

The Failures of Odysseus' Heroic Leadership: A Cautionary Myth

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In the paper, the authors offer preliminary insights about leadership and the reasons why looking at the Odysseus myth might not be a good idea. The focus of the paper is on the distinction between heroic behaviors and leadership behaviors and how misalignment between the two undermines the organizational mission (Nostoi). Quality of leadership is still today judged by focusing on the leader's behavior rather than the success of the mission and the effect on their followers. This leads to various possibly wrong ends such as confusion about the importance of charisma, erosion of trust, and minimizing the importance of the overall mission compared to the personal goals of leaders.

Keywords: *critique of behavior model, leadership failure, Odysseus.*

Introduction: The Odyssey heroic model and allegorical readings

As teachers and thinkers on leadership, we have often been confounded by mentioning Greek heroes and using them as examples of good leadership. These ideas came to us from both our students and our colleagues (some of whom are, and some might not be, familiar with the classics). One such frequently mentioned person is Odysseus. Since neither of us is a classics scholar

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(we are philosophers and business management professors) in order to get our thoughts in order we have set up to look for and analyze examples of Odysseus leadership achievements. We hoped this might help us to get a clearer picture of what kind of a leader he was and are his endeavors worthy, we suspect not, to teach us and others about leadership. Furthermore, we look at our text as testing the waters for possible caveats of using heroes as described in classical literature to understand, teach and practice leadership today.

This essay examines Odysseus's actions and choices as he leads his men back from Troy to Ithaca described primarily in Books IX, X, and XII of the *Odyssey*.¹ We will focus on two main themes: the distinction between heroic behaviors and leadership behaviors and how that misalignment between the two undermines the organizational mission (*Nostoi*) and causes the *death of all of Odysseus' followers*.

Odysseus has always been a heroic model since before Homer quilled the tale: the adventures of his journey, exotic Mediterranean locations, beautiful erotic seductresses, dangerous foes, feats of courage, and guile. Even into the present day:

»Television, not to mention schoolbooks and feature films such as *Ulysses*, have made Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops, the Sirens, and episodes such as the contest of the bow familiar to even the smallest children. What adventures! How poignant the story of the old sailor struggling to get home to his family! How many tasks and obstacles thrown in his way!«²

Joseph Campbell reads these adventures through Jungian glasses as the inward journey we all must make. He says:

»What followed were the *Nostoi*, 'Returns', when the masters of excellence in the world of the outer deed returned to their neglected wives, who for ten years (or, in Odysseus's instance, twenty) had been supposed to be sitting faithfully (...) at home...«³

These locales, seductions and foes were in fact part of our own internal psychic struggle to return to our authentic selves, to return home to wholeness.

A more recent reading of the *Odyssey* as allegory comes in a brilliant book by Jonathan Shay. He reads the *Odyssey* as a tale of return, *nostoi*, not to our original selves, but of war veterans scarred by what they have seen, done, and suffered. Shay sees the tale:

¹ All quotations from the *Odyssey* are from the Samuel Butler translation available at The Internet Classics Archive provided by the MIT, <http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.html> (09.06.2022).

² Jonathan SHAY, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, New York, Scribner, 2002, 3.

³ Joseph CAMPBELL, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, New York, N.Y, Penguin Books, 1976, 159.

»(...) as exactly what it says it is: the story of a soldier's wanderings and troubles as he tries to make it home. The first dozen or so chapters 'decode' Odysseus' adventures in wonderland - the most famous part of the epic - as an allegory for real problems of combat veterans returning to civilian society. These are adventures that Odysseus himself tells as a story-within-a-story, to people who resemble wealthy complacent civilians.«⁴

Shay's reading resonates with our own re-reading of Odysseus, which we have done for this essay, as a failed heroic leader:

»Today, we see our heroes as unmixed blessings, almost as though pure benevolence is part of the definition... However, the ancient Greek idea of the hero was deeply mixed. As I noted Odysseus means 'man of hate'. Achilles' name means 'he whose host of fighting men have grief' - referring to his own men as well as to the enemy's. Ancient Greek heroes were men of pain who were both needed by their people and dangerous to them. Achilles' withdrawal resulted in numberless Greek deaths. Odysseus' long return home to Ithaca caused more than seven hundred Ithacan deaths on the way or when he got there. Achilles harmed the Greek army during the war; Odysseus harmed his people after the war. They were both Greek heroes in the ancient Greek sense.«⁵

While in many quarters, these heroic qualities are the par excellence what seems desirable in leaders, a careful read of the case of Odysseus the paradigm hero, the individualistic dazzle of heroic qualities opens up the harsh truth that the hero is a disaster to their followers.

