

Read after
p. 895

PART ONE: THE WANDERINGS

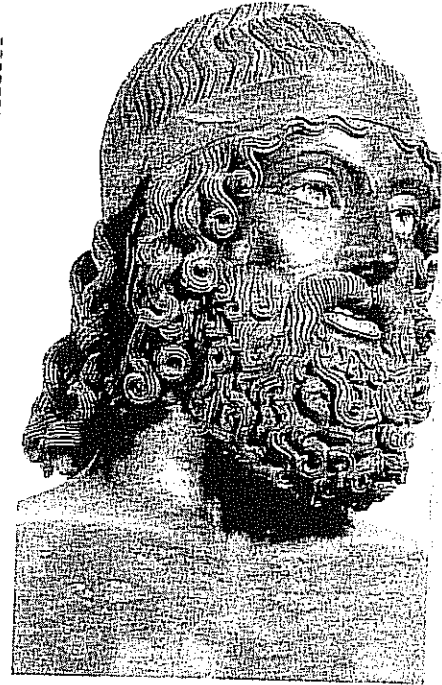
CALYPSO, THE SWEET NYMPH

The first books of the epic (Books 1–4) tell about Odysseus' son, Telemachus. Telemachus has been searching the Mediterranean world for his father, who has never returned from the ten-year Trojan War. (Today, Odysseus would be listed as missing in action.)

When we first meet Odysseus, in Book 5 of the epic, he is a prisoner of the beautiful goddess Calypso. The old soldier is in despair: He has spent ten years (seven of them as Calypso's not entirely unwilling captive) trying to get home.

The goddess Athena has supported and helped Odysseus on his long journey. Now she begs her father, Zeus, to help her favorite, and Zeus agrees. He sends the messenger god Hermes to Calypso's island to order Odysseus released. It is important to remember that although Calypso is not described as evil, her seductive charms—even her promises of immortality for Odysseus—threaten to keep the hero away from his wife, Penelope.

No words were lost on Hermes the Wayfinder
 who bent to tie his beautiful sandals on,
 35 ambrosial,^o golden, that carry him over water
 or over endless land in a swish of the wind,
 and took the wand with which he charms asleep—
 or when he wills, awake—the eyes of men.
 So wand in hand he paced into the air,
 40 shot from Pieria^o down, down to sea level,
 and veered to skim the swell. A gull patrolling
 between the wave crests of the desolate sea
 will dip to catch a fish, and douse his wings;
 no higher above the whitecaps Hermes flew
 45 until the distant island lay ahead,
 then rising shoreward from the violet ocean
 he stepped up to the cave. Divine Calypso,
 the mistress of the isle, was now at home.
 Upon her hearthstone a great fire blazing
 50 scented the farthest shores with cedar smoke
 and smoke of thyme, and singing high and low
 in her sweet voice, before her loom aweaving,
 she passed her golden shuttle to and fro.
 A deep wood grew outside, with summer leaves



Man with a headband
 (c. 460–450 B.C.). Bronze.

Museo Archeologico Nazionale,
 Reggio Calabria, Italy.

35. **ambrosial**: fit for the gods; divine. Nectar and ambrosia are the drink and food that kept the gods immortal.

40. **Pieria** (pī-ir'ē-ə): place in central Greece not far from Olympus; a favorite spot of Hermes'.

55 of alder and black poplar, pungent cypress.
 Ornate birds here rested their stretched wings—
 horned owls, falcons, cormorants—long-tongued
 beachcombing birds, and followers of the sea.
 Around the smooth-walled cave a crooking vine
 60 held purple clusters under ply of green;
 and four springs, bubbling up near one another
 shallow and clear, took channels here and there
 through beds of violets and tender parsley.
 Even a god who found this place
 65 would gaze, and feel his heart beat with delight:
 so Hermes did; but when he had gazed his fill
 he entered the wide cave. Now face-to-face
 the magical Calypso recognized him,
 as all immortal gods know one another
 70 on sight—though seeming strangers, far from home.
 But he saw nothing of the great Odysseus,
 who sat apart, as a thousand times before,
 and racked his own heart groaning, with eyes wet
 scanning the bare horizon of the sea. . . .

