

HOMER  
THE ODYSSEY  
ABRIDGED

Translated  
by  
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This abridged version of Homer's *Odyssey* has been prepared by Ian Johnston of Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada, from his translation of the complete poem. This abridged translation is roughly one-third the length of the original poem. Each line is a direct translation from the Greek original (i.e., I have shortened the poem by removing large parts of it, not by rewriting different sections). In many places, I have included a very short prose summary of the missing material placed in square brackets and italics. However, these short summaries do not include all details of the omitted text. And in many places no summary is provided for missing material.

In numbering the lines, the translator has normally included a short indented line with the shorter line immediately above it, so that the two partial lines count as a single line in the tally. Note that the numbering of the lines starts again in each book.

BOOK ONE  
ATHENA VISITS ITHACA

Muse, speak to me now of that resourceful man  
who wandered far and wide after ravaging  
the sacred citadel of Troy. He came to see  
many people's cities, where he learned their customs,  
while on the sea his spirit suffered many torments,  
as he fought to save his life and lead his comrades home.  
But though he wanted to, he could not rescue them—  
they all died from their own stupidity, the fools.  
They feasted on the cattle of Hyperion,  
god of the sun—that's why he snatched away their chance  
of getting home someday. So now, daughter of Zeus,  
tell us his story, starting anywhere you wish.<sup>1</sup> 10

The other warriors, all those who had escaped  
being utterly destroyed, were now back safely home,  
facing no more dangers from battle or the sea.  
But Odysseus, who longed to get back to his wife  
and reach his home, was being held in a hollow cave  
by that mighty nymph Calypso, noble goddess,  
who wished to make Odysseus her husband.  
But as the seasons came and went, the year arrived  
in which, according to what gods had once ordained,  
he was to get back to Ithaca, his home— 20  
not that he would be free from troubles even there,  
among his family. The gods pitied Odysseus,  
all except Poseidon, who kept up his anger  
against godlike Odysseus and did not relent  
until he reached his native land.

But at that moment,  
Poseidon was among the Ethiopians,  
a long way off. But other gods had gathered  
in the great hall of Olympian Zeus. Among them all, 30  
the father of gods and men was first to speak.  
In his heart he was remembering royal Aegisthus,

<sup>1</sup>The Muses, divine patrons of the arts, are daughters of Zeus, the most powerful god on Olympus.

BOOK ONE

whom Orestes, Agamemnon's famous son,  
had killed. With him in mind, Zeus addressed the gods:

“It's disgraceful how these humans blame the gods.  
They say their tribulations come from us,  
when they themselves, through their own foolishness,  
bring hardships which are not decreed by fate.  
Now there's Aegisthus, who took for himself  
the wife of Agamemnon, Atreus' son, 40  
and then murdered him, once the man came home.  
None of that was set by Fate. Aegisthus knew  
his acts would bring about his total ruin.  
So he has paid for everything in full.”<sup>1</sup>

Athena, goddess with the gleaming eyes, answered Zeus:

“Son of Cronos and father to us all,  
you who rule on high, yes indeed, Aegisthus  
now lies dead, something he well deserved.  
May any other man who does what he did  
also be destroyed! But my heart is torn 50  
for skilful Odysseus, ill-fated man,  
who has had to suffer such misfortune  
for so many years, a long way from friends.  
He's on an island, surrounded by the sea,  
the one that forms the ocean's navel stone.  
In the forests of that island lives a goddess,  
who stops the sad, unlucky man from leaving.  
But Odysseus yearns to see even the smoke  
rising from his native land and longs for death.  
And yet, Olympian Zeus, your heart 60  
does not respond to him. Did not Odysseus  
offer you delightful sacrifices

<sup>1</sup>Aegisthus, as part of a scheme to avenge a terrible act of Agamemnon's father against his father, seduced Agamemnon's wife, Clytaemnestra, while Agamemnon was leading the Achaean army at Troy, and when Agamemnon returned victorious, the two lovers killed him and took control of Argos. Orestes, Agamemnon's son, who was away at the time of the murder, returned to Argos in disguise and avenged his father by killing Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra. This famous story is referred to a number of times in the Odyssey. Agamemnon's shade provides some details of the killing in Book Eleven.

BOOK ONE

on Troy's far-reaching plain beside the ships?  
Why then, Zeus, are you so angry with him?"

Cloud-gatherer Zeus then answered her and said:

“My child,  
How could I forget godlike Odysseus, pre-eminent among all mortal  
men  
for his intelligence and offerings  
to the immortal gods, who hold wide heaven?  
But Earthshaker Poseidon is a stubborn god, 70  
constantly enraged about the Cyclops,  
the one whose eye Odysseus destroyed,  
godlike Polyphemus, the mightiest  
of all the Cyclopes. Thoosa bore him,  
the nymph, a daughter of that Phorcys  
who commands the restless seas. Poseidon,  
down in those hollow caves, had sex with her.  
That's the reason Earthshaker Poseidon  
makes Odysseus wander from his country.  
Still, he has no plans to kill him. But come, 80  
let's all of us consider his return,  
so he can journey back to Ithaca.  
Poseidon's anger will relent. He can't  
fight the immortal gods all by himself,  
not with all of us opposing him.”<sup>1</sup>

Goddess Athena with the gleaming eyes replied to Zeus:

“Son of Cronos and father to us all,  
ruling high above, let's send Hermes,  
killer of Argus, as our messenger,  
over to the island of Ogygia, 90  
so he can quickly tell that fair-haired nymph  
our firm decision—that brave Odysseus

<sup>1</sup>A cyclops, as we find out later in the poem, is a huge, one-eyed cannibal monster living in the wilderness. Poseidon, Zeus' divine brother, is god of the sea (hence, he is often called “Encircler of the Earth”). He is also called Earthshaker because he rules over earthquakes.

BOOK ONE

will now leave and complete his voyage home.<sup>1</sup>  
I'll go to Ithaca and urge his son  
to be more active, put courage in his heart,  
so he will call those long-haired Achaeans  
to assembly, and there address the suitors,  
who keep on slaughtering his flocks of sheep  
and shambling bent-horned cattle.<sup>2</sup> I'll send him  
on a trip to Sparta and sandy Pylos, 100  
to learn about his father's voyage home—  
he may hear of it somewhere—and to gain  
a worthy reputation among men.”

Athena spoke. Then she tied those lovely sandals  
on her feet, the immortal, golden sandals  
which carry her as fast as stormy blasts of wind  
across the ocean seas and endless tracts of land.  
She raced down from the peak of Mount Olympus,  
sped across to Ithaca, and then just stood there,  
at Odysseus' outer gate before the palace, 110  
on the threshold, gripping the bronze spear in her fist.  
She looked like Mentès, a foreigner, the chief  
who ruled the Taphians. There she met the suitors,  
those arrogant men, who were enjoying themselves  
playing checkers right outside the door, sitting down  
on hides of cattle.

God-like Telemachus  
observed Athena first, well before the others.  
He moved up near Athena, then spoke to her—  
his words had wings:

“Welcome to you stranger.  
You must enjoy our hospitality. 120

<sup>1</sup>Cronos is Zeus' father, whom Zeus fought against and imprisoned deep in the earth. Hermes, divine son of Zeus, killed the monster Argus, whom Zeus' wife and sister, Hera, had told to guard the goddess Io, in order to prevent her getting into sexual mischief with Zeus.

<sup>2</sup>The suitors are the rich, young aristocratic men of Ithaca and the neighbouring islands who are seeking to marry Penelope, Odysseus' wife, in the belief that Odysseus is dead.