1. *What it means to be heroic and how does Odysseus fit?*

Let's begin with the question, »What does it mean to be heroic?« Looking more deeply into the notion of hero and of Greek heroism, we find:

»everything pivoted on the single element of honour and virtue: strength, bravery, physical courage and prowess. Conversely, there was no weakness, no unheroic traits, but one, and that was cowardice and the consequent failure to pursue heroic goals.«⁶

For these men, there is no social conscience, holy texts, duties beyond »one's own prowess and one's own drive to victory and power.«⁷

John Kegan, in his book, *The Mask of Command*, echoes Finley's assessment and notes that the hero displays:

⁴ Shay, *Odysseus in America...*, 2-3.

⁵ *Ibid*, 2.

⁶ M.I. FINLEY, *The World of Odysseus*, Gretna, Louisiana, Penguin Books, 1962, 28.

⁷ *Ibid*, 28.

»Disregard for personal danger, the running of risk for its own sake, the dramatic challenge of single combat, the display of life-and-death courage under the eyes of men equal in their masculinity if not social rank...«⁸

And of Odysseus as hero: »the *Odyssey* has only one proper hero, Odysseus himself. His companions are faceless mediocrities.«⁹

A hero prevailing against long odds he may be, but he is undoubtedly a lethal leader. While he may have prevailed personally, his men paid for his mistaken judgment and reckless behavior with their lives. Their Penelopes had best settle for whatever suitors camped in their courtyards. In fact, in the course of this closer reading of the *Odyssey*, we conclude that the typical heroic qualities work against sound leadership behavior. So, we can hardly concur with Moore's gushing endorsement:

»As for Odysseus, sacker of cities and liar in excelsis, he is hardly a knight gentle and pure – he is too mature for that – but if you want a man for all seasons and extreme circumstances, he is your man.«¹⁰

2. *The critical importance of mission for a leader.*

Peter Senge holds that one of the main tasks of a leader is to forge a mission-driven organization. He says that:

»Mission provides an orientation, not a checklist of accomplishments. It defines direction, not a destination. It tells the members of an organization why they are working together... Without a sense of mission there is no foundation for establishing why some intended results are more important than others.«¹¹

Senge argues the most appropriate meaning of mission is purpose or *raison d'être*. Our mission defines the very purpose of our existence, the reason why the organization exists and why we work together. Understanding the organization's mission should motivate everything that people in positions of authority do. Our critique of Odysseus follows Senge's understanding that:

»To be truly mission-based means that key decisions can be referred back to the mission – our reason for being. It means that people can and should object to management edicts that they do not see connected to the mission. It means that thinking about and continually clarifying the mission is everybody's job because, as de Geus points out, it expresses the aspirations and fundamental identity of the human community.«¹²

⁸ John KEEGAN, *The Mask of Command*, New York, NY, Penguin, 1988, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰ John Rees MOORE, *Voyaging with Odysseus: The Wile and Resilience of Virtue*, *Humanitas*, 13 (2000) 1, 103-127, 105.

¹¹ Peter M. SENGE, *The Practice of Innovation*, *Leader to Leader*, 9 (1998) 16-22, 17.

¹² *Ibid.*

In the case of Odysseus, his commitment to the heroic values over the mission to return his fellow warriors safely to Ithaca results in the death of over seven hundred of his men. The point here is not that men died in spite of Odysseus's acts of heroism to save them, *but they died because he chose to value his heroic behavior over their well-being*. He places another priority ahead of the mission. Odysseus values his fame and status as a hero above all else. He most often makes decisions based on what heroic values call for rather than what is best for his colleagues and the mission. This creates what Jim Collins calls a misalignment of action and values. Great leaders identify and correct misalignments so that actions become more and more consistent with the organizational mission.¹³

The interplay between literature, myth, story and contemporary organizational behavior theory and research yields a deeper understanding of these issues than either perspective alone.¹⁴

3. Events in Book 9: Ciconians, Lotus-eaters and Polyphemus

Odysseus and his companions face three situations in Book 9 that dictate interactions between him and his followers: (1) the battle with the Ciconians, (2) a few of his followers' brief encounter with the Lotus-eaters and, finally, (3) the fateful struggle with Polyphemus the Cyclopean. Here is the account of the attack on the Ciconians:

»When I had set sail thence the wind took me first to Ismarus, which is the city of the Cicons. There I sacked the town and put the people to the sword. We took their wives and also much booty, which we divided equitably amongst us, so that none might have reason to complain. I then said that we had better make off at once, but my men very foolishly would not obey me, so they staid there drinking much wine and killing great numbers of sheep and oxen on the sea shore.«¹⁵

¹³ Jim COLLINS, *Aligning Action and Values*, in: Frances HESSELBEIN, Paul M. COHEN (eds.), *Leader to Leader: Enduring Insights on Leadership from the Drucker Foundation's Award-Winning Journal*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999, 237-246.

¹⁴ Patrick Dobel embarked on a similar but not identical pursuit as we do here in this essay. He is interested in using »the Odyssey, as a case study to illustrate the importance of the interaction of character and mortality in political leadership.« He, too, seeks to connect the leadership behaviors in the Odyssey with contemporary leadership studies. Ultimately, Dobel seeks the connection between leadership and self-mastery in the Greek world and our own understanding of leadership. For all its virtues and there are many of them, this admirable article re-enforces dangerous confusion that mixes heroism and leadership. The two are not the same. Doble has a tendency to conflate admirable moral character traits like fortitude with heroic behavior and then heroic behavior with leadership. Please see: J. DOBEL, *Mortal Leadership in Homer's Odyssey*, *Public Integrity*, 8 (2006) 3, 215-231, 216.

¹⁵ HOMER, *The Odyssey by Homer*, Book IX, <http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.9.ix.html> (09.06.2022).

Then what Odysseus had feared and warned his men about took place. The Ciconians regrouped, gathered forces in greater numbers, ferocity and fighting skill. They counter-attacked with a heavy force early the next morning. Odysseus's men made a fight of it. The tide of battle ebbed and flowed all day but at sunset, the Ciconians finally prevailed, driving away the Greeks with heavy losses.

Odysseus commands his men to leave quickly after the raid and get on board the ship. They ignore him; instead, they eat and drink until they are set upon by the Ciconian kinsmen. He fails to lead his men to the right action because they did not listen to him.

We might wonder, »What did he do after they ignored his commands?« The text does not say. He appears not to have interfered with their celebration. Did he perhaps join in? Apparently, he did little beyond his initial command. Why? Is this related to heroic charismatic leadership style? Followers listen to the leader when they need them in danger, chaos and confusion but not otherwise?

More importantly, this raid on the Cicones was not mission related, but an example of a simple display of heroic behaviors. Odysseus did not attack to bring the crew closer to Ithaca. The point of the raid may have been plunder for glory and a show of risk-taking bravado. Or it may be some score-settling from the war at Troy. According to the *Iliad*, the Ciconians were Thracian allies who fought alongside the Trojans. Regardless, this attack did not bring the crew any closer to Ithaca. Just the opposite, many die unnecessarily and will never reach home. When Odysseus acts outside of the mission, displaying his heroic behavior, he wastes time, energy, resources and members of his crew die.

As we noted earlier, Peter Senge is particularly instructive on this point about the centrality of mission for truly effective leaders. He talks about the mission as a long-term guiding star that allows us to balance the inevitable pressures between the short term and the long term.¹⁶

One wonders what the intended short-term results of the raid were supposed to be. Could it have been to increase booty and wealth? How should we measure this against the mission of returning his men safely to Ithaca? On the face of it, even if the raid had been successful in terms of short-term results, we could still seriously question the wisdom of engaging in the raid in the first place as being out of balance – too much in favor of the short term at the expense of the long term.

Clearly, the attack on the Ciconians is an off-mission adventure, »a pirate raid« to borrow Shays' phrase. Perhaps at some point in the past (during the Trojan War), attacking them might make sense, but not now. At this point, the organization's purpose is to return to Ithaca. As leader, Odysseus must keep his followers on mission and not be distracted by other attractive but tangential courses of action. In this incident with the Cicones, the consequences of failing

¹⁶ Senge, *The Practice of Innovation...*, 17.

to do this are obvious. Of course, we might blame the followers for not listening to their leader but Odysseus put them in a bad situation in the first place and failed to lead by keeping their attention on the mission. The fact that he led them off mission may have contributed to his followers being more interested in feasting than listening to him. Once those in positions of authority compromise the mission, then everyone feels free to substitute their personal preferences for the organizational mission.

