

THE DARK LEGACY OF ODYSSEUS

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ABSTRACT. Odysseus, traditionally considered as the archetypal hero of cunning, reveals through close textual analysis, a pattern of moral ambiguity, deceit, hybris and cruelty that challenges the Homeric ideal of heroic virtue. Far from embodying the pure honor and loyalty of earlier epic figures, Odysseus exploits strategic falsehoods, disregards communal ethics and indulges in ruthless violence, particularly in his vengeance against the suitors and disloyal servants, for instance. Drawing on ancient sources and critical modern readings, this research paper examines the Odyssean worldview through the lens of fractured heroism and post-heroic survivalism. By comparing Odysseus' leadership failures with models of shame culture outlined, the study underlines Odysseus as cynic survivor and ethically compromised agent whose legacy invites profound rethinking of the values embedded in early Greek epic regarding this type of human beings. This paper is about a guide within archaeological tourism within the context of philosophical Ithaca.

KEYWORDS: Odysseus, legacy, immorality, cynicism, democracy, West.

Introduction

Television, along with educational materials and films, has introduced even the youngest children to Odysseus' encounters with the Cyclops, the Sirens and events such as the bow contest and these seemed to be thrilling adventures. The tale of the sailor striving to return to his family was truly moving since he had so many challenges and hurdles to face along his journey.¹ Odysseus stands out among Homer's heroes as he is characterized by a range of intellectual qualities that are depicted in great depth; notably, he is the sole figure to whom adjectives prefixed with "*poly-*" are assigned.²

Odysseus is objectively a unique figure within the realm of Homeric epics and beyond. Amidst a multitude of heroes in the epic poem of Iliad, such as Achilles,

¹ Shay (2003) 3

² Kohler (2015) 876-902

Ajax the Great (Homer, *Iliad* 2.558), Diomedes (Homer, *Iliad* 2.567), Idomeneus (Homer, *Iliad* 1.145), Nestor (Homer, *Iliad* 1.248), Menelaus (Homer, *Iliad* 1.160), Agamemnon (Homer, *Iliad* 1.24), Meriones (Homer, *Iliad* 2.651), Teucer (Homer, *Iliad* 6.31) etc., he manages to leave an indelible mark of his own. In the context of Greek mythology as a whole, he holds a unique position, as evidenced by the fact that Homer dedicated an entire epic poem to him. Favored and protected by the daughter of the Oceanid Metis), the goddess Athena (Hesiod, *Theogony* 886-888), he manages to accomplish nearly any task in his own distinctive manner, establishing himself as a significant figure during the Trojan War. His cunning strategies are similarly remarkable in his quest to return to his homeland, Ithaca.

Upon reading the two epic poems attributed to Homer, it is challenging to identify any negative traits in his character. This, of course, is linked to a superficial analysis and approach to the ancient texts and it is not understood well until nowadays, what role the possible genealogical connection between Odysseus and Homer plays (Philostratus, *Heroicus* 677).³ However, even the greatest heroes exhibited certain negative aspects of their personalities such as Heracles (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* A 3.2; Euripides, *Heracles* 1130-1160)⁴ and Jason (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 4.55.1; Euripides, *Medea* 1386-1388; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* A 9.28) for example. Even the quintessential hero and illustrious Achilles had at least two vulnerabilities which were his mortal body (Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* IV 865-879) – like any mortal, even a demigod – and his heel (Statius, *Achilleid* I 133-134). This portrayal of Telemachus' father raises significant doubts regarding the almost uncritical acceptance of Homer's personal opinion, with all due respect to the esteemed poet. This serves as the primary argument for the development of the present article. The second argument pertains to the fact that there are numerous sources related to Odysseus beyond the epic poems of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The abundance of sources allows everyone without exception the right and opportunity to form a comprehensive perspective on what will ultimately be revealed as a controversial figure.

The research is grounded in the examination of both primary and secondary sources, revealing previously unknown aspects of the hero on both emotional and rational levels. The sources deliberately focus on ancient Greek authors rather than Latin ones, as the latter are expected to possibly hold a negative bias not only towards Odysseus but also towards other Homeric heroes. This is substantiated by the close relationship between the Latins and Aeneas, the son of the mortal An-

³ Loeb Classical Library (2003) 322

⁴ Topostext (2019A)

chises and the goddess Aphrodite who escaped the fall of Troy and eventually settled in what is now well known as Italy (Homeric Hymns, Aphrodite 191-198; Homer, *Iliad* 20.306-307; Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.1-7).

It is noteworthy that despite a shared foundation of mythological themes and motifs which encompassed ideas, patterns and concepts familiar to the public,⁵ the overall perception of Odysseus remained unfavorable. This can be attributed to the observation that the source material for the plays, the "*Odyssey*", was not as widely recognized in ancient times as the *Iliad*.⁶ The anti-Odysean tradition has its roots already in the epic cycle⁷ and even philosophers like Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Xenophanes etc. supported it.⁸ At this point, it is important to mention that there is no attempt to create prejudice against Odysseus rather than to capture his true psychological inner world which is timeless, as it has consistently manifested and been applied globally, from his era to the present day.

Odysseus vs Penelope

Greek mythology offers numerous examples that encapsulate the ancient Greeks' perception of the Celestial Aphrodite (Plato, *Symposium* 180c-181d; Xenophon, *Symposium* 8.9), representing beauty and absolute love, on philosophical level. These aspects ultimately lead to the spiritual and overall elevation of humanity towards divinity. Notable examples include Penelope (Homer, *Odyssey* 1.328-329), renowned for her unwavering faithfulness to Odysseus; Laodamia (Apollodorus, *Epitome* 3.30; Virgil, *Aeneid* 440-448; Ovid, *Heroides* 13.151-164),⁹ who chose the dense darkness of Hades alongside her husband Protesilaus over the sunlight without him; Hero (Ovid, *Heroides* 19.207-210; Virgil, *Georgics* 3.258-263), who drowned in the sea after her beloved Leander was swept away by the waves to a tragic end; Euadne (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* C 7.1; Euripides, *Supplices* 980-1071; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.447),¹⁰ who willingly perished in flames, unable to bear the death of Capaneus when he was struck by Zeus' lightning; and perhaps the most remarkable case is that of Alcestis (Euripides, *Alcestis* 280-284), who volunteered to sacrifice herself in place of king Admetus, in order to appease the goddess Artemis. Throughout his life, Odysseus never honored the unwavering faith of Penelope, fully implementing the strategies of Pandemos Aphrodite (Plato, *Symposium* 180d-181c; Xenophon,

⁵ Lamari (2010) 119-120; Segal (1986) 49-50

⁶ Sommerstein (1996) 352-353

⁷ Stanford (1964) 83-86

⁸ Ibid. 90-101, 108-117

⁹ Topostext (2019A)

¹⁰ Topostext (2019A)

Symposium 8.9), coming in complete contrast with the philosophy of absolute love linked to Urania Aphrodite. Penelope's unwavering loyalty to her missing husband over the course of two decades, reflects her admirable character which stands in contrast to Odysseus' value. She expresses to the suitors, "*I wither away in my yearning for Odysseus*" (Homer, *Odyssey* 19.136-197).

Firstly, the fact that he spent a full period of seven years on the island of Calypso is a compelling argument itself. Odysseus only left the goddess when he was commanded to do so by Zeus, following the encouragement of his daughter, the goddess Athena (Homer, *Odyssey* 1.45-50). Secondly, Odysseus does not refuse to engage similarly with another goddess, Circe (Hesiod, *Theogony* 1011-1014), the daughter of the Titan Helios. The son resulting from this union, Telegonus, will eventually kill his own father (Homer, *Odyssey* 10.333-335; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca Epitome* 7.36-37),¹¹ unaware of each other's identities, possibly within a context of retribution of justice since there is no reason to assume that Circe was being influenced by sexual motives.¹² The legendary Odysseus must ultimately atone for the numerous occasions when the gods favored him. His humbling descent may be essential for the restoration of moral equilibrium. Consequently, the tragic figure of Odysseus is now devoid of divine protection, not due to any malevolence on the part of the gods but because he is in search of redemption for his past actions¹³ which are going to be analyzed within this research article.

