

The Wanderings of Odysseus

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By

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For Hannah

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PREFACE

There are many books which provide a (necessarily) more or less superficial overview of the whole of the *Odyssey*. This one is something different. It presents an in-depth analysis of a distinct segment of the poem - the wanderings of Odysseus from the fall of Troy to his return to Ithaca in books 5-13. To produce such a detailed and full examination of the entire epic would mean a work of daunting length (about 600 pages), so I decided to restrict myself to the most famous and appealing part of the *Odyssey*, in the hope that people would be stimulated to move on to the rest of the poem and engage in a close reading of it themselves, applying the critical techniques which are employed in this book. And so, to encourage users of it to think for themselves, I have included questions and topics for investigation (more and more towards the end).

This work is aimed especially at Classical Civilization students taking courses in epic, Homer and myth. The translations (of Allen's Oxford Classical Text) are intended to be reliable and also readable, so that the epic is accessible to its target audience. The comments are meant to enhance critical appreciation and plain enjoyment, making the *Odyssey* really come alive and reach people. An immense amount has been written about Homer, and I do direct students to various works of criticism, but I deliberately do not erect the barrier of a mass of scholarship between the reader and the poetry, and I carefully avoid dry and dusty controversy. I go along with more recent trends in Homeric studies and do Homer the courtesy of assuming that he actually knew what he was doing and was a subtle, skilful and intelligent poet, who thoroughly deserved the very great admiration and reverence accorded him in the ancient world. He does not always spell things out, leaving us to do some of the work, but there is generally a point to his verse, which can be grasped if we are not too lazy to look for it. Readers should be aware that the interpretations offered are usually my own, and at times are not above dispute, but I have chosen not to bog them down in argumentation supporting my views and attacking those of others. I hope the probability of them being correct will be self-evident.

It remains for me to thank a good friend and fine scholar who has been extremely helpful and supportive. Dr Ray Clark very generously allowed me to draw on his expertise in connection with Homer and Virgil and went through a first draft with painstaking thoroughness, making lots

of useful criticisms and suggestions. For any errors and infelicities that remain I alone must take responsibility.

P. Murgatroyd.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this book is on a close reading of one of the most famous and appealing sections of the *Odyssey*, to enhance your critical appreciation and plain enjoyment of it, and so that you can get on to the poetry itself there as soon as possible, I'll provide just brief background here. I'll present the material under headings to let readers skim, as some of it will already be familiar to some of you, and I'll suggest further reading for those in need of more detail (so in the bibliography at the end of this book see Kahane 2012 on Homeric poetry in general, see Griffin 2004 on the *Odyssey* in particular, and see Thomas & Conant 2007 on the historical and archaeological background).

AUTHORSHIP The ancients believed that the *Odyssey* and a related epic poem (the *Iliad*) were both composed by the same poet (called Homer); but subsequently some critics have disputed this, claiming that the *Iliad* was by one poet and the *Odyssey* was by another, or that groups of poets were involved in the composition of each poem (see further Kahane 2012, 46ff.). To me, and to many others, the style, construction and outlook of these two epics suggest that they were the works of one and the same author, and it is hard to believe that there were two or more major poets capable of producing such masterpieces living at round about the same time. So I'll talk of a single author (Homer), although clearly his epics were the culmination of a long poetic tradition, to which he owed words, phrases, lines and whole passages. As for chronology, most scholars now date the *Iliad* to between 750 and 730 BC and the *Odyssey* to between 725 and 700 BC.

GENRE An epic in general was a long poem in a specific metre (the hexameter), which celebrated the deeds (especially in combat) of mythical heroes, and also major historical events (particularly wars), and in which usually gods figured and the language and tone were solemn and elevated (see further Toohey 1992).

The *Odyssey* is a particular type of epic - an oral epic. Oral poetry is called that because it is entirely oral (or spoken), composed during the

course of an actual performance before an audience, with the poet largely thinking it up on the spot, not reading out something he had written down beforehand. For him to achieve the remarkable feat of producing as he goes words that fit into a fixed metrical pattern a system is needed. It combines memorization and extemporization. The oral poet has a repertoire of subjects which he has worked over generally before performing. He has the plot of his story firm in his mind, and has a good idea of the nature and role of his characters. The verse itself is composed by putting together various verbal units (like building-blocks). These consist of standard phrases for people, objects and actions that occupy part of a hexameter line (like “wine-dark sea” and “resourceful Odysseus”), or whole lines of poetry (such as “when early-rising, rosy-fingered Dawn appeared”), or longer passages (describing incidents like the arming of a hero or preparations for a meal). Homer was one of these oral poets, or perhaps he came at the end of a long line of them and, while not composing such verse himself, took over material and poetic techniques from them. On oral poetry and the hexameter see further Clark in Fowler 2004, 117ff.

SUMMARY OF THE ODYSSEY The poem tells the stirring story of the great Greek hero Odysseus’ return to his home on the island of Ithaca after the Trojan War, in which he spent ten years besieging Troy as part of a large Greek army that went there to recover Helen (the wife of the Greek king Menelaus who had eloped with the Trojan prince Paris). It took Odysseus another ten long years to make his way back from Troy and re-establish himself as husband and king on Ithaca, slaughtering the 108 suitors for his wife’s hand, who had assumed him to be dead and had been besieging her and abusing the rights of hospitality by eating him out of house and home during his absence, while his wife (Penelope) and twenty year old son (Telemachus) on their own were powerless to get rid of them.

