

# THE ODYSSEY

## BY HOMER

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### BOOK 5

**A**THENE ASKS ZEUS TO HELP OUT ODYSSEUS. HE SENDS THE MESSENGER god, Hermes, to Calypso's island, Ogygia where Odysseus has been for seven years. He tells her that she must let Odysseus go. Calypso agrees but points out the fact that the male gods can have mistresses and it is unfair that the female one's cannot have lovers.

She finds Odysseus weeping (very different to his description of character in Book 4 by Menelaus and Helen) and longing for Ithaca. This is a very positive character trait as the Greeks placed a lot of emphasis on family. She tells him that he may go. He first thinks that it is a trick, which shows his shrewd nature. She offers him immortality he would stay with her, as her beauty is superior to Penelope's. Odysseus, not wanting to upset and anger a goddess, says that it is not so much Penelope he longs for but Ithaca. He makes her swear an oath that she will not harm him.

Homer has shown Calypso as a much more human goddess. She shows human feelings and is warm and affectionate towards Odysseus and jealous of Penelope. She acts as a good contrast to Circe.

He then builds a raft with tools from Calypso and with food and drink, clothes and wind in the sail all from the nymph, Odysseus sets sail. From here on in we see why he is called 'resourceful'. As in Book 4 we learnt of his endurance and deception.

On his way back from Ethiopia, Poseidon decides to punish Odysseus more for the blinding of his son, Polyphemus, the Cyclops. He creates a terrible storm with the strongest winds. He is shipwrecked and about to drown when Ino tells him to remove his heavy clothing and gives him a magic cloth that will protect him should he need it.

As he floats on the remainder of his raft, Athene controls the wind to the god-loved Phaeacians on Phaeacia. Unfortunately, ahead of Odysseus is only cliffs and rock. Athene manages to give him the inspiration to hold onto the rocks but is henceforth

pulled out to see again. Odysseus swims around the island and sees a river going into the island.

He climbs onto the riverbank and throws the cloth in the river for Ino. He then goes into the woods and buries himself under some leaves, as he fears that he will freeze to death on the riverbank. Athene then helps him sleep.

Here we meet Odysseus at last and we are given many examples of his steadfast spirit and endurance. His willingness to retain his mortality and withstand the many dangers that lie ahead of him endears Odysseus' character to his audience. There is always a hollow mockery in Homer's descriptions of the gods' antics, and we are most always interested in the deeds of men, not immortals. Therefore, as scholars have pointed out, Odysseus' rejection of Calypso's offer may keep him in danger, but also keeps him part of the dynamic world of heroism, and frees him from the static, listless world of the gods.

Calypso's reason, though divine, is naïve because of its very arrogance. She assumes that Odysseus will remain with her because her beauty is greater and longer lasting than Penelope's. She cannot perceive the internal beauty that one mortal may perceive in another. In the conversation between Calypso and Odysseus we see summed up Odysseus' unbreakable will and desire to struggle on as a mortal until he reaches the home he so desperately longs for.

Now that Odysseus' adventures have begun to be related in the main narrative, there are more epic similes in this book than there have been in the four preceding books combined. While the epic similes in the 'Odyssey' are generally inferior to and less frequent than those found in the 'Iliad', there are some that offer crisp images that have a powerful effect on the surrounding narrative. Critics have noted the effects of many of the epic similes: the pebbles clinging on to the octopus' tentacles give us a vivid, negative impression of the skin being torn from Odysseus' fingers; the smouldering log buried in the ashes to preserve its hidden spark of fire gives us a clear perception of Odysseus' flickering spark of life being tenderly preserved in the bed of leaves. The most touching of all the similes comes when Odysseus sees Phaeacia as he is in the sea. Here we see how fleeting and desperate is the hope that Odysseus has nourished concerning his arrival at a safe port; so fleeting and desperate is the hope of children whose father's health hangs precariously between life and death.