Thirdly, Odysseus journeys to the realm of the Thesprotians where he weds their queen, Callidice (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca Epitome* 7.34-35). Although the narrative involving the ship travelling is not explicitly referenced as foreshadowed in *Odyssey* (Homer, *Odyssey* 19.270-299), it is reasonable to assume that this aspect was a crucial component of the broader Thesprotian-Telegonian tradition which likely influenced the later Cyclic Telephony. Moreover, the notable absence of a male monarch in the Thesprotians' kingdom suggests that the Thesprotian-Telegonian tradition intentionally sought to establish circumstances that would allow Odysseus to settle permanently in the land of the Thesprotians. The discussion regarding whether Odysseus resided permanently or for an extended period among the Thesprotians is further supported by the fact that, following the conflict with the Brygians and the death of Callidice, Polypoites, Odysseus' son with Callidice, ascends to the throne. Taking into account that Polypoites must have been of sufficient age to assume leadership, this serves as an *argumentum ex silentio* regard-

¹¹ Topostext (2019A)

¹² McClymont (2008) 24

¹³ Kalamara (2020) 25-26

ing Odysseus' prolonged stay in Thesprotians' territory. The circumstances surrounding Callidice's demise remain unclear, yet one might associate it with Odysseus' departure. The death of Callidice, occurring after Odysseus' near defeat in battle – where Athena aids the Thesprotians and Apollo's intervention brings the conflict to a close – emphatically underscores his failure as a “Hero of the Land”, as he is unsuccessful in combat, he lacks the leadership qualities necessary to assume full command within a strategic context. This is evidenced in the *Iliad*, where he acts as a mere executor of Agamemnon's orders who utilizes his cunning. At the end of the day, he is unable to enjoy a fulfilling life alongside Callidice and the significant aspects of this inland journey include Odysseus' marriage to Callidice and the birth of a new son. Both the Thesprotian-Telegonian narrative and the Cyclic Telegony highlight Odysseus' disinterest in Penelope. In contrast, the *Odyssey* minimizes Odysseus' extramarital relationships, as he consistently thinks of Penelope and Ithaca and there are no children from his romantic escapades that would overshadow Telemachus' status, as Odysseus' legitimate heir.¹⁴ Finally, it is worth noting the tale of Odysseus' love for Polymele, the daughter of Aeolus, during his stay on the island of the god of winds.¹⁵

Odysseus vs Palamedes

The name of Nauplius' son, Palamedes, is not recorded in any of the Homeric epics. Strabo (*Geographica* 8.6.2) believes that his existence is a creation of later poems, following the completion of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. However, Philostratus (*Heroicus* 43-44) is noted for his insistence that Homer was well aware of Palamedes' presence during Odysseus' era,¹⁶ deliberately sidelining him in order to glorify the Ithacan king.¹⁷ The conflict between Palamedes (Philostratus, *Heroicus* 33.2) and Odysseus began shortly before the Trojan War¹⁸ when Odysseus was initially reluctant to participate and feigned madness. Palamedes exposed his ruse by pretending to threaten the infant Telemachus which compelled Odysseus to admit his deception and join the Achaean forces in Troy (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca Epitome* 3.7). Odysseus was therefore forced to participate in the Trojan War, leaving both his wife and son behind (Homer, *Odyssey* 11.447-449). The ingenuity and intelligence of Palamedes has been noted since ancient times, as he was renowned for

¹⁴ Tsagalis (2008)

¹⁵ Topostext (2019B); Loeb Classical Library (2010) 44

¹⁶ Kirby-Hirst (2014) 76

¹⁷ Woodford (2013) 164

¹⁸ Fernandez-Cano/Fernandez Guerrero (2011) 525

his rhetorical skills, military strategies, the invention of words and numbers (Philostratus, *Heroicus* 33.1-11),¹⁹ as well as various innovations that facilitated daily life during that era.²⁰

The popularity of Palamedes was such that a narcissistic character like Odysseus could not tolerate such a reality. The incident mentioned earlier between the two was certainly not the only one. When the Achaeans arrived in the plains of Troy, Odysseus suggested that the army should hunt wolves for food. Observant as he was, Palamedes concluded that the wolves would lead to the spread of plague. It is therefore not surprising that the son of Laertes was lurking to eliminate Palamedes at the first opportunity. Subsequently, Palamedes imposed a specific regimen of diet, exercise and hygiene for all the warriors to reduce the chances of plague spreading within the army. As a result, the Achaeans survived, something which would not have been the case, had they followed Odysseus' naive advice (Philostratus, *Heroicus* 33.21).²¹

The ongoing vigilance regarding the procurement of supplies for the Achaean soldiers had led to a new conflict between them. Odysseus travels to Thrace with the aim of gathering corn; however, his return proves to be fruitless and results in a complete failure. In contrast, Palamedes returns with abundant supplies.²² From that point onward, Odysseus devises a scheme to oust Palamedes who was artfully accused of treachery by Odysseus. He drafts a letter containing false information, claiming that Priam, the king of Troy, promises a substantial amount of gold as a reward for Palamedes' defection. This letter was secretly placed by Odysseus, along with a golden cup, in the grain sacks of his rival.²³ Palamedes defended himself based on the truth (Philostratus, *Heroicus* 33.34-36)²⁴ – a central notion also in the stories of Achilles and Ajax – but this was insufficient and the hero was nonetheless condemned to death by stoning after Agamemnon's order, with Achilles absent from the trial. Other versions state that Palamedes was drowned by Odysseus and Diomedes (Pausanias, *Phocis* 31.2) or that these two men dropped him in a well, pretending that they had found gold and they wanted to share it with him.²⁵ Last but not least, Palamedes had his neck pierced by an arrow from Paris while the Phrygians finished him off with their spears.²⁶

¹⁹ Topostext (2019A); Topostext (2019C); Loeb Classical Library (1913) 400

²⁰ Bassino (2021) 41-45

²¹ Cantrell (2011)

²² Topostext (2019D)

²³ Topostext (2019A); Rose/March (2016) 1099

²⁴ Biesecker-Mast (1994) 149-151

²⁵ Topostext (2019E)

²⁶ Frazer (1966) 156

While the ancient sources (Plato, *Phaedrus* 261b-261c; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 13.34-60; Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.81-93) in general, adopt the false accusations of Odysseus, there is simultaneously an acceptance about Palamedes' caliber as written above such as his invention of the dice he dedicated to the temple of the goddess Tyche (Pausanias, *Corinth* 20.3), the invention of the numbers and his rhetoric (Plato, *Republic* 7.522d; Plato, *Phaedrus* 261d). This argument is also supported by other ancient writers like Gorgias,²⁷ Xenophon (*Cynegeticus*, 1.11), Aeschylus (Palamedes, fr. 181-182), Euripides²⁸ and Sophocles.²⁹ The silence of Homer is indicative of the fact that the Homeric epics commence with the final year of the war. Homer evidently did not want to diminish the reputation of Odysseus (Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 4.16)³⁰ and it is not a coincidence that all three tragedians wrote plays titled after the eponymous hero.

Odysseus vs Ajax the great

It is no coincidence that there is a negative view of Odysseus in many cases and Sophocles' "Ajax" moves in this direction.³¹ Apart from Homer, the image of Odysseus was not favorable.³² Epicharmus treated the knavish Odysseus as a frequent target of his mythological comedies.³³ The gigantic figure of Ajax – literally and metaphorically – cannot be neglected in order to fully understand his essence.³⁴ Among the men, the one who stood out was Telamonian Ajax while Achilles stayed angry, since he was far the best of all of them (Homer, *Iliad* 2.768-769). Ajax, as Pindar asserts, was next to Achilles, "κράτιστος" of those who went to Troy (Pindar, *Nemean* 7.27) while his beauty and the work of his hands surpassed all other Danaans, after the blameless son of Peleus (Homer, *Iliad* 17.279-280). Ajax was most famously known as the "ἔρκος Ἀχαιῶν", the bulwark of the Achaeans. The *Iliad* employs this unique epithet for Ajax three times, always in apposition with his name (Homer, *Iliad* 3.229, 7.211). In the *Iliad*, Ajax is the "summoned" warrior and in pitched battle, comrades look to Ajax, calling on him for aid when they become imperiled (Homer, *Iliad* 7.179, 11.465-471). He is "μέγας" (=Great), "πελώριος" (Homer, *Iliad* 7.211), (=huge) and in his most celebrated epithet, "ἔρκος Ἀχαιῶν" (=bulwark of

²⁷ Kalligas (2025)

²⁸ Walker (1920) 26

²⁹ Loeb Classical Library (1996) 242-246

³⁰ Kakridis (1986) 93.

³¹ Hubbard (2000) 315

³² Lang (1910) 188-196

³³ Mahaffy (1874) 265

³⁴ Wigodsky (1962) 149

the Achaeans) (Homer, *Iliad* 3.229, 6.5, 7.211), the *Iliad* manages to capture his massive size as well as his military function. Often likened to the war god, Ajax even strides like Ares (Homer, *Iliad* 7.208), carrying his shield into battle “ἥϋτε πύργον” (=like a tower), suggesting the paradoxical image of an advancing fortress (Homer, *Iliad* 7.219-223).

Along with Achilles, their armor is not simply functional but serves as an extension of their character as avatars of defense and offense respectively. Whereas Ajax carries the gigantic Mycenaean body-shield, Achilles wields the Pelian ash spear. Whereas Ajax is identified by his shield, the ashen spear is Achilles' exclusive purview.³⁵ Achilles' and Ajax's isolation is a direct result of their exceptional heroic characters. For if Achilles was left alone to fight with the Trojans they would not even for a little, hold off the swift-footed demigod. For even before now they would tremble whenever they saw him and now, when his heart is grieved and angered for his companion's death, there is fear that against destiny he may storm their fortress (Homer, *Iliad* 20.26-27). Conversely, Ajax is the unrivalled Achaean defensive fighter who alone, without Achilles, defends the ships against Hector's fire (Homer, *Iliad* 15.500-513). From Books 7 through 16 of the *Iliad*, as Hector makes steady advances against Achaean positions, pressing them back against their beached ships, only Ajax leads the defense.

