

*“Odysseus has no real feelings for the female characters he encounters on his travels.” How far do you agree with this view?*

Odysseus encounters many female characters on his prolonged journey back to Ithaca, including Nymphs and goddesses. Although his resistance temptation is often tested, his remaining *nostos* seems to surpass any feelings he has towards his female ‘obstacles’, and it is likely that he in fact has no real feelings towards the women he meets; simply using them for his own benefit to aid him on his voyage. In Ancient Greece, it was not considered adultery if a man slept with servants or foreigners. This means that in principle, Odysseus could have slept with every woman he met on his travels (though there would have still been consequences), but he only sleeps with the two goddesses, Circe and Calypso. I believe he does show some signs of feeling towards the women he meets, but it never compares to the love and longing he feels for his wife Penelope.

The first female character the audience hear of Odysseus encountering on his voyage back to Ithaca is the Nymph Calypso. She is in fact one of the most alluring of all the women he meets, as he does end up staying on her beautiful island where ‘even an immortal visitor must pause to gaze in wonder and delight’ for almost ten long years. However, the first we hear of Odysseus that he is ‘sitting disconsolate on the shore... tormenting himself with tears and sighs and heartache’ and he is shown as being almost imprisoned on this island - ‘he *had* to sleep with her in the vaulted cavern, cold lover, ardent lady’. This is far from the heroic and virile image that is built up of Odysseus previously, and despite the fact that he is on this extraordinary island with a beautiful Nymph, who even tempts him with immortality (‘stay and share this home with me, and take on immortality’), he longs to reach his home, saying it is his ‘never-failing wish’. In this case, although he may have been tempted to stay by Calypso’s looks, her island’s abundance and immortality, he longs for his home and his wife - ‘I too know well enough that my wise Penelope’s looks and stature are insignificant compared to yours... I long to reach my home’, showing how he does not have enough feelings for Calypso to force him to stay with her and give in to accepting her offers. When he does eventually leave the island, it is ‘with a happy heart’, and this too shows his wish to leave Calypso and her island far behind.

In addition, Odysseus suspects a trap when Calypso offers him help, showing how he does not trust the women he encounters. ‘Goddess, it is surely not my safety you are thinking about’ – he believes she is up to something, and asks for her to give him her ‘solemn oath’ that she ‘will not plot some other mischief against’ him. Similarly, he says to the goddess Circe as we see later on - ‘Nothing, goddess, would induce me to come into your bed unless you can bring yourself to swear a solemn oath that you have no other mischief in store for me.’ His untrusting attitude towards the immortal women he encounters and suspicion of the ‘crafty way’ their minds work, also shows how his feelings towards them are limited; he is more adamant on not falling into a trap to prolong his journey home than trusting the goddess’ judgement carelessly, showing how his longing for home is greater than his submission to temptation.

Likewise, when Goddess Ino, when daughter of Cadmus takes pity on him after Poseidon sends a storm that batters his raft and leaves him to almost drown in the waves, she gives him a veil to wrap around his waist and instructs him to throw it into the sea when he touches dry land. Odysseus at first does not trust her. He takes ‘counsel with his indomitable soul’ and says, ‘I am afraid this is one of the immortals setting a snare to catch me, with her advice to abandon my raft. No, I will not leave the raft for the moment.’ He shows no feeling towards Ino, instead not trusting the words of a goddess and sticking to his pride. This shows how his journeys have caused him to become extremely cautious and paranoid of trickery, meaning that Odysseus is forced to diminish and overlook any feelings he may have towards the characters he meets to avoid there being the possibility of falling into another trap that would prevent him reaching home sooner, if ever.

As well as his longing for home, the necessity for basic human needs is what drives Odysseus forward. He uses the female characters he meets solely for the purpose of aiding him with his journey and providing him with basic necessities. When he hears Nausicaa and her maids he hears ‘a shrill echo...as though some girls were shrieking – Nymphs, who haunt the steep hill-tops...’ Immediately he suspects they are Nymphs who ‘haunt’ the hills (perhaps showing how he had no feelings towards the Nymph Calypso, the word ‘haunt’ having negative connotations) and he ‘advances on them like a mountain lion who sallies out, defying wind and rain in the pride of his power, with fire in his eyes, to hunt down the oxen or sheep or pursue the wild deer’. This simile used by Homer shows just how eager he is to ‘hunt’ these girls and use them for his own benefit, the ‘fire in his eyes’ perhaps being the fire of the hearth in his eyes, depicting his longing for home. He ‘made a move towards these girls...necessity compelled him’, showing how the girls themselves do not compel him, it is only the human basics such as food, water and clothes he is after at this moment.

Odysseus flatters the women he meets in order to get what he needs from them. He compliments Nausicaa with ‘Are you some goddess or mortal woman?’ and ‘I am overcome with awe as I look at you’, perhaps showing his craftiness, seeing as we know that he is not attracted to her (at least not as much as he is attracted to the basic requirements for survival) and showing respect. He is able to manipulate the women he meets to help him - ‘pity me, princess... Do direct me to the town and give me some rags’. Although he does use women in this way and does not show any true feelings towards them, he is respectable in his approach, asking Nausicaa and her maids ‘stand back over there and leave me wash...I should be ashamed to stand naked in the presence of elegant ladies’. In the mortal Nausicaa’s case though, he does leave her feeling attracted to him - ‘I wish I could have a man like him for my husband’, and Calypso was also left wanting him to stay with her for eternity; although Odysseus himself may not have feelings towards the women he encounters, he does induce the feelings they have towards him.