At the start of the poem it is agreed in a council of the gods that after an enforced stay of seven years on the remote island of the beautiful and amorous goddess Calypso Odysseus can resume his journey home (he had been dogged by the god Poseidon, enraged with him for blinding his son Polyphemus, but Zeus thinks that Poseidon, who happens to be absent at present, will now relent under pressure from the other gods). After that for the rest of the first four books of the epic the concentration is on Telemachus. Odysseus’ great champion, the goddess Athena, goes in disguise to his palace and persuades Telemachus to go off in quest of news of his father from kings Nestor and Menelaus in mainland Greece. He sets off secretly, and learns from Menelaus that a god had told him about Calypso’s imprisonment of Odysseus. Meanwhile the suitors find out

about Telemachus' mission and decide to ambush and kill him at sea when he returns.

In book 5 at another council of the gods Zeus sends Hermes to order Calypso to let Odysseus go. She agrees reluctantly, helps him build a boat and sends him off with a favouring breeze. But later Poseidon spots him, raises a terrible storm and wrecks his boat. Odysseus makes it ashore with great difficulty at the marvellous land of the Phaeacians, where he is kindly treated by the lovely young princess Nausicaa and her father and mother. During the course of a banquet there he tells them of his adventures so far. He says that he left Troy with a squadron of twelve ships. First he raided a town belonging to a people called the Cicones. The raid was successful and he wanted to sail on, but his men preferred to stay there eating and drinking. The next day some other Cicones caught them and after a prolonged battle drove them off, killing many of his comrades. When they sailed away, they were caught in a massive storm, which blew them into a strange and dangerous region.

There they first came upon the Lotus-eaters, who offered Odysseus' reconnaissance party the sinister fruit of the lotus, which made them lose all wish to return. Odysseus dragged them on board weeping and sailed off with them. Next they encountered Polyphemus, a savage, one-eyed giant who trapped the hero and some of his men in his cave and began eating them. The wily Odysseus got him drunk and put out his eye while he slept. The next day, when Polyphemus let his sheep out of the cave, moving the huge boulder that blocked the entrance, and feeling them to make sure there were no men among them, the Greeks clung underneath them to their bellies and so escaped. Back on board his ship, Odysseus taunted Polyphemus and revealed his name to him, with the result that the monster hurled great rocks in the direction of his voice, nearly smashing the ship, and prayed to his father Poseidon for revenge on him. After that they were entertained by the king of the winds (Aeolus), who sent Odysseus on his way with a bag containing all the winds apart from the one that would blow him home. But when he was tantalizingly close to Ithaca, tragically he fell asleep, and his men opened the bag, thinking there was treasure inside, and thereby releasing the winds, which blew them all the way back to Aeolus. He decided that the gods must hate Odysseus and sent him packing. Next, when they reached the land of the Laestrygonians, Odysseus moored his ship outside the harbour, but the other eleven ships tied up inside it. The Laestrygonians turned out to be cannibalistic giants and surrounded the eleven ships, smashing them with rocks and devouring all their crews.

Odysseus in the one surviving ship then came to the island of the gorgeous goddess and witch Circe, who turned his reconnaissance party into pigs. He needed help from a god (Hermes) to withstand her magic and get her to restore his men to their human form. She then became a lover and Helper, and, when Odysseus decided to leave, she told him that he must first go to the Land of the Dead to get advice from the prophet Teiresias about his onward journey. The brave Odysseus actually went to that dreadful place, got the advice and also spoke to his dead mother and some dead comrades. When he returned to Circe, she gave him additional information, which enabled him to cope with the awful hazards ahead. These included the Sirens, female monsters who lured men to them with their beautiful voices, and then killed them. At Circe's suggestion he blocked his men's ears with wax, so that they would row on and not be enticed, and he had them tie him to the mast, so that he could hear the Sirens' wonderful song but be unable to go to them. Then he had to steer down a strait between Charybdis (a mysterious monster which sucked down the sea, creating an inescapable whirlpool) and Scylla (a fierce predator with six heads, who swooped down from her lofty cave and carried off six of Odysseus' men and devoured them before his eyes). Finally they came to an island where the Sun had herds of cattle, which Odysseus' men killed and ate, despite his stern warnings not to do that. When they left they were punished. A thunderbolt shattered the ship and killed them all, except for Odysseus, who had not eaten the meat. He clung to the remains of the ship and was blown back to Charybdis. When she sucked the water down, he jumped from his makeshift raft and clung on to a nearby tree, until she spewed up the raft again. He then drifted on that for nine days, before finally washing up at the island of Calypso, who fell in love with him and kept him there. (A brief summary cannot do justice to the power of Homer's lines on the Wanderings, but I hope that it whets your appetite for the real thing.)

