldiers. The language of the PMC illustrates his reluctance to employ such tactics, but he sees no other way

Ferlo he amidos, de grado non avrié nada  
 Con vuestro consejo, bastir quiero dos arcas. (ll. 84-5).  
*I'm doing this against my better judgement, but otherwise we would have nothing, so with your consent, let's fill two chests.*

His integrity is closely linked to his devotion and piety. He is often quoted praying to the Virgin Mary for assistance (ll. 221-25) and expressing his thanks to God every time they manage to escape the hands of their enemy unscathed.

When he deposits his young family in the Monastery of San Pedro, he insists upon paying in advance for their care, and like the good Samaritan, makes arrangements to pay for any other unforeseen expenses that may be incurred (l. 260). Granted, this is not his *own* money, since it was obtained through Rachel & Vidas, but it may as well be his own banking on the integrity of his word to pay the lenders back.

#### **d. Loyalty**

Fourth, **Loyalty**.<sup>9</sup> Rodrigo Díaz is ever loyal to the King, Alfonso VI, but undying in his loyalty to the men who sacrificed so much to fight next to him against the Moors. Although examples abound in the Romances and the CMC to illustrate this point, three particularly moving accounts point out the extent to which he both exhibited this quality and inspired it in his men.

The first account in the raid of Castejón, Rodrigo's men are ecstatic at the rewards of their efforts, yet rather than making off with the exploits, each man lays the bounty at his feet. Remember that the men who joined this campaign are employed by the Cid and depend on their winnings in war to continue their livelihood. It is stated in the Cantar, "todo esto non preçian nada" in the sense that the wealth meant more to them as a piece of the whole and as a symbol of their loyalty to their leader than as something that could make them individually or temporarily rich.

The second example is more an accumulation of the three separate times Rodrigo calculates his gains from battle and in dividing them among his men, sets apart a portion as a tribute for the King. Upon defeating the Fáriz and Galve company of Moorish soldiers, Rodrigo states his desire to rebuild the relationship between himself and the throne of Castile,

"quíerol' enbiar en don treinta cavallos,  
 todos con siella e muy bien enfrenados,  
 señas espadas de los arçones colgando" (ll. 816-19).

The synergy takes place as the King reciprocates and finally agrees to formally grant him pardon and call him back from exile.

The ultimate example of his loyalty is proven in his reliance on the King to settle the *queja* or dispute with the Infantes of Carrion. These men, in whom Rodrigo had trusted two of his most treasured possessions, that is his own daughters, stabbed him in the back. Multiple

---

<sup>9</sup> "Synergize...Synergy works; it's a correct principle. It is the crowning achievement of all the previous habits. It is effectiveness in an interdependent reality-- it is teamwork, team building, the development of unity and creativity with other human beings."

traits of his remarkable character shine brilliantly as Rodrigo measures out his response. Rather than resorting to impulse and striking in rage, he responds with patience.

“una grand ora pensó e comidió” (he pondered and reflected a great while) (l. 2828)

After sending for his daughters and finally embracing them, he promises a better future for them and sets his sights on taking the issue to the King. There is no discussion about pursuing the matter in any way inconsistent with the proper channels of authority. He sends Muño Gustioz, a trusted friend and colleague to Alfonso’s court all in proper order, including orders to kiss the hand of the King,

“por mi bésale la mano d’alma e de corazón,  
cuemo yo so su vassallo e él es mio señor.” (ll. 2904-5)

It is one thing to be loyal when the one to whom you are loyal loves you. It becomes more difficult to be loyal to one who falsely accuses you or executes judgment based on false witnesses or pursues you like an enemy and doubts your success or forces you into contracts your heart doesn’t agree with. While Alfonso VI had done all of these things, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar maintained the presence of mind to make decisions based on principles of loyalty and integrity rather than acting on raw emotion.

#### e. **Charity**

The fifth characteristic is **Charity**, exhibited magnificently in the story of the lion that escaped from its cage and frightened his sons-in-law. Despite their cowardice, their failure to protect him and their failure to keep their wits about them (“Diego Gonzalez por la puerta salió/diziendo de la boca: -- “¡Non veré Carrión!”) (ll. 2288 – 89), Rodrigo does not lash out at them or accuse them of failing to protect him. Rather than avenge or accuse, he turns to protect them, both from the lion and from the mockery of the court.

“Quando los fallaron, ellos vinieron assí sin color;  
non viestes tal juego commo iva por la cort,  
mandólo vedar mio Cid el Campeador” (ll. 2306-9)

*When [the infantes] were found, they came forth pale; you’ve never seen such a jest as was had in the court at their expense, yet the Cid el Campeador would have none of it.*

#### f. **Mercy**

Sixth, Rodrigo Díaz is **merciful**, which he exemplifies in the form of magnanimity. He treats his defeated enemy with respect and dignity.<sup>10</sup> Montaner comments, “el compartamiento del Cid con los moros es siempre clemente y moderado, lo que le granjea su agradecimiento” (443). Rodrigo is merciful to his enemy as well as those of his supposed allies who wrong him. When meeting privately with the Count of Barcelona, Remont Berenguer, he gives him three chances to eat and be reconciled. When the count finally concedes, Rodrigo gives him his freedom and the opportunity to pay him back over the space of a year.

