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ABSTRACT

Purpose

This paper takes the most prominent aspects of what is commonly called 'the hero's journey' (Propp, Campbell, Vogler) – a model of storytelling in which a protagonist acts as the champion of a community in a personal journey to restore harmony – in order to see whether there are significant elements of that to be found in recent Annual Reports of Qantas Airlines.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper adopts a literary perspective in analysing the Chairman's and Chief Executive Officer's reports in the Qantas Annual Reports for years 2008 to 2012 for traces of the hero's journey. Both the style of reporting and the construction of narrative regarding corporate performance are considered.

Findings

The recent Annual Reports of Qantas do present some details of particular challenges to profitability that faced senior management, but they are not indicative of either a hero's journey in action or in depiction. The key reasons for that conclusion relate to the way that senior management is expected to function in such organisations, and to the less dramatic purposes that corporate accounting serve.

Research limitations/implications

The analysis of Qantas Annual Reports is a restricted reading, but it does leave room for future research on other corporations in which the findings may vary.

Originality/value

This paper is a novel assessment of the manner in which senior management reports of corporate performance can be read as responses by that group, or individuals within it, to challenges facing the corporation.

Classification

Research paper

Key Words

Qantas, hero's journey, storytelling, senior management

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Company annual reports have generally been understood as a source of financial information and therefore they have been evaluated in terms of their contribution to financial decision making. However, there is an emerging body of literature that suggests company reports can be understood, not just as information intermediaries, but as cultural and literary objects. This paper extends the emergent work by examining the reports of Qantas, a prominent Australian company, from the analytical perspective of the hero's journey.

There is a long-standing interest in issues of narrative in accounting research (Lewellyn, 1999, Hayes, 2006). However, it was the work of Macintosh and Baker (2002) that called us to consider the links between accounting reports and literary theory. Macintosh and Baker (2002) argued that there is a need to transcend the notion of reports as economic commodities and to consider their representational nature, which implies that a company annual report can be subject to literary analysis as a representational text. Macintosh and Baker (2002) suggest that the literary theoretical approaches of expressive realism, the new criticism and deconstructionism can be used to bring fresh insight into the nature of accounting texts. They draw parallels between a structuralist reading of a novel's meaning and seeing accounting as a reflection of an independent and objective reality. They also argue that other readings (of both the novel and the annual report) move away from the notion of an objective reality and reveal implicit politics and heteroglossic texts. On this basis they recommend that the preparation of accounting reports be informed by Bakhtin's (1895-1975) notion of the heteroglossic novel, where the accounting is part of an ongoing conversation rather than a reflection of a single meaning. However, Macintosh and Baker (2002) oversimplify the structuralist (or more correctly formalist) position and, therefore, they can be subjected to their own critique. The notion is not that there is a single meaning to a text, but rather that elements of human culture (including both novels and annual reports) must be understood in relation to larger networks of relationship and significance. One element of this structural perspective which has remained and has grown in significance has been the analysis and study of myth. The argument is that in many examples of human culture, authors have tended (both intentionally and unintentionally) to follow certain well established storylines. One very prominent example among these is the 'hero's journey'. The most obvious (and publically declared) example of this in current times is the way that George Lucas used it as the basis for the development of the *Star Wars* movies. However, Macintosh and Baker's (2002) call to investigate accounting reports for their narrative qualities remains important and relatively unaddressed.

One author who has addressed the issue of the qualities of accounting narrative is Davison (2011). She also emphasise the need to study the annual report as a literary text. Davison (2011) draws on the French poststructuralist and literary theorist Genette to emphasise the notion of *Paratext*. *Paratext* describes the way a text is framed and presented through physical, narrative and visual elements such as physical

format, names, authorship, titles, epigraphs, prefaces (introduction/Chairman's Statement) and intertitles. In effect these *Paratextual* elements control and focus and reading (and therefore understanding) of the text. From this perspective accounting information is framed in certain physical and contextual ways which emphasise emotional and cultural connotations such as authenticity, reputation, history, quality, status, achievement, aspiration, culture. From that perspective, the notion of *Paratext* highlights the emotional attachments associated with accounting reports. However, mythologists such as Propp (1927), Campbell (1968) and Vogler (1992) also highlight the powerful link between socially imbedded and persistent archetypal myths and emotion. Therefore, the question arises whether we can see myth as a form of emotional and cultural referent being mobilised to frame, understand and interpret. Can we see use of the myth of the hero's journey in the annual report, and what role does accounting play in the narrative? The focus and basis of our analysis are the Chairman and CEO's reports of Qantas Airlines between 2008 and 2012. This was a particularly challenging period for this company where, if they existed, it would be reasonable to expect notions of hero's and mythic journeys.

Qantas Airlines, founded in 1920, is Australia's largest airline and regarded as the national carrier. It is the second oldest in the world, and the oldest continuously operating one. It has more than 300 aircraft and more than 33,000 employees.

The annual reports of Qantas Airlines depict its environment and operational activities, noting the successes and problems that it faces in each period, together with a view forward. Our interest here is to consider the way in which these successive reports might be seen to function as instalments in a narrative in the style of what is commonly called 'the hero's journey.' In brief, we ask the question, 'Is there a heroic journey evident in the Annual Reports of Qantas'?