His respect towards young women is shown when Athena is ‘disguised as a young girl carrying a pitcher’ to aid him on his way to the palace ‘I wonder if you could show me the way to the house of Alcinous... I’ve had a hard time’. No real feelings are shown at all towards the women in this book seeing as home seems to be the only thing on his mind at the moment after having lost all his men and after his long period of hopelessness on Calypso’s island. Although he admires the work of the Phaeacian women (‘each was draped with a delicately woven cover that the women have worked’ and the ‘dexterity of their womenfolk at the loom’), he addresses Arete with ‘I come a suppliant to your husband... May the gods grant them happiness for life... But for me please arrange and escort to my own country’. He does not want to waste too much time on celebrating the survival of his near-death experience; by now he’s grown tired of adventures and the feelings he has towards characters he encounters seem minor and insignificant to him compared to his feeling of longing for home.

Although it is never clear whether Odysseus does have true feeling towards the female characters he meets, his patriarchal views are shown, displaying his feelings on how women should behave in society. When he is telling king Alcinous of how Nausicaa aided him to reach the palace he says ‘I asked her for help. And she proved what good sense she has, acquitting herself in a way you would not expect in one so young— young people are thoughtless as a rule.’ Here, his admiration for her actions as a woman, and as an intelligent young girl is shown, and although he may not be showing any strong emotion towards her, he is appreciative of her brightness and behaviour. However, this could all just be flattery in order to get what he needs and be off on his journey, and it is never implied by Homer that he does have any true feelings towards her.

Nausicaa is the first normal woman Odysseus sees in nearly twenty years, the last of whom being the women from Ismarus, the city he sacks directly after leaving Troy, and understandably he is very weary of her. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, he treats her with the utmost respect and keeps his distance from her, both

physically and emotionally. He admires her beauty, respects her decisions and listens to her like an equal, despite her age and sex, which shows respect, although not necessarily feelings. Despite his lack of show of affection towards her, he is kind and shows his appreciation for her saving him from death - 'I do indeed pray to Zeus... to let me reach my home... If he does, then I will pray you as a divinity all the rest of my days. For it was you lady, who gave me back my life.' showing how he does indeed respect what she has done for him, and is grateful towards her. After Odysseus leaves Nausicaa in the town, Homer does not mention her anymore but for their goodbyes, despite the fact they are staying under the same roof. This indicates Odysseus's lack of interest in Nausicaa's comings and goings.

When Odysseus begins to explain his adventures to Alcinoos, in particular he mentions Calypso and Circe, and how he never had any affection for them - 'The divine Calypso was certainly for keeping me in her cavern home because she yearned for me to be her husband and with me the same object Circe... but never for a moment did they win my heart.' Here Odysseus states in his own words that he was never won over by either, and although he may have found pleasure in staying with them, it could never compare with the pleasure of seeing his wife again; any feelings he had towards Calypso or Circe were not genuine or heart-felt.

Similarly to Calypso, Circe is first seen as 'singing with her beautiful voice' and 'weaving one of those delicate, graceful and dazzling fabrics that goddesses make', and the temptation to stay with her (as he then does with Calypso) would have been immense. Hermes warns her that 'she will... invite you to her bed. You must not refuse... if you want her to free your men and look after you'. The fact that Odysseus obeys this shows the extent of what he would do to free his men and return home; going to bed with Circe would have been merely another obstacle for him on his journey home, his feelings towards her being limited. Although he describes the 'comfortable heat' and the way 'all the painful weariness was gone' from his limbs, his 'thoughts were elsewhere' and 'mind was full of forebodings' showing how he cannot feel content without knowing his crew is safe and his chances for ever reaching home are still tangible.

In addition, the way in which he prioritises Circe's actions towards him and his crew is also relevant, seeing as it is Odysseus recounting the story to Alcinoos. He first says Circe 'graciously bathed the members of my party in her palace and rubbed them with olive-oil. She gave them tunics and warm cloaks', showing how to him, the women he encounters are mostly beneficial to him for the reason that they give him and his crew shelter, food and drink, and there is no implication of any feeling towards them. They stay on the island for a year, and by the end the crew are frustrated - 'What possesses you to stay on here? It's time you thought of Ithaca'. It is only when Ithaca is mentioned that Odysseus is persuaded to leave - 'my proud heart was convinced'; if he did have any feelings towards Circe, he would have stayed, or at least contemplated staying for a little longer.

Overall I consider that Odysseus does not care about these women. He loves his wife dearly - '[Penelope] is never out of your thoughts' - and is happy to leave every island he sets foot upon if he thinks he is heading for home. Circe does seem to hold a certain place in Odysseus' heart, because she is the one he stays with voluntarily and has to be persuaded to leave, but Odysseus leaves the others without a backward glance - 'with a happy heart' in fact, in the case of Calypso. Odysseus's affection and respect for Nausicaa seems to be purely polite and possibly only to suit his own means, or at the most brotherly - he wants the best for her. As for Arete, Odysseus never had affectionate feelings for her. He needs her support to get home, and this is the only reason he shows respect for her, except perhaps because she is a wise woman. Throughout the *Odyssey*, Odysseus longs for his homeland, and is unable to feel much but grief at his prolonged absence.