In book 13 the Phaeacians convey Odysseus to Ithaca on one of their magic ships, and Athena appears to him and helps him plot his campaign of revenge on the suitors. She disguises him as an old beggar, so he can find out exactly how things stand on Ithaca and who he can rely on there. He gets shelter from a loyal swineherd called Eumaeus, and his son returns, escaping the suitors' ambush, and is re-united with his father. Still in disguise, Odysseus visits his own palace, sees and experiences the insolence of the suitors and some of his servants, and speaks to Penelope, without revealing his true identity. She has been under intense pressure to marry one of the suitors because they assume that Odysseus must by now be dead, and she now proposes a contest, announcing that she will wed

whoever can string Odysseus' great bow and shoot an arrow through a line of axe-heads. The suitors fail, but the "beggar" succeeds, and starts shooting the suitors. With the help of Athena, Telemachus, Eumaeus and another loyal herdsman he kills all of the suitors. Then he sheds his disguise and goes to Penelope, who can't believe that he is really Odysseus and sets him a test. She asks a female servant to move her bed, and he protests that this would be impossible, as he had constructed the bedroom around an olive tree that was growing there and made it one of the bedposts. The knowledge of this secret proves that he is in fact Odysseus, and the husband and wife are joyfully re-united. The next day he reveals himself to his old father, who has been pining for him. The two of them together with Telemachus get involved in a skirmish with the vengeful relatives of the suitors, until Zeus and Athena intervene, establishing peace between them and ensuring a happy ending.

OVERVIEW OF THE WANDERINGS The section on the wanderings of Odysseus from leaving Troy until reaching Ithaca is filled with high adventure and contains exotic and memorable characters and places. After the raid on the Cicones (a real people, in the real world) Odysseus is blown way off course and enters an Otherworld, an extraordinary never-never land, a fabulous realm of witches, giants, monsters etc.

There is lively variety here, for example in tone (humour, sadness, drama and so on), in the length and type of episodes (with different characters, different threats and so forth) and in narrators (the story is told first by Homer, then by Odysseus, and finally by Homer again). If you are not enjoying one episode, hang on, and another one, which you'll like better, will be along before too soon. But all of these disparate incidents do come together in a coherent whole. This is partly because after the Cicones they all take place in Never-never Land, a region which is consistently unpredictable and unreliable, a wonderful and weird area where you have to be cautious and on your guard constantly, where things seem safe and unthreatening but suddenly turn right round (so Aeolus is initially welcoming and helpful, but subsequently drives Odysseus away). This is also a region of eerie and unsettling echoes and parallels. In particular, it often seems to have a malevolent intelligence of its own and to be playing with Odysseus, making it look as if he has evaded one kind of hazard only for it to return, usually in a worse form (so with Polyphemus it looks as if Odysseus escapes cannibalistic giants with the loss of only a few men devoured by him, but then he encounters the Laestrygonians who eat almost all of his men; and he leaves the amorous Circe after a stay of one year, but soon falls into the clutches of the similar Calypso, who detains him for seven years). Something else that draws these adventures together

is the presence of recurring themes, like deception, hospitality and the issue of Odysseus' leadership and his crew's unruliness.

The wanderings are elegantly organized as well. At the start and end Odysseus is in contact with humans (the Cicones, the Phaeacians) rather than supernatural beings, and he is caught by a great storm. That forms a frame for the other episodes, which have a grim centre-piece in Odysseus' visit to the Land of the Dead (for more on the structure see Most 1989, 21ff.).

We also learn much more here about the remarkable hero of the *Odyssey* (who has not figured much in the first four books of the poem), as we go through his ordeals with him, and discern qualities that he already possessed (like courage and intelligence) which will help him cope with the suitors, and also see him learning lessons useful for the situation on Ithaca (the need for caution, deception, self-control and so on). In this way we come to like and admire him.

Epic poems often have an extra dimension, raising major issues like man's place in the universe and the relation of man to the gods and fate, and containing lessons that are relevant and valuable to us in our day-to-day lives. This is true of the Wanderings (and of the rest of the *Odyssey*), where we can easily extrapolate and see a message and view Odysseus as a role model. In his adventures on the way home (and in the action on Ithaca) there is a bleak comment on the human situation. Mortal suffering and the unhappiness that is generally the lot of mankind are often in evidence. But there is also a celebration of the triumph of the human spirit, as we observe an individual surviving and overcoming life's challenges and dangers, and showing us the qualities needed to do that. All this is worthy of contemplation and can prepare us for what may lie ahead of us and help us cope with our own existence.

CHARACTERIZATION OF ODYSSEUS In books 5 to 13 we learn too much about him to go into detail about here. I'll leave you to keep on noting new attributes of the hero as you meet them and to put together the whole picture of this striking, memorable and complex character, but I will give you direction now with some general points.

Three characteristics stand out in particular. Firstly, Odysseus is resourceful. He can turn his hand to all kinds of things (planning, making speeches, fighting, telling stories, building a boat etc.) and cope with all kinds of situations, almost never at a loss or short of words, and capable of coming up with a plan to deal with just about every difficulty. Secondly, he is highly intelligent, a man of prudence, foresight, eloquence, cunning and so on. Some of the less attractive aspects of his intelligence (such as lying) may seem to you questionable, but are very necessary for him to

stay alive. Thirdly, he is enduring - he faces many ordeals and dangers and patiently gets through them all and carries on. He's a survivor.

Odysseus has all the standard characteristics of an epic hero - noble birth, strength, bravery, skill in athletics and battle. But he also has qualities which are not expected as a matter of course in a Homeric hero. There is his great intelligence, for example, and in particular his intellectual curiosity (this is what the sinister Sirens aim at, trying to entice him with information about absolutely everything that went on in the Trojan War). In line with that he doesn't always just charge into combat but recognizes that sometimes circumventing a hazard rather than facing it head on is the best way to achieve his ends (so he restrains himself from killing Polyphemus because then he and his men would end up permanently trapped in his cave, unable to move the huge boulder blocking the entrance). There is also Odysseus' charisma, his personal magnetism, his ability to inspire respect and affection in so many people, like Penelope, Telemachus and Nausicaa, and also Calypso, Circe and Athena (even goddesses love him).