In Achilles' absence, Ajax alone stands against Hector and the Trojans as they make their deepest incursion into the Achaean camp and force the Greek army back against its ships. In this moment, Ajax fights as the indefatigable soldier, warding off destruction as he leaps from deck to deck of the Greeks' ships (Homer, *Iliad* 15.676). In stature, Ajax is a colossal figure, standing head and shoulders above other warriors (Homer, *Iliad* 3.225-227). In the *Iliad*, it is mentioned that Achilles and Ajax placed their huts at each end of the Achaean camp because they were the most powerful warriors and therefore, could occupy the most vulnerable positions (Homer, *Iliad* 11.7-9). He is the fighter who sweats (Homer, *Iliad* 16.110), who consistently exhorts and reproaches comrades and serves as a rallying point for his companions (Homer, *Iliad* 6.5-8, 15.675-688). When Trojans surround wounded Odysseus for instance, Menelaus summons Ajax and they rescue him (Homer, *Iliad* 11.485-486). Menelaus immediately considers Ajax; he is the first person to come to his mind. The hero's willingness to make sacrifices exemplifies a selfless disposition which is regarded as commendable moral conduct. In contrast, the trickster's self-serving actions diverge from ethical standards.³⁶

³⁵ Carver (2018) 38

³⁶ Zielinski (2020) 181

Ajax is in fact a figure of equitable disposition and a strategist who apprehends the tide of battle and then implements a plan of action. In the embassy to Achilles, Ajax demonstrates a keen sensitivity to Achilles' mood and is able to articulate his case and to move Achilles where Phoenix and Odysseus could not (Homer, *Iliad* 9.643-645). Moreover, Ajax demonstrates a commander's voice on the battlefield as he is heard in the midst of the throng, marshaling and directing units in combat (Homer, *Iliad* 356-360). The awe he inspires is so immense that the scene with the struggle between Odysseus and Ajax must be staged (Homer, *Iliad* 23.700-739). Just as in the battle between Ajax and Hector, Homer aims to assist the weaker party (Homer, *Iliad* 7.244-302).

One of the most discussed topics of the Trojan War is the conflict between Ajax and Odysseus regarding who would inherit Achilles' weapons after his death (Homer, *Odyssey* 11.545-551). It is noteworthy that Ajax, the son of Telamon and first cousin of Achilles, was regarded as the bravest and strongest hero after the son of Peleus and Thetis, making significant contributions to the war, as written above. While Ajax awaits the natural progression of events without fanfare, Odysseus once again exhibits an obsessive tendency and demands Achilles' weapons. Although there are various accounts regarding how the immortal arms came to be in Odysseus' possession, the most recognized involves Nestor's suggestion where the Achaeans seek the opinion of the Trojans, as theoretically impartial judges regarding the two heroes. Following espionage, as recounted in the epic poem of the *Little Iliad*,³⁷ a conversation between two Trojan women concluded that Odysseus is the more deserving, as he remained and fought whereas Ajax merely carried Achilles' lifeless body, possibly implying a hint of cowardice. At this juncture, numerous and diverse questions come to the surface. Proclus' summary of the *Little Iliad* takes up the narrative which says that on the advice of Athena, Odysseus was awarded the prize and that this caused Ajax to go mad, attack the livestock and commit suicide. This has to do with Ajax's rejection of the help of the goddess Athena as he did not accept it and urged her to help the other Achaeans (Sophocles, *Ajax* 760-777). One side of the coin is indeed identified with hubris but the other side of the coin, demonstrates the correctness of his words because like his cousin, Achilles, he was never defeated.

King Nestor of Pylos does not affirm the title of wise man for the second time during the Trojan War. The first instance occurred during the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon where neither he nor the entire army deemed Achilles to be wrong (Homer, *Iliad* 1.248-317). However, he succumbed to the fear instilled

³⁷ The Online Medieval & Classical Library (1995)

by Agamemnon's scepter and failed to choose what was just and right. For this reason, Achilles cannot be considered as egocentric since he symbolizes the sun of justice³⁸ which the Achaeans persistently conceal. The second instance is related to Ajax where, despite knowing that Achilles' weapons rightfully belong to him, Nestor refrains from taking a clear and fair stand – as does the army one more time – likely due to possible internal discord, taking into consideration that Agamemnon, Odysseus and Diomedes form a separate alliance within the Achaean forces. Instead, he emphasizes the positioning of the enemies, thereby indirectly supporting Odysseus. Furthermore, the question arises as to whether the opinions of only two individuals from the opposing camp should be seriously examined and whether they can be considered objective. The answer to this question, using simple reason, cannot be affirmative. The envy which brings Ajax's downfall can be attributed not only to Odysseus but to the Greek army as well.³⁹ Another aspect of this incident is when Odysseus avoids responsibility by telling Ajax in Hades that Achilles' weapons were placed there by the gods as a reward for the misfortunes of the Achaeans (Homer, *Odyssey* 11.555-556) and he wishes he had not won this match, where the Trojan children and Athena were the judges (Homer, *Odyssey* 11.547-549).

Ajax's response to this incident exemplifies the grandeur of both reason and emotion. The great hero turns away from potential threats, such as arrows and spears which Odysseus and the others could not control, focusing solely on preserving the honor of the deceased body of his beloved cousin. This indicates a blend of logic and emotion, demonstrating that their combination surpasses any imminent risk of death, even if it is dishonorable. Therefore, Ajax cannot be accused of cowardice, a fact largely supported in the *Iliad*. The Achaeans pray for Ajax to confront Hector in direct combat, rather than Odysseus who is incapable of facing men like Hector, let alone stronger ones like Memnon (Aeschylus, *Fragments* 126a),⁴⁰ the demigod son of the goddess Eos. Where was the eloquent Odysseus then (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 13.59-72)? Odysseus was accused of abandoning his position and going to a place where the battle would not present any difficulty when he saw Hector, Sarpedon, or Aeneas somewhere (Philostratus, *Heroicus* 34.3). Furthermore, when Hector was on the verge of destroying the Achaean fleet which would signify their inability to return home and thus their ultimate defeat, it was Ajax who saved the day with his unparalleled bravery and strength (Homer, *Iliad* 15.653-746). If the offense of the Achaeans is represented by Achilles, then the

³⁸ Lygeros (2012)

³⁹ Most (1985) 152

⁴⁰ Nagy (2023)

defense of the Achaeans and consequently their survival, is embodied by Ajax and of course, not by Odysseus for sure. Similarly, the pride he took in the conquest of Troy must be reconsidered, as on the one hand, the Trojans could not have been so naive regarding the Wooden Horse, or it could have been something entirely different (a wooden siege engine or hidden wooden ships of the Achaeans). On the other hand, Achilles had already slain all their formidable opponents who could defend Troy, thus the city would have fallen inevitably, like a ripe fruit in the end. Conversely, cowardice is a trait that characterizes Odysseus and there is ample evidence to support this claim. In addition to the previously mentioned incident where Odysseus proved unable to assume a leadership role in particularly grim circumstances, Agamemnon himself criticizes him as coward and scheming. He declines Diomedes' urging to assist Nestor who was in immediate danger, opting instead to retreat to the Achaean ships (Homer, *Iliad* 8.93-98).

This scene of Ajax however, conceals a much deeper symbolism. Ajax does not merely transport the body of Achilles; he mourns the fact that with the hero's demise, the value system he fully embraces, begins to waver. This system stands in stark contrast to the Odyssean worldview which emphasizes stability in unchanging eternal principles, honesty, directness, integrity, self-respect, respect for others and the pursuit of truth and beauty, ultimately aiming for "*eudaimonia*" rather than mere happiness.

Concerning the specific incident between Ajax and Odysseus, later generations studying the *Iliad*, recognized the excessive injustice faced by the son of Telamon, a sentiment echoed by prominent figures of considerable influence. Indicative examples are from the one hand Pindar who argues that unfortunately, the deceit and falsehood of Odysseus triumphed over the crystalline Ajax (Pindar, *Nemean* 8.23-27) and on the other hand, Socrates who in turn, expressed his desire to meet both Ajax and Palamedes in the afterlife, as their earthly lives had ended due to unjust judgment (Plato, *Apology* 41b).

