

Calypso's Island: An Ovidian Reinterpretation of Homer

Calypso plays a deceptively passive role in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, 2.123-142. She was one of the "watery goddesses" (124) enamored by Odysseus because he was *facundus*, eloquent (123)— he won her over with repeated tales of his Iliadic glories. However, close analysis of the language and Homeric references reveals that Calypso's agency overshadows that of Odysseus. I argue that contrary to the expected celebration of Odysseus, Ovid emphasizes the persuasive skills of Calypso as an allegory for the literary validity of elegiac love poetry.

It is Odysseus' speaking skills that Ovid suggests will be displayed as a didactic exemplum supporting the precept that eloquence is requisite for lovers. Yet despite supposedly being seduced by Odysseus' persuasion, Calypso herself is the one persuading *him* as the subject of the majority of active verbs denoting speech in the passage (*negavit, rogabat, exigit, rogat, inquit*). Even when Odysseus speaks directly, his storytelling is undercut by Calypso's final admonitory question as the waves wash away the Trojan war scenes he has drawn in the sand: "Do you see how many names these waves have destroyed, which you believe will be faithful to you when you go? (141-2)". Instead of actually glorifying the smooth-talker's seduction of a goddess as he claims to do, Ovid assigns persuasive authority to the goddess herself. Zerba (2009) notes the inability of Homer's Odysseus to convince Calypso to let him go since as a goddess, she is immune to persuasive feats of human speech. Thus, Ovid pretends to present Odysseus as the intellectually and sexually dominant lover while in reality reinforcing the Homeric dynamic in which the goddess holds all the power.

Subversion of erotic agency is a common feature of Ovid's elegy but here in particular, the treatment of Homeric themes suggests metapoetic significance. Sharrock (1987) argues that

Ovid has carefully constructed this scene to align with the sequence of events in Homer. Ovid's deliberate reference to the Homeric scene would have been easily recognizable by his audience and emphasizes the irony in his representation of events. The final story is told when they stand on the shore together and "(even) there too (*illic quoque*, 129), Calypso forces out (*exigit*, 130) the retelling of Rhesus' murder. The stick Odysseus uses to draw in the sand, which he held "by chance" (*forte*, 131), was no accident; Ovid refers to the point in the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus was building a raft to get off the island (Sharrock 409). Until the last possible moment, Ovid's Calypso coaxes stories out of Odysseus and there is no indication that she aids him in building the raft as she does in the *Odyssey*. By drawing close connections to the Homeric version of the story while simultaneously reinterpreting it, Ovid invites closer attention to his variation.

There is emphasis on the physical rather than the oral quality of Odysseus' storytelling; although he does say words (*inquit*, 133), he more noticeably "draws" (*pingit*, 132 and *pingebat*, 139) and "makes" (*fecit*, 133 and *facit*, 135). This is, so to speak, a new way of telling the same story, which Ovid draws particular attention to (126-8). In her response to the waves' destruction of Odysseus' drawings, Calypso diminishes his attempt, mocking his naivety in entrusting himself to the treacherous waves. This argument by a woman to a man about to depart is an erotic literary *topos*, but in this case, Calypso is not desperately begging, but remonstrating him for the repetition of stories she supposedly elicited from him. The contradiction suggests the presence of Ovid's own reflections on genre and authorship. The ambiguous "names" (*nomina*, 142) destroyed by the waves are perhaps the lives of those washed away with Pergama, but Ovid may also refer to the names of poets, those who retell the stories of epic and become lost in the sea of anonymity. Just as Odysseus is thought to have been for Homer a self-reflective

representation of the poet and the epic genre, so for Ovid the ironic juxtaposition of Calypso's persuasive skills to Odysseus' asserts the literary value of the feminine and erotic, elegy.

Bibliography

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