BOOK ONE

Then, after you have had some food to eat,  
you can tell us what you need.”

Saying this,

Telemachus led Pallas Athena into his home.  
He brought Athena in and sat her in a chair,  
a beautifully crafted work. Under it  
he rolled out a linen mat and then arranged  
a foot stool for her feet. Beside her he drew up  
a lovely decorated chair for him to sit in.  
A female servant carried in a fine gold jug  
and poured water out into a silver basin,  
so they could wash their hands. Beside them she set down  
a polished table. Then the worthy housekeeper  
brought in the bread and set it down before them.  
Next, she laid out a wide variety of food,  
drawing freely on supplies she had in store.  
A carver sliced up many different cuts of meat  
and served them. He set out goblets made of gold,  
as a herald went back and forth pouring their wine

130

Then, one after another, the proud suitors came.  
They sat down on reclining seats and high-backed chairs.  
Heralds poured water out for them to wash their hands,  
and women servants piled some baskets full of bread,  
while young lads filled their bowls up to the brim with drink.  
The suitors reached out with their hands to grab  
the tasty food prepared and placed in front of them.  
When each and every man had satisfied his need  
for food and drink, their hearts craved something more—  
dancing and song—the finest joys of dinner feasts.

140

A herald gave a splendid lyre to Phemius,  
so he was forced to sing in front of all the suitors.  
On the strings he plucked the prelude to a lovely song.  
But then Telemachus, leaning his head over  
close to Athena, so no one else could listen,  
murmured to her:

150

“Dear stranger, my guest,  
These men here, they spend all their time like this,  
with songs and music—it’s so easy for them,

BOOK ONE

because they gorge themselves on what belongs  
to someone else, and with impunity,  
a man whose white bones now may well be lying  
on the mainland somewhere, rotting in the rain, 160  
or in the sea, being tossed around by waves.  
If they saw him return to Ithaca,  
they'd all be praying they had swifter feet  
rather than more wealth in gold or clothes.  
But by now some evil fate has killed him,  
and for us there is no consolation,  
not even if some earth-bound mortal man  
should say that he will come. But tell me,  
and speak candidly—Who are your people?  
What city do you come from?"

Then Athena, 170  
goddess with the gleaming eyes, answered Telemachus:

"To you I will indeed speak openly.  
I can tell you that my name is Mentès,  
son of the wise Anchialus, and king  
of the oar-loving Taphians. My ship  
is berthed some distance from the city.  
But come, speak openly and tell me this—  
What is this feast? Who are these crowds of men?  
Why do you need this? Is it a wedding?  
Or a drinking party? It seems clear enough 180  
this is no meal where each man brings his share.  
It strikes me that these men are acting here  
in an insulting, overbearing way,  
while dining in your home."

Noble Telemachus  
then said to Athena in reply:

"Stranger,  
since you've questioned me about the matter,  
I'll tell you. Our house was once well on its way  
to being rich and famous—at that time  
Odysseus was alive among his people.  
But now the gods with their malicious plans 190  
have changed all that completely. They make sure

BOOK ONE

Odysseus stays where nobody can see him—  
they've not done this to anyone before.  
But it's not him alone who makes me sad  
and cry out in distress. For now the gods  
have brought me other grievous troubles.  
All the best young men who rule the islands,  
Dulichium and wooded Zacynthus,  
and Same, as well as those who lord it here  
in rocky Ithaca—they are all now  
wooing my mother and ravaging my house.  
She won't turn down a marriage she detests  
but can't bring herself to make the final choice.  
Meanwhile, these men are feasting on my home  
and soon will be the death of me as well."

200

This made Pallas Athena angry—she said to him:

"It's bad Odysseus has wandered off  
when you need him here so much! He could lay  
his hands upon these shameless suitors.  
Listen now to what I'm going to tell you.  
Tomorrow you must call Achaea's warriors  
to an assembly and address them all,  
appealing to the gods as witnesses.  
Tell the suitors to return to their own homes.  
As for your mother, if her heart is set  
on getting married, then let her return  
to where her father lives, for he's a man  
of power with great capabilities.  
He'll organize the marriage and arrange  
the wedding gifts, as many as befit  
a well-loved daughter. Now, as for yourself,  
if you'll listen, I have some wise advice.  
Set off in search of news about your father,  
who's been gone so long. Some living mortal  
may tell you something, or you may hear  
a voice from Zeus, which often brings men news.  
Sail first to Pylos—speak to noble Nestor.  
After you've been there, proceed to Sparta  
and fair-haired Menelaus, the last one  
of all bronze-clad Achaeans to get home.

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220

230

BOOK ONE

You must not keep on acting like a child—  
the time has come when you're too old for that."

Prudent Telemachus then answered her:

"Stranger, you've been speaking as a friend,  
thinking as a father would for his own son—  
and what you've said I never will forget.  
But come now, though you're eager to be off,  
stay here a while. Once you've had a bath  
and your fond heart is fully satisfied,  
then go back to your ship with your spirit  
full of joy, carrying a costly present, 240  
something really beautiful, which will be  
my gift to you, an heirloom of the sort  
dear guest-friends give to those who are their friends."

Goddess Athena with the gleaming eyes then said to him:

"Since I'm eager to depart, don't keep me here  
a moment longer. And whatever gift  
your heart suggests you give me as a friend,  
present it to me when I come back here,  
and pick me something truly beautiful. 250  
It will earn you something worthy in return."

This said, Athena with the gleaming eyes departed,  
flying off like some wild sea bird. In his heart she put  
courage and strength. She made him recall his father,  
even more so than before. In his mind, Telemachus  
pictured her, and his heart was full of wonder.  
He thought she was a god. So he moved away.  
And then the noble youth rejoined the suitors.  
Celebrated Phemius was performing for them,  
as they sat in silence, listening. He was singing 260  
of the return of the Achaeans, that bitter trip  
Athena made them take when they sailed home from Troy.

In her upper room, the daughter of Icarus,  
wise Penelope, heard the man's inspired song.  
She came down the towering staircase from her room,  
but not alone—two female servants followed her.  
Once beautiful Penelope reached the suitors,

BOOK ONE

she stayed beside the door post in the well-built room,  
with a small bright veil across her face. On either side  
her two attendants stood. With tears streaming down,  
Penelope addressed the famous singer:

270

“Phemius,  
you know all sorts of other ways to charm  
an audience, actions of the gods and men  
which singers celebrate. As you sit here,  
sing one of those, while these men drink their wine  
in silence. Don’t keep up that painful song,  
which always breaks the heart here in my chest,  
for, more than anyone, I am weighed down  
with ceaseless grief which I cannot forget.  
I always remember with such yearning  
my husband’s face, a man whose fame has spread  
far and wide through Greece and central Argos.”

280

Sensible Telemachus answered her and said:

“Mother, why begrudge the faithful singer  
delighting us in any way his mind  
may prompts him to? One can’t blame the singers.  
It seems to me it’s Zeus’ fault. He hands out  
to toiling men, each and every one of them,  
whatever he desires. There’s nothing wrong  
with this man’s singing of the evil fate  
of the Danaans, for men praise the most  
the song which they have heard most recently.  
Your heart and spirit should endure his song.  
Go up to your rooms and keep busy there  
with your own work, the spindle and the loom.  
Tell your servants to perform their duties.  
Talking is a man’s concern, every man’s,  
but especially mine, since in this house  
I’m the one in charge.”