But he does also have his flaws, so that he is a realistic character. He can be domineering, as when he drags off the men given the lotus to eat. He can be rash, as when he taunts Polyphemus. He sometimes makes poor decisions as a leader, as we will see. And he can be savage. Although he is a civilized man of feeling, he behaves with ferocity towards the suitors and the unfaithful servants on Ithaca. Given the situation, this is understandable and seems human enough. And there you have the point - Odysseus is only human, he is not an impossible paragon of virtue. He has his faults, and Homer depicts him warts and all as a complete, well rounded man, with many impressive qualities, but also with some flaws, someone who might actually have existed. For more on the characterization of Odysseus (in Homer and others) see Stanford 1954.

HOMER'S INTRODUCTION Before we get down to the Wanderings we need to look at Homer's handling of Odysseus prior to that section. In the first ten lines of book 1 of the *Odyssey*, in the course of a solemn invocation of the Muse (goddess of poetry) for inspiration, he dexterously tells us a lot about his hero and engages us, and deceives us.

The man, Muse, tell me of the ingenious man who wandered
 far and wide after sacking the hallowed town of Troy
 and saw the cities of many people and found out how they thought
 and went through a lot of heart-rending hardship at sea,
 as he tried to stay alive and get his comrades home.
 But even so, for all his keenness, he didn't save his comrades.

They destroyed themselves by their own criminal recklessness,
 the fools. They ate the cattle of the Sun-god Helios.
 And He took from them the day of their return.
 Tell us of that, divine daughter of Zeus, beginning where you like. 10

First impressions are important, and Homer here tries hard to arouse admiration and sympathy for Odysseus from the start (as he is the protagonist, we need to be interested in him and feel for him, if this poem about him is going to have an effect on us). His ingenuity is foregrounded in the very first line, and is closely followed by his endurance (of all the wanderings, which arouse pity). The second line refers to the vital part that he played in the glorious conquest of Troy (by thinking up the ruse of the Trojan Horse and commanding the men hidden inside it), and so alludes to his cunning, deceptiveness and leadership. In 3 he is depicted as a man of wide experience and intellectual curiosity, while 4 repeats for emphasis his endurance and suffering. His self-control comes out at 7f., where, unlike his crew, he refrained from eating the cattle of the Sun, and we have to feel sorry for him losing all his comrades. At the same time Homer is careful to stress early on in his epic that he was a good, concerned commander (5f.) and that their deaths were their own fault (7f.), to make sure that we don't count the loss of the men as a black mark against their leader.

All of this is intriguing too and makes us want to read on, to find out more about this great hero's wanderings and hardships and the crew's recklessness (why *would* anyone run such a risk by eating cattle belonging to a god?). Our subtle poet reveals some things here, but he won't give too much of the story away, and wants to keep surprises up his sleeve. So he also conceals and misleads, employing in connection with Odysseus the kind of trickery that is typical of Odysseus himself. Homer says nothing here about Telemachus, Penelope or affairs on Ithaca, but confines himself to the Wanderings, and is not specific about them. So too lines 7-9 at first sight seem to mean that all of Odysseus' crews (not just the remnant on the last surviving ship) were destroyed for devouring the cattle, so that the deaths of Odysseus' companions prior to that are unexpected and have impact.

After the general overview at 1-10, Homer sharpens the picture at 11ff., letting us know where the Muse decided to start the story, and giving us a snapshot of Odysseus' grim situation in the tenth year of his wanderings.

All the others, those who'd escaped sheer destruction,
 were now at home, having escaped from the war and the sea.
 But he alone, yearning for his return and his wife,
 was detained by the lady Calypso, that glorious goddess, in her
 arching cave. The nymph longed for him to be her husband. 15
 Even when the rolling seasons brought the year
 in which the gods ordained that he should go back home
 to Ithaca, he was not yet free from ordeals and with
 his dear ones. All the gods felt pity for him,
 except Poseidon. He raged remorselessly at 20
 godlike Odysseus until he reached his homeland.

The Muse starts the story here because it is a momentous point (Odysseus' return will now re-commence), it cuts out seven static (boring) years on Calypso's island, it means that earlier events can be told in a lively flashback and it allows an outrageous and dangerous situation to have developed on Ithaca, with the suitors now firmly entrenched in the palace.

More sympathy for Odysseus is built up here, as we see him at a very low point. He longs for his wife and his return (Odysseus as a loving husband determined to get home is a major theme of the *Odyssey*), but he is trapped and helpless, in the power of one might deity (Calypso), and hated by another (the terrible wrath of Poseidon is another major theme of the poem). The contrast with the other Greeks who have escaped difficulties and got home makes us feel even more for the hero. At 16ff. things brighten up a bit, with his return ordained by the gods, and almost all of them feeling pity for him, but there are more ordeals ahead of him (18), and dread Poseidon will not give up his rage yet (20f.). So we take it that Odysseus will get home, but it won't be easy, and we want to find out exactly what problems he will have and how he will cope with them.