On another occasion Rodrigo pursues Bucar, the King of Seville, all the way to the edge of the sea whereupon he calls out,

“¡Acá torna, Bucar!...saludarnos hemos e tajaremos amistad.”  
*Come back, Bucar let’s make up and forge a friendship.* (l. 2409-11)

<sup>10</sup> e.g. those defeated in Castejón (l. 518); he spares the life of the conde of Barcelona, Remont Berenguer (ll. 1025-49);

But the Moorish king would have none of that. Rather, he replies, “Confonda Dios tal amistad.” *Goddamn any such friendship* (l. 2412). At this point, having given him the chance, Rodrigo continues to pursue him and closes the deal by promptly slicing Bucar from helmet to hilt in true epic fashion. This end, however, does not discount Rodrigo’s mercy, it only serves to show that he resorted to aggressive negotiation only after exhausting all other possible avenues.

#### g. **Patience**

Lastly, Rodrigo Díaz is the model of **Patience**. His battle strategies are steps of carefully calculation. He does not rush into compromising circumstances or unnecessarily risk the lives of his loyal men. In the example of his stay in Alcocer, as he watched the enemy amass on the plains surrounding the city, his patience is precisely measured. He does not wait until his patience is expired and risk acting in desperation. He doesn’t react at the first sign of danger. He watches them, and consults his men, explaining in calm detail the strategy for the battle, gets a good night’s sleep and after giving a rousing pep talk, sallies forth to battle, butchering the enemy despite phenomenal odds (ll. 662-99).

In the tragic example of the attack on beloved daughters, he reacts slowly and cautiously. While he was sensitive enough to the possibility of something happening that he proactively sent one of his trusted advisors to follow them, yet when his fears were confirmed, he stayed in Valencia and appealed the case through the proper channels.

### IV. **Conclusion**

To be a good leader, one needs to first be a good follower. This modern axiom was understood in the CMC in the expression, “*que buen vasallo si oviese buen señor*” (l. 20) referring to Rodrigo Díaz. On top of being a great leader, in his mind, he was merely a follower, loyal to the throne of Castile, Alfonso VI. In all his relationships, interactions, victories, business transactions, and even his defeats and humiliations, Rodrigo Díaz was exemplary. Reading the CMC, the romances, and chronicles written about this Castilian soldier, one sees all seven salient characteristics of a successful and inspiring leader. These characteristics of Vision, Humility, Integrity, Loyalty, Charity, Mercy and Patience serve to catapult the legacy of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar onto the canonic stage as well as the annals of history. Not only did these characteristics make him stand out among his peers in the Middle Ages, but these same qualities made the principle work about his life the keystone of the Spanish canon, and a literary monument in western literature for almost a millennium. This is not to say he did not have defects or chinks in his armor, whatever defects he did possess only deepen the character that rises above and exhibits his true being. There are few legends (and even fewer those based in true verifiable, factual historical figures) that have managed to stand the test of time despite the weathering of the centuries.<sup>11</sup> Ulysses, Aeneas, Roland, and knight Zifar are a few of Rodrigo’s epic colleagues and some of the best known and often exploited characters. In addition, Rodrigo is inescapably compared with contemporary greats such as Fernando III. Nevertheless, he does not suffer in comparison to any of these. Rodrigo Díaz remains irreproachably balanced and unquestionably worthy.

---

<sup>11</sup> The French came up with their *neufpreux* or “nine worthies” consisting of Hector, Alexander the Great, Caesar, David, Joshua, Judas Macchabeus, Charlemagne, Arthur and Godfrey of Bouillon in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century as “champions of chivalry from the Pagan law the Old law, and the new Christian law” (O’Siodhachain).

### **Bibliography**

- Covey, Stephen. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.
- Montaner, Francisco. 1993. *El Cantar de Mio Cid*. Barcelona: Crítica.
- Menéndez Pidal, Ramón. 1944-46 *Cantar de Mio Cid*. 3 volumes. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe.
- Roberts, Wess. 1987. *Leadership Secrets of Atilla the Hun*. New York: Warner Books.
- Smith, Colin. 1994. "Toward a Reconciliation of Ideas about Medieval Spanish Epic."  
*Modern Language Review* 89, 3.622-34.
- Vaquero, Mercedes. 1990. El cantar de la Jura de Santa Gadea y la tradicion del Cid  
como vasallo rebelde. *Olifant* 15, 1.47-84.