According to Ajax, an individual who does not come from a respectable family cannot achieve excellence, regardless of their conduct. In Ajax's perspective, nobility encompasses both one's lineage and one's worth. The character of Odysseus at the conclusion of Ajax exemplifies a leadership model that contrasts with the aristocratic perspective.⁴¹ Several times in Sophocles' play, the goddess blames him

⁴¹ Paillard (2020) 69

for his cowardice.⁴² Consequently, Odysseus does not conform to the Greek aristocratic ideal of the “*noble hero*” which allows for a connection between him and characters of lesser status.⁴³

In the grand competition between Odysseus and Ajax for Achilles’ armor, it is believed that Athena played a significant role in determining the result of the contest in multiple ways (Homer, *Iliad* 23.782-783). Vase paintings from the early 5th century depict the decision being made through a vote overseen by the goddess.⁴⁴ Due to the support of Ajax’s aristocratic allies, Athena’s assistance for Odysseus is met with strong disapproval (Sophocles, *Ajax* 74-126). The *Iliadic* Ajax makes an appearance once more when Teucer reminds Agamemnon of how he single-handedly defended the Achaean ships against Hector (Sophocles, *Ajax* 1273-1281): “*He stood his ground, one man alone and saved you when the flames were licking the ships’ decks and Hector was leaping high over the trench and would have boarded us*”. The choice between the two heroes takes on broader symbolic connotations, as expressed by Ajax himself (Sophocles, *Ajax* 441-446): “*One thing I think I know. If Achilles had been still alive to judge the contest for the armor and award it as a prize for bravery, no one would have taken it but me. But as it was, my bravery meant nothing to the sons of Atreus, so they gave my armor to a shameless cheat*”. In the end, Odysseus gives Achilles’ armor to his son, Neoptolemus⁴⁵ but now, there is no point since Ajax is dead because of him. This incident was particularly popular in pottery and not only in that.⁴⁶ Ajax’s suicide marks the decline of the aristocratic values of progress and the establishment of the early concept of socialism.⁴⁷

Moving on the same wavelength, Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1402a) writes about making the worse argument appear the better one and Aristophanes underlines the two causes; the better, whatever it may be and the worse which by maintaining what is unjust, overturns the better (Aristophanes, *Nubes* 112-115). The character of Odysseus is therefore eminently problematic with terms like curiosity, cleverness, narrative skills⁴⁸ corresponding to cunning and demagoguery. Besides, all of humanity speaks of Odysseus’ deceits (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.19-20). The composite character depicted in plays such as this one, reveals a hero distinctly equipped to

⁴² Goldhill (1986) 159

⁴³ Paillard (2020) 72

⁴⁴ Suksi (1999) 65

⁴⁵ The Online Medieval & Classical Library (1995)

⁴⁶ Kunst (1980) 137

⁴⁷ Alcorn (1994) 163

⁴⁸ Marincola (2007) 1

orchestrate political schemes, often unscrupulous, yet consistently adept at manipulating situations and emotions.⁴⁹ His complimentary Homeric epithet “*polytropos*” is intricately linked to the sophistic technique of enhancing the weaker argument while diminishing the stronger one.⁵⁰

The lack of skill in speaking is not identified with the lack of essence. On the contrary, depravity and dishonesty are linked to public discourse. Virtuous actions serve as the hallmark of an admirable hero whereas eloquence may signify the traits of a deceitful manipulator who exploits the base and envious masses. For the aristocratic ideal, noble birth alone is not enough but the overall personality (“*μύθων τε ῥητῆρ’ ἔμεναι πρηκτῆρά τε ἔργων*”) (Homer, *Iliad* 9.443). Ajax’s suicide means that he was deprived of the honor of Telamon, to conquer Troy (Euripides, *Cyclops* 198-202) and the end of these kind of principles and values.

Via ancient tragedies, the real face of Odysseus can be seen since he transformed admirable traits of mythology into despicable flaws of modernity. Ajax, like his cousin Achilles, represents a quintessential Homeric character, embodying the tragic essence. He symbolizes Athens’ unwavering resolve to persevere, uphold its honor and defend itself alongside its allied city-states.⁵¹ The difference between heroes like Achilles and Ajax compared to others like Odysseus, is more than obvious.⁵² It is a mistake when excellence (*arête*) and practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is limited to specific frameworks or that Odysseus’ actions would have been just as successful in everyday life,⁵³ as these kinds of aspects should be analyzed and evaluated in the most difficult moments and periods of a person’s life and for better or worse, war is one of them. The pattern of the heroic code is something that Odysseus cannot embrace.⁵⁴ Whereas Achilles characterizes Odysseus as an unscrupulous rhetorician, he assures Ajax that he is forthright like himself (Plato, *Hippias Minor* 369d-371d) where their disparate personalities contrast with the consonance of spirit between Achilles and Ajax. Although Odysseus speaks first and at length, he also accomplishes least, provoking Achilles’ most negative response and most decided withdrawal from the war (Homer, *Iliad* 9.225-429).

Following the Athenian victory at the sea-battle of Salamis, the association of Athens with the Ajax myth evolved beyond merely serving as a rationale for territorial claims. Athens strategically utilized its connection to Ajax, the Panhellenic champion of Greek freedom, to assert its dominance in the geopolitical landscape

⁴⁹ Worman (2012) 326

⁵⁰ Sipiora/Baumlin (2002) 25

⁵¹ Pozzi/Wickersham (1991) 115

⁵² Nagy 1979, 34-41; Valk (1952) 269

⁵³ Suvak (2017) 8

⁵⁴ Finkelberg (1995) 1

following the Persian Wars. In the years following Xerxes' expulsion from Greece, city-states began to draw parallels between the Persian War and the Trojan War. The epic nature of contemporary Greeks facing an ancient eastern adversary naturally invited such comparisons, leading city-states to perceive their conflict with Persia as a continuation of the battle against Troy.⁵⁵

Looking to his performance in the *Iliad*, it is easy to imagine why 5th century Athens might find in Ajax a Panhellenic symbol for its leadership in the struggle against Persia. As a formidable non-Greek enemy, the Persian Empire became equated with the Trojans.⁵⁶ What is more, as one of two leading city-states who refused to betray Greece, Athens could link its resistance to Persia with Ajax's opposition to Hector. It could then envision its defense of Greece aboard triremes as the contest of Ajax beating back Hector from the Achaean ships. Perhaps it was this idea that inspired the Athenians, shortly before the sea-battle of Salamis, to offer prayers and to dispatch a trireme to bring Ajax and Telamon from the island as allies in the upcoming engagement (Herodotus, *Histories* 8.64.1; Philostratus, *Heroicus* 35.16-18). In this dire moment, Athens desperately needed an Ajax on the deck of its ships. Having dedicated a trireme to him after their victory, the Athenians understood that Ajax was physically present in battle and intervened on their behalf (Herodotus, *Histories* 8.121).

Academics have thus far opted to interpret Aeschylus' depiction of Odysseus in alignment with this prevailing trend; Aeschylus expresses a disapproval of Odysseus' character traits, consequently portraying him in a negative light in his works.⁵⁷ Odysseus' previous existence is critiqued from Plato, as one characterized by self-inflicted hardships and struggles stemming from his ambition and quest for acknowledgment.⁵⁸ By opting for the existence of a private individual who focuses on his own affairs, Odysseus aligns himself with the politically detached aristocrat typical of the late 5th and early 4th centuries. Plato emphasizes the importance of first examining the essence and general characteristics of an object before forming a specific judgment (Plato, *Laws* 2.668b). While success holds considerable importance, the manner in which it is achieved is of significant relevance.⁵⁹ During the 5th century, Odysseus' reputation experienced a decline. While he is portrayed as a largely admirable hero in the Homeric epics, dramatists often depicted him as

⁵⁵ Carver (2018) 20

⁵⁶ Carver (2018) 24; Boedeker (2001) 125-126; Georges (1994) 61-65

⁵⁷ Mikellidou (2016) 341; Stanford (1964) 15

⁵⁸ Colocontes/Groumouti (1992A) 187

⁵⁹ Fuqua (1991) 49

a mercenary and morally questionable figure whose cunning disguises and manipulative rhetoric illustrate the potential pitfalls of persuasive communication. It is widely recognized that in tragic literature, Odysseus is characterized in this way and is often linked to the sophists.⁶⁰ During the 5th and early 4th centuries BC, Athens exhibited a notable balance amidst the sociopolitical conflicts between the democratic and egalitarian aspirations of the majority of its citizens and the elitist priorities of an aristocracy that had recently lost its formal power yet remained essential for the effective governance of the city-state and Ajax is the epicenter. Justice was ultimately served in the Greeks' perception and Achilles' weapons were awarded to Ajax, exactly as it should have been (Pausanias, Attica 35.4).

The conclusion drawn is that, similar to the case of Palamedes, Odysseus fails to recognize the value of the lives of his fellow warriors, let alone anyone else, in order to secure his own interests. As written above, he acknowledges his mistake, albeit belatedly, as he hands over Achilles' weapons to his son, Neoptolemus.⁶¹ However, the damage has already been done and for this reason, Odysseus mentally identifies with the Titan Epimetheus, as he reflects correctly after his action. This is further supported by his desire for the deceased Ajax to be buried following his suicide (Sophocles, Ajax 1332-1369). This action taken by Odysseus certainly cannot restore Ajax to life, nor does it in any way justify his reckless desire to survive by any unethical means.