In the following lines Homer (again like the tricky Odysseus) plays a trick on us. He describes a council of the gods, held while Poseidon is away in a remote part of the world. At this, when Athena raises the plight of Odysseus, Zeus says that he thinks that Poseidon will relent in the face of the support for the hero by all the other gods. Athena then suggests that they send Hermes to tell Calypso to let Odysseus go, and announces that meanwhile she will go to Ithaca, put some spirit into Telemachus and send him off to mainland Greece for news of his father. At this point, after the stress on Odysseus at 1-21, we assume that the main focus will be on him and his release from the nymph and that the mission to Telemachus is just a sub-plot, but actually it turns out to be the other

way round. The narrative (story) until the end of book 4 concentrates on Telemachus, not Odysseus, and says nothing about Hermes and Calypso. There is a cliff-hanging effect, as we are left wondering if Hermes has actually gone to her and if he has persuaded her. There is also a great build up to Odysseus' actual appearance in book 5, especially as in books 1-4 we keep on getting little glimpses of him and indications of people's feelings about him (love, admiration, regret at his supposed death), until finally our hero takes centre stage again.

CHAPTER TWO

CALYPSO

The focus does finally shift back to Odysseus in book 5. There we are shown him at a pathetically low point in his fortunes (from which he now starts to rise, eventually reclaiming his wife and kingdom). He is a prisoner of the nymph Calypso, and is deeply despondent and powerless. Even the wily and resourceful Odysseus cannot think up a means of escape. He has no crew or ship, or tools to make a new boat, he is on the very distant island of Ogygia, with no idea of which direction to take if he could sail away, and he would run the risk of offending this mighty goddess if he did abscond. To add to his troubles, she wants him to become her husband and offers him immortality if he consents, and she now forces him to sleep with her against his will. With truly heroic endurance he has been holding out against her offer of marriage for seven years, because of his love of his home and wife (who has been holding out against similar pressure). It takes the intervention of the gods to get him out of this predicament. (Incidentally Odysseus is not diminished by divine aid; on the contrary it is an indication of his merits as a hero that he wins the favour and affection of deities.)

His jailor is the first of several dangerous females who we will encounter in the *Odyssey*. She is a dread divinity, and a rather mysterious figure in her remote home totally secluded from gods and men. The name of this nymph who keeps the hero hidden away has been connected with the Greek verb *kalypto* (= “conceal”) and taken to mean “The Concealer”. She shows the menace and deceptiveness of Never-never Land, as one who was initially a Helper (taking Odysseus in when shipwrecked) but became a Hinderer (detaining him), and one who perverts hospitality (she is a generous hostess, but keeps her guest too long). But Calypso is also an enchanting goddess on an enchanting isle, and a passionate lover with a healthy sexual appetite and a heavily erotic aura, something that Homer’s male audience in particular will have relished. She is independent and feisty too (not just lying down when ordered about and threatened by greater gods), and in her dealings with the divine messenger Hermes and with Odysseus she is seen to be urbane, intelligent and subtle. Although

there is humour in her crafty handling of Odysseus here before she lets him go, she is ultimately a rather sad character. She really loves Odysseus: it is not just a matter of sex; even when he is leaving her, she gives him lots of help to make his journey comfortable and safe. But hers is a misplaced and frustrated affection, and she makes the one she loves unhappy by keeping him from the one he loves. All her beauty and divine power are unsuccessful in the long run, and when he sails away, she ends up all on her own again on her distant, lonely island. This is a tragicomic episode.

At the start of book 5 we learn that Hermes has not in fact gone off to Calypso yet. At a second council of the gods Athena again speaks up for her favourite, and gets things moving in connection with his release. To reassure her, Zeus tells Hermes to go to Ogygia and inform Calypso that he has decided that the hero must now set out for home, and he declares that in 20 days Odysseus will reach the land of the Phaeacians, who will honour him like a god, give him lots of presents and convey him to Ithaca on one of their ships. As a result of that we now know that Odysseus will make it home for sure, and as a very wealthy man, so we can relax while he is with the friendly Phaeacians and enjoy the gentle humour in that lighter episode. But Homer has not revealed that Poseidon will catch sight of our hero sailing away from Calypso and smash his boat in a massive storm, so that His sudden intervention then comes as a dramatic surprise.

Hermes duly flies off to Calypso on His winged sandals across vast stretches of sea. At this point the action halts and, as often in epic, we are given a lengthy description of a significant place (where Odysseus' homecoming will start up again). Sometimes in such depictions Homer gives us just a few bold strokes, leaving us to fill in the rest for ourselves, but here he is full and detailed, so that we can picture the spot clearly (with a bit of effort), and enter into the striking and also unsettling world of the Wanderings early on, and experience wonder along with Hermes (whose reaction encourages the same response from us). There is a cinematic zoom-in from far out at sea to the nymph's island and then to her cave and its surrounds. As you read the passage, see what makes it vivid.