Zeus' wrath of bad storms lasts for nine days but on the tenth day, they set foot on the land of the lotus-eaters, who eat a flowery psychedelic food. After reprovisioning the ships with fresh water and getting something to eat, Odysseus sends out three of his men to explore the area and see what kind of men lived there. They stumble upon some locals fond of eating the lotus plant that is so delicious they no longer care about returning home. Odysseus *forces* the men to return even though they do not want to. He ties them up and chucks them under their rowing benches until they come to their senses. He directs the oarsmen to return to the sea and their voyage home.

His behavior here stands in contrast to other instances where he allows them more free choice. Why? They desired to stay forever, munching on that marvelous native plant, forgetting about their homeland. They had abandoned the mission, forgetful of their homeward way. So, in this instance he could not allow this. He also exerts more force with the rest of the men for the same reason. They need to stay on mission heading for home and working together. No one gets hurt and the ship moves forward.¹⁷

This theme of staying on mission versus abandoning the mission through temptations of attractiveness of alternatives repeats itself in his encounters with Circe, the Sirens and Calypso (this latter, after his men are all dead and he is on his own). Sometimes Odysseus himself initiates a return to the mission – like here among the Lotus eaters and with the Sirens and, as with Circe, sometimes his men remind him of the mission and the need to pursue it. In all of these cases, *the danger was that they would completely abandon* the voyage to return home. In these cases, both Odysseus and his men appear committed to their mission.

But when a situation presents itself as a kind of side adventure along the way, *he treats it as a bonus opportunity to demonstrate his heroic stature*. The unexamined value assumption seems to be that the pursuit for heroic glory from these temporary mission lapses does not threaten the overall mission – like above in the attack on the Cicones. This is precisely Collins' point about the misalignment between mission and core values. When there is no opportunity present for a demonstration of personal valor and glory, then the decision path is clear – act in a way to stay on mission. However, when there is an opportunity for the actualization of his heroic core value, then he makes a

¹⁷ Perhaps, this is driven by the fact that a life of lotus eating lacks the necessary heroic virtues.

misalignment decision as the mission gets a lesser priority. It will happen again in the encounter with Polyphemus. Unfortunately, Odysseus's followers must pay the tuition for this leadership lesson with their lives: that ultimately these seemingly less threatening temporary departures from the mission can be the most destructive.

Immediately after leaving the land of lotus-eaters, Odysseus and his men come upon the isle of the Cyclopeans. They can see a cave from the sea. Odysseus thinks it warrants investigation. Odysseus as leader takes his own ship and men first into danger leaving the other ships in his small fleet in safety. He picks twelve men to follow him to Polyphemus' cave. Arriving at the cave, he and his men look over the cache of cheese, goats and sheep. His men beg him to take the loot and run. He refuses to listen because he hopes that the owner: »might give me a present.«¹⁸

Unfortunately, when Polyphemus arrives, he does not see an obligation for gift giving to strangers as an attractive option. Instead, he starts eating the raiding Greeks. Through courage and cunning, Odysseus blinds Polyphemus and helps his men escape the cave with a flock of sheep. Once free of Polyphemus, Odysseus and his men return to the ship. The crew rejoiced for those who returned and wept for their fallen comrades. Odysseus quiets the men and gets them to board the rustled sheep. They put their backs to the oars and leave the harbor.

Had he left the matter thus, Odysseus might have redeemed himself somewhat as a superior leader despite the initial mistake of seeking personal gain rather than listening carefully to his followers. Unfortunately, he could not, as they say, quit while he was ahead. When the ships had gone a ways out but were still close enough for Polyphemus to hear, Odysseus mocks and jeers at him.