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## BOOK 6

**A**THENE, DISGUISED AS ONE OF NAUSICAA'S FRIENDS, APPEARS IN THE Phaeacian Princess' dream and inspires her to be a dutiful woman and potential wife by washing the palace laundry. In the morning, Nausicaa, daughter of King Alcinous and Queen Arete, goes with her friends to the river with the laundry and begins to wash and play games.

Odysseus wakes up by their noise and, covered in salt and covering up his private parts with a leaf, travels to them. Nausicaa's friends run away screaming but Nausicaa stays to listen to what the stranger has to say.

Fearing that he may scare her if he were to grab her knees in supplication, Odysseus pleads with her at a distance. Nausicaa respects Odysseus and his fine words and thought and gets her friends to bathe him in the river and to clothe him. In the process, Athene divinely enhances his appearance so that he looks quite like a god.

The fact that Nausicaa, without her maidservants and veil – the two things that protect her person and reputation in public – stays to talk to Odysseus shows her spirit and sturdiness of character.

Fearing gossip, Nausicaa tells Odysseus, after inviting him to the palace to meet her parents, to wait in the grove. While there, Odysseus prays to Athene to aid him in his supplication to the king and queen.

Book 6 contains an element, which although not scarce in the 'Odyssey', is certainly very rare in most epic poem: comedy. The comic element is unmistakable in these scenes. Odysseus' embarrassment when making his approach to the girls and right before bathing, as well as the girls' terrified reactions to his nakedness, cannot help but elicit a lighter mood in the poem's action, which until now had centered solely on the horrible problems faced by Odysseus and his family.

Homer uses a simile to describe Odysseus as a lion (used in war situation in the 'Iliad' which demonstrates, in this non-warfare situation that the girls viewed Odysseus as a dangerous and wild beast) and Nausicaa and the other girls as sheep. Here, the ravenous lion, buffeted by the elements but striving onward to state his all-consuming hunger on helpless sheep, is compared to the salt-covered Odysseus, ragged from days at sea, and filled with a hunger of an entirely different nature. The relation of the sheep to the girls can be seen clearly in retrospect when the girls flee before this ominous figure of male sexuality as sheep would flee before a hungry lion. This simile does not serve merely to make us once again pity the poor, travel-beaten Odysseus; it is rather an attempt to lighten the tension filling much of the first five books.

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## BOOK 7

**W**HEN NAUSICAA AND HER FRIENDS HAD REACHED THE PALACE, Athene, disguised as a young girl, offers to lead Odysseus to the palace and places a magical mist around him rendering him invisible in order to evade rude questioning. Athene tell him that in order to speak to King Alcinous, he must first win favour with Queen Arete.

When they reach the palace, Athene leaves and buggers off to Athens. Odysseus admires the fine palace then enters, sees Arete and grabs her knees in supplication. She allows him to see the king, who after removing one of his sons off of a chair so that Odysseus doesn't have to sit in the ash, feats with them and tells them the story of how he came to Phaeacia.

The queen notices his Phaeacian clothes and Odysseus tells them about their daughter's generosity. As they admire Odysseus and Nausicaa ha refused all other suitors, Alcinous hints at marriage but Odysseus stresses that he wants to go home. He is therefore promised their magic ships to sail home by. The ships can reach any destination and return in a day.

Arete and the servants then prepare a bed for Odysseus and sleeps.

In Book 7, we see the epitome of a motif that runs throughout the 'Odyssey': the relationship of host to guest. We saw the kind treatment Telemachus bestowed on Athene when was disguised as Mentos as well as the great hospitality extended to Telemachus by both Nestor and Menelaus. Now it is Odysseus himself who comes as a stranger to a foreign court and must act accordingly. Indeed, the role of a foreign visitor is one that Odysseus knows well, for he has wandered long and far and knows the customary courtesies expected by guests. Contrasted with his seasoned guest, Alcinous, although kind and benevolent as a host, is unused to receiving guests, and is initially unsure of how to react to Odysseus' suit. After Odysseus has humbled himself by sitting in a heap of ashes, no one, including Alcinous, knows quite how to act. Finally, an elder named Echeneus, the oldest man of Phaeacia speaks. Echeneus tactfully reminds Alcinous of his duties as a host to a stranger. Once again, it is not Alcinous' social grace and magnanimity that is lacking; it is his inexperience with situations of this sort that temporarily holds him back from action.

