

## Of Loitering, Profit, and (Failed?) Leadership

It can be dangerous to take Odysseus at face value, as Polyphemus and the suitors discovered. Yet curiously, modern translators and commentators typically do just that, accepting Od. 9.228 (ἀλλ' ἐγὼ οὐ πιθόμην, ἧ τ' ἄν πολὺ κέρδιον ἦεν) as an honest confession of failure. Such a reading, however, fails to address key themes of the *Odyssey* and the proper meaning of κέρδιον. The hero as tester, as rival to Herakles, and as singer of his own κλέος are active subtexts to the episode.

The opening lines of the epic identify Odysseus as a man of uncommon thirst for knowledge (Od. 1.3). His desire to hear the Sirens is but the most obvious example. He tests Eumaios even though Athena has vouched for him. He risks his life to test the suitors individually. He even tests Laertes without strategic necessity. His professed motivation for journeying to Polyphemus' cave (ἐλθὼν τῶνδ' ἀνδρῶν πειρήσομαι, Od. 9.174) also evokes this theme. We should note that this is not an idle and ill-considered curiosity (Bona 1966, 82). He takes the Ismarian wine because he already knows what he will find (Od. 9.215). Moreover, Athena expressly praises his reflective and inquisitive nature as the root of her patronage (Od. 13.291-9, 330-2).

Comparison with Herakles is a constant motif in the *Odyssey* (cf. Galinsky 1972, 10-14; Clay 1983, 90-96; Schein 2002, 97-101). I suggest that this subtext is also active in the Cyclops episode. Odysseus opens with an extended description of the island and its failed potential for civilization (Od. 9.116 ff.). As would Herakles, Odysseus engages the impeding brute. His victory is not total, but the same can be said for several of Herakles' labors. More important, such an outcome would be ill-suited to Odysseus' temporary role as performer.

In book 14 (457 ff), Odysseus obtains a warm bed and mantle from Eumaios by means of a strategic tale. I suggest that a similar dynamic is operative in book 9. Odysseus' foremost need is conveyance homeward, something Alkinoos has the capacity and will to provide. He must, however, provide his true name and home to guide their ships (Od. 8.555-63). This complicates matters. Admission of identity implies an explanation for his destitute state. It also implies persuading his hosts to ignore the prophecy of Poseidon's wrath, repeated by Alkinoos at the close of Od. 8. Finally, we should note the agonistic context; Odysseus' performance as narrator arises out of the Phaeacian games. Odysseus not only has the opportunity to tell his story, but to win prizes in so doing, rewards that will ultimately outstrip his lost γέρα (cf. Od. 13.134-38).

With these themes in mind, we may return to Odysseus' claim that it would have been πολὺ κέρδιον to flee the cave (Od. 9.228). Lattimore, Fagles, Lombardo, and Powell all render this as "better", evoking moral and strategic connotations. Heubeck and Hoektra (1989 ad loc.) sense "folly" on Odysseus' part. Yet the poet habitually characterizes the companions as νήπιοι with a penchant for ἀτασθαλίη. The notion that they suddenly – and for the only time in the *Odyssey* – know the ideal course of heroic action seems highly suspect. The primary idea of κέρδος is "gain" (its connotation with "cunning" being derivative of association with verbs of cognition). Thus, on one level, Odysseus offers a candid explanation for his present, destitute state. Yet the word choice also underscores the acquisitive function of the episode, the first of several intimations that he would welcome material reward for his excellence at storytelling.

The narrative provides leverage. In advocating flight, Odysseus' companions asked him to behave like an ἄνακτις ἀνὴρ, an errant estimation of him that they share with Polyphemus (cf. Od. 9.475). In a culture where mindfulness of ἀλκή legitimized kingship (cf. Collins 1998, 71-7), he was right to stand firm. His men, however, are not the only point of comparison. The

Phaeacians had fled from the Cyclopes (Od. 6.4-10). Odysseus' tale thus signals his right to recognition. Not only he superior to his hosts for rejecting φυγή, but his victory over the Cyclopes evokes a degree of justice that the Phaeacians had failed to obtain for themselves. In this honor-bound culture, such deeds validate the abundance of gifts that will follow.

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