

PART ONE: THE WANDERINGS

CALYPSO, THE SWEET NYMPH

Books 1–4 of the epic tell about Odysseus's 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. 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
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^o of green;

35. **ambrosial** (am·brō'zhəl) *adj.*: 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.



Man with a headband. Detail from a bronze statue (c. 460–450 B.C.).

60. **ply** (plī) *n.*: twisted strands.


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
 would gaze, and feel his heart beat with delight:
 65 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
 on sight—though seeming strangers, far from home.
 70 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.


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,

 33–66. There is a great deal of nature imagery in this episode. Jot down some of the images that help you see Hermes' flight. What images describing Calypso's island appeal to your senses of sight, hearing, and smell? How does the natural beauty of Calypso's island compare with the reality of Odysseus's situation?



National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

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

 88–91. Zeus ordered Calypso to free Odysseus, but the nymph claims that the idea is her own. Why do you think she does this? What is your opinion of her deception?

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Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Reggio Calabria, Italy