290

Astonished at his words,  
Penelope went back to her own chambers,  
setting in her heart the prudent words her son had said.  
With her attendant women she climbed the stairs  
up to her rooms and there wept for Odysseus,

300

BOOK ONE

her dear husband, until bright-eyed Athena  
cast sweet sleep on her eyelids.

In the shadowy halls  
the suitors started to create an uproar,  
each man shouting out his hope to lie beside her.  
Then shrewd Telemachus began his speech to them:

“You suitors of my mother, who all have  
such insolent arrogance, let us for now  
enjoy our banquet, but no more shouting, 310  
for it’s grand to listen to a singer  
as fine as this one—his voice is like a god’s.  
But in the morning let us all assemble,  
sit down for a meeting, so I can speak  
and tell you firmly to depart my home.  
Make yourself some different meals which eat up  
your own possessions, moving house to house.  
But if you think it’s preferable and better  
for one man’s livelihood to be consumed 320  
without paying anything, I’ll call upon  
the immortal gods to see if Zeus  
will bring about an act of retribution.  
And if you are destroyed inside my home,  
you will not be avenged.”

Telemachus finished.

They all bit their lips, astonished that he’d spoken out  
so boldly. Then, Antinous, son of Eupheithes,  
declared:

“Telemachus, the gods themselves,  
it seems, are teaching you to be a braggart  
and give rash speeches. I do hope that Zeus,  
son of Cronos, does not make you king 330  
of this sea island Ithaca, even though  
it is your father’s legacy to you.”

At that point, the suitors  
switched to dancing and to singing lovely songs.  
They amused themselves until dark evening came.  
Then each man went to his own house to sleep.

BOOK ONE

Telemachus moved up to where his room was built  
high in the splendid courtyard, with a spacious view,  
his mind much preoccupied on his way to bed.

Accompanying him, quick-minded Eurycleia  
held two flaming torches. She was Ops's daughter.

340

Of all the female household slaves she was the one  
who loved him most, for she had nursed him as a child.

He opened the doors of the well-constructed room,  
sat on the bed, and pulled off his soft tunic,  
handed it to the wise old woman, who smoothed it out,  
and folded it, then hung the tunic on a peg  
beside the corded bedstead. Then she left the room,  
pulling the door shut by its silver handle.

Telemachus lay there all night long, wrapped up  
in sheep's wool, his mind thinking of the journey  
which Athena had earlier proposed to him.

350

BOOK TWO  
TELEMACHUS PREPARES FOR HIS VOYAGE

As soon as rose-fingered early Dawn appeared,  
Odysseus' dear son jumped up out of bed and dressed.  
He slung a sharp sword from his shoulders, then laced  
his lovely sandals over his shining feet.  
At once he asked the loud-voiced heralds to summon  
all the long-haired Achaean to assembly.

They issued the call, and the Achaeans came,  
gathering quickly. When the assembly had convened,  
Telemachus moved to the meeting. Among the men,  
heroic Aegyptius was the first to speak,  
a man stooped with age.

10

“Men of Ithaca,  
listen now to what I have to say.  
We have not held a general meeting  
or assembly since the day Odysseus  
sailed off in his hollow ships. What man  
has made us gather now? What's his reason?  
Has he heard some news about the army  
and will tell us details of its journey home,  
or is it some other public business  
he will introduce and talk about?”

20

Odysseus' dear son Telemachus began to speak,  
talking to Aegyptius first of all:

“Old man,  
the one who called the people to this meeting  
is not far off, as you will quickly learn.  
I did. For I'm a man who suffers more  
than other men. But I have no reports  
of our returning army, no details  
I've just heard myself to pass along to you,  
nor is there other public business  
I'll announce or talk about. The issue here  
is my own need, for on my household  
troubles have fallen in a double sense.  
First, my noble father's perished, the man  
who was once your king and my kind father.  
And then there's an even greater problem,

30

BOOK TWO

which will quickly and completely shatter  
this entire house, and my whole livelihood  
will be destroyed. These suitors, the dear sons  
of those men here with most nobility,  
are pestering my mother against her will. 40  
They're don't want to journey to her father,  
Icarius, in his home, where he himself  
could set a bride price for his daughter  
and give her to the man he feels he likes,  
the one who pleases him the most. Instead,  
they hang around our house, day after day,  
slaughtering oxen, fat goats, and sheep.  
They keep on feasting, drinking sparkling wine  
without restraint, and they consume so much.  
My home is being demolished in a way 50  
that is not right. You men should be ashamed."

Telemachus spoke, then threw the sceptre on the ground  
and burst out crying. Everyone there pitied him,  
so all the others men kept silent, unwilling  
to give an angry answer to Telemachus.  
Antinous was the only one to speak. He said:

"Telemachus you boaster, your spirit  
is too unrestrained. How you carry on,  
trying to shame us, since you so desire  
the blame should rest on us. But in your case, 60  
Achaean suitors aren't the guilty ones.  
Your own dear mother is, who understands  
how to use deceit. It's been three years now—  
and soon it will be four—since she began  
to frustrate hearts in our Achaean chests.  
She gives hope to each of us, makes promises  
to everyone, and sends out messages.  
But her intent is different. In her mind  
she has thought up another stratagem:  
in her room she had a large loom set up, 70  
and started weaving something very big,  
with thread that was quite thin. She said to us:

BOOK TWO

‘Young men, those of you who are my suitors,  
since lord Odysseus is dead, you must wait,  
although you’re keen for me to marry,  
till I complete this cloak—otherwise  
my weaving would be wasted and in vain.  
It is a shroud for warrior Laertes,  
for the day a lethal Fate will strike him dead.  
Then none of the Achaean women here <sup>80</sup>  
will be annoyed with me because a man  
who acquired so many rich possessions  
should lie without a shroud.’

That’s what she said.  
And our proud hearts agreed. And so each day  
she wove at her great loom, but every night  
she set up torches and pulled the work apart.  
Three years she fooled Achaeans with this trick.  
They trusted her. But as the seasons passed,  
the fourth year came. Then one of her women  
who knew all the details spoke about them, 90  
and we caught her undoing her lovely work.  
Thus, we forced her to complete the cloak  
against her will. The suitors now say this,  
so you, deep in your heart, will understand  
and all Achaeans know—send your mother back.  
Tell her she must marry whichever man  
her father tells her and who pleases her.  
But we are not going back to our own lands,  
or some place else, not until she marries  
an Achaean man of her own choosing.” 100

Prudent Telemachus then said in reply:

“Antinous, there’s no way I will dismiss  
out of this house against her will the one  
who bore and nursed me. As for my father,  
he’s in a distant land, alive or dead.  
It would be hard for me to compensate  
Icarius with a suitable amount,  
as I would have to do, if I sent her back.  
If I didn’t do that, then her father

BOOK TWO

would treat me badly, and some deity  
would send other troubles, since my mother,  
as she left this house, would call upon  
the dreaded Furies. Men would blame me, too.  
That's why I'll never issue such an order.  
Just give me a swift ship and twenty rowers—  
so I can make a journey and return  
to various places, to sandy Pylos  
and then to Sparta, to see if I can find  
some news about my father's voyage home.  
If I hear my father is still living  
and returning home, I could hold out here  
for one more year, although it's hard for me.  
If I learn he's dead and gone, I'll come back  
to my dear native land, build him a tomb,  
and there perform as many funeral rites  
as are appropriate. And after that,  
I'll give my mother to a husband.”