Odysseys vs Philoctetes

In Sophocles' tragedy "*Philoctetes*", an additional negative aspect of Odysseus' character is depicted. Odysseus, theoretically prioritizes the common good over his own honor, showing indifference to negative perceptions if it aids in persuading Philoctetes to join the effort at Troy (Sophocles, Philoctetes 79-85). This sharply contrasts with heroic figures like Ajax who regard honor as an ultimate value that must be safeguarded at any expense. His overt reliance on falsehood and deception, along with his preference for rhetoric over tangible deeds, is inconsistent with the conduct expected of a conventional hero. The character of the Homeric Odysseus was already marked by such ambiguity, a theme that Sophocles also explores.⁶² His frequent employment of terminology associated with deception or falsehood highlights a specific aspect of Odysseus' behavior, capturing the audience's attention.⁶³

⁶⁰ Worman (1999) 35

⁶¹ The Online Medieval & Classical Library (1995)

⁶² Ribeiro-Ferreira (1980) 120

⁶³ Greengard (1987) 18

To transport Philoctetes who possesses the poisonous arrows of Heracles, soaked in the lethal blood of the Lernaean Hydra, from Lemnos to Troy, Odysseus employs the young Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, without any moral hesitation, to persuade him to join their cause. When Odysseus brings Neoptolemus from the island of Skyros (Homer, *Odyssey* 11. 506-509), he admits that he uses words to deceive, supposedly for the common good (Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 108-109). Specifically, the claim that Neoptolemus allegedly opposed all the Achaeans will convince Philoctetes, according to Odysseus, to assist. While Neoptolemus has received the bow of the wounded hero, his inherent inclination towards truth, prevails. He returns the bow to Philoctetes, revealing the truth to him. Neoptolemus is thus deemed a worthy descendant of Aeacus, Peleus and Achilles, as he continues the genealogical legacy of virtue, unparalleled in all of ancient Greek literature, within such a genealogical length. The situation of Neoptolemus may be more challenging than that of his father, as Achilles possessed an inherent inclination towards truth and was also educated by the centaur Chiron whereas his son, relied solely on the first aspect. The upbringing of Achilles & similar personalities in general, was such that he would resist habits of evil mortals (Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Aulis* 925-930). The issue of honor is evident here as well. Just as Ajax committed suicide because he did not take Achilles' weapons, the same will happen to Philoctetes if Odysseus succeeds (Sophocles, *Ajax* 441-446; *Philoctetes* 965-974).

Odysseus possesses several characteristics that render him distinctly unheroic. The most apparent act of cowardice he exhibits occurs at the conclusion of the play, following his final speech when he attempts to evade the arrows of Philoctetes and the spear of Neoptolemus (Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 1293-1303). The expulsion of Odysseus from the stage serves to depict him as a despicable and unworthy rogue.⁶⁴ From the outset, the play hints at his timidity, as he seeks various justifications to avoid confronting Philoctetes (Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, 70-85), echoing his earlier hesitance to engage with Ajax.⁶⁵ When circumstances demand, Odysseus readily opts for escape over combat. An additional aspect of Odysseus' characterization associates him with individuals of lower status. He portrays himself as a simple soldier, following the commands of the two Atreidae, thereby distinguishing himself from the leaders. Furthermore, Odysseus is likened to Thersites (Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 442). He does not fully achieve his goal of convincing Neoptolemus that adaptability and service to the common good are genuinely noble values,

⁶⁴ Taplin (1971) 36-37

⁶⁵ Roisman (2005) 75; Taplin (1971) 37

as Neoptolemus is more drawn to Philoctetes' concept of nobility which emphasizes his true nature and the bonds of friendship among noble heroes.⁶⁶ Thersites is the individual whom Odysseus chastised and physically assaulted for having the audacity to challenge the authority of the aristocratic leaders of the Greek forces (Homer, *Iliad* 2.211-239). This interaction which highlights the contrast between Odysseus and Thersites who were diametrically opposed in the *Iliad* implies that, similar to Thersites, Odysseus was a contemptible usurper of the privileges of the nobility and excessively inclined to engage in discourse.⁶⁷ They consider that the Atreides only are responsible for the attribution of Achilles' armor to Odysseus, without mentioning him, contrary to Philoctetes' point of view (Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 360-390, 405-410). Heracles' intervention vindicates Philoctetes and the aristocratic ideal (Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 1409-1444). The redefinition of the concept of nobility as Odysseus has it in his mind, does not necessarily mean progress. After all, Odysseus only ensured the return of Philoctetes after an oracle from the seer Helenus, as he had forgotten him on Lemnos for ten whole years.⁶⁸

In any case, Odysseus loses his composure and threatens that Philoctetes will go to Troy, regardless of whether Achilles' son desires it or not. This stance reveals Odysseus' fear, as he is well aware of Neoptolemus' fierce nature which, despite his youth, is comparable to that of his father. Odysseus also exhibits fear when Philoctetes aims his arrows at him and then, disappears. A similar situation applies in Sophocles' tragedy 'Ajax' (74-88) where he trembles at the thought of confronting Ajax while the great hero is recovering from his rage.

It is abundantly clear that through Neoptolemus, Odysseus once again confronts the world of Achilles. He relativizes any superior value solely for the sake of profit, showing no concern for anything else, a fact he acknowledges in the statement – once again – “*When you act for profit, you should not hesitate*” (Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 108-111). In contrast, Achilles asserts that he harbors as much hatred for the gates of the Underworld as he does for those who think one thing but say another (Homer, *Iliad* 9.312-313).

The concept of lying was one that the Greeks disapproved of, with Plato (*Laws* 11.916d-917b) asserting that lying is neither right nor lawful and that one who attempts to deceive for personal gain is despicable. Even Aristotle (*Ethica Nichomacheia* 4.1127a-1127b), who is generally more moderate than Plato, praises those who do not lie. It is therefore not surprising that Odysseus is characterized as cunning and deceitful, as these traits align with the ever-changing and unstable realm

⁶⁶ Rose (1976) 90

⁶⁷ Suksi (1999) 167

⁶⁸ The Online Medieval & Classical Library (1995)

of the senses or the world of illusions, a state of existence that the idealist Plato holds in low regard.

Odysseus vs Dolon

In the *K* rhapsody of the *Iliad*, there is a mention of a Trojan named Dolon (Homer, *Iliad* 10.426-579). He volunteered to spy on the Achaeans, as Hector promised him the immortal horses of Achilles which was indeed a futile promise since only Achilles could control those horses. Dolon fell into the trap set by Diomedes and Odysseus and was captured. Pleading for his life, Odysseus responded that nothing would happen to him, provided that Dolon revealed all he knew about the Trojans, information that was crucial for the Achaeans. However, after Dolon's testimony, Odysseus did not honor his agreement and Diomedes killed the Trojan. In response to the argument that "*in war there are no principles, only interests*", a counterargument exists. When Priam arrives at Achilles' tent, requesting the body of Hector for burial, the hero assures him that he will leave the Achaean camp unharmed and that there will be a truce for twelve days (Homer, *Iliad* 24.660-670). If Achilles had employed Odysseus' strategy, the war would have concluded swiftly with the demise of the Trojan kingdom's leader. Nevertheless, Achilles demonstrates honor and respect towards his formidable adversary, even in such circumstances. The most poignant moment in the *Iliad* clearly illustrates that this epic while centered on war, is not belligerent and that Odysseus is far from grasping and embodying the ideals of aristocracy. It is noteworthy to mention also the incident involving Lycaon where Achilles, after capturing him chose to release him (Homer, *Iliad* 21.74-82), an action completely unfamiliar to the background of Odysseus.

Odysseus vs Hecuba & Clytemnestra

The insensitivity of Odysseus is further highlighted in the tragedy "*Hecuba*" by Euripides. Following the fall of Troy, Hecuba, the wife of Priam, implores Odysseus not to sacrifice her daughter, Polyxena. She attempts to remind him of the favorable treatment she extended towards him when he was recognized within the walls of Troy and on his knees, pleaded with her not to reveal his true identity (Euripides, *Hecuba* 239-250). The desire of Achilles' ghost for Polyxena (Euripides, *Hecuba* 92-95) to be sacrificed at his tomb likely served as a pretext to appease the army and Odysseus – always for his own benefit – would have been keen on avoiding any rupture in his relations with the victors, especially given that the developments were favorable on all levels. Odysseus remains unaffected by Hecuba's curses, being both emotionally and physically armored. His reaction is dictated by a political rationale that is simultaneously wise and distasteful, enabling him to achieve what

Hecuba could not.⁶⁹ The sacrifice of Polyxena to Achilles is more important to the Hellenes than Odysseus' own relationship with Hecuba and he says himself that he wishes that it was not necessary (Euripides, *Hecuba* 390-394). Odysseus must put matters of public importance above those of his own private affairs. Achilles deserves to be treated honorably by the Greeks. He, as Odysseus clearly states, died most nobly fighting for "Hellas" (Euripides, *Hecuba* 309-310). If his use of the term "Hellas" is indeed anachronistic,⁷⁰ then all that this does is to promote the rift created between Greeks and barbarians. Also, not honoring Achilles would have serious public implications. Odysseus states that it is a source of weakness for many states when a brave man receives no greater honor than his inferior (Euripides, *Hecuba* 306-308) and hence not to pay honors to the greatest of the Greeks after his death would set an example for the whole army who would think twice about risking their lives in battle if they knew the dead received no honor.

