

Immortal Textiles and Immortals' Textiles: Death, Salvation, and Fabric in *Odyssey* 5

Our first introduction to Odysseus comes in Book 5 of the *Odyssey*, a pivotal episode in which he is finally released from Calypso's clutches and allowed to re-enter the world of men. While many scholars have identified this book as a transition between the worlds of gods and men, a few read it as fundamental evidence of Odysseus' spiritual or cosmic journey (Holtmark 1966; Marinatos 2001; Rank 1952). Others have examined the varied roles that textiles play in narrative and poetic aspects of the *Odyssey* (Jenkins 1985; Kardulias 2001; Barber 1991; Pantelia 1993; *inter alia*). Combining these two approaches, in this paper I show that textiles in Book 5 hold powers of life and death linked to the goddesses who own them. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the apparent "immortality" of these textiles and the narrative roles they play situates Odysseus' voyage within the cosmic cycles and spiritual rebirths innate in Egyptian and Near Eastern folklore.

I begin by identifying the textiles mentioned in depictions of this episode. While there are typical mentions of textiles such as garments and sail cloths, two articles in particular have pivotal roles in Odysseus' journey: the clothes that Calypso gives him, which almost fatally weigh him down in the sea, and the "immortal veil" that Ino supplies to keep him alive. Both garments are called "immortal" (*ambrota*): the latter by Ino herself, the former by Odysseus in his account of these events in Book 7.

I next identify the few other instances in Homer where textiles are described as "immortal." The phrase that Odysseus uses to refer to his garments from Calypso is *ambrota heimata*, "immortal clothes." To gain a deeper understanding of this phrase's precise connotation, I examine the other two Homeric passages where it appears, both of which present

ambrota heimata as garments used to dress deceased heroes (*Il.* 16.670 and 680; *Od.* 24.58).

Through comparison with these lines, I argue that the phrase's exclusivity to describe burial or cremation clothes suggest that in Odysseus' account of his near-death at sea, he depicts Calypso's gifted clothes as "death garments," thus himself interpreting the episode as a symbolic death.

Ino's instruction to shed those clothes and instead don her "immortal" veil, which saves Odysseus from his would-be death at sea. He is then reborn into the world of men, washed up naked and weakened on the shores of Scheria. I then show that this death-rebirth cycle, and specifically one's death and rebirth *by sea* have precedents in Egyptian and Near Eastern cosmic journeys as well as other Greek myths, in which conveyance in bodies of water are both necessary for crossing over into the afterlife and are used to symbolize birth (West 1997, Wiggermann 1996).

Finally, I interpret Ino and her "immortal" veil as foils to Calypso and her gifted clothes by examining the characterizations of the two goddesses in the *Odyssey* and beyond. Each is associated with death, immortality, and concealment. Calypso's repeated offer of immortality indicates that she can even manipulate the distinctions between mortal and immortal. Ino Leucothea also has a complex of associations that parallel Odysseus' journey to Scheria. Details of Ino's myths—her concealment of Dionysus to save him from Hera's wrath, the murder of her son by submerging him in a cauldron, and her immortalization by means of water—all find echoes in Odysseus' voyage. I conclude that Calypso and Ino drive the action of the spiritual or cosmic journey in Book 5 by means of their "immortal" textiles, which prove to be the cause of both Odysseus' death and his salvation.

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