110

120

Telemachus said this and soon dissolved the meeting.  
The men dispersed, each man to his own house.  
Telemachus walked away to the ocean shore.  
There, once he'd washed his hands in gray salt water,  
to Athena he made this prayer:

130

“O hear me,  
you who yesterday came to my home  
as a god and ordered me to set out  
in a ship across the murky seas,  
to learn about my father's voyage back  
after being away so long. All this  
Achaean are preventing, most of all,  
the suitors with their wicked arrogance.”

As he said this prayer, Athena came up close to him,  
looking and sounding just like Mentor. She spoke—  
her words had wings:

140

“You must not delay  
that trip you wish to make. I am a friend  
of your ancestral home, so much so that I  
will furnish a fast ship for you and come

BOOK TWO

in person with you. But now you must go home.  
Mingle with the suitors. I'll go through the town  
and quickly round up a group of comrades,  
all volunteers. In sea-girt Ithaca,  
I'll choose from the many ships, new and old,  
the best one for you, and then, when that ship  
has been made ready and is fit to sail,  
we'll launch it out into the wine-dark sea."

150

*[Telemachus goes down into the storage rooms of the palace and instructs Eurycleia to get some supplies ready for his voyage. He swears her to secrecy.]*

Telemachus went up into the dining hall  
and there rejoined the company of suitors.

Then goddess Athena with the gleaming eyes  
thought of something else. Looking like Telemachus,  
she went all through the city. To every man  
she came up to she gave the same instructions,  
telling them to meet by the fast ship that evening.  
Next, she asked Noemon, fine son of Phronius,  
for a swift ship, and he was happy to oblige.  
Then the sun went down, and all the roads grew dark.  
Athena dragged the fast ship down into the sea  
and stocked it with supplies, all the materials  
well-decked boats have stowed on board, then moved the ship  
to the harbour's outer edge. There they assembled,  
that group of brave companions, and the goddess  
instilled fresh heart in every one of them.

160

Then bright-eyed Athena told Telemachus  
to come outside, by the entrance to the spacious hall.

170

"Telemachus, your well-armed companions  
are already sitting beside their oars,  
waiting for you to launch the expedition.  
Let's be off, so we don't delay the trip  
a moment longer."

With these words, Pallas Athena  
quickly led the way, and Telemachus followed.  
Then, with Athena going on board ahead of him,

## BOOK TWO

Telemachus embarked. She sat in the stern.  
Telemachus sat right beside her, as the men  
untied the stern ropes, then climbed aboard the ship  
and went to seat themselves beside their oarlocks.  
Bright-eyed Athena arranged a fair breeze for them,  
a strong West Wind blowing across the wine-dark sea.  
As the ship sliced straight through the swell on its way forward,  
around the bow began the great song of the waves.  
Then all night long and well beyond the sunrise,  
their ship continued sailing on its journey.

180

BOOK THREE  
TELEMACHUS VISITS NESTOR IN PYLOS

*[Telemachus and his crew reach Pylos and are welcomed and entertained by Nestor, king of Pylos; Nestor provides a chariot for Telemachus to journey to Sparta and sends his son with him on the trip.]*

BOOK FOUR  
THE SUITORS PLAN TO KILL TELEMACHUS

*[Telemachus and Peisistratus arrive at Menelaus' home in Sparta; Menelaus gives a long account of his travels in Egypt, especially his adventures with the Old Man of the Sea, the death of the lesser Ajax, and the death of Agamemnon; Menelaus invites Telemachus to stay for longer, but Telemachus declines.]*

Meanwhile, back in Telemachus' Ithaca, the suitors were outside Odysseus' palace, enjoying themselves by throwing spears and discus on level ground in front—with all the arrogance they usually displayed. Their two leaders, Antinous and handsome Eurymachus, were sitting there—by far the best of all the suitors. Then Noemon, Phronius' son, came up to question Antinous. He said:

“Antinous,  
in our hearts do we truly know or not  
when Telemachus will journey back  
from sandy Pylos? He went away  
taking a ship of mine which I now need  
to make the trip across to spacious Elis.”

10

He finished. In their hearts the suitors were amazed. They had no idea Telemachus had gone to Pylos, land of Neleus, and still believed he was somewhere with the flocks on his estates. Antinous, Eupheithes' son, then spoke to them. He was annoyed, his black heart filled with rage, his flashing eyes a fiery blaze:

20

“Here's trouble.  
In his overbearing way Telemachus,  
with this voyage of his, has now achieved  
significant success. And we believed

## BOOK FOUR

he'd never see it through. Come now,  
give me a swift ship and twenty comrades,  
so I can watch for him and set an ambush,  
as he navigates his passage through the strait  
dividing Ithaca from rugged Samos,  
and bring this trip searching for his father  
to a dismal end.”

30

Antinous picked out his men,  
twenty of the best. They went down to the shore  
and dragged a swift black ship into deep water.  
The suitors then embarked and sailed away  
on their trip across the water, minds fully bent  
on slaughtering Telemachus. Out at sea,  
half way between Ithaca and rugged Samos,  
there's the rocky island Asteris. It's small,  
but ships can moor there in a place with openings  
in both directions. The Achaeans waited there  
and set up their ambush for Telemachus.

40

BOOK FIVE  
ODYSSEUS LEAVES CALYPSO'S ISLAND

As Dawn stirred from her bed beside lord Tithonus,  
bringing light to eternal gods and mortal men,  
the gods were sitting in assembly, among them  
high-thundering Zeus, whose power is supreme.  
Athena was reminding them of all the stories  
of Odysseus's troubles—she was concerned for him  
as he passed his days in nymph Calypso's home.

“Father Zeus and you other blessed gods  
who live forever, let no sceptred king  
be prudent, kind, or gentle from now on, 10  
or think about his fate. Let him instead  
always be cruel and treat men viciously,  
since no one now has any memory  
of lord Odysseus, who ruled his people  
and was a gentle father. Now he lies  
suffering extreme distress on that island  
where nymph Calypso lives. She keeps him there  
by force, and he's unable to sail off.  
And now some men are setting out to kill  
the son he loves, as he sails home. The boy 20  
has gone to gather news about his father,  
off to sacred Pylos and holy Sparta.”

Cloud-gatherer Zeus then answered her and said:

“My child,  
did you not organize this plan yourself,  
so that Odysseus, once he made it home,  
could take out his revenge against those men?  
As for Telemachus, you should use your skill  
to get him to his native land unharmed—  
that's well within your power. The suitors  
will sail back in their ship without success.” 30

Zeus spoke and then instructed Hermes, his dear son:

“Hermes, tell the fair-haired nymph  
my firm decision—the brave Odysseus  
is to get back home. He'll get no guidance  
from the gods or mortal men, but sail off  
on a raft of wood well lashed together.”

## BOOK FIVE

Zeus finished speaking. The killer of Argus,  
his messenger, obeyed. At once he laced up  
on his feet those lovely golden ageless sandals  
which carry him as fast as stormy blasts of wind. 40  
When he reached the distant island, he rose up,  
out of the violet sea, and moved on shore,  
until he reached the massive cave, where Calypso,  
the fair-haired nymph, had her home. He found her there,  
a huge fire blazing in her hearth—from far away  
the smell of split cedar and burning sandal wood  
spread across the island. With her lovely voice  
Calypso sang inside the cave, as she moved  
back and forth before her loom—she was weaving  
with a golden shuttle. All around her cave 50  
trees were in bloom, alder and sweet-smelling cypress,  
and poplar, too, with long-winged birds nesting there—  
owls, hawks, and chattering sea crows, who spend their time  
out on the water. A garden vine, fully ripe  
and rich with grapes, trailed through the hollow cave.  
From four fountains, close to each other in a row,  
clear water flowed in various directions,  
and all around soft meadows spread out in full bloom  
with violets and parsley. Even a god,  
who lives forever, coming there, would be amazed 60  
to see it, and his heart would fill with pleasure.  
The killer of Argus, god's messenger, stood there,  
marvelling at the sight. But once his spirit  
had contemplated all these things with wonder,  
he went inside the spacious cave. And Calypso,  
that lovely goddess, when she saw him face to face,  
was not ignorant of who he was, for the gods  
are not unknown to one another, even though  
the home of some immortal might be far away.

