

BOOK 5:

Calypso, the Sweet Nymph

For seven of the ten years Odysseus has spent wandering the Mediterranean Sea, he has been held captive by the goddess Calypso on her island. As Book 5 begins, Zeus sends the god Hermes to tell Calypso to release Odysseus. However, she is only to help him build a raft. He must sail for 20 days before landing on the island of Scheria, where he will be helped in his effort to return home.

No words were lost on Hermes the Wayfinder,
who bent to tie his beautiful sandals on,
ambrosial, golden, that carry him over water
or over endless land in a swish of the wind,
5 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,
shot from Pieria down, down to sea level,
and veered to skim the swell. A gull patrolling
10 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 **B**
until the distant island lay ahead,
then rising shoreward from the violet ocean
15 he stepped up to the cave. Divine Calypso,
the mistress of the isle, was now at home.
Upon her hearthstone a great fire blazing
scented the farthest shores with cedar smoke
and smoke of thyme, and singing high and low
20 in her sweet voice, before her loom a-weaving,
she passed her golden shuttle to and fro.
A deep wood grew outside, with summer leaves
of alder and black poplar, pungent cypress.
Ornate birds here rested their stretched wings—
25 horned owls, falcons, cormorants—long-tongued
beachcombing birds, and followers of the sea.
Around the smoothwalled cave a crooking vine
held purple clusters under ply of green;
and four springs, bubbling up near one another
30 shallow and clear, took channels here and there
through beds of violets and tender parsley.

1–6 Hermes (hûr'mēz): the messenger of the gods, also known for his cleverness and trickery.

8 Pieria (pī-îr'ē-ə): an area next to Mount Olympus, home of the gods.

B EPIC SIMILE

Identify the epic simile in lines 9–12. What does this comparison tell you about Hermes?

ANALYZE VISUALS

How has the painter characterized Calypso in this 1906 portrait? Consider any relationship between her white dress and the white clouds.

28 purple clusters: grapes.

Even a god who found this place
would gaze, and feel his heart beat with delight:
so Hermes did; but when he had gazed his fill
35 he entered the wide cave. Now face to face
the magical Calypso recognized him,
as all immortal gods know one another
on sight—though seeming strangers, far from home.
But he saw nothing of the great Odysseus,
40 who sat apart, as a thousand times before,
and racked his own heart groaning, with eyes wet
scanning the bare horizon of the sea. . . .

Calypso invites Hermes to her table for food and drink, asking why he has come. Hermes explains that he has brought with an order from Zeus that Calypso must not detain Odysseus any longer but send him on his way home. She reluctantly obeys, agreeing to offer Odysseus her advice about how to get home.

The strong god glittering left her as he spoke,
and now her ladyship, having given heed
45 to Zeus's mandate, went to find Odysseus
in his stone seat to seaward—tear on tear
brimming in his eyes. The sweet days of his life time
were running out in anguish over his exile,
for long ago the nymph had ceased to please.
50 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
and broke his own heart groaning, with eyes wet
scanning the bare horizon of the sea. ©
55 Now she stood near him in her beauty, saying:

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

60 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,
where the divine Calypso placed before him
victuals and drink of men; then she sat down
65 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
until they had their pleasure; and she said:

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Reread lines 43–54. Which of Odysseus' qualities is emphasized here?

“Son of Laertes, versatile Odysseus,
70 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—
all the adversity you face at sea—
you would stay here, and guard this house, and be
75 immortal—though you wanted her forever,
that bride for whom you pine each day.
Can I be less desirable than she is?
Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals
compare with goddesses in grace and form?”

80 To this the strategist Odysseus answered:

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

D EPITHET

Reread Odysseus’ answer to Calypso in lines 81–86. Why do you think he is referred to in line 80 as “the strategist Odysseus”? Explain.

With Calypso’s help, Odysseus builds a raft and sets out to sea. For 17 days he sails until he is in sight of Scheria. For 3 more days he is pummeled by storms and finally swims for the island. He makes it safely ashore and crawls to rest under some bushes.

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