This so angers Polyphemus that he throws a huge rock in the direction of the ship. It lands long but its backwash pushed them back to shore. Rowing hard, his men pull the ship back to the safety of the sea. Still not satisfied, Odysseus readies another taunt for his blind and bested opponent. His followers begged and prayed for him to hold his tongue. But he would not listen to them, and instead

»shouted out to him in my rage, 'Cyclops, if anyone asks you who it was that put your eye out and spoiled your beauty, say it was the valiant warrior Ulysses, son of Laertes, who lives in Ithaca.«¹⁹

In response Polyphemus prays to his father

»Hear me, Poseidon, girdler of the earth, god of the dark hair, if indeed I be thine, and thou avowest thee my sire,--*grant that he may never come to his home, even Odysseus, waster of cities, the son of Laertes, whose dwelling is in*

¹⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey...*, Book IX.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

*Ithaca; yet if he is ordained to see his friends and come unto his well-builded house, and his own country, late may he come in evil case, with the loss of all his company, in the ship of strangers, and find sorrows in his house.*²⁰

Once again, we wonder what Odysseus' motivation for seeking out the Cyclopeans actually is. He says initially it is to »(see) proof of these men, what manner of folk they are, whether forward, and wild, and unjust, or hospitable and of god-fearing mind.«²¹ Later, however, he reveals a more selfish motive – to score *xenia*, the hospitality gifts a stranger was due, as was the custom of the time. The *xenia* demand takes some audacity on Odysseus's part. He and his men have just been caught red-handed stealing from Polyphemus. As Shay remarks:

»No learned commentator on the Cyclops episode has claimed that the customs of the ancient Mediterranean permit the uninvited strangers to walk into someone's home in his absence and eat up his food.«²²

Ultimately, he does not heed followers' request. Here we have the first instance of his followers giving him advice – take the loot and run. He does not listen because he desires the »gifts as a stranger's due«. We now see that was his original motivation. He placed his own agenda and gain ahead of that of his follower's and the mission's wellbeing. He refuses to listen to his follower's warnings. This is the reverse of the situation with the Cicionos where his men did not take his advice, but the consequences will be the same: men will die further weakening the group's ability to complete their mission.

Here Odysseus with an angry and proud heart loses control of his emotions and boasts using his own name. He does this over the objection of his men who counsel sounder actions. Odysseus, however, cannot resist taking his heroic reward – glory over the defeated enemy. It is not sufficient to have outwitted Polyphemus, the Cyclopean must know that he was beaten, beaten by a better man, a superior foe and he must know his name so that Odysseus's name will live in his heart and continue to torment him to the end of his days. This is the victory Odysseus seeks, a personal heroic victory that dooms his men and their mission. Poseidon hears Polyphemus's supplication and overtime grants his prayer. While Odysseus will survive, all of his men will die. This tendency of followers bearing the consequences of their leaders personal initiatives is not new in leadership literature. For example:

»the dark side may skew their vision of the future, or unadulterated ambition may cloud their judgment. Vision is an insight function, but charisma is not. The charismatic leader, especially one pursuing self-indulgent ends, is inclined

²⁰ *Ibid.* Our emphasis.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Shay, *Odysseus in America...*, 45.

to ignore the feedback necessary to modify goals in changing circumstances and to lose contact with followers.«²³

In short, when leaders pursue their own heroic agenda, too often the followers suffer the most.

4. Events in Book 10: Aeolian Island, the Laestrygonians and the Circe Island

Following the horrific and ultimately deadly encounter with Polyphemus, Odysseus and his men come to the Aeolian Island ruled over by King Aeolus who wed his twelve daughters to his twelve sons. Aeolus offers a full welcome and gracious hospitality for a month of feasting and rest. The King wanted to hear stories of Troy and Odysseus' adventures since. Odysseus happily obliges him. At the end of the stories, Odysseus asks the King for his help in returning home. The King, in his turn, happily obliges him.

»Moreover, he flayed me a prime ox-hide to hold the ways of the roaring winds, which he shut up in the hide as in a sack—for Jove had made him captain over the winds, and he could stir or still each one of them according to his own pleasure. He put the sack in the ship and bound the mouth so tightly with a silver thread that not even a breath of a side-wind could blow from any quarter. The West wind which was fair for us did he alone let blow as it chose; but it all came to nothing, for we were lost through our own folly.«²⁴

Odysseus and his men ride a favorable wind, sailing day and night for nine days. On the tenth day, they are so close to Ithaca, so close to completing their mission, that they can see their country folk tending the beacon fires. But: »I, being then dead beat, fell into a light sleep, for I had never let the rudder out of my own hands, that we might get home the faster.«²⁵

While Odysseus sleeps, his men start talking among themselves complaining that Odysseus was getting more than his share of both recognition and loot and vowing to do something to at least even the distribution of the goods.