Ultimately, his deceit is also evident in the case of Iphigenia, in Euripides play "Iphigenia in Tauris" where he promised her that she would marry Achilles; however, this was merely a falsehood intended to lead her unimpeded to the sacrificial altar, in order to appease the goddess Artemis and allow the Achaeans' ships to set sail with favorable winds (Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Tauris* 24-27). Given all the above, one could easily argue that the phrase "*the end justifies the means*" is in complete alignment with the cunning Odysseus. The identification of Odysseus with deception cannot be coincidental, as he is often regarded in ancient Greek literature as the son of Sisyphus (Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Aulis* 524, 1361-1362; Aeschylus, fr. 90; Sophocles, *Ajax* 190; Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 417, 625, 1310-1311).⁷¹ This allegation is made several times in tragedy, nearly always with derogatory effect to Odysseus' character (Euripides, *Cyclops* 104; Sophocles, *Ajax* 190; *Philoctetes* 417, 625). Another clue that strengthens the previous one is that his grandfather was Autolycus (Homer, *Odyssey* 19.394-413), son of the god Hermes (Hesiod, *Catalogue of Women* 64.15-19). In the Homeric hymn to Hermes, the young god performs actions similar to those of Odysseus. It is no coincidence that Hermes was regarded as a protector, among other roles, of thieves (Homeric Hymns, *Hermes* 577-578). Therefore, deceit and falsehood are at the core of Odysseus' nature (Pindar, *Nemean* 8.26-27; Plato, *Hippias Minor* 364e-365b).

⁶⁹ Blaiklock (1952) 106

⁷⁰ Synodinou (1994) 192

⁷¹ Goodwin (1874)

Odysseus vs Ciconians

In Book 9 of the “Odyssey”, Odysseus and his crew encounter three critical events that shape their interactions; the conflict with the Ciconians, a fleeting encounter with the Lotus-Eaters experienced by some of his men and the pivotal confrontation with Polyphemus the Cyclops. Concerning the first incident (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.39-61), after he plundered the town, he advised his men to leave immediately; however, they foolishly disregarded his command and remained, indulging in excessive wine consumption and slaughtering numerous sheep and oxen along the shoreline. The Ciconians reorganized and amassed a larger force, demonstrating increased ferocity and combat proficiency. They launched a counter-offensive with significant strength at dawn the following day. The men of Odysseus put up a strong resistance. Throughout the day, the battle saw fluctuating fortunes but by sunset, the Ciconians emerged victorious, forcing the Greeks to retreat with substantial casualties.

Odysseus instructs his crew to depart swiftly following the raid and board the ship. However, they disregard his orders and instead indulge in food and drink until they are attacked by the Ciconian’s relatives. His inability to guide his men towards the appropriate course of action stems from their refusal to heed his commands. The text does not clarify whether he took any actions after they ignored his orders and it appears he chose not to disrupt their celebrations. If he potentially took part, that raises another question with a complex answer. Clearly, he did little beyond giving his initial directive.

The assault on the Ciconians was not carried out for the sake of a mission; instead, it functioned as a display of valorous behavior. Odysseus did not launch the offense to aid the crew’s passage to Ithaca. Rather, the aim of the raid seemed to be the procurement of loot for the purpose of achieving glory and showcasing bold bravery.⁷² Many people die unnecessarily and will never make it back home. When Odysseus strays from his objective, displaying his heroic traits, he wastes time, energy and resources, leading to the loss of his crew members.

Odysseus vs Lotus-Eaters

In the realm of the Lotus-Eaters (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.82-104), Odysseus forces his crew to return despite their reluctance. He binds them and keeps them under their rowing benches until they recover their composure. He directs the oarsmen to steer back to the sea and proceed with their voyage home. When a chance presents itself that resembles a minor adventure, he views it as an extra opportunity to

⁷² Richards/Jalsenjak (2023) 124

demonstrate his heroic traits. The fundamental belief seems to be that the pursuit of heroic acknowledgment during these short mission detours does not endanger the main goal – as demonstrated in the attack on the Ciconians. In the absence of a chance to display personal courage and honor, the appropriate course of action is clear – one should maintain focus on the mission. On the other hand, when an opportunity arises to reflect his heroic core values, he often makes a choice that conflicts with the mission, relegating it to a lesser priority.⁷³

Odysseus vs Polyphemus

Shortly after departing from the land of the Lotus-Eaters, Odysseus and his crew encounter the island of the Cyclopes (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.105-535). From the sea, they spot a cave which Odysseus believes merits exploration. As the leader, he bravely takes his own ship and crew into potential peril, leaving the remaining vessels of his small fleet in a secure position. He selects twelve men to accompany him to the cave of Polyphemus. Upon reaching the cave, they survey the stockpile of cheese, goats and sheep. His men urge him to seize the goods and flee but he declines their pleas, hoping that the cave's owner will offer him a gift instead. Regrettably, upon his arrival, Polyphemus does not perceive the act of offering gifts to strangers as a favorable choice. Instead, he begins to consume the invading Greeks. Through bravery and cleverness, Odysseus blinds Polyphemus, enabling his men to escape the cave with a herd of sheep. Once liberated from Polyphemus, Odysseus and his crew return to their ship. The crew celebrated the safe return of some while mourning their lost companions. Odysseus calms the men and instructs them to board the gathered sheep. They then set to rowing and depart from the harbor. Had he chosen to leave the situation as it was, Odysseus could have somewhat salvaged his reputation as a capable leader, despite his earlier error of prioritizing personal benefit over the concerns of his crew. Regrettably, he was unable to stop while he was in a favorable position. As the ships sailed a distance away, yet remained within earshot of Polyphemus, Odysseus began to taunt and ridicule him. This infuriates Polyphemus to the extent that he hurls a massive rock towards the ship. Although it lands far away, the resulting backwash pushes them back to the shore. With great effort, his crew rows the vessel back to the safety of the open sea. Yet, Odysseus, still unsatisfied, prepares another insult for his blind and defeated adversary. His companions implored him to remain silent but he disregarded their pleas and in his fury, proclaimed that if anyone was to inquire about who had blinded him and marred his appearance, it was the brave warrior Odysseus, son of Laertes, hailing from Ithaca.

⁷³ Richards/Jalsenjak (2023) 125-126

Naturally, there exists a curiosity regarding Odysseus' genuine motivation for pursuing the Cyclopeans. At first, he asserts that his aim is to observe and comprehend the characteristics of these beings, determining whether they are hostile and unjust or hospitable and virtuous. Nevertheless, he subsequently reveals a more self-interested motive to acquire "*xenia*", the traditional gifts of hospitality that are owed to a newcomer. This request for *xenia* illustrates a certain audacity on Odysseus' part, particularly given that he and his crew have just been caught pilfering from Polyphemus.

No knowledgeable commentator on the Cyclops episode has asserted that the customs of the ancient Mediterranean people allow uninvited guests to enter a person's home in their absence and consume their food.⁷⁴ At the conclusion of the Cyclops episode, Odysseus reverently offers a sacrifice of the ram that aided his escape from Polyphemus' cave to Zeus. However, the deity rejects this offering and contemplates the annihilation of Odysseus' vessels and their sailors (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.550-555). He retains therefore the restricted perspective of an epic character which precludes any precise knowledge of supernatural processes.⁷⁵

Ultimately, he ignores the entreaties of his followers to take the treasure and flee. His refusal is based on his conviction that the rewards belong to him as an outsider which was his original incentive. He places his own interests and benefits above the well-being of his followers and the mission disregarding the cautions from his followers. This is in stark contrast to the situation with the Ciconians where his men overlooked his advice. Nevertheless, the result will be the same; lives will be lost, further reducing the group's ability to accomplish their mission.

Odysseus, filled with anger and pride, loses control over his emotions and boasts of his identity, disregarding the advice of his crew who advocate for more prudent actions. Be that as it may, he cannot resist claiming his heroic accolade – the glory over his vanquished foe. Merely outsmarting Polyphemus is insufficient; the Cyclops must be aware that he has been defeated by a superior adversary and he must know Odysseus' name, ensuring that it haunts him for the rest of his life. This is the triumph Odysseus desires, a personal heroic victory that ultimately leads to the demise of his men and jeopardizes their mission. Poseidon, upon hearing Polyphemus' plea, eventually answers his prayer. While Odysseus may endure, all of his companions will perish. Odysseus' unchecked pride critically undermines his relationship with the divine and precipitates much of his prolonged suffering. After successfully escaping Polyphemus, Odysseus' decision to reveal his true

⁷⁴ Shay (2002) 45

⁷⁵ Friedrich (1991) 16

name (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.502-505) provokes Poseidon's wrath and dramatically alters the course of his voyage. This moment epitomizes the fatal need for personal recognition that plagues some Greek heroes whose epicenter of course is Odysseus. This critique can be advanced by the interpretation of Odysseus; *hybris* as a disruption of divine justice since his "success" paradoxically becomes the source of cosmic imbalance.⁷⁶ He is situated within the broader Greek tradition where over-reaching ambition inevitably draws divine punishment⁷⁷ and indeed, Odysseus' reckless boasting dissolves the sacred boundary between mortal modesty and divine prerogative, placing him in violation of fundamental cosmic order.⁷⁸ In this light, the *hybris* of Odysseus appears not merely as a personal flaw but as a profound ethical transgression against the universal order.