The hero's journey can be summarised as a champion's course undertaken on behalf of a community that takes a protagonist through severe obstacles in order to restore stability. It is a rescue and quest tale, with a goal that, in its original forms, traditionally involves recovering a charm, attaining a difficult qualification, or defeating an enemy in order to produce the desired effect – and all at considerable personal risk. Fairy tales abound with such plots.

There are necessary conditions. There must be a major crisis or threat, and a high risk of substantial loss in the event that nothing is done or that the resisting action should happen to fail. The stakes must be significant so that the dramatic function of the hero's action is appropriately elevated and the rewards for success are well deserved. There is no drama, after all, in just setting out to replenish a stationery cupboard.

This paper is developed, in part, from one delivered at the APIRA 2001 conference: 'The Eternal Quest: Stories of Numbers' (Evans, 2001). That paper considered the way that a story of corporate activity could be perceived through different readings of financial accounts to reveal other aspects of business activity. It, too, contemplated notions of the hero's journey.

Within the Qantas Annual Reports, we pay most attention to the reports of the Chairman and CEO, both of whom are charged with responsibility for the company's performance, and accountable for the content and manner of relaying that to the

public and to shareholders and are a major focus on stakeholder interest (see Epstein and Pava, 1993, Anderson and Epstein, 1996, Bartlett and Chandler, 1997). We have also augmented our analysis of the Chairman and CEO reports with reference to other parts of the Annual Reports, where relevant, in order to trace events in Qantas trading and the manner in which they are depicted.

Shareholders generally want sensible, long-term returns from trustworthy managers rather than exposure of their capital to high-risk ventures and scarily unpredictable leadership. The top managers' reports would therefore be expected to soothe shareholder concerns where necessary, putting a gloss on corporate performance without ignoring critical factors that affect its activities. Clatworthy and Jones (2003) provide evidence for this expectation. They suggest that despite Chairman's reports being widely used and considered important by private and institutional investors, companies report good and bad financial news in very different ways. In effect, all companies adopted a particular narrative approach, emphasising the good news and down-playing the bad news. In addition, the Chairman (and by extension management) took the credit for good news while blaming the environment for the bad news (Clatworthy and Jones, 2003, p. 171). However, their findings were based on content analysis with little broader qualitative examination of the nature and narrative structure of the Chairman's reports. Our intention is to explore in more detail in the context of a case study of one significant and publicly visible corporation. Our period of study was a difficult period for Qantas with low and falling profits, union strikes and industrial despites, and public relations challenges. In many ways, a company in this situation really needs to emphasise the success and down-play the challenges. However, sometimes the challenge cannot be simply allocated to an outside threat (or the achievement attributed to internal performance) and more complex forms of narrative are required. Our question is how are these narratives constructed in the reports and what role does accounting play within the narrative?

THE HERO'S JOURNEY: THEORISING THE NARRATIVE

Before we begin an account of recent Qantas history, we need to explain in more detail what constitutes the hero's journey. For this purpose it is useful to outline, in chronological order, what three key theorists have proposed as different models for common story structures in certain kinds of stories as they all potentially relate to the notion of the hero's journey.

In the 1920s, structural theorist Vladimir Propp examined thousands of Russian folk tales looking for similarities in actions that they contained, in order to generate a morphology. He concluded that there was a set of thirty-one generic functions that could describe, in a linear fashion, all of the actions that were performed in those stories. He claimed that a coherent story could be built by simply following the sequence of these common elements (Propp, 1927). While that might be contested, especially since he stripped out the function of such things as tone and mood and characterisation, what matters here is the typical form of those stories. At the risk of oversimplifying, Propp's model moves through the four following stages, or spheres:

- An initial situation is described, and then a disturbance/lack is introduced
- The hero identifies the lack and sets out on a mission

- The hero seeks a way to correct the lack, and then overcomes it
- The hero returns, pursued, but eventually claims the reward (typically ascending to the throne and marrying the damsel/princess)

These basics reveal a set sequence; a disturbance to the normal order of things, an heroic response, and success that is rewarded. Its simplicity, once one overlooks the underlying thirty-one steps, is appealing as a means of understanding narrative formula. It should be remembered, however, that these results pertain to the Russian wonder tales or folk tales, and were not claimed to extend more widely.

The next key theorist was Joseph Campbell, whose influential *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* proposed a hero's journey divided into seventeen steps organised across three consecutive acts. Campbell's model set out an ordinary world in which a call to adventure is refused by the potential hero before it becomes irresistible, and then a series of ordeals before the main one is encountered and the hero can return for the reward. Essential to this structure is the idea of a persistent archetypal monomyth that revolves around a shared search for belonging, something that resonates in a community at a deep psychic level. In the modern age, however, Campbell sees that as being supplanted, with the individual's interest being at the centre rather than the community (1968, p. 391).