But Hermes did not find Odysseus in the cave— 70  
that great-hearted man sat crying on the shore,  
just as before, breaking his heart with tears and groans,  
full of sorrow, as he looked out on the restless sea  
and wept. Calypso invited Hermes to sit down

BOOK FIVE

on a bright shining chair. Then the lovely goddess questioned him:

“Hermes, my honoured guest,  
why have you come here with your golden wand?  
You haven’t been a visitor before.  
Tell me what’s on your mind. My heart desires  
to carry out what you request, if I can,  
and if it’s something fated to be done.”

80

After this speech, Calypso set out a table laden with ambrosia, then mixed red nectar. And so the messenger god, killer of Argus, ate and drank.<sup>1</sup> When his meal was over and the food had comforted his heart, Hermes gave his answer, speaking to Calypso with these words:

“You’re a goddess.  
Since you’ve questioned me, I’ll tell you the truth.  
Zeus told me to come here against my will.  
He says that you have here with you a man  
more unfortunate than all the other ones  
who fought nine years round Priam’s city,  
which in the tenth year they destroyed and left  
to get back home. Now Zeus is ordering you  
to send him off as soon as possible.”

90

The killer of Argus, the gods’ great messenger, said these words and left. The regal nymph Calypso, once she’d heard Zeus’s message, went off to find great-hearted Odysseus. She found him by the shore, sitting down, with his eyes always full of tears, because his sweet life was passing while he mourned for his return. The nymph no longer gave him joy. At night he slept beside her in the hollow cave, as he was forced to do—not of his own free will,

100

<sup>1</sup>The diet of the gods is different from the human diet. Calypso serves Hermes ambrosia and nectar and has those herself, but Odysseus, a human being, has to have different things to eat and drink.

BOOK FIVE

though she was keen enough. Moving up,  
close to him, the lovely goddess spoke:

“Poor man,  
spend no more time in sorrow on this island  
or waste your life away. My heart agrees—  
the time has come for me to send you off.  
So come now, cut long timbers with an axe,  
and make a raft, a large one. Build a deck  
high up on it, so it can carry you  
across the misty sea. I’ll provision it  
with as much food and water and red wine  
as you will need to satisfy your wants.”

110

As soon as rose-fingered early Dawn appeared,  
Odysseus quickly put on a cloak and tunic,  
and the nymph dressed in a long white shining robe,  
a lovely lightly woven dress. Then she organized her plans  
so brave Odysseus could leave. She handed him  
a massive axe, well suited to his grip, and made  
of two-edged bronze. It had a finely crafted shaft  
of handsome olive wood. Next she provided him  
a polished adze. Then she led him on a path  
down to the edges of the island, where tall trees grew,  
alder, poplar, and pine that reached the upper sky,  
well-seasoned, dried-out wood, which could keep him afloat.  
Once she’d pointed out to him where the large trees grew,  
Calypso, the lovely goddess, went back home.

120

Odysseus then began to cut the timber. His work  
proceeded quickly. He cut down twenty trees,  
used his bronze axe to trim and deftly smooth them,  
then lined them up. The fair goddess Calypso  
then brought him augers, so he bored each timber,  
fastened them to one another, and tightened them  
with pins and binding. Next he set up a mast  
with a yard arm fastened to it and then made  
a steering oar to guide the raft. Calypso,  
the beautiful goddess, brought him woven cloth  
to make a sail—which he did very skillfully.  
On it he tied bracing ropes, sheets, and halyards.

130

140

BOOK FIVE

Then he levered the raft down to the shining sea.  
By the fourth day he had completed all this work.

So on the fifth beautiful Calypso bathed him,  
dressed him in sweet-smelling clothes, and sent him  
from the island. The goddess stowed on board the raft  
a sack full of dark wine and another large one,  
full of water, and a bag of food, in which she put  
many tasty things for him to eat. She sent him  
a warm and gentle wind, and lord Odysseus sailed  
for ten days on the water, then for seven more,  
and on the eighteenth day some shadowy hills appeared,  
where the land of the Phaeacians, like a shield  
riding on the misty sea, lay very close to him.

150

Poseidon watched Odysseus sailing on the sea,  
and his spirit grew enraged. He shook his head  
and spoke to his own heart:

“Something’s wrong!

The gods must have changed what they were planning  
for Odysseus, while I’ve been far away  
among the Ethiopians. For now,  
he’s hard by the land of the Phaeacians,  
where he’ll escape the great extremes of sorrow  
which have come over him—so Fate ordains.  
But still, even now I think I’ll push him  
so he gets his fill of troubles.”

160

Poseidon spoke.

Then he drove the clouds together, seized his trident,  
and shook up the sea. He brought on stormy blasts  
from every kind of wind, concealing land and sea  
with clouds, so darkness fell from heaven. East Wind  
clashed with South Wind, while West Wind, raging in a storm,  
smashed into North Wind, born in the upper sky,  
as it pushed a massive wave. Odysseus’s knees gave way,  
his spirit fell, and in great distress he spoke aloud,  
addressing his great heart:

170

“I’ve got such a wretched fate!  
How is all this going to end up for me?”

BOOK FIVE

I'm afraid everything the goddess said  
was true, when she claimed that out at sea,  
before I got back to my native land,  
I'd have my fill of troubles."

As he said this,  
a massive wave charged at him with tremendous force,  
swirled round the raft, then from high above crashed down. 180  
Odysseus let go his grip on the steering oar  
and fell out, a long way from the raft. The fierce gusts  
of howling winds snapped the mast off in the middle.

Then Athena, Zeus's daughter, thought up something new.  
She blocked the paths of every wind but one  
and ordered all of them to stop and check their force,  
then roused the swift North Wind and broke the waves in front,  
so divinely born Odysseus might yet meet  
the people of Phaeacia, who love the oar, 190  
avoiding death and Fates.

So for two days and nights  
he floated on the ocean waves, his heart filled  
with many thoughts of death. But when fair-haired Dawn  
gave rise at last to the third day, the wind died down,  
the sea grew calm and still. He was lifted up  
by a large swell, and as he quickly looked ahead,  
Odysseus saw the land close by. He kept swimming on  
and reached the mouth of a fair-flowing river,  
which seemed to him the finest place to go onshore.  
There were no rocks, and it was sheltered from the wind. 200  
Odysseus recognized the river as it flowed  
and prayed to him deep in his heart. Both knees bent,  
he let his strong hands fall—the sea had crushed his spirit.  
All his skin was swollen, and sea water flowed in streams  
up in his mouth and nose. He lay there breathless,  
without a word, hardly moving. Close by the water  
he found a place with a wide view. So he crept  
underneath two bushes growing from one stem—  
one was an olive tree, the other a wild thorn.  
Athena then poured sleep onto his eyes, 210

## BOOK FIVE

covering his eyelids, so he could find relief,  
a quick respite from his exhausting troubles.