But when he arrived at the remote island,	55
he left the violet sea for the land and strode on	
until he came to a massive cavern, where the nymph	
of the lovely hair had her home. He found her inside.	
A massive fire blazed in the hearth, and the smell of	
burning logs of cedar and citron wafted far across the island.	60

Inside she was singing with her beautiful voice, as she glided
 back and forth at her loom, weaving with a shuttle of gold.
 Around the cavern there grew a luxuriant grove
 of alders and poplars and fragrant cypresses,
 in which long-winged birds had their nests - 65
 owls and falcons and cormorants with their long
 tongues, which busily scour the sea for food.
 There, around the hollow cavern's entrance, trailed
 a vine in its prime, with lots of clusters of grapes.
 Four crystal-clear springs in a row and close to 70
 each other were flowing off in different directions.
 All around were soft meadows, full of violets and
 parsley. Even an immortal who came to that spot
 would marvel at the sight and be delighted by it.
 Hermes the Messenger stood there and marvelled. 75

Homer sharpens the picture by including small points of detail,
 by specifying different types of trees in the copse and birds in the trees and
 by adding a few adjectives (descriptive words, like "fragrant" and "long-
 winged") to characterize them. There is also *chiaroscuro*, i.e. the
 combination of contrasting darkness (in the shadowy copse and cave) and
 brightness (in the fire and darting gold shuttle, lit up by the flames), which
 makes Calypso as she weaves stand out as the centre of attention. The
 lines also appeal to all five senses, so we can appreciate the scene fully.
 Obviously there is much that has visual impact. We can hear the nymph
 singing in her beautiful voice as well, and smell the rich scent of the fire.
 There is also the warmth of the blaze and the softness of the meadows for
 touch, and the ripe grapes and clear fresh water for taste.

There is a concentration of attractive features that makes this spot
 into a lush and lovely paradise, enough to make even a god on an
 important mission halt and marvel. This is an aptly beautiful and seductive
 setting for a beautiful and seductive goddess. There are pointed undertones
 too. Calypso's great fire may symbolize the fire of love, while meadows
 and flowers were associated with Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Owls,
 falcons and cormorants are predators which seize on lesser creatures.
 Cypresses and parsley were connected with death and tombs (and
 Odysseus endures a sort of living death here, shut up and dead as far as the
 rest of the world is concerned). The copse and cave are concealing, like
 Calypso, and make for much blackness (suggestive of gloom, ill omen and
 death). So there are darker undercurrents too, and the gorgeous nymph at
 the centre is enclosed by sombre and disturbing elements all around her.

At 76ff. Hermes enters Calypso's cave. She sits him down, gives him food and drink and asks him why he has come. He tells her that Zeus, whose will cannot be evaded or thwarted, orders her to let Odysseus go at once, as he is fated to get home and not end his days with her there. She shudders at his words. The length of her speech in response and the intensity and range of emotions in it show how very upset she is and how much she loves her man. She starts off angry and combative, seeing a male plot against goddesses, and accusing the masculine gods of cruel envy. She supports her point by citing at resentful length two examples of goddesses' human lovers who were killed (without any warning or discussion), and her stress of Demeter's love for Iasion in line 126 brings out the misery resulting from such sudden and shocking deprivation. Then at 130ff. her rage gives way to other feelings.

"You're cruel, you gods, intensely jealous,
 envious when a goddess sleeps openly with a human,
 if one shares her bed with a man she loves. 120
 So, when rosy-fingered Dawn carried off Orion,
 you gods who live your lives of ease were envious,
 until chaste Artemis of the golden throne attacked him
 on Ortygia and killed him with her gentle arrows.
 So, when Demeter of the lovely hair followed her heart 125
 and made love with her dear Iasion in a thrice-ploughed
 fallow field, it wasn't long before Zeus found out,
 struck him with a blazing bolt and killed him.
 So now again you gods are envious because *I* have a man.
 I saved him when he was all alone astride his keel, 130
 after Zeus pinned down his speedy ship and shattered it
 with a blazing bolt in the middle of the wine-dark sea.
 All his fine companions ended their lives there, but the
 wind and the waves bore him and brought him here.
 I looked after him lovingly and told him I'd 135
 make him immortal and ageless for all his days.
 But, as it's absolutely impossible for another god
 to evade or frustrate the will of aegis-bearing Zeus,
 he can go to hell, over the barren sea, if Zeus urges
 and orders him. But I won't transport him anywhere. 140
 For I don't have ships with oars or crews
 who'd row him over the broad back of the sea.
 But I will readily advise him, without concealment,
 so he can get back to his own country entirely unscathed."

Calypso's bitter attack at the start of her speech is touchingly heartfelt, but biting Hermes' head off has its humorous side too, because she is completely wrong about envy motivating the command to let Odysseus go and about the male plot (in fact the female Athena is ultimately behind the hero's release). At 130-6 indignation begins to predominate. Because of her emotional state she doesn't make her point clear there, but the idea seems to be that it's not fair to take Odysseus away from her after she saved his life and did so much for him. There is an amusing lack of logic in that (and Homer is thus showing us that she has no claim on his hero, who is married to someone else and is not some sort of pet to be kept by her, and who is therefore not callous in leaving her). At the same time there is also affecting self-pity there, as she dwells on the extent of her kindness and love, which all go for nothing now. At 137ff., with a sudden switch, she tries valiantly to be resigned and to convince and console herself by stressing the futility of resistance to Zeus' will and orders. But she isn't happy about giving in - hence her petulance (almost like a spoilt child's) in saying that Odysseus can go to hell and in refusing to transport him. Then, at the very end, in the final two lines, with an abrupt turn around which is both comically and sadly undignified, she relents over helping him, because she loves him (as is clear from her concern over his safety even now in 144).

Hermes' response to that speech shows no sympathy at all for her, and is curt, forceful and threatening.

Hermes the Messenger said to her in reply: 145
 "Send him off right now, beware of Zeus' wrath, in case
 he gets angry and vents his rage on you some day."
 So saying, the mighty Hermes departed.