»Thus they talked and evil counsels prevailed. They loosed the sack, whereupon the wind flew howling forth and raised a storm that carried us weeping out to sea and away from our own country. Then I awoke, and knew not whether to throw myself into the sea or to live on and make the best of it; but I bore it,

²³ James J. TRITTEN, David M. KEITHLY, Charismatic Leadership: Costs and Benefits, *Military Review*, 76 (1996) 1, 82-86, 84.

²⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey...*, Book X, <http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.10.x.html> (09-06.2022).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

covered myself up, and lay down in the ship, while the men lamented bitterly as the fierce winds bore our fleet back to the Aeolian island.«²⁶

At a critical moment, right when they were ready to fulfill their mission, Odysseus fell asleep. He does not see the journey through to full completion. Clearly, this is a significant lapse in judgment. What is the reason? He is too tired because, by his own admission, he had not delegated the task of steering. Assuming that only he, and he alone, was capable of steering the ship day and night set him up for failure. We know these are all experienced sailors. Instead of delegating and trusting, he tries to do it all himself. The lack of trust does him and his followers in. He does not trust them with guiding the ship and they do not trust that he will treat them fairly.

This falling asleep encourages his followers to make their own selfish, mission impeding comments and behavior out of envy and greed. Since he is not vigilant enough to lead to the very completion, then the followers, too, lose sight at the very end.

The lack of trust in his men also underlies what his men did in another way. They did not know what was in the bag. They mistakenly thought it was full of gold and silver. Why did they not know? Odysseus never told them. Worse, he »put the sack in the ship and bound the mouth so tightly with a silver thread that not even a breath of a side-wind could blow from any quarter.«²⁷ An action that likely gave rise to his men's suspicion that he was secreting it away for himself. Perhaps he thought what was in the bag was »on a need to know basis« and from Odysseus' perspective, they did not need to know. He was wrong.

Odysseus reacts to his men's stupidity by first contemplating killing himself in despair; however, he decides to endure in silence among the living. They go back to Aeolus and appeal for a do-over. Aeolus recognizes that the gods have cursed this ill-fated. He, too, like Odysseus, calculates as a strategic pragmatist and decides it is bad politics to side with those whom the gods are against. So, he sends them back to sea to face their fate without his help.

They sail on until they come to an island where they encounter the Laestrygonians who set upon them and from the cliffs above »speared them like fishes and took them home to eat them.«²⁸ Only the men on Odysseus's ship survive. Everyone else dies.

Distraught, completely demoralized and grieving for their dead companions, all of whom had survived ten years of war together with them on Troy, Odysseus and his men make land on another unknown island. It is Circe's island and they idle there in comfort and ease for over a year with no sense of urgency of returning home. Unlike the scene at the Lotus Eaters, his followers, not Odysseus, bring up the issue of getting back on mission.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Before leaving, Circe convinced Odysseus that if he sails into hell, he would be able to gain vital information on dangers to avoid on his trip home.

In hell, Odysseus seeks out Teiresias, the Theban prophet, and he gains advice on three dangers that threaten their return home: the Sirens' songs, the passage to be negotiated between Scylla and Charybdis and not eating Helios' cattle on Thrinacia Island.

5. Events in Book 12: Thrinacia Island

From the themes we have been examining, the events on Thrinacia Island are relevant to our essay.

As the ship approaches Thrinacia, Odysseus tells his men of the terrible dangers here and advises them that they should not stop on the island but row hard past it. He has been told of the death that awaits them if any of Helios' cattle are harmed. His men were deeply discouraged by this and made a case for landing and just staying overnight.

Odysseus relents, even though he suspects that some god may be working evil in this. He agrees but makes them swear a »mighty oath« that if they do put in on the island, no one will slay and eat any cattle or sheep from the island. A storm forces them to remain on the island for longer than expected. He warns them again not to touch the cattle on the island.

But for a whole month the south wind blew without ceasing. The crew ran out of things to eat from the ship and from the hunting. They were getting desperately hungry. Odysseus wanders off to pray to the gods for help. They did not grant him his prayers; instead, the gods, according to him, put him to sleep. When Odysseus returns from his nap and on the way back, he can smell the fat in the fire. Immediately, clear signs forebode that this was a bad choice by the sailors: »for the hides of the cattle crawled about, and the joints upon the spits began to low like cows, and the meat, whether cooked or raw, kept on making a noise just as cows do.«²⁹ Finally, when the ship finally sets back to sea, a great storm under Zeus' direction destroys the ship and all aboard perish except for Odysseus.