BOOK SIX  
ODYSSEUS AND NAUSICAA

While much-enduring lord Odysseus slept there,  
overcome with weariness and sleep, Athena  
went to the land of the Phaeacians, to their city,  
into the palace of the king, lord Alcinous,  
to arrange a journey home for brave Odysseus.  
She moved into a wonderfully furnished room  
where a young girl slept, one like immortal goddesses  
in form and loveliness. She was Nausicaa,  
daughter of great-hearted Alcinous. Like a gust of wind,  
Athena slipped over to the young girl's bed, 10  
stood by her head, then spoke to her.  
Her appearance changed to look like Dymas' daughter—  
a young girl the same age as Nausicaa,  
whose heart was well disposed to her. In that form,  
bright-eyed Athena spoke out and said:

“Nausicaa,  
how did your mother bear a girl so careless?  
Your splendid clothes are lying here uncared for.  
And your wedding day is not so far away,  
when you must dress up in expensive robes  
and give them to your wedding escort, too. 20  
You know it's things like these that help to make  
a noble reputation among men  
and please your honoured mother and father.  
Come, at day break let's wash out the clothing.  
Ask your noble father to provide you,  
this morning early, a wagon and some mules,  
so you can carry the bright coverlets,  
the robes and sashes. That would be better  
than going on foot, because the washing tubs  
stand some distance from the town.” 30

As soon as Dawn on her splendid throne arrived  
and woke fair-robed Nausicaa, she was curious  
about her dream. So she went through the house.  
Nausicaa went to stand close by her father  
and then spoke to him:

“Dear father, can you prepare  
a high wagon with sturdy wheels for me,

BOOK SIX

so I can carry my fine clothing out  
and wash it in the river? It's lying here  
all dirty. And it's appropriate for you  
to wear fresh garments on your person<sup>40</sup>  
when you're with our leading men in council.  
You have five dear sons living in your home—  
two are married, but three are now young men  
still unattached, and they always require  
fresh-washed clothing when they go out dancing.  
All these things I have to think about.”

Nausicaa said these words because she felt ashamed  
to remind her father of her own happy thoughts  
of getting married. But he understood all that  
and answered, saying:

“I have no objection,  
my child, to providing mules for you,  
or any other things. Go on your way.  
Slaves will get a four-wheeled wagon ready  
with a high box framed on top.”

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Once he'd said this,  
he called out to his slaves, and they did what he ordered.  
They prepared a smooth-running wagon made for mules,  
led up the animals, and then yoked them to it.  
Nausicaa brought her fine clothing from her room.  
She placed it in the polished wagon bed. Her mother  
loaded on a box full of all sorts of tasty food.  
She put in delicacies, as well, and poured some wine  
into a goat skin. The girl climbed on the wagon.  
With a clatter of hooves, the mules moved quickly off,  
carrying the clothing and the girl, not by herself,  
for her attendants went with her as well.

60

When they reached the stream of the fair-flowing river,  
the girls picked up the clothing from the wagon,  
carried it in their arms down to the murky water,  
and trampled it inside the washing trenches,  
each one trying to work more quickly than the others.  
Once they'd washed the clothes and cleaned off all the stains,  
they laid the items out in rows along the sea shore,

70

BOOK SIX

right where the waves which beat upon the coast  
had washed the pebbles clean. Once they had bathed themselves  
and rubbed their bodies well with oil, they ate a meal  
beside the river mouth, waiting for the clothes to dry  
in the sun's warm rays. When they'd enjoyed their food,  
the girl and her attendants threw their head scarves off  
to play catch with a ball, and white-armed Nausicaa  
led them in song. But when the princess threw the ball  
at one of those attendants with her, she missed the girl  
and tossed it in the deep and swirling river.  
They gave a piercing cry which woke up lord Odysseus.  
So he sat up, thinking in his heart and mind:

“Here's trouble! In this country I have reached,  
what are the people like? Are they violent  
and wild, without a sense of justice?  
Or are they kind to strangers? In their minds  
do they fear the gods? A young woman's shout  
rang out around me—nymphs who live along  
steep mountain peaks and by the river springs  
and grassy meadows. Could I somehow be  
near men with human speech? Come on then,  
I'm going to try to find out for myself.”

With these words, lord Odysseus crept out of the thicket.  
With his strong hands, he broke off from thick bushes  
a leafy branch to hold across his body and conceal  
his sexual organs. He emerged, moving just like  
a mountain lion which relies on its own strength—  
though hammered by the rain and wind, it creeps ahead,  
its two eyes burning, coming in among the herd  
of sheep or cattle, or stalking a wild deer—  
his belly tells him to move in against the flocks,  
even within a well-built farm. That how Odysseus  
was coming out to meet those fair-haired girls,  
although he was stark naked. He was in great distress,  
but, caked with brine, he was a fearful sight to them,  
and they ran off in fear and crouched down here and there  
among the jutting dunes of sand. The only one  
to stand her ground was Alcinous' daughter.

BOOK SIX

So he quickly used his cunning and spoke to her  
with soothing language:

“O divine queen,  
I come here as a suppliant to you.  
Are you a goddess or a mortal being?  
If you’re one of the gods who hold wide heaven,  
then I think you most resemble Artemis,  
daughter of great Zeus, in your loveliness,  
your stature, and your shape. If you’re human,  
one of those mortals living on the earth,  
your father and noble mother are thrice-blest, 120  
and thrice-blest your brothers, too. In their hearts  
they must glow with pleasure for you always,  
when they see a child like you moving up  
into the dance. But the happiest heart,  
more so than all the rest, belongs to him  
who with his wedding gifts will lead you home.  
But great distress has overtaken me.  
Yesterday, my twentieth day afloat,  
I escaped the wine-dark sea. Before that,  
waves and swift-driving storm winds carried me 130  
from Ogygia island. But, divine queen,  
have pity. You’re the first one I’ve approached,  
after going through so much grief. I don’t know  
any other people, none of those who hold  
the city and its land. Show me the town.  
Give me some rag to throw around myself,  
perhaps some wrapping you had for the clothes.”

White-armed Nausicaa then answered him and said:

“Stranger, you don’t seem to be a wicked man,  
or foolish. Olympian Zeus himself 140  
gives happiness to bad and worthy men,  
each one receiving just what Zeus desires.  
But now you’ve reached our land and city,  
you’ll not lack clothes or any other thing  
we owe a hard-pressed suppliant we meet.  
I’ll show the town to you, and I’ll tell you  
what our country’s called—the Phaeacians

BOOK SIX

own this city and this land. As for me,  
I am the daughter of brave Alcinous—  
Phaeacian power and strength depend on him.”

150

Nausicaa finished speaking. Then she called out  
to her fair-haired attendants:

“Stand up, you girls,  
Have you run off because you’ve seen a man?  
Surely you don’t think he is an enemy?  
So, my girls, give this stranger food and drink.  
Then bathe him in the river, in a place  
where there’s some shelter from the wind.”