We are also given insight into another motif of the poem: the nature of divine disguise. Alcinous suggests that Odysseus might be a god who has come to test the Phaeacians' benevolence towards guests. We have already been told of the gods' special love for the Phaeacians, and how the people of Phaeacia themselves are nearly divine. Now we learn that the gods manifest that love by appearing to them not disguised, but in their actual form. This gives us an indication of just how strongly Athene loves Odysseus, for she often converses with him in her pure, undistinguished form. But it is not until Odysseus once again reaches Ithaca that she will be able to do so without fear of Poseidon's wrath.

Homer, by mixing in some elements of magic (the forever ripe fruit and semi-divine Phaeacians) prepares the reader for the fantasy books.

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## BOOK 17

**T**ELEMACHUS LEAVES EUMAEUS' HUT AND GOES HOME AND IS WARMLY greeted by Eurycleia, maidservants and his mother, Penelope. He tells her to go and pray to the gods while he meets Theoclymenus the seer and Peiraeus in the place of assembly. There he tells Peiraeus to hold onto his Spartan treasure until after the conflict with the suitors. Theoclymenus and Telemachus then return to the palace where Theoclymenus reveals a prophecy of Odysseus already being in the city to Penelope over dinner.

Odysseus and Eumaeus then head off into the city and meet the traitorous Melanthius who both physically and verbally abuses Odysseus who manages to keep his peace while Eumaeus tells him off. Unshaken, the goatherd goes off into the palace. Then, as they approach the palace themselves, they see Odysseus' old dog Argus is dying on top of dung. The dog wags his tail as he recognises his master after twenty years of separation and then dies.

In the palace, Telemachus gives Odysseus a meal and then Athene commands Telemachus' disguised father to beg from the suitors. Antinous, who was slightly provoked by Odysseus' beggar, throws a footstool at him and Odysseus walks off bitterly and silently.

The fact that Antinous did this, and was corrected and doomed by the other suitors, shows that he has no respect for Xenia.

Penelope then decides that she wishes to speak to Odysseus as the beggar. Eumaeus, however, tries to dissuade her from this as she has heard so many false tales from men who have falsely claimed to have met Odysseus. Still, she wants to see him. But Odysseus only wants to see her after the suitors have left. She agrees and Eumaeus goes home but is asked by Telemachus to come back to the palace in the morning.

Now that Odysseus has appeared before the larger Ithacan community in disguise, there is more room for the dramatic irony that fills many of the verses of 'The Odyssey'. We see this notably during the Melanthius episode. Although Odysseus holds his peace after Melanthius' attack, Eumaeus calls upon the gods to return Odysseus to his home so that he can punish the scornful goatherd.

Melanthius, a loyal follower of the suitors, knows the power that will be his when Telemachus is eliminated. His own vow, of course, recoils back upon him. Melanthius wishes that Telemachus may suffer death as surely as Odysseus himself has already done so. The irony lies in the fact that Melanthius' vow is fulfilled, only not in the way he had intended. Odysseus himself has not died, and is in fact standing right there. Therefore, as surely as Odysseus has not died, so too will Telemachus not die. Melanthius has unwittingly stated the truth.

We see a similar use of irony later, after Antinous strikes Odysseus with the footstool. Only this time, no one specifically mentions the long-lost Odysseus. Instead the

suitors remark that Antinous did badly to strike the 'beggar' as he could have been a god testing the suitors' kindness. Of course, we know Odysseus is not a god. But the gods have indeed disguised him for the very reason that the suitors suggest: to test them and to see which are righteous and which are malevolent. It is also appropriate that Odysseus' disguise makes others liken him once more to a god. Yet this time the situation is reversed. Before, Telemachus thought Odysseus a god for removing his disguise. Now, the suitors consider the possibility due to the lowly appearance of the disguise itself, not because of the majesty with which the gods envelop him when he stands revealed in his true form.