This was further refined by Christopher Vogler in his study of screenplays, which promotes the idea of a relatively predictable story structure being used repeatedly. Vogler is also well known as the author of *The Writer's Journey* (1992), which condenses his decades of advice to motion picture studios about traditional and effective structures and dynamics in their scripts. His special interest is the journey narrative. He has evaluated over 6000 screenplays, and breaks down the stages in the typical quest as follows, here compared with Campbell's model (Vogler, p. 16):

<i>Writer's Journey</i>	<i>The Hero with a Thousand Faces</i>
<u>Act One</u>	<u>Departure, Separation</u>
Ordinary World	World of Common Day
Call to Adventure	Call to Adventure
Refusal of the Call	Refusal of the Call
Meeting with the Mentor	Supernatural Aid
Crossing the 1st Threshold	Crossing the 1st Threshold
	Belly of the Whale
<u>Act Two</u>	<u>Descent, Initiation, Penetration</u>
Tests, Allies, Enemies	Road of Trials
Approach to the Inmost Cave	Meeting with the Goddess
Supreme Ordeal	Woman as Temptress
	Atonement with the Father
	Apotheosis

Reward	The Ultimate Boon
<u>Act Three</u>	<u>Return</u>
The Road Back	Refusal of the Return The Magic Flight Rescue from Within Crossing the Threshold Return
Resurrection	Master of the Two Worlds
Return with the Elixir	Freedom to Live

We do not need to ‘unpack’ all of these terms to see that there is a great deal of commonality; the underlying structure in Vogler’s analysis accords with Propp and Campbell’s. A common model cited as evidencing these stages is the original *Star Wars* movie, in which Luke Skywalker is shown in his customary life before its routine calm is shattered and he is forced into heroic mode. Is it too far-fetched to look at the activities of Qantas in case a similar pattern is discernable?

TELLING THE STORY: TIME LOVES A HERO

The commonly structured myths discussed by Propp, Campbell and Vogler are not restricted to the high adventure of an individual confronting physical danger in exotic locations. Setting up and running a business enterprise is also part of the spectrum of human endeavours that reflects our needs, our hopes, and our fears.

The story of a business enterprise is not entirely contained in its financial reports. These present a version of its history and, sometimes almost incidentally, a strong message about its culture. It has been argued, for instance, that it is valuable for employees to be given the opportunity to periodically audit the cultural profile of their organisation, largely to understand how it communicates its identity internally and externally (Sewell, 1997 p. 201). We can take the cold and rational, essential data, and find the story behind them. There is always the arc of a human narrative that a reader can identify. With some reports that is harder than others, and extra imagination might then be required to make the business seem more ‘human’.

When Miller and O’Leary examined modernisation in the Caterpillar ‘Plant With a Future’ program, they: “sought to understand how ‘dreams and schemes...were constituted and made practicable” (1998, p. 709). Others may have questioned their approach on the basis that the plant’s accounting practices failed to reflect the full impact of significant factors such as class and social structure at the plant (Arnold 1998, p. 665). That only tends to reinforce the argument that there is another story underlying the financial records.

Annual reports constitute arbitrary divisions of ongoing activity but they also provide convenient milestones for story telling, not least in meeting expectations of accounting for performance. The formal report itself is part of the impression that the reader receives; its format and its style and content all matter. The way that message

is conveyed can affect the perception of such things as the dynamics of the firm, its responsiveness to the market, and its aptitude for change and profit.

As Morgan notes, accountants are "subjective 'constructors of reality': presenting and representing the situations in limited and one-sided ways" (1988, p. 477). He lists various popular metaphors that affect accounting theory, and makes the point that no single one of them constitutes the correct approach: "accounting, like other aspects of social life, is inherently complex, multi-dimensional and paradoxical" (1988, p. 481).

Reiter examined the way in which financial economic stories told at a conference about hostile takeovers substituted for or augmented the official versions of corporate performance (1997, p. 605). These alternative outlooks may have developed in part because of a human need to outguess the formal statements, to allow the storytellers to occupy a position of authority marked by an assumption of superior data and, presumably, analytical skills. This would be consistent with the traditional view of the storyteller as the custodian of privileged information as well as a possessor of special oral skills. It would also help to reinforce a culture of insider/outsider demarcation where that was useful to particular practitioners. Who is the best sorcerer, or has the best crystal ball?

Reiter argues that "Stories are powerful, and their ethical and conceptual underpinnings are often hidden" (1997, p. 608). She quotes Witten (193, p. 100): "narrative is a singularly potent discursive form through which control can be dramatized, because it compels belief while at the same time it shields truth claims from testing and debate" (Reiter 1997, p. 608). On this basis it might be expected that from time to time an unauthorised biography of a company, so to speak, would emerge that airs information or views not delivered through official channels. Who would own such a story? The answer depends on who's telling the story and who's listening. The story that is unofficial or non-complying, in the sense that it stands outside the approved format and channels, can serve a valuable purpose since it provides an alternative and sometimes more valuable source of information, one not inhibited by 'the benefits of standardised reporting'. It may escape regulation because it is oral or because it is a form of text beyond corporate control.

Financial reports are limited as records of business activity and often neglect a view of the enterprise that is more informative and, incidentally, more entertaining. The accounts are interpreted subjectively by their producers, regulators and other readers, all of whom contribute to construction of particular meaning. The full story of business activities is necessarily larger than the formal accounting reports can contain and it may be instructive to think of it as an adventure in the style of a journey.

Individual enterprises may have grand or modest goals, and the span of the quest may vary enormously in time, but some of the key features identified by Vogler are likely to be present. Should accounting reports be supplemented by information that better acknowledges this narrative? That will always depends on the interests of the readers and the corporate sensitivity to any demand that readers articulate. Why would they do that?

If we reconstruct and simplify Vogler's version of the stages of the journey, we might also pose them as questions.

1. How did the quest begin and who was involved?
2. Who and what helped get things on track?
3. What was learnt in the process?
4. What has been the most serious challenge so far?
5. What major threats and opportunities await, and how will they be met?
6. What happens after that?