Nausicaa finished. They stood up and called out  
to one another. Then they took Odysseus aside,  
to a sheltered spot, following what Nausicaa,  
daughter of great-hearted Alcinous, had ordered.  
They set out clothing for him, a cloak and tunic,  
and gave him the gold flask full of smooth olive oil.  
They told him to bathe there in the flowing river.  
When he’d washed himself all over and rubbed on oil,  
he put on clothes the unmarried girl had given him.  
Then Odysseus went to sit some distance off,  
beside the shore, glowing with charm and beauty.  
Nausicaa gazed at him in admiration. They set out  
food and drink before resourceful lord Odysseus.  
He ate and drank voraciously—many days had passed  
since he’d last tasted food. Then white-armed Nausicaa  
thought of something else. She folded up the clothes,  
put them in the handsome wagon, harnessed up  
the strong-hooved mules, and climbed up by herself.  
She called out to Odysseus, then spoke to him:

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170

“Get up now, stranger, and go to the city.  
I’ll take you to my wise father’s house,  
where, I tell you, you will get to meet  
all the finest of Phaeacians. You seem  
to me to have good sense, so act as follows—  
while we are moving through the countryside  
past men’s farms, walk fast with my attendants  
behind the mules and wagon. I’ll lead the way.

180

BOOK SIX

You'll come across a fine grove to Athena—  
it's near the road, a clump of poplar trees.  
There's a fountain, with meadows all around.  
My father has a fertile vineyard there  
and some land, too, within shouting distance  
of the town. Sit down there, and wait a while,  
until we move into the city and reach  
my father's house. When you think we've had time  
to reach my home, then go in the city  
of the Phaeacians and inquire about  
my father's house, great-hearted Alcinous.  
Once inside the house and in the courtyard,  
move through the great hall quickly till you reach  
my mother Arete seated by the fire,  
against a pillar, spinning purple yarn—  
a marvelous sight. Servants sit behind her.  
If her heart and mind are well-disposed to you,  
then there's hope you'll see your friends and reach  
your well-built house and your own native land."

190

200

Saying this, Nausicaa cracked the shining whip  
and struck the mules. They quickly left the flowing river,  
moving briskly forward at a rapid pace.  
Using her judgment with the whip, she drove on  
so Odysseus and her servants could keep up on foot.  
Just at sunset, they reached the celebrated grove,  
sacred to Athena. Lord Odysseus sat down there  
and made a quick prayer to great Zeus' daughter.

210

BOOK SEVEN  
ODYSSEUS AT THE COURT OF ALCINOUS IN PHAEACIA

So lord Odysseus, who had endured so much, prayed there,  
while two strong mules took the girl into the city.  
Then Odysseus got up and set off for the city.  
Odysseus moved towards Alcinoüs's splendid home.  
The Phaeacians, so celebrated for their ships,  
did not see him as he moved across the city  
in their midst. Athena, fair-haired fearful goddess,  
would not permit that. Her heart cared about him,  
so she cast around him an amazing mist.

Odysseus moved towards Alcinoüs' splendid house. 10  
Above the high-vaulted home of brave Alcinoüs  
there was a radiance, as if from sun or moon.  
Bronze walls extended out beyond the threshold  
in various directions to the inner rooms.  
They had a blue enamel cornice. Golden doors  
blocked the way into the well-constructed palace.  
The bronze threshold had silver doorposts set inside  
and a silver lintel. The handles were of gold.  
On both sides of the door stood gold and silver dogs,  
immortal creatures who would never age, 20  
created by Hephaestus' matchless artistry,  
to guard the palace of great-hearted Alcinoüs.  
Lord Odysseus, who had endured so much, stood there  
and gazed around. When his heart had marvelled at it all,  
he moved fast across the threshold into the house.

Long-suffering lord Odysseus, still enclosed in mist,  
the thick covering poured around him by Athena,  
went through the hall until he came to Arete  
and Alcinoüs, the king. With his arms Odysseus  
embraced the knees of Arete, and at that moment 30  
the miraculous mist dissolved away from him.  
The people in the palace were all silent,  
as they gazed upon the man, struck with wonder  
at the sight. Odysseus then made this entreaty:

“Arete, daughter of godlike Rhexenor,  
I've come to you and to your husband here,  
to your knees, in supplication to you—  
a man who's experienced so much distress—

BOOK SEVEN

and to those feasting here. May gods grant them  
happiness in life, and may they each pass on  
riches in their homes to all their children,  
and noble honours given by the people.  
Please rouse yourself to help me return home,  
to get back quickly to my native land.  
I've been suffering trouble for a long time  
so far away from friends.”

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When he heard these words,  
brave and kingly Alcinous stretched out his hand,  
reached for Odysseus, that wise and crafty man,  
raised him from the hearth, and invited him to sit.  
Then noble Alcinous spoke to his herald:

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“Pontonous, prepare wine in the mixing bowl,  
then serve it to all people in the hall,  
so we may pour libations out to Zeus,  
who loves lightning, for he accompanies  
all pious suppliants.”

Once Alcinous said this,  
Pontonous prepared the honeyed wine, and then poured  
the first drops for libation into every cup.  
When they'd made their offering and drunk their fill of wine,  
Alcinous then addressed the gathering and said:

“You Phaeacians counselors and leaders,  
pay attention to me so I can say  
what the heart here in my chest commands.  
Now that you have all finished eating,  
return back to your homes and get some rest.  
In the morning we'll summon an assembly  
with more elders, entertain this stranger  
here in our home, and also sacrifice  
choice offerings to the gods. Then after that,  
we'll think about how we can send him off,  
so that this stranger, with us escorting him  
and without further pain or effort, may reach  
his native land, no matter how far distant.  
Meanwhile he'll not suffer harm or trouble,  
not before he sets foot on his own land.

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BOOK SEVEN

After that he'll undergo all those things  
Destiny and the dreaded spinning Fates  
spun in the thread for him when he was born,  
when his mother gave him birth. However,  
if he's a deathless one come down from heaven,  
then gods are planning something different.”

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Resourceful Odysseus then answered Alcinous:

“Alcinous, you should not concern yourself  
about what you've just said—for I'm not like  
the immortal gods who hold wide heaven,  
not in my form or shape. I'm like mortal men.  
Indeed, I could recount a longer story—  
all those hardships I have had to suffer  
from the gods. But let me eat my dinner,  
though I'm in great distress. For there's nothing  
more shameless than a wretched stomach,  
which commands a man to think about its needs,  
even if he's really sad or troubles  
weigh down his heart, just the way my spirit  
is now full of sorrow, yet my belly  
is always telling me to eat and drink,  
forgetting everything I've had to bear,  
and ordering me to stuff myself with food.  
But when dawn appears, you should stir yourselves  
so you can set me in my misery  
back on my native soil, for all I've suffered.  
If I can see my goods again, my slaves,  
my large and high-roofed home, then let life end.”

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Once Odysseus finished, they all approved his words,  
and, because he'd spoken well and to the point,  
they ordered that their guest should be sent on his way.

*[Odysseus tells Alcinous and Arete the story of his voyage from Calypso's island to Phaeacia and of his treatment by Nausicaa]*

BOOK EIGHT  
ODYSSEUS IS ENTERTAINED IN PHAEACIA

The next day king Alcinous addressed them all  
and said to the Phaeacians:

“Listen to me,  
you Phaeacian counsellors and leaders.  
I’ll tell you what the heart in my chest says.  
This stranger here, a man I do not know,  
a wanderer, has travelled to my house.  
He’s asking to be sent away back home  
and has requested confirmation from us.  
So let us act as we have done before  
and assist him with his journey. No man  
arriving at my palace stays there long  
grieving because he can’t return back home.”