Hermes tells Calypso that she must give up Odysseus forever. Now we are directly introduced to Odysseus. Notice what this great warrior is doing when we first meet him.

75 The strong god glittering left her as he spoke,
 and now her ladyship, having given heed
 to Zeus's mandate, went to find Odysseus
 in his stone seat to seaward—tear on tear
 brimming his eyes. The sweet days of his lifetime
 80 were running out in anguish over his exile,
 for long ago the nymph had ceased to please.
 Though he fought shy of her and her desire,
 he lay with her each night, for she compelled him.
 But when day came he sat on the rocky shore
 85 and broke his own heart groaning, with eyes wet
 scanning the bare horizon of the sea.
 Now she stood near him in her beauty, saying:

“O forlorn man, be still.
 Here you need grieve no more; you need not feel
 90 your life consumed here; I have pondered it,
 and I shall help you go. . . .”

Calypso promises Odysseus a raft and provisions to help him homeward without harm—provided the gods wish it. Now Odysseus and Calypso say goodbye.



Hermes (5th century B.C.). Bronze

There is a great deal of nature imagery in this episode. Jot down some of the images that help you see the god's flight. What images describing Calypso's island appeal to you senses of sight, hearing, and smell? How does the natural beauty of Calypso's island compare with the reality of Odysseus' situation?

Zeus ordered Calypso to free Odysseus, but in lines 88-91, the nymph claims that the idea is her own. Why do you think she does this? How do you feel about her deception?

Swiftly she turned and led him to her cave,
 and they went in, the mortal and immortal.
 He took the chair left empty now by Hermes,
 95 where the divine Calypso placed before him
 victuals and drink of men; then she sat down
 facing Odysseus, while her serving maids
 brought nectar and ambrosia to her side.
 Then each one's hands went out on each one's feast
 100 until they had had their pleasure; and she said:

"Son of Laertes,^o versatile Odysseus,
 after these years with me, you still desire
 your old home? Even so, I wish you well.
 If you could see it all, before you go—
 105 all the adversity you face at sea—
 you would stay here, and guard this house, and be
 immortal—though you wanted her forever,
 that bride for whom you pine each day.
 Can I be less desirable than she is?
 110 Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals
 compare with goddesses in grace and form?"

To this the strategist Odysseus answered:

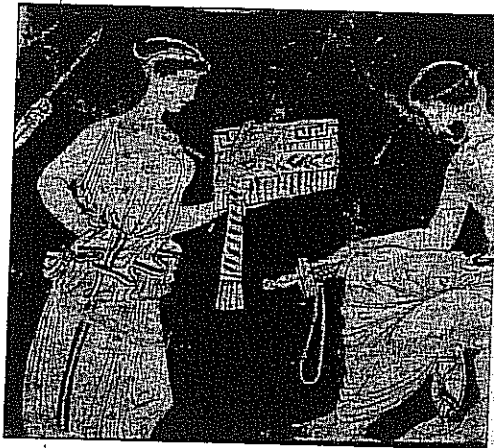
"My lady goddess, there is no cause for anger.
 My quiet Penelope—how well I know—
 115 would seem a shade before your majesty,
 death and old age being unknown to you,
 while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day
 I long for home, long for the sight of home. . . ."

So Odysseus builds the raft and sets sail. But the sea god Poseidon is by no means ready to allow an easy passage over his watery domain. He raises a storm and destroys the raft. It is only with the help of Athena and a sea nymph that Odysseus arrives, broken and battered, on the island of Scheria (skē'rē·ə). There he hides himself in a pile of leaves and falls into a deep sleep.

A man in a distant field, no hearth fires near,
 120 will hide a fresh brand in his bed of embers
 to keep a spark alive for the next day;
 so in the leaves Odysseus hid himself,
 while over him Athena showered sleep
 that his distress should end, and soon, soon.
 125 In quiet sleep she sealed his cherished eyes.

(from Book 5)

101. Laertes (lā-ar'tēz').



Calypso and Odysseus (5th century B.C.)
 Detail from a red-figured vase.

Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy.



What has Calypso offered Odysseus if he will stay with her? What does Odysseus' reply tell you about his feelings for his wife? How has Odysseus managed to say no to Calypso and still not offend her?