Once again at a moment of special importance of keeping the men from feasting on Helios' s cattle, Odysseus falls asleep. He blames the gods. Clearly, this is his failure not the fault of the gods to keep him awake. In the end, the rest of his men die in a storm far from home.

Mission failed.

²⁹ Homer, *The Odyssey...*, Book XII, <http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.12.xii.html> (09.06.2022).

Conclusion: Making a long story short

Odysseus's pursuit of heroic values was most often at odds with his explicit mission to return his 700 veterans to their home. Here we see an ancient example of the leader-centric behavior that plagues many organizations today. Yet still today, just as in this ancient tale, we judge the quality of leadership by focusing on the leader's behavior rather than the success of the mission and the effect on their followers.

Some may object that we now have ample guidance and warnings about more appropriate leader behavior. We would suggest otherwise for these reasons.

First, we are still confused about the importance of charisma and inspiration as unadulterated positive virtues – the essence of the heroic leadership model. Joe Raelin notes:

»Often such individuals have such heroic qualities because they're thought to persist in spite of the odds against them. They're also thought to possess particular heroic characteristics, such as courage and persistence, to face and prevail against those who would resist their noble efforts.«³⁰

Because of this, as moderns, we misread the lessons of Odysseus. As Jim Collins noted in his audio: »To be charismatic and wrong is bad combination.«³¹ The transformational leadership enthusiasts with their emphasis on inspiration are both symptom and contemporary cause of this misreading due to their confused effort to distinguish management from leadership.

Second, as we saw that Odysseus going off mission in order to pursue his own personal heroic agenda creates a lack of trust among the followers and a desire for them to imitate their leader by putting their own agendas ahead of the mission. The erosion of trust caused by those in positions of authority pursuing their own ends, whether we would categorize those ends as heroic or not, is one of the most destructive effects of leader centric entitled behavior.

Third, the focus on leader qualities regardless of the particular content misdirects our attention away from the larger issues of mission and colleagues. The mission is larger than any one individual including, and perhaps especially, the leader. True enough one of the functions of people in positions of authority is to keep the organization and its members focused on staying on mission. This means that the mission comes first, not the leader. Read almost any of the popular material on leadership and note that the vast majority of it is about »the leader« or »leadership«. The mission and organizational members may get a tangential reference.

³⁰ Joseph A. RAELIN, The Myth of Charismatic Leaders, *Training and Development Journal*, 57 (2003) 3, 46-54, 47.

³¹ Jim COLLINS, *Jim Collins - Video/Audio - Being Charismatic and Wrong Is a Bad Combination*, (2017), https://www.jimcollins.com/media_topics/BeingCharismatic.html.

Finally, readers of organizational literature are often urged to improve or increase their »leadership behaviors« as if there were some specific behaviors that were uniquely, specifically applicable only to »leaders«. The implication being the possession of these behaviors or traits ipso facto makes one a »leader«. Heroic behaviors are illustrative of the overarching fallacy.

So, what can we take away from after our re-reading of the *Odyssey*? Basically, it would seem that heroic behavior per se does not make or qualify one to be a leader in the sense that people should follow you. Finally, if you do find yourself in a position of authority, the story is not about you. It is about your organizational mission and the well-being of others.

After all is said and done, Odysseus' endeavors do seem to be worthy of use in leadership classes today but only as cautionary myths to the distinction between heroic behaviors and leadership behaviors. Further study is needed to take these ideas and see what the situation is with other classical heroes as well as to better understand the value of Odysseus myth in the context of leadership studies.

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Neuspjesi Odisejeva herojskog vođenja: upozoravajući mit

Sažetak

U članku autori pružaju preliminarne uvide o vodstvu i mogućim razlozima zašto nije dobra ideja razumijevanje vodstva na temelju mita o Odiseju. U fokusu rada je razlika između herojskog ponašanja i ponašanja prilikom vođenja i kako neusklađenost između tog dvoga potkopava misiju organizacije (*nostoi*). Kvaliteta vođenja se danas još uvijek često prosuđuje na temelju ponašanja vođe, a ne na uspješnosti ostvarivanja misije i utjecaju na sljedbenike. To dovodi do mnogih, potencijalno pogrešnih, zaključaka o važnosti karizme, o nestanku povjerenja i umanjuje važnost cjelovite misije u odnosu na osobne ciljeve vođe.

Ključne riječi: kritika bihevioralnog modela vodstva, neuspjeh vodstva, Odisej.

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