Odysseus vs Aeolus

After the tragic and ultimately fatal encounter with Polyphemus, Odysseus and his crew arrive at the Aeolian Island, governed by King Aeolus (Homer, *Odyssey* 10.1-5; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 5.7.7). The king extends a warm welcome and generous hospitality for a month filled with feasting and relaxation. Seeking assistance in his journey home, Odysseus approaches the king who gladly agrees to help. With a favorable wind, Odysseus and his men sail continuously for nine days. On the 10th day, they find themselves within sight of Ithaca, so near to achieving their goal that they can see their fellow countrymen tending the beacon fires. However, Odysseus, having never relinquished control of the rudder to expedite their return, succumbs to a brief slumber.

While Odysseus rests, his crew converses, voicing their discontent regarding the unequal distribution of both praise and rewards and they vow to take measures to correct the disparity in resource allocation. As a result, they engaged in dialogue, and malicious counsel prevailed. They unsealed the sack, unleashing the wind with a fierce howl which conjured a storm that carried them far from their homeland, leaving them weeping at sea. When he awoke, he found himself torn diving into the ocean or enduring his plight. In the end, he opted to persevere, covering himself and lying down in the ship, as the crew lamented profoundly while the fierce winds propelled their fleet back to the island of Aeolus.

At a crucial juncture, just as they were about to achieve their objective, Odysseus fell into a deep slumber. He failed to see the journey through to its end. This

⁷⁶ Cook (1995) 121

⁷⁷ Knox (1964) 38

⁷⁸ Vernant (2001) 209

indicates a considerable error in judgment. What is the reason? He is overly exhausted because, as he himself admits, he did not entrust the task of navigation to anyone else. His belief that only he could continuously steer the ship ultimately led to his downfall. It is clear that these were all experienced sailors. Instead of delegating and placing his trust in them, he tried to handle everything by himself. He lacked faith in their capability to navigate the ship and they, in turn, questioned his fairness towards them.

The lack of trust in his crew also affected their behavior in another way. They were oblivious to the bag's contents, mistakenly thinking it was filled with gold and silver. Odysseus never revealed this information to them which raises a significant question about the reason why he did not. To complicate matters further, he secured the sack on the ship, tightly fastening its opening with a silver thread which prevented even the slightest breeze from escaping. This action likely intensified his crew's suspicions that he was keeping its contents for himself. It is possible that Odysseus thought that knowledge of the bag's contents was information only he needed and from his perspective, his men did not need to be informed.

Odysseus initially considers ending his life in response to his crew's foolishness but ultimately chooses to persevere quietly among the living. They return to Aeolus to request another chance. Aeolus, understanding that the gods have condemned this unfortunate group, acts as a pragmatic strategist. He concludes that it would be unwise to support those who have fallen out of favor with the gods and thus, he sends them back to the ocean to confront their destiny without his assistance.

Odysseus vs Laestrygonians

Odysseus and his comrades continue their voyage until they reach an island inhabited by the Laestrygonians, who attack them (Homer, *Odyssey* 10.80-132). From the heights of the cliffs, the Laestrygonians impale the crew as if they were fish and carry them away to devour. Only the men on Odysseus' vessel succeed in surviving while the others meet their demise. Overcome with grief and despair for their fallen companions who had fought alongside them for a decade in Troy, Odysseus and his crew reach an unfamiliar island. This island is owned by Circe where they indulge in comfort and leisure for over a year, showing no urgency to return home. Unlike the scenario with the Lotus-Eaters, it is Odysseus' men rather than Odysseus himself, who express the desire to continue their journey.

Odysseus vs Helios

As the vessel nears Thrinacia (Homer, *Odyssey* 12.260-453), Odysseus warns his crew of the grave perils that lie ahead and advises them to row swiftly past the island without stopping. He has been forewarned of the fatal consequences that will befall them should any of Helios' cattle be harmed. His men, feeling disheartened by this news, argue for a brief landing to rest overnight. Odysseus, despite his suspicions that some divine force may be orchestrating misfortune, concedes to their request but insists that they take a solemn oath not to harm or consume any cattle or sheep from the island. Unfortunately, a storm compels them to remain on the island longer than anticipated, and he reiterates his warning against touching the cattle. For an entire month, the southern wind blew incessantly. The crew exhausted their food supplies from the ship and their hunting efforts, leading to severe hunger. In desperation, Odysseus ventured to pray to the gods for assistance. However, his prayers went unanswered; instead, the gods caused him to fall asleep. Upon awakening and returning, he detected the scent of fat from a fire. This immediately signaled that the sailors had made a grave mistake. Ultimately, when the ship set sail again, a fierce storm, commanded by Zeus, wrecked the vessel, resulting in the loss of all lives on board except for Odysseus.

At yet another critical juncture, while attempting to prevent his crew from indulging in the cattle of Helios, Odysseus succumbs to sleep. He attributes this lapse to the gods; however, it is evident that the responsibility lies with him, not the deities, for his inability to remain vigilant. Ultimately, his men perish in a tempest, far from their homeland, marking a failed mission.⁷⁹

Odysseus vs Comrades

The *Odyssey* features a singular true hero, Odysseus while his companions are largely indistinguishable and lack distinction.⁸⁰ The differentiation between heroic actions and leadership qualities and how the discord between these two aspects continues to exist, undermines the organizational mission – “Nostoi” – and leads to the demise of all of Odysseus' companions (Homer, *Odyssey* 12.403-419). This results in several potentially misguided outcomes, including misunderstanding the significance of charisma, a decline in trust and a diminished emphasis on the overarching mission in relation to the personal objectives of leaders.⁸¹ These individuals

⁷⁹ Richards/Jalsenjak (2023) 130

⁸⁰ Keegan (1988) 32-35

⁸¹ Richards/Jalsenjak (2023) 119

like Odysseus, lack a sense of social responsibility, sacred scriptures and obligations that extend beyond their personal abilities and their ambition for triumph and dominance.⁸² His leadership role, not by chance apparently, is significantly diminished by the presence of Achilles, Ajax, Diomedes, Agamemnon and Menelaus. In the “Iliad”, Odysseus demonstrates his attributes as a loyal subordinate, adept at following orders.

The “*Dark Factor of Personality*” is defined as the overarching inclination to enhance one’s personal benefit, often at the expense of others whether through indifference, acceptance or intentional harm, supported by rationalizations that validate such behavior.⁸³ In the field of personality psychology, various aversive traits, often referred to as “*dark traits*” have been utilized to account for individual variations in socially and ethically undesirable behaviors, such as “*Machiavellianism*”, “*Narcissism*” and “*Psychopathy*”, collectively known as the “*dark triad*”.⁸⁴ Due to the significant conceptual and empirical similarities among aversive traits, there is substantial evidence supporting a shared underlying factor among them.⁸⁵

Despite his reputation as a master strategist, Odysseus frequently exhibits selfishness and poor leadership, resulting in catastrophic consequences for his men. His decision to explore the Cyclops’ cave despite the obvious risks (Homer, *Odyssey*, 9. 224-230) reflects a self-centered pursuit of personal fame at the cost of collective safety and his leadership subordinates communal welfare to personal narrative needs, ending up to some inconsistencies in Homer’s version of the Mycenaean society.⁸⁶ Odysseus’ storytelling subtly frames himself as the heroic center while marginalizing the experiences and sufferings of his crew.⁸⁷ Effective leadership in heroic societies demands transparency and solidarity, virtues that Odysseus systematically subverts through secrecy and manipulation. Thus, Odysseus’ leadership is marked less by effective stewardship and more by an egoistical drive that ultimately isolates him.

Odysseus’ quest for heroic ideals frequently conflicted with his stated objective of bringing his 700 veterans back home. This serves as an early illustration of the leader-centric tendencies that continue to afflict numerous organizations in contemporary times. Even now, akin to this ancient narrative, the quality of leadership is evaluated by analyzing the leader’s actions rather than measuring the success of

⁸² Finley (1977) 11

⁸³ Moshagen/Hilbig/Zettler (2018) 657

⁸⁴ Paulhus/Williams (2002) 556

⁸⁵ Hilbig/Zettler/Moshagen (2024) 377; Muris/Merckelbach/Otgaar/Meijer (2017) 183; Schreiber/Marcus (2020) 1021

⁸⁶ Schein (1984) 41

⁸⁷ Jong (2001) 221-249

the mission and its effects on their followers.⁸⁸ The negative aspects may distort their perception of the future or unrestrained ambition may obscure their decision-making. Insight is a function of vision whereas charisma is not. A charismatic leader, particularly one driven by self-serving motives, tends to overlook the essential feedback required to adjust objectives in response to evolving situations, resulting in a disconnection from their followers.⁸⁹ There should be no misunderstanding regarding the significance of charisma and inspiration as pure positive qualities. Specific heroic traits, including bravery and determination, to confront and overcome those who oppose their honorable endeavors⁹⁰ are aspects within the sense of community and not atomism like Odysseus.