The messenger needs to make sure that Zeus is obeyed, and, as she is clearly unhappy about losing her man, he doesn't trust her yet to behave herself (rightly so, as we'll see), and so reinforces his message. And Hermes probably doesn't appreciate being attacked by her and accused of being part of a male conspiracy! His brisk departure in 148 gives her no chance to speak again: there's nothing left for her to say, as far as he is concerned, and he doesn't want any more trouble from her. Calypso has been given her orders in no uncertain terms and now goes to Odysseus, apparently cowed and obedient. But she makes a last effort to keep him, even risking the rage of the king of the gods for the sake of her man.

Now we are eager to see Odysseus' return begin, but again there is retardation, tantalizing us and making for a build-up, as it is over 100 lines before he actually gets off. To begin with, at 151-8 we have our first encounter with Odysseus in person, at last. There Homer presents a powerful picture of misery, with word after word bringing out the hero's grief, and line 157 in particular packed with pain.

After hearing the message from Zeus, the queenly
 nymph went off to great-hearted Odysseus. 150
 She found him sitting on the shore. His eyes were always wet
 with tears, as he wept his sweet life away, despondently
 yearning to get home, as the nymph no longer pleased him.
 At night, it's true, he slept with her in her vaulted cave,
 though under compulsion, not wanting what she wanted. 155
 But during the day he would sit on the rocky shore,
 tearing himself apart with tears and groans and grief,
 gazing over the barren sea, and weeping.

This is a moody, atmospheric sketch, and an eloquent one. Here we see Odysseus just sitting (inactive, rather than engaged in heroic activity), and sitting apart (away from Calypso), on appropriately hard rocks, at the shore (as near to departure as he can get), gazing over the sea (staring at his means of escape), and weeping (because he cannot escape). True, he is sleeping with a beautiful goddess, but he is doing so unwillingly (so great is his love for his wife), and the reference to sex with the nymph in 154 is surrounded and swamped by lines on his great unhappiness. The passage makes us feel for the hero and want to see him get home. It also makes clear in advance the futility (and silliness) of Calypso's coming attempt to persuade him to stay with her.

The first step in that campaign by this entertainingly crafty inhabitant of deceptive Never-never Land comes in her speech at 160ff. See if you can work out how her words there are carefully aimed at Odysseus, while she is on the surface obeying Zeus' orders.

The glorious goddess stood beside him and said:
 "You poor man, please don't grieve here any more, 160
 stop pining away. I'll send you off, I'm more than ready.
 Come on, cut some long timbers with an axe, make a broad
 raft and attach to it a lofty platform for a mast,
 so it can carry you across the misty sea.
 I'll put on board lots of food and water and 165

red wine (you won't go hungry with all that).
 I'll clothe you, and send you a following breeze,
 so you'll get back to your own country entirely unharmed,
 if *they* are willing - the gods who live in the broad heavens
 and have more power than I to make plans and implement them."170

She begins with an attempt to soften him up, expressing great sympathy for him in his misery (which is rich, as she is the cause of it!). Then she quickly holds out to him the alluring prospect of escape, with her help (which she slyly represents as all her idea, saying nothing about the command from Zeus). At 162ff., with a winning show of loving concern as point after point is added, she wants for him a proper sea-going vessel which will convey him safely, and she offers him abundant provisions (with the thoughtful addition of wine, which would cheer him), together with clothing to protect him from the elements and (especially welcome) a favourable breeze to take him home. She is representing herself as extremely kind and helpful, but implicit in all that is the idea that this will be a long voyage (in the course of which a lot of things could happen), and, more openly, she ends with two lines on possible problems caused by the gods (so that this will be uppermost in the hero's mind when she finishes speaking). She is here subtly preparing the way for her later warning of serious dangers ahead for him on the voyage (at 206ff.). The claim that she is totally co-operative and the gods are the ones who might spoil his return is an outrageous perversion of the truth and makes for a comic climax to her speech. There is also humour in Odysseus' reply to her.

When she said that, much-enduring, noble Odysseus
 shuddered, and then spoke winged words to her:
 "Goddess, you've got something else in mind, not my passage home at all,
 when you tell me to cross on a raft that dreadful and destructive
 great gulf of ocean which not even swift-moving, trim 175
 ships cross, exulting in a favourable breeze from Zeus.
 If you'd really rather I stayed, I wouldn't set foot on a raft,
 goddess, unless you brought yourself to swear a great oath
 that you won't plot to harm me in any other way."

After seven years of imprisonment Calypso's sudden apparent change of mind makes the shrewd hero properly suspicious, and he gives a shudder of apprehension. Calypso is not so clever after all. Amusingly her suggestion of problems on the voyage has backfired, and he has got hold

of the wrong end of the stick, thinking that she doesn't really want him to go (177) but is sending him off to get hurt or killed (presumably in pique because he is a cold lover and won't marry her). With his (mis)interpretation of her motives he is in a tricky situation. He handles it with typical (but misplaced) deftness. He begins with the deferential "goddess" to soften his claim that she has a hidden agenda. He doesn't openly accuse her of trying to harm him, but leaves that merely as a suspicion to be inferred. And he tries to cover himself against danger from her by asking in a respectfully roundabout way for an oath from her.

Calypso now needs to put an end to his suspicions and make him well disposed to her, so he will believe her later on, when she warns of the great dangers facing him at sea, and so decide not to sail off. She promptly attends to that.

