

Cruel Immortalities in *Odyssey* 5

In this paper I argue that the evocation of Tithonos in first verse of *Odyssey* 5 presents attentive auditors with a frame for the episodes to come, one that both underscores the nature and degree of danger posed by Calypso and transforms Odysseus' rejection of immortality into a paradigm of uncommon μῆτις.

Stanford emphasized the absence of evidence for Tithonos' "cruel immortality" prior to the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (292). Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth addressed textual and philological concerns in the sequence only (254). De Jong discusses Tithonos as foreshadowing of Odysseus choice (127), but does not develop it in the context of existential danger and μῆτις that I advocate (136).

Two subsequent passages reveal the crux of the matter. When speaking with Hermes, Calypso avers her desire to make Odysseus both ἀθάνατος and ἀγήρωσ (134-5). Yet, once bound by a Stygian oath (178-91), her final attempt to entice the hero specifies that he would be the guardian of her house (κε... δῶμα φυλάσσοις, 208) and ἀθάνατος (209). Just as Eos would eventually do, she omits ἀγήρωσ. Equally important, the language of agelessness survives in perverse form. Calypso acknowledged that, were he to accept, he would still desire Penelope and "long for her for all time" (τῆς τ' αἰὲν ἐέλδεται ἧματα πάντα, 210).

Calypso's speech on the jealousy of male gods anticipates this shift. Her first parallel is the tale of Eos and Orion, whom Artemis slew (121-4). Clearly Eos "moved on" for the audience has been reminded but a few minutes earlier that her present lover is Tithonos, whose ill-fate is recalled in the subsequent attention to agelessness, first as untrustworthy intention, then as omission and perversion.

With regard to Stanford's concern about evidence for Tithonos' fate, the archaeological proverb that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence" bears recollection. Relative chronology could also be problematic depending on how late one dates the *Odyssey* and how early the *Hymn to Aphrodite*. Moreover, the *Hymn* does not stand in isolation; reference to Tithonos' harsh aging also appears in Mimnermus (4 W), Sappho (58 LP), and Hellanikos (4F140). Finally, Memnon is the progeny of this union, and there is good evidence for the centrality of his role in the Trojan Cycle prior to the *Iliad* we now possess (Burgess 27-9). Taken together, there is a plausible case that the union of Eos and Tithonos has deep roots in oral tradition and that the *Hymn to Aphrodite* does not represent a unique invention.

Multiple commentators have observed that the immortality Calypso offers is kind of living death for the hero (see Schein 22-5 for discussion). The horror of Tithonos' perpetual aging offers a potent complement to such readings and speaks to Odysseus' traditional capacity for extreme endurance. He must, moreover, escape this moment without divine instruction. Even at his heroic nadir, he still has the presence of mind to bind the goddess by oath and to temper his rejection of immortality with flattery. By contrast, Hermes much coach such behaviors in Odysseus' encounter with Circe, a contrast which draws further attention to the unique degree of unaided μῆτις exhibited in the exchange with Calypso.

Bibliography

Burgess, Jonathan. 2009. *The Death and Afterlife of Achilles* (Johns Hopkins University Press).

De Jong, Irene J.F. 2001. *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge).

Heubeck, Alfred; West, Stephanie; and Hainsworth, J.B. 1988. *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, Vol. I* (Oxford).

Schein, Seth. 1996. "Introduction" in *Reading the Odyssey* (Princeton) 3-31.

Stanford, W.B. 1959. *Homer: Odyssey I-XII* (Bristol Classical Press).