Although he may be a hero who triumphs against great challenges, he is undeniably a dangerous leader. While he may have succeeded on a personal level, his men suffered the consequences of his poor judgment and reckless actions with their lives. Indeed, through a more detailed examination of the Odyssey, traditional heroic characteristics frequently obstruct successful leadership.⁹¹ He is scarcely a knight of gentility and purity.⁹² In the case of Odysseus, his dedication to heroic ideals, rather than prioritizing the safe return of his fellow warriors to Ithaca, leads to the demise of all of his men. The crucial point is not that these men perished despite Odysseus' attempts at heroism to save them but rather that they died because he prioritized his heroic conduct over their safety. He places another concern above the mission. Odysseus holds his reputation and status as a hero in higher regard than anything else. He frequently makes choices based on the demands of heroic values instead of what would be most beneficial for his comrades and the mission.⁹³ This pertains to a discrepancy between actions and values. Effective leaders recognize and rectify these discrepancies to ensure that actions increasingly align with the organization's mission.⁹⁴ Although each leader is required to forge their own unique path, they also benefit from the foundations laid by those who came before them⁹⁵ and the dipole "*Odysseus-Agamemnon*" is such an instance. In summary, when leaders prioritize their own ambitious goals, it is frequently the followers who bear the greatest burden.⁹⁶

⁸⁸ Richards/Jalsenjak (2023) 131

⁸⁹ Tritten/Keithly (1996) 84

⁹⁰ Raelin (2003) 47

⁹¹ Richards/Jalsenjak (2023) 122

⁹² Moore (2000) 105

⁹³ Richards/Jalsenjak (2023) 123

⁹⁴ Collins (1999) 237-245

⁹⁵ Latemore/Callan (1999) 76

⁹⁶ Richards/Jalsenjak (2023) 128

Odysseus vs Suitors

The climactic vengeance Odysseus enacts upon the suitors and the disloyal maids blurs the line between justice and cruelty. In Book 22 (Homer, *Odyssey* 22.310-329, 22.474-477), Odysseus does not merely punish but exterminates his enemies with unrelenting brutality. This spectacle of violence exceeds proportional retribution, implicating Odysseus in the very disorder he claims to correct.⁹⁷ His massacre represents a privatization of justice, undermining communal norms and moral universality.⁹⁸ As a harbinger of rational domination, this violence is interpreted as the logical outcome of a survival logic that disregards ethical restraint.⁹⁹ Ultimately, Odysseus' revenge destabilizes the very ethical order that he ostensibly restores, exposing a darker, nihilistic undercurrent within heroic ideology. Last but not least, Odysseus is reckless and humiliates himself to save himself when he transforms into a beggar (Homer, *Odyssey* 13.429-438, 17.462-466). Odysseus' habitual deceit challenges the conventional Homeric heroic ethos which prized transparency, honor and communal trust. His skillful lies to Eumaeus (Homer, *Odyssey* 14.191-359, 14.457-506) and Penelope (Homer, *Odyssey* 19.164-202) illustrate deliberate tactic and moral ambiguity. He can be easily characterized as a paradigmatic trickster, arguing that his polytropic nature marks a fundamental instability at the core of his entire entity.¹⁰⁰ Odysseus' manipulation of appearance and truth reflects the evolution from mythic to rational consciousness, representing a fragmented, adaptive identity rather than a stable heroic self.¹⁰¹ The episode involving the Phaiakians in the *Odyssey* (Homer, *Odyssey* 6.110-120) is intricately connected to skepticism and the early Machiavellian interpretation of "*arête*" which represents the pinnacle of ancient Greek values.¹⁰² This reliance on deceit as a betrayal of communal bonds can be highlighted that in heroic societies, lying undermines the foundational trust necessary for group survival.¹⁰³ His lying tales are not merely defensive but actively constitutive of his selfhood, a narrative strategy that destabilizes

⁹⁷ Murnaghan (1987) 118

⁹⁸ Scodel (1980) 94

⁹⁹ Adorno/Horkheimer (2002) 262

¹⁰⁰ Hopman (2012) 5-6; Nagy (2006); Jong de (2001) 244; Cook (1999) 153-155; Friedrich 1991, 22; Olson (1989) 138; Segal (1983) 34

¹⁰¹ Vernant (2001) 214

¹⁰² Zerva (2009) 313

¹⁰³ Cohen (1986) 179

fixed meaning.¹⁰⁴ Thus, deceit in the *Odyssey* is not incidental but intrinsic, posing a radical challenge to traditional heroic models.

Another intriguing research perspective that is related to this particular incident is that converging pieces of evidence appear to support the notion that the genuine identity of the protagonist in the *Odyssey*, who reemerged in Ithaca nearly two decades after the onset of the Trojan War, does not align with the portrayal of Odysseus in the “*Iliad*”. Instead, it is more accurately associated with the Cretan hero Meriones, recognized during the war for his exceptional combat skills and prowess as an archer. It is likely that this companion of Odysseus orchestrated and executed the massacre of the suitors at the behest of Telemachus, who had recently departed Ithaca in search of assistance from his father's former allies to address the impending marriage of Penelope – an event that would jeopardize his ambitions to ascend to the throne of Ithaca. Nevertheless, the poet of the *Odyssey* subsequently distorted the narrative to render the slaughter of the suitors more ethically justifiable.¹⁰⁵

Conclusions

Though certain aspects mentioned earlier could be discussed and philosophical cycles are distinguished by different approaches,¹⁰⁶ the scale is tipping towards the negative side, as Odysseus emerges not as a paragon of heroic virtue but as a profoundly ambivalent figure whose deceit, hybris, cruelty, flawed leadership and rational cunning expose the fracture within the Homeric heroic ideal. He succeeds not through strength or communal honor but through self-centered adaptability, narrative manipulation and ethical compromise. It is not an overstatement to assert that, even by descent, Odysseus represents the ultimate trickster character in global mythology.¹⁰⁷ This practical perspective however, adds to the 5th century view of Odysseus as more utilitarian than noble, often portraying him as mercenary and calculating. His practical and efficient approaches to ensure that his requirements are fulfilled remain effective,¹⁰⁸ even in the case of feasts.¹⁰⁹ The legendary figure of Odysseus could be considered the paramount embodiment of the spy archetype in Western literary tradition.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Pucci (1987) 39

¹⁰⁵ Vinci/Maiuri (2023) 65

¹⁰⁶ Montiglio (2011)

¹⁰⁷ Russo (1997) 241

¹⁰⁸ Worman (2002) 101

¹⁰⁹ Williams (2019) 3

¹¹⁰ Wilder (2021) 799

Odysseus cannot be regarded as a “tragic” figure like Achilles, Ajax, Philoctetes and Antigone, for the simple reason that he does not confront anything supernatural. The self-centered and elongated mindset stands in stark contrast to the noble character and aristocratic upbringing of his rival, Achilles who, through truth, justice and sound reasoning, presents a value system grounded in unchanging, pure ideals. With the death of Ajax and subsequently Neoptolemus, the Odyssean worldview continues to prevail to this day, not necessarily because it is the correct one but due to the inclination of human nature towards ease, falsehood, deceit, cunning and the “super-ego”, representing the natural progression of events. In contrast, the Achillean code – although in-depth analysis is required in another research article – is a matter of personal choice and contemplation, indicating the suppression of instincts and a commitment to the vast realm of ideas, achieved through an individual journey along the path of truth. It is not coincidental that all these individuals – Achilles, Ajax, Patroclus and Antilochus – gather on Leuke Island within Euxinus Pontus, continuing to adhere to their own eternal, unyielding and unchanging code of life and ethics which leads to the progress and spiritual elevation of any human being (Pausanias, Laconia 19.12-13).

Ajax¹¹¹ and additionally, Palamedes and Neoptolemus were the last of the heroes representing a worldview that, due to its significant complexity and arduousness cannot be applied by the masses. The mission serves as a guiding principle rather than a mere list of achievements. Being genuinely mission-driven implies that significant decisions can be traced back to the mission, to the fundamental purpose. It allows individuals to challenge management directives that they perceive as unrelated to the mission, like Achilles did with Agamemnon. Furthermore, it signifies that reflecting on and consistently refining the mission is a collective responsibility, as it embodies the hopes and core identity of the human community.¹¹²

Last but not least, in the context of dualism in the universe – man/woman, mind/heart, body/soul, light/darkness, etc.), it is essential to consider the dichotomy of Achilles and Odysseus which represent on the one hand, the concepts of the Spartan Eunomia and aristocracy (in the ancient sense of the term) and on the other hand, the Athenian democracy and demagogy (Aristophanes, *Knights*, 191-193; *Wasps*, 650-718). However, this dichotomy is both philosophical and geopolitical,¹¹³ transcending the narrow confines of epic narratives. Odysseus, through Athens, symbolizes the West which due to the worldview of this particular figure, has

¹¹¹ Knox (1961) 20

¹¹² Senge (1998) 17

¹¹³ Stamkos (2002)

been in a state of continuous decline for many years now.¹¹⁴ The balance of technology between the East (which until recently marginalized it) and the West in the present,¹¹⁵ brings to the forefront the concept of collectivism versus individualism and consequently, the conflict between Achilles and Odysseus, in a clash of civilizations that fundamentally embodies these elements.¹¹⁶ The developments of the events nowadays demonstrate in a practical manner this philosophical debate since the essential difference lies in the fact that an individual may run faster alone while together, the distance covered is significantly greater.

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¹¹⁴ Spengler (1932)

¹¹⁵ Aktar (2021) 13

¹¹⁶ Huntington (2017)

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