Kalypso

The Island of Ogygia

Prologue

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Odysseus, how he suffered –
tossed on rough seas for ten years;
yet not all his hours were troubled
by fate – there were times of ease.

Or was it a hardship, to caress
lovely Kalypso for six years
and share the bed of a goddess?

Prelude

Tell me, Muse, of the man
of many wiles, voyaging far
after he had sacked
the holy citadel of Troy.

All other survivors were home, safe;
but one man was held captive,
pining for his home and his wife,
by the lovely nymph Kalypso.

On the far-off island Ogygia
lives Kalypso, a dread goddess.
She promised to make him immortal,
and ageless for all his days.

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How often Kalypso grieved
at his wish to be off, and said
that the sea was not fit for rowing.

Again and again she asked him
to tell her the story of Troy
and he would tell her the tale
once more in different words.

They would stand on the shore, and she
would ask about cruel Rhesus.
With a stick which he was holding
he would draw in the sand.

Here is Troy (*drawing walls*),
here Simois, and here my camp.
There was a plain (*he drew it*),
where we shed Dolon’s blood.
Here were the tents of Rhesus.

He was tracing out more things
when a wave washed away Troy
and Rhesus’ camp with its chief.

These waves
you thought you could trust,
what great names they’ve destroyed,
you see?

Dawn brought light to gods and men
and the gods sat down in council,
among them Zeus the thunderer
whose power is the greatest.

Athene began to speak to them,
recalling Odysseus’ ordeal;
it grieved her that he was still held
captive in the house of the nymph.

My heart is torn for Odysseus;
far from his friends he suffers
on the island of a goddess,
daughter of Atlas.

She keeps that luckless man,
trying to make him forget
Ithaca. But he longs to see
his own hearth-smoke rise:
or else die.

You do not care, Olympian;
yet did he not give you offerings
by the ships, on the plain of Troy?
Why, Zeus, so harsh to him now?

My child, what are you saying?
I could not forget great Odysseus;
but Poseidon is angry, because of his blinded son, Polyphemos.

But let us plan his homecoming; Poseidon will not remain angry if he finds that he is opposed by all the immortal gods.

O Father, if he may go home, let us send Hermes to Ogygia, to tell the nymph our resolve that Odysseus is to leave.

Hermes, go to the nymph and tell her our fixed resolve: Odysseus is fated to go home to his people and his father’s land.

Hermes obeyed, fastening on the golden sandals that carry him over land and sea as swift as the wind.

He swooped down over the sea from Pieria, and skimmed over the waves like a bird.

Landing on the island he came to the nymph’s cave and found her there. A great fire of cedar and citron burned on the hearth, spreading fragrance.

Inside, the nymph sang sweetly as she moved back and forth at the loom with her gold shuttle.

Hermes the guide stood and admired. But he did not see Odysseus for he was weeping by the shore, looking out to sea, his tears flowing.

The goddess Kalypso questioned Hermes, when she had seated him on a bright, gleaming chair.

Why have you come, honoured guest? Tell me your wish: if I can, I’ll do it, if it can be done.

The nymph placed a table by him
laden with ambrosia 
and poured the nectar for him. 
When he had eaten he answered:

You, a goddess, ask me, a god
why I am here; I shall tell you. 
Zeus sent me, though against my will.

He says a man is here with you,
most wretched of those who besieged 
Troy for nine years, and in the tenth 
sacked the city and left for home.

But his men offended the goddess 
Athene who sent a fierce storm. 
All his comrades perished, but 
wind and waves carried him here.

Zeus commands you to send him 
away at once: he is not fated 
to die here, far from his friends, 
but to return to friends and home.

Gods, you are cruel and envious. 
You resent it if goddesses 
take mortal men to their beds.

So when rosy Dawn chose Orion 
you gods begrudged it, till Artemis 
attacked him in Ortygia 
and killed him with gentle arrows.

So now you resent my keeping 
a man I saved when Zeus destroyed 
his ship, and his friends perished, 
but wind and waves carried him here.

I took him in kindly, fed him, 
offered to make him immortal 
and ageless all his days. But Zeus 
must be obeyed, so let him depart.

But I have no ships with oars 
nor men to go with him by sea. 
Yet my help he shall have freely 
to return home in safety.

So send him on his way now 
and beware the anger of Zeus 
lest he hold a grudge against you.
Then Hermes left and the nymph went to great-hearted Odysseus; he wept by the shore, pining, indifferent now to the nymph.

At night he had to sleep by her, unwilling, though she was willing; but by day he wept by the sea. The goddess now addressed him:

Unlucky man, grieve no longer. I’ll help you leave, so cut wood and make a raft, with a high deck, to bear you on the misty sea.

I shall give you provisions and clothes. I’ll send a wind to bring you home if the gods allow, for they are stronger than I.

You plan something else, goddess, not my passage home. To cross the sea in a raft? That is too dangerous. Good ships with fair winds can fail.

I’ll set foot on no raft without your good will, nor unless you swear a binding oath not to devise any fresh misery for me.

You are wicked, and quick-witted! I swear by Earth and Heaven and by Styx, the gods’ greatest oath: I plan no fresh misery for you.

I am planning for you as I would for myself, were I in your plight. My intentions are pure; my heart is not of iron, but feels pity.

Goddess and man went to the cave and he sat in the chair that Hermes had used; and the nymph set food before him, such as mortals eat.

But she sat opposite him and was served the food of the gods, ambrosia and nectar.
They reached out to the good food
and when they had had their fill
of food and drink, Kalypso,
the beautiful goddess, spoke first:

Laertes’ son, wily Odysseus
sprung from Zeus, are you really
so eager to return home
to the land of your fathers?

I wish you well, but if you knew
how hard it will be, you’d stay here,
share this house, and be immortal,
in spite of longing for your wife.

I think I am not inferior
to her in face or figure
for surely a mortal woman
cannot rival a goddess in looks?

Great goddess, do not be angry.
It’s true that wise Penelope
cannot match you in face and figure:
she is mortal, you are ageless.

But every day I long for home.
If a god strikes me at sea
I shall bear it stubbornly
having already endured much.

He spoke; the sun set and night fell.
In the inmost part of the cave
these two enjoyed a night of love
staying together all night.

When rosy dawn came, Odysseus
put on cloak and tunic. The nymph
wore a white robe, with a gold belt,
and a veil drawn over her head.

She began to make things ready
for Odysseus to leave.
She gave him a great bronze axe
and a polished smoothing adze.

He began to fell trees; the work
went quickly. He cut down twenty
and trimmed and smoothed them all
and trued them up to a straight line.
He drilled and pegged them together.  
As a carpenter builds the hull  
of a freight ship, so broad of beam  
did Odysseus build his raft.

Then he attached the rigging  
fixing it expertly in place,  
and levered the raft to the sea.  
On the fourth day his work was done.

On the fifth day fair Kalypso  
sent him off from the island  
giving him wine, water and food  
and a mild following wind.

Odysseus gladly spread his sail  
and seated at the helm  
steered his raft skilfully.

Sleep never closed his eyes  
as he gazed at the Pleiades,  
Boötes, and the Great Bear  
which some men call the Plough.

For Kalypso had told him always  
to keep the Great Bear on his left  
as he sailed across the sea.

Epilogue

PROPERTIUS  
Beautiful Kalypso mourned  
when the Ithacan went away;  
she wept by the lonely waves.

Hair unkempt, for many days  
she lamented by the cruel sea.  
She would never see him again  
and she grieved,  
remembering her long joy.

ΤΕΛΟΣ