

THE LOTUS EATERS AND THE SIRENS

Two of Odysseus' most memorable adventures involve a strange people called the Lotus Eaters, who spend the entire day grazing on an intoxicating fruit called lotus, and supernatural creatures called Sirens, who lure sailors to their death with their irresistible voices. Odysseus barely rescues his men from the allure of the lotus plant, for those who have tasted the fruit try to escape from the ship. Odysseus has to tie them to their rowing benches to keep them from jumping overboard. As for the Sirens, Odysseus plugs the ears of his men with beeswax to keep them from hearing the song of the Sirens. These tales need no other teller than Homer himself. After reading "Searching for Odysseus," read these two excerpts from the *Odyssey*.



THE LOTUS EATERS

"[O]ur squadron reached the land of the Lotus-eaters, people who eat the lotus, mellow fruit and flower. We disembarked on the coast, drew water there and crewmen snatched a meal by the swift ships. Once we'd had our fill of food and drink I sent a detail ahead, two picked men and a third, a runner, to scout out who might live there—men like us perhaps, who live on bread? So off they went and soon enough they mingled among the natives, Lotus-eaters, Lotus-eaters who had no notion of killing my companions, not at all, they simply gave them the lotus to taste instead... Any crewman who ate the lotus, the honey-sweet fruit, lost all desire to send a message back, much less return, their only wish to linger there with the Lotus-eaters, grazing on lotus, all memory of the journey home dissolved forever." (*Odyssey* Book IX, Lines 93-110, Trans. Robert Fagles)

THE SIRENS

"Now with a sharp sword I sliced an ample wheel of beeswax down into pieces, kneaded them in my two strong hands

and the wax soon grew soft, worked by my strength
 and Helios' burning rays, the sun at high noon,
 and I stopped the ears of my comrades one by one.
 They bound me hand and foot in the tight ship—
 erect at the mast-block, lashed by ropes to the mast—
 and rowed and churned the whitecaps stroke on stroke.
 We were just offshore as far as a man's shout can carry,
 scudding close, when the Sirens sensed at once a ship
 was racing past and burst into their high, thrilling song:
 "Come closer, famous Odysseus—[Greece's] pride and glory—
 moor your ship on our coast so you can hear our song!
 Never has any sailor passed our shores in his black craft
 until he has heard our honeyed voices pouring from our lips,
 and once he hears to his heart's content sails on, a wiser man.
 We know all the pains that the [Greeks] and Trojans once endured
 on the spreading plain of Troy when the gods willed it so—
 all that comes to pass on the fertile earth, we know it all!"
 So they sent their ravishing voices out across the air
 and the heart inside me throbbed to listen longer.
 I signaled the crew with frowns to set me free—
 they flung themselves at the oars and rowed on harder.
 Perimedes and Eurylochus springing up at once
 to bind me faster with rope on chafing rope.
 But once we'd left the Sirens fading in our wake,
 once we could hear their song no more, their urgent call—
 my steadfast crew was quick to remove the wax I'd used
 to seal their ears and loosed the bonds that lashed me."
 (*Odyssey*, Book XII, Lines 189-217, Trans. Robert Fagles)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What could be a modern parallel for the addictive nature of the lotus fruit?
- In the episode with the Sirens, why does Odysseus leave his own ears unplugged?
- How is the test of the Sirens similar to the test of the Lotus Eaters?
- Homer does not describe the Sirens' appearance, but later myth-makers described them as half-woman, half-bird creatures. Others said they were mermaid-like creatures. (In every case they were described as female.) How do you picture the Sirens? Is it more or less effective to leave their appearance ambiguous? Explain.