Readers typically want to know what comes next. Do the business reports you read deal explicitly with any of these issues? This kind of information tends to be found in pages of the business media instead, and not always for reasons of timeliness. It could be said that, “the role of the annual report is (might be) to obfuscate the underlying reality that business is an adventure and not a stable story of progress (much like the story of science has been told to us as steady evolution, when the reality is much more of an adventure and revolution)” (Flinders University lecturer in Commerce, Matt Tilling 2001, pers. comm.).

The questions listed above can be seen as plot elements that project the firm into the future and, as with story telling in general, the most pressing issue overall is always going to be ‘what does the next episode contain?’ In the context of a given corporation, in this case Qantas, we might ask:

- what significant problems does it face?
- who will help it overcome them?
- what obstacles will be faced on the way to the solution?
- what will be the reward?

In addition, a number of questions arise when a corporation that has experienced severe challenges need to recount those, especially if there is a key figure such as the CEO in charge of the telling. Some of these are:

- who should be best placed to tell his or her story with a degree of independence and credibility?
- would a series of annual reports capture a sense of drama if the relevant period covered was tumultuous, or would a more accurate depiction come from an external commentator?
- to what extent could we trust narration by the person with most to lose or gain?
- would a corporation’s own reports generally adopt a more sedate tone, with selective presentation of content?
- would they tend to highlight successes rather than failures, and perhaps be biased towards the chief who is endorsing if not personally recounting the events?

In the case of Qantas in 2008, is it too much to say this is the beginning of a hero’s journey? The stage is set: the company is in strife and an attempted rescue is underway. With a corporation, however, it is a standard part of the management brief to deal with problems. This removes the dramatic element of refusing the call to action before finally being persuaded to commit. There should be no reluctant hero in this case because it is the expected role of management to step into the breach. The

issues of personal risk and reward are also significantly absent because the safety cushion of large salaries and share entitlements, diminish the personal costs of failure. In effect the risk remains with the shareholders rather than the managements, which immediately undermines their position as the hero. However, considering the annual reports in the five years from 2008 to 2012, we look to see how the challenges to economic corporate performance are addressed, and whether the response to the situation facing Qantas was truly in the heroic mode, both in action and in the telling.

ANALYSING THE QANTAS REPORTS

We reviewed the Annual Reports of Qantas for the five most recent financial periods, coinciding with the start of the period in which the new CEO, Alan Joyce, stepped in. Qantas was facing problems of profitability and competition in both the domestic and international market segments. According to Drucker, “The purpose of an organization is to enable ordinary human beings to do extraordinary things” (Drucker, 1999, p. 361), and we intended to see whether some extraordinary behaviour might comprise heroic action associated with senior management, or others.

Our reading of the Qantas reports essentially focuses on the text rather than scrutinising the visual content, although that would likely make for interesting analysis too. This is especially so when news is not so good since positive images can tend to counter otherwise adverse reaction. Pictures of happy workers, shiny planes, pretty landscapes, etc. might dispose a reader to a more positive interpretation than otherwise. In the 2008 Annual Report, for instance, the outgoing and incoming CEOs are pictured with their hands on a model of a Jetstar plane, both laughing (Annual Report 2008, p. 21). It suggests that all is harmonious in the top levels of the management team, despite any internal friction that may have actually existed.

What we do in the following sections is to identify key features that indicate operating events regarding the health of Qantas, the environment in which it traded (for instance, whether it was particularly challenging or trending that way), and how the management response was depicted through the Annual Reports. A fundamental aspect of this analysis was to see whether there was evidence of claims to what might be attributed as heroic behaviour. The key events are read against the most prominent features of the heroic journey as explained above.

The 2008 Report

To set the scene, the outgoing Chairman’s report for 2008 indicates increases in traffic, revenue, pre-tax profit, earnings per share, declared dividends, and cash returned to shareholders (pp. 21, 51-52). The profits before tax had increased from \$965 million in 2007 to \$1,408 million in 2008. This would seem to be a good news story. However, this was not how it was presented and the positive financial news was overshadowed by something darker threats and challenges.

Various measures implemented during the year included significant cost-cutting, more efficient aircraft, adopting a two-brand strategy (with Jetstar), and segmenting areas of business operation. The company is understandably sensitive at the time about the failure of an oxygen cylinder on one flight that saw the plane diverted, and about the associated Australian engineers’ dispute over safety and jobs, plus the bad

publicity that resulted from both of these. Safety has always been a proud aspect of Qantas but incidents in recent years, and the attendant debate about whether it was slipping in this regard, caused questions in the press and, doubtless, in the minds of some potential customers, though it could still be said that, 'The airline has an enviable reputation for air safety' (Creeley, 2008).

The financial outlook for the following year was presented as being worrying, with evident softening in the fourth quarter results due to higher fuel costs, reducing demand, and greater competition, 'compounded by a downturn in global financial markets' (p. 7). The report noted the appointment of Alan Joyce who was to take over as CEO from Geoff Dixon in November 2008, the former described as 'the best person to take Qantas forward in a very challenging environment'. Qantas, then, needed to perform well in the face of perceived worsening in market conditions. Could Joyce carry the day? A Hero had arrived, if not to save the day, at least to keep the ship on track. The departing champion gracefully leaves the stage and the reasons for this change are described as 'retirement' and his success, at least in financial terms, is rewritten as failure. The fact that this 'retirement' involved a \$10.7 million payout, which makes it look more like a termination (Schwab, 2009), was not discussed in the Chairman's report. Clearly 'failure', be it real or fictive, has no personal financial cost to the hero.