Alcinous spoke and led them off. The sceptred kings  
came after him, while a herald went to find  
the godlike singer. Fifty-two hand-picked young men  
went off, as Alcinous had ordered, to the shore  
beside the restless sea. Once they’d reached the boat,  
they dragged the black ship into deeper water,  
set the mast and sails in place inside the vessel,  
lashed the rowing oars onto their leather pivots,  
then hoisted the white sail. Next, they moored the ship  
well out to sea and then returned to the great home  
of their wise king. Halls, corridors, and courtyards  
were full of people gathering—a massive crowd,  
young and old. On their behalf Alcinous slaughtered  
eight white-tusked boars, two shambling oxen, and twelve sheep.  
These carcasses they skinned and dressed and then prepared  
a splendid banquet. Meanwhile the herald was returning  
with the loyal singer, a man the Muse so loved  
above all others. She’d given him both bad and good,  
for she’d destroyed his eyes, but had bestowed on him  
the gift of pleasing song. The herald, Pontonous,  
then brought up a silver-studded chair for him.

Once they’d enjoyed their heart’s fill of food and drink,  
the minstrel Demodocus, inspired by the Muse,  
sang about the glorious deeds of warriors,  
that tale, whose fame had climbed to spacious heaven,

BOOK EIGHT

about Odysseus and Achilles, son of Peleus,  
when, at a lavish feast in honour of the gods,  
they'd fought each other in ferocious argument. 40  
This was the song the celebrated minstrel sang.<sup>1</sup>

Alcinous then asked Laodamas and Halios  
to dance alone. No man could match their dancing skill.  
The two men picked up a lovely purple ball.  
Then, leaning back, one of them would throw it high,  
towards the shadowy clouds, and then the other,  
before his feet touched ground, would catch it easily.  
Once they'd shown their skill in tossing it straight up,  
they threw it back and forth, as they kept dancing  
on the life-sustaining earth, while more young men 50  
stood at the edge of the arena, beating time.  
The dancing rhythms made a powerful sound.

Then lord Odysseus spoke:

“Mighty Alcinous,  
most renowned among all men, you claimed  
your dancers were the best, and now, indeed,  
what you said is true. When I gaze at them,  
I'm lost in wonder.”

At Odysseus' words,  
powerful king Alcinous felt a great delight,  
and spoke at once to his Phaeacians, master sailors.

“Leaders and counselors of the Phaeacians, 60  
listen—this stranger seems to me a man  
with an uncommon wisdom. So come now,  
let's give him gifts of friendship, as is right.  
Twelve distinguished kings are rulers here  
and govern in this land, and I myself  
am the thirteenth king. Let each of you

<sup>1</sup>These lines refer to a famous argument between Odysseus and Achilles, the finest of the Achaean warriors, about the best tactics to use against the Trojans. That Demodocus sings about the Trojan War reinforces the claim that this image of the blind singer is a self-portrait of Homer.

BOOK EIGHT

bring a fresh cloak and tunic, newly washed,  
and a talent of pure gold. All of this  
we should put together very quickly,  
so this stranger has his gifts in hand  
and goes to dinner with a joyful heart.”

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Alcinous spoke. All those present agreed with him  
and said it should be done. Then every one of them  
sent an attendant out to bring back presents.  
As the sun went down, the splendid presents were brought in,  
carried to Alcinous' home by worthy heralds.  
The sons of noble Alcinous took the lovely gifts  
and set them down before their honoured mother.

Nausicaa, whose beauty was a gift from god,  
standing by the doorway of that well-built hall,  
looked at Odysseus and was filled with wonder.  
She spoke winged words to him:

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“Farewell, stranger.  
When you are back in your own land,  
I hope you will remember me sometimes,  
since you owe your life to me.”

Then Odysseus,  
that resourceful man, replied to her and said:

“Nausicaa, daughter of great Alcinous,  
may Hera's loud-thundering husband, Zeus,  
grant that I see the day of my return  
when I get home. There I will pray to you  
all my days, as to a god. For you, girl,  
you gave me my life.”

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Odysseus finished speaking.  
Then he sat down on a chair beside king Alcinous,  
who then spoke out at once to his Phaeacians,  
lovers of the sea:

“Listen to me now,  
you Phaeacians counsellors and leaders.  
To any man with some intelligence,  
a stranger coming as a suppliant

BOOK EIGHT

brings the same delight a brother does.  
And you, our guest, should no longer hide  
behind those cunning thoughts of yours and skirt  
the things I ask you. It's better to be frank.  
Tell me your name, what they call you at home—  
your mother and your father and the others,  
those in the town and in the countryside.  
Tell me your country and your people,  
your city, too, so ships can take you there,  
using what they know to chart their passage.  
And now come, tell me this, and speak the truth—  
Where have you travelled in your wandering? <sup>110</sup>  
What men's countries have you visited?  
Tell me of people and their well-built towns,  
whether they are cruel, unjust, and savage,  
or welcome strangers and fear god in their hearts.”

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BOOK NINE  
ISMARUS, THE LOTUS EATERS, AND THE CYCLOPS

Resourceful Odysseus then replied to Alcinous:

“Lord Alcinous, most renowned of men, I say  
there’s nothing gives one more delight  
than when joy grips entire groups of men  
who sit in proper order in a hall  
feasting and listening to a singer,  
with tables standing there beside them  
laden with bread and meat, as the steward  
draws wine out of the mixing bowl, moves round,  
and fills the cups. To my mind this seems 10  
the finest thing there is. But your heart  
wants to ask about my grievous sorrows,  
so I can weep and groan more than before.  
What shall I tell you first? Where do I stop?  
For the heavenly gods have given me  
so much distress. Well, I will make a start  
by telling you my name. Once you know that,  
if I escape the painful day of death,  
then later I can welcome you as guests,  
though I live in a palace far away. 20

I am Odysseus, son of Laertes,  
well known to all for my deceptive skills—  
my fame extends all the way to heaven.  
I live in Ithaca, a land of sunshine.  
From far away one sees a mountain there,  
thick with whispering trees, Mount Neriton,  
and many islands lying around it  
close together. It’s a rugged island  
and nurtures fine young men. But come, I’ll tell you  
of the miserable journey back which Zeus 30  
arranged for me when I returned from Troy.

I was carried by the wind from Troy  
to Ismarus, land of the Cicones.\*  
I destroyed the city there, killed the men,  
seized their wives, and captured lots of treasure,  
which we divided up. I took great pains  
to see that all men got an equal share.  
Then I gave orders we should leave on foot—

BOOK NINE

and with all speed. But the men were fools.  
They didn't listen. They drank too much wine  
and on the shoreline slaughtered many sheep, 40  
as well as shambling cows with twisted horns.  
Meanwhile the Cicones set off and gathered up  
their neighbours, tribesmen living further inland.  
There're more of them, and they are braver men.  
They reached us in the morning, thick as leaves.  
They set their ranks and fought by our swift ships.  
We threw our bronze-tipped spears at one another.  
While the morning lasted and that sacred day  
gained strength, we held our ground and beat them back, 50  
for all their greater numbers. But as the sun  
moved to the hour when oxen are unyoked,  
the Cicones broke through, overpowering  
Achaean. Of my well-armed companions,  
six from every ship were killed. The rest of us  
made our escape, avoiding Death and Fate.

We sailed away from there, hearts full of grief  
at losing loyal companions, though happy  
we'd eluded death ourselves. Cloud-gatherer Zeus  
then stirred North Wind to rage against our ships— 60  
a violent storm concealing land and sea,  
as darkness swept from heaven down on us.

Nine days fierce winds drove me away from there,  
across the fish-filled seas, and on the tenth  
we landed where the Lotus-eaters live,  
people who feed upon its flowering