When he said that, the glorious goddess Calypso smiled. 180
 She stroked him with her hand and said to him:
 "You really are a cunning rogue
 to think of saying such a thing as that.
 Let the earth be my witness now and the wide heaven
 above and the down-flowing waters of the Styx 185
 (the greatest and most terrible oath for blessed gods):
 I won't plot to harm you in any other way.
 What I have in mind and will ponder further is the very
 plan I'd come up with for myself, if I was as hard pressed.
 I'm a person of principles, and the heart in my 190
 breast is compassionate, not made of iron."

The charm-offensive continues there (and so does the humour). The affectionate smile in 180 and the intimate contact in 181 are non-threatening and designed to soften him up. When she speaks, she begins with friendly banter, implying that his innate cunning has made him misconstrue things and say something scandalous. (Actually she is the cunning one who has just come out with a scandalous speech, so she is enjoying herself here by twisting the truth again.) To disarm him further, despite the clear implication at 182f. that she has no harm in mind for him, she readily goes on to swear a most solemn oath, giving him exactly the reassurance that he wanted. (Outrageously she is swearing by the gods' heaven and using the gods' greatest oath to undermine the will of the gods - this nymph has style!) Then by way of reinforcement, she maintains in connection with her proposal about the raft that what she has in mind and will work on further is precisely the plan that she would come up with for

herself if similarly hard pressed, suggesting clearly that it is not something harmful. (She likes playing with words: what she has in mind now and will work on further is in fact the plan that she *has* come up with for herself when hard pressed.) Then as a final bit of reinforcement (and cheek) she spends the last two lines assuring him of her righteousness (when her scheming goes against the command of Zeus and is not fair on the married couple) and of her compassion (when she is callously trying to detain him for her own selfish ends).

As part of her campaign the nymph next gives Odysseus a meal, with lots of food and wine (to relax him and arouse a feeling of well-being), while she has the food and drink of the gods, ambrosia and nectar (to remind him of what he is turning down by not becoming her immortal husband). Then she comes out with another artful speech.

“Zeus-born Odysseus, resourceful son of Laertes,
 so you really want to go home right now to your
 beloved Ithaca? In spite of that I wish you well. 205
 But if you knew all the hardships you’re fated to endure
 to the bitter end before reaching your country,
 you’d remain right here, stay on in this home with me
 and be immortal, even though you long to see your wife
 and yearn for her constantly, every single day. 210
 I’m *sure* that my figure and stature aren’t inferior
 to hers. For it definitely isn’t fitting for mortal women
 to compete with goddesses in appearance or beauty.”

Calypso begins with a flattering address to Odysseus. (It’s a bit much to call him resourceful when she is herself being resourceful here; and this will rebound on her when he proves to be resourceful in his response to this speech.) Next she tries to undermine his resolve by expressing incredulity at his eagerness to leave, and then disarmingly wishes him well despite that. She maintains her dignity by not openly asking him to stay, but presents that as clearly the preferable course. At 206-8 she attempts to daunt him by means of the many hardships which she says he is fated to endure before he gets back to Ithaca. She may be aware of what lies ahead of him, as she is a goddess, but she may have no idea; and there is only one problem still to come - the storm caused by Poseidon. So, naughtily, she is either exaggerating the trouble or making the whole thing up. But she is not likely to daunt a great hero like Odysseus, especially when she makes the slip of talking of him actually getting home in 207! At 208f. she tries to allure him by holding out the

alternative of being safe and sound on Ogygia (with a gorgeous goddess) and becoming immortal (and so enjoying nectar and ambrosia like her and (see 122) leading the gods' life of ease). She then moves on to the main stumbling block (Penelope) and now employs menace, beneath the civilized surface, ending with the hard sell. Odysseus is meant to sense envy, resentment and annoyance at his constant longing for his wife. There is also worrying injured pride in Calypso's assertion that she is lovelier than Penelope. And she goes on to imply (with scandalous unfairness) that the woman may be engaging in some sort of inappropriate contest in beauty with her, which amounts to a thinly veiled threat for Odysseus and Penelope if he supports his wife over the nymph in this "contest". Entertainingly, while Calypso is stressing her superiority in terms of beauty, she is betraying other characteristics that greatly lessen her attractiveness.

Calypso has now really put Odysseus on the spot. He is in a very tricky position: he desperately wants to go, but he can't afford to alienate her, as he needs her help to build a raft, and she is a powerful deity who might take it out on him, if angered. But Odysseus can think on his feet, and he shows that he fully deserves his standard epithet "wily", as he puts on a diverting display under pressure and keeps his end up. Look to see how carefully considered his response is to the nymph.

Wily Odysseus made the following reply to that:
 "Mighty goddess, don't be angry with me over this. I myself 215
 know perfectly well that anyone looking at wise Penelope
 would find her beauty and stature less impressive than yours.
 For she is human, while you are immortal and ageless.
 But even so I want, I yearn, every single day,
 to go home and to see the day of my return. 220
 If some god shipwrecks me again on the wine-dark sea,
 I'll endure it, I have a heart inured to suffering.
 I've already gone through many troubles and very many ordeals
 at sea and in war. This can just be added to all of them."

He has picked up on her irritation, and he shrewdly allows her to keep her dignity. His first sentence is winning, and shows that he too can be flattering and disarming (he saw what she was up to at the start of her speech, and is now utilizing her own ploys against her). He takes up her point about her appearance first, knowing how important that is to her. He readily concedes that her beauty is superior, placating her by using her own terms to stress how right she is, and by adding her agelessness (so she