The 2009 Report

The 2009 report comprised an initial Business Review section and then a separate Financial Report. The Business Review included a Financial Overview and 26 other sections, its opening parts establishing a setting for the consequent explanations in 'A Transformative Year' and 'The Vision', respectively.

It is clear from the text in 'A Transformative Year' that shareholders are expected to understand that Qantas is in trouble. Partially, this trouble is financial but partially it is associated with broader issues such as the reputation of the airline. This situation is summarised by pithy comments above each section heading – as the comment '2008/09 was a year of change and challenge for the Qantas group' is followed by the sub-sections of 'Restoring our Reputation', 'Confronting the Crisis', 'Operating Sustainably', and 'Planning for the Future'. There are trials and challenges but these will be managed by the careful hand of Alan Joyce. The tenor is of careful leadership being required for operating in a quite difficult economic environment, not so much heroic as reliable and reflected in 'The Vision'.

Problems with aircraft safety are described as being due both to industrial action that delayed maintenance and to manufacturing faults that Qantas could not control, probably harking back to the previous report and its continuing legacy. Aviation reporter Ben Sandilands pointed out that the industrial action took the form of 'an overtime ban, imposed because the company had run down staff numbers and replacement parts inventory to such an extent that too much of its fleet became filthy and unreliable' and that Joyce expected the catch-up maintenance of \$300m to be reflected in the 2010 year (Sandilands, 2009). Intriguingly, Sandilands adds, 'But this was all self-inflicted, and done by a predecessor who had been hell bent on flogging the airline to a private equity consortium that was going to pay him a reported \$100 million. (Sandilands, 2009). Strong words and one potential explanation for the

department and payoff-of Geoff Dixon. Essentially Joyce is re-visited as the hero who is on a journey to rescue and restore Qantas the Australian national treasure.

However, the internal challenges are not the only source of trouble. There is also the Global Finance Crisis (GFC), which the report says was quickly met by 'decisive measures' on the part of 'the new management team' to seize opportunities to transform the group. Specifically, the goals included restoring previous levels of profitability and shareholder confidence. No challenge is too large for the Qantas management team led by the redoubtable Alan Joyce. What was not emphasised was the dramatic drop in profits before tax from \$1,408m in 2008 to only \$100m in 2009. This financial disaster is linked to external challenges with relatively little blame being attributed to the new and heroic CEO.

The next page-spread combines 'The Vision' on one side with New Management team on the other, but there is a deliberate overlap between them. The Vision asserts a goal of operating 'both the world's best premium airline and the world's best low fares carrier' in Qantas and Jetstar, with a future to be determined by its shareholders, who will receive 'sustainable returns'. There is relatively little text, and it lies across a picture of the managers, with new CEO and MD Alan Joyce occupying the most prominent position in the foreground on the right hand side, above a small list of managers.

So far, we have a business in some strife and new people at the helm who are charged with the task of its recovery. However, despite this story of responsiveness and vigour there is an inevitable dark-side. During the report period, capacity was reduced, supplier costs were cut, 1750 staff cuts were made or identified, and executive pays were frozen. These were drastic moves, justified, in the report, by the implicit alternative of reputation loss and financial disaster. However, despite these challenges group paid out its full year after-tax profit in dividends but withheld a final dividend. The costs were shared by the shareholders and the now dismissed employees. Accounting information was primarily mobilised to emphasise the challenges and highlight the threat that have to be addressed. In effect accounting is the dark-side.

The 2010 Report

The next year saw reporting split into two documents, an Annual Review and an Annual Report.

The Annual Review

The message from the Annual Report was a feel-good one underlining collaboration and shared interest. A large and very stylised design of a kangaroo dominated the front (clearly reinforcing the notion of Qantas as a national treasure and Joyce's role in restoring and protecting). The notion of a collective national treasure is also evident in the report title, 'The Sum of Us'. The theme inside the Annual Review builds on the notion of collective collaboration with a group image of happy staff. However, this title has a second ironic implication as this is also the title of the 1990 off-Broadway play by David Stevens adapted as an Australian movie in 1994, and which concerns acceptance of homosexuality. This second reading, together with the issues of the staff sacked or 'let go' in the preceding year, is not acknowledged.

The paramount message of the Annual report is about promoting confidence and stressing careful but innovative progress under Alan Joyce's leadership. Joyce is a reliable trustee of the national treasure. As such the Chairman's Report includes the announcement of a new non-statutory measure, underlying profit before tax of \$377 million, 'to identify how well the Group manages those business factors it controls, by eliminating one-off and high change factors such as hedge volatility in currencies and fuel' (Clifford, 2011), and we will return to this briefly. He adds that no dividend was to be paid in 2009/2010, essentially to maintain its capital and that there was significant progress towards \$1.5 billion in permanent savings with \$533 million achieved to date (making the case that the increase in profits is a result of management cost saving initiatives). There is a Financial Performance summary on pp. 18-19 that employs simple summary graphics, leaving more detailed commentary for the Annual Report. Good governance and stewardship is reflected in the provision of additional financial information and stability, safety and progress requires that the Qantas shareholders and staff members accept the cost.

