



When I think of inconsistent yet resilient leadership, the first thing that comes to mind is not a particular leader but a character type: the mythical trickster figure. This is someone in story, often in a leadership role, who gets into trouble because of some baser, irrational impulse (greed, ambition, hunger, lust) but then suddenly comes to focus on executing a brilliantly resourceful plan that saves himself/herself and the day. This type of character appears in story-telling the world over (perhaps most recently in the figure of Maui in the Disney movie *Moana*), but one of the most familiar examples is Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, whose resourcefulness (*mētis*) is on display throughout. Much of what he does could be described as trickster-like, but it is his activity in the cave of the cyclops that is exemplary. In that scene in *Odyssey* 9, Odysseus and his men venture into the cave of the cyclops, Polyphemus, because Odysseus hopes that the cyclops will give him a hospitality prize. This is the irrational impulse that gets him into trouble. The impulse is not irrational because it's wrong to want hospitality prizes but because the cyclopes as a group are so inhospitable that it's unreasonable to expect one. When Odysseus and his men get to the cave, they help themselves to the stores of goat cheese and await the return of Polyphemus. When the cyclops arrives, he is predictably inhospitable: he immediately starts eating Odysseus' men, though as a "gift" to Odysseus, he promises to eat him last!

It is at this point Odysseus begins to focus and springs back into action as the leader of his men. He checks his impulse to kill the cyclops because that will leave him trapped behind the large boulder that seals the entrance to the cave and is too large for Odysseus and his men to move. Instead, he decides to offer the cyclops some wine and get him drunk, so that he and his men can fashion a spear to gouge his eye. He also tells the cyclops that his name is "Nobody", which will allow him to cover his tracks if anyone wants to avenge the cyclops. Once the cyclops becomes drunk and passes out, Odysseus and his men heat a stick in a

fire, gouge out his eye, and hide when he wakes up. The next morning, when the cyclops opens the entrance to the cave, Odysseus and his men tie themselves under his sheep to escape notice.

Polyphemus reports to his fellow cyclopes that “Nobody” has wronged him, and so Odysseus and his men seem to be in the clear. But as they are leaving the island Odysseus begins taunting the cyclops and in the process reveals his real name. Again, there is nothing irrational about a hero revealing his name to an enemy per se; characters do this in the Iliad all the time. But this action is irrational in the sense that it now gives Polyphemus the means to curse Odysseus to his father Poseidon, which he does. This act triggers the bulk of Odysseus’ wanderings that he will spend much of the rest of the epic going through, totaling ten years of absence from home *after* the conclusion of the ten-year Trojan War.

I had not thought of Antony as a trickster figure until thinking about this prompt and reading the comparison between Antony and Demetrius Poliorcetes (his Greek counterpart in Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*). In chapter 3 of the comparison, Plutarch comments on both men’s relationship to luxury:

3 1 Both were insolent in prosperity, and abandoned themselves to luxury and enjoyment. But it cannot be said that Demetrius, for all his pleasures and amours, ever let slip the time for action, nay, it was only when his leisure was abundant that he introduced his pleasures; and his Lamia, like the creature of fable, he made his pastime only when he was sportive or drowsy. 2 But when he got ready for war, his spear was not tipped with ivy, nor did his helmet smell of myrrh, nor did he go forth to his battles from the women's chamber, sleek and blooming, but quieting down and stopping the revels and orgies of Bacchus, he became, in the words of Euripides, a "minister of unhallowed Ares," and got not a single slip or fall because of his indolence or pleasures.3 Antony, on the contrary, like Heracles in paintings where Omphalé is seen taking away his club and stripping off his lion's skin, was often disarmed by Cleopatra, subdued by her

spells, and persuaded to drop from his hands great undertakings and necessary campaigns, only to roam about and play with her on the sea-shores by Canopus and Taphosiris. 4 And at last, like Paris, he ran away from the battle and sank upon her bosom; although, more truly stated, Paris ran away to Helen's chamber after he had been defeated; but Antony ran away in chase of Cleopatra, and thereby threw away the victory. (translation by Bernadotte Perrin)

In this regard Plutarch seems to have seen Antony as a kind of failed trickster figure. It is common for the trickster figure to be both “tight” at times and “loose” at times, but the trickster is supposed to have a sense for when to be tight or loose. For example, Herodotus in his *Histories* (2.173) tells this story of Amasis, king of the Egyptians, who is in many ways a trickster figure:

[T]his is how he ordered his affairs: in the morning, till the filling of the market place, he wrought zealously at such business as came before him; the rest of the day he spent in drinking and jesting with his boon companions in idle and sportive mood. But this displeased his friends, who thus admonished him: "O King, you are ill guided so to demean yourself. We would have you sit aloft on a throne of pride all day doing your business; thus would the Egyptians know that they have a great man for their ruler, and you would have the better name among them; but now your behaviour is nowise royal." "Nay," Amasis answered them, "men that have bows bend them at need only; were bows kept for ever bent they would break, and so would be of no avail when they were needed. Such too is the nature of men. Were they to be ever at serious work nor permit themselves a fair share of sport they would go mad or silly ere they knew it; I am well aware of that, and give each of the two its turn." Such was his answer to his friends. (translation by A. D. Godley)

Plutarch's final judgment of Antony is that, unlike Demetrius, he did not ultimately have the right sense of balance, or occasion, between tightness and

looseness, so much so that he was wont to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

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