CEO Joyce's message (pp. 16-17) is mostly about aircraft purchases, menus, booking systems, loyalty programs, and extra-cost options such as additional baggage. There is hardly any mention of the business environment beyond hoping to ride out its cycles and to maintain cash flow. Issues of safety are left for a following section where a commitment to best practice is announced as a 'first priority' (p. 21). One impediment to the airline's operations was the eruption of Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano in April that shut down its European services for six days. Under Hero Joyce, everything is safe and secure. Even disasters such as volcanic eruptions are but a challenge in the hero's path.

The Annual Report

From a narrative perspective the annual report is a far less interesting document than the annual review and significantly distancing the counter-narrative elements of the financial statements from the positive and narrative of the CEO's vision. However, the 2010 annual report does reflect much more accounting evidence and tells a slightly different story. The extent of profits and the expense movements are detailed in the 'Information on Qantas' and 'Review of Operations' section and then the 'Financial Report section' of the Annual Report. This section reminds the reader that the current profits of \$377 million is still low against historical levels and that passenger revenues for their current year is lower than previous year. The increase in profits is due to cutting costs.

What is significant but only becomes visible in the depth of the financial report (p. 34) is the change in the that Short Term Incentive Payments to eliminate the link to earnings per share and introduce up to half of the allocation based on a comparison to its 'airline peer group'. Given the low levels of profitability across the airline industry this virtually guarantees executive bonus payments despite persistent low profitability (or even losses). In effect, the executives are rewarded when shareholders get nothing. Despite the rewards for heroism traditionally being uncertain, the heroes of Qantas management and boards rest secure in their wealth. In this case cash bonuses were not paid, despite the board considering that it had exceeded its goals, but shares were still awarded up to the first threshold level (p. 36). It is unsurprising that this relatively unheroic aspect of the activity was relegated to the details of the annual reports.

The 2011 Report

The next report returned to images of aircraft rather than people and is headed 'Building a Stronger Qantas'. The first summary paragraph, isolated above a picture of a jet, bears the heading 'A Strong Performance in Challenging Conditions', and says:

In 2010/2011 the Qantas Group reported a strong result in a complex and challenging global operating environment, with increased revenue across all business segments. The result was achieved while overcoming a series of natural disasters and operational disruptions, and despite the underperformance of Qantas' international business. (p. 3)

It was a year of troubles, which the Chairman's Report recounted. If this were a quest tale, the range of crises would fit well with struggles to reach a final challenge and claim a key goal. There was:

...a series of natural disasters and major weather events. These included severe flooding and Cyclone Yasi in Queensland, the Christchurch earthquake, and the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. In June 2011 an ash cloud from Chile's Puyehue-Cordon Caulle volcano caused widespread disruption to Australian airspace, forcing the cancellation of thousands of Qantas and Jetstar flights. These events cost the Group \$224 million. (Clifford, p. 4)

Then there was the failure of a Rolls-Royce engine on a flight from Singapore to Sydney that led to the fleet being grounded for three weeks. Chairman Clifford noted:

With considerable uncertainty in global economic conditions, fuel prices, foreign exchange rates and the industrial relations environment, it is vital that the Group continues to manage capital effectively. (Clifford, p.4)

In effect, the management are not to blame for the difficulties faced. However, the neat attribution of all of the 'problems' to external sources is not as straight-forward as it appears as some of them were actually linked to management actions. Brian Palmer commented in *Slate* that the grounding occurred 'during a contentious industrial dispute' and, on the matter of safety, that the Switzerland-based Air Transport Rating Agency placed Qantas 13th (the top 10 were not differentiated). He mentions that other rankings also appear periodically: 'the International Airline Passengers Association has published ratings of domestic airlines, and news organizations like U.S. News & World Report' (Palmer, 2011). The prized Qantas safety record was under threat, or at least the public perception was.

The CEO's Report reclaimed discussion of finances after their disappearance from the previous year. Much of this seems to be because adoption of the underlying earnings before interest and tax (EBIT) measure allowed a view that excluded some significant cost impacts, in other words, permitting more good news to be associated with leadership. The CEO's closing words emphasise an expectation of change while also echoing the traditional Australian-ness of Qantas. It is a message of belonging, of

common identity. Again Alan Joyce's journey to rescue and restore Qantas the Australian national treasure is re-emphasised.

In 2011 an underlying profit before tax reported was \$554 million which, while not being a return to 2008 levels, did represent a significant increase on the last two years. However, despite this improvement the Board elected not to pay dividends to shareholders for 2010/2011. Cash bonuses were not paid to senior executives either, but shares were awarded. Some elements of the incentive payments scheme for senior executives were recognised but deferred, partly as a retention initiative (p. 35). The Remuneration Report details the performance outcomes on which executive remuneration was based:

Management's contribution to this result was by way of a combination of coordinated responses to the challenges of the year, plus the successful implementation and achievement of benefits from a number of key strategic initiatives (p.39)

It then goes on to list such 'contributions' as re-allocating aircraft capacity required by the grounding period, dealing with the impact of the volcanic eruption, rolling out new products, and so on. Of course, the directness of any connection between senior management and the itemised outcomes is open to conjecture. The CEO's remuneration increased from marginally under \$A3m in 2010 to \$A5m, an increase of two-thirds. Was the CEO's performance two-thirds better, or has he had been under-rewarded in the previous year?

In the typical hero's journey, any expectations of substantial reward would remain contingent on success in achieving one critical goal. A smaller success en route would possibly produce a small incentive. However, for the hero the boon is only achieved at the end of the journey and at the resolution of the challenges (and even then the boon is intended to help others, not just the hero). For Qantas the challenges remain, the hero gets rich while staff become redundant, and shareholders' dividends are reduced.

The 2012 Report

The Annual Report was entitled 'Broadening our horizons', with a cover image of an empty sky and begins with the epigram "Building on unique Australian qualities – and the skills of its 33,600 people – the Qantas Group is broadening its horizons to secure a successful and profitable future". The first act is to re-emphasise the ongoing theme of Alan Joyce's journey to rescue and restore Qantas the Australian national treasure. However, this morphs into a message of challenge, signalling the weakness of the international network compared to domestic operations. The implication is that one (the international) must be sacrificed to save the whole (the company).

Qantas International was separated from Qantas Domestic and Jetstar in May of 2012, and this seemed inevitable. The story was that International Operations was continuing to run at a substantial loss, whereas the domestic products remained profitable. Joyce asserted his ability (as hero) to resolve this challenge and to return the international sector to profit in 2014 (Kelly, 2012). However, given this challenge

(and by implication the national treasure status of Qantas) he was arguing for government intervention to improve the airline's competitive position:

Qantas argued that either the Foreign Investment Review Board should limit the scope of Etihad's purchase of Virgin or Qantas should be freed of the constraints of the Qantas Sale Act - which restricts foreign investment and Qantas's business options - to allow it to compete on a level playing field.

Otherwise, the airline warned, "we could go under". (Coorey & O'Sullivan, 2012)

Chairman Leigh Clifford's report firstly emphasises an underlying profit before tax of \$95m (the actual 'statutory' loss before tax and interest reported in the financial statements was actually \$173m) and then he mentions a statutory loss after interest and tax of \$244m. Clearly the decision was to report the most positive financial figure and distance the actual results with the term 'statutory'. The times are tough and once more, the cost is carried by the shareholders as dividends were withheld. Clifford attempts to attach the blame for this poor financial performance on external factors and mentions a moderating impact of fuel costs, though still high, a competitive and regulated market, and the advent of a 10-year Qantas partnership with Emirates. However, the fundamental cause is attributed to the Australian workforce (and the unions), who had carried much of the cost of previous losses in the form of redundancy. This demonization and the threat that the union (and by implication the workforce) represented the journey to rescue and restore Qantas the Australian national treasure:

Within Australia, extensive industrial action and union campaigns to discredit the Qantas brand caused significant damage to the Group. These unions' attempts to exert control over company strategy were unacceptable and the Board unanimously supported Alan Joyce's decision to ground the Qantas fleet. The Group's response brought certainty for passengers, employees and investors. (Clifford, p. 6)

CEO Alan Joyce repeats a similar strategy, attributing the blame for the failure on others. He opens his report with financial news that emphasises difficulty; there is the rising fuel bill, the carry-over impact of the previous year's fleet grounding, and the costs of revising International Operations. He notes a strong domestic result, and expansion of the overseas-based Jetstar operations in the Pacific. It is unclear whether the 'heavy maintenance consolidation' that is projected to produce about \$300m in savings involves the loss of jobs in Australia or not. However, the implication is that it will. Debt reduction is the new target rather than capital expenditure.

The CEO declined his annual incentive (\$792,000 Short Term Incentive Plan payment) and kept his base pay unaltered for 2012/2013 rather than participate in the normal review. Because the long-term incentive targets were not met, his associated share rights lapsed (p. 42). Interestingly, however, both the Chairman and CEO's issued capital rose dramatically in the year, and a table of share rights shows very large numbers of shares set to be vested in the Long Term Incentive Plan, including \$8m for 2012-2014 and the financial figure which is the basis of the calculation is not

the actual loss after income and tax of \$244m, experienced by shareholders, but the reported ‘underlying profit before tax’ of \$95m.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

Safety and financial durability remain key concerns. The public perception of Qantas operating standards is important, and it is affected by incidents such as an emergency landing at Changi Airport after engine problems (Mace & Olivieri, 2013). Rankings from the Jet Airliner Crash Data Evaluation Center (JACDEC) placed the airline 13th globally, though Qantas argued that the index was not reputable, claiming that its ‘safety record ‘speaks for itself’ (Mace & Olivieri, 2013). Two days later, travel journalist Clive Dorman responded in the same newspaper with scepticism about the measures employed by JACDEC and about the credibility of the centre itself (Dorman, 2013). Does the public care for such debate or simply absorb the headlines?

Safety, of course, is only one aspect of meeting customer expectations that will fill planes. Price, comfort, staff behaviour, scheduling convenience, connection spreads, and so on, will all contribute to market share. Lately, Qantas seems to be struggling in many of these areas, with its own former chief economist, Tony Webber, arguing that it needs to relinquish loss-making international routes and operate under global alliances instead, undertake better hedging against fuel costs movements, and unbundle its domestic services (Dennis, 2013). Clearly the narrative that some will be sacrificed to save others (namely the international aspect to save the company) continues.

And the change continues underpinned by the same basic narrative. Qantas has substituted a partnership with Emirates Airlines for its previous one with British Airways to link with Europe, and is expanding into Asia through Jetstar. It is suggested that this will both improve profitability and resolve the ‘international routes’ problem. While it is questionable whether this will be shared with staff or shareholders, it is certain that management will be rewarded.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the narrative and literary aspects of company reports, most particularly the Chairman and CEOs reports, which are recognised as a critical source of information for many stakeholders. In contrast to much of the prior work on accounting and literary theory, we mobilise notions of myth derived from the work of Propp (1927), Campbell (1968) and Vogler (1992). These people argue that there are strong archetypal meta-myths which underpin story-telling in much of human culture, particularly the monomyth of the hero’s journey. Therefore we ask if we can find evidence of these mythic elements in annual reports and, if so, what role accounting plays. Clatworthy and Jones (2003) suggest that accounting information is not objectively reported in chairmen’s reports but is mobilised to present the most positive story of performance (and forestall the most negative). In effect, the goal of the story is for the chairman (and by extension the management team) to claim credit for positive performance and attribute blame for negative performance on outside uncontrollable influences. In other words, it is potentially the construction of a mythic narrative of a battle by a heroic management team against outside evil forces.

Our study focuses on the financial reports of Qantas Airlines between 2008 and 2012. This was a difficult and challenging period for Qantas which involved both profits and losses, senior leadership changes, strikes, major disruptions (both natural and human made), safety concerns and high levels of concerned public visibility. If ever it was a time for a hero who knew the accounting secret knowledge, this was it.

A critical aspect of our review is that in taking a set period, we should not impose any expectations of finding a tidy story in order to fashion a plot with an equally neat beginning, middle and end where there really is none. Given the arbitrary selection of a number of years of trading, discovering evidence of an incomplete journey story with heroic behaviour and structural elements might seem more likely.

Unlike typical hero's journey stories, the events of corporate trading are very complex and influenced by many factors. It is not necessarily an oversimplification, however, to ask whether the significant elements of a hero's journey are present in a view of corporate activity where there is a prominent leader acting on behalf of the shareholding community during difficult times. The need for such action can arise in many theatres of life. Airline or other business operations are tales intended for dramatic entertainment, but then neither are wars or personal struggles against hardship in life. That does not mean that their constituent events are unable to be seen and rendered as stories of heroism. That said, there is no single or, at least, paramount measure of success in the period of Qantas's operations covered in this paper and, in that sense, no closure to any story of heroism that might be intuited.

Looking at its corporate activity as potentially a case of a normal world being disturbed by some influence that a hero then overcomes, the life of Qantas contains many problems that need to be solved but none that fits neatly into the hero's journey mould...at least so far. Ultimately, it appears that while the CEO, in particular, is sometimes portrayed as the corporate warrior charged with steering the business through difficult times towards profitability, the heroic journey is mostly underplayed in the Annual Reports of Qantas.

There were ongoing elements of the hero's journey, particularly around the creation of the CEO as a hero, the call to the journey to rescue and restore Qantas as 'the Australian national treasure', the ongoing road trials where the performance of Qantas is challenged by enemies both internal (primarily the union – and by extension the Qantas staff) and external (too numerous to list). While the question of boon or reward seems unclear, every report described some form of victory which is justified by retaining and rewarding the management team. Consistent with Clatworthy and Jones (2003), financial information was played down (or selectively reported) during bad times and emphasised during good times. When things got really bad, actual financial performance distanced with the term 'statutory' and the Chairman and CEO focused on other financial figures which were more positive. The negative information was provided, but this was only in the details of the financial statements (which it was clearly assumed that many readers would ignore).

However, there are elements of the hero's journey which were missing or were vaguely unsatisfactory which would suggest that, while there are mythic elements, the Annual Reports of Qantas do not portray a hero's journey. First and foremost was the absence of reluctance on the part of the hero (quite clearly the CEO from the

perspective of the annual report). However, despite frequent mentions of challenges faced by the airline, the CEO was not a convincing heroic figure. There was no real sense that the CEO has received a call to action, resisted it, finally and reluctantly accepted it, and then set out on a journey of high personal risk on behalf of others. Joyce was all too happy to displace Geoff Dixon and showed no evidence of the refusal of the call. While the notion of the supernatural does not tend to feature highly in company annual reporting, the notion of vision, destiny, calling (or guidance from well recognised management gurus or consulting firms) does. While the notion of 'The Vision' outlined in 2009 might be seen in these terms, it was hardly convincing.

The issue of personal risk is the most problematic to the case for the heroic. The heart of this problem is the transparency of senior executive remuneration enforced by current reporting requirements. Nonetheless, while shareholders face reduced dividends (and employees face reduced salaries or terminations) there is evidence of senior executives manipulating their bonus schemes to ensure that the risks are borne by others while they continue to be richly rewarded. In short, the personal risk of the heroic CEO is low (even when they get fired they are payed millions) and therefore their credibility in facing risks on behalf of others is weak. Despite the attempts to create heroic narratives, the CEOs are not very heroic. Ironically, the accounting information is equally motivated to make the case for the heroic CEO and to undermine the same case.

Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect CEOs to be heroes but rather a form of anti-hero risk avoider. In this case, the repeated claims that the Qantas CEO was the defender of the national treasure came across as weak and self-serving rhetoric (which would lead to massive personal rewards). While not being sustained in this case it is clear that CEOs do like to claim the hero's mantle, as is all too evident in official histories and movie dramatisation. Maybe the ultimate conclusion is that the real world does not fit the kind of Hollywood blockbuster narrative that Christopher Vogler has described so well. What remains to be seen is whether the preparers of annual reports will follow the path of the Hollywood studies and start to turn to hire the services of script consultants to strengthen the literary qualities of their efforts. Having PR departments with a sense of what constitutes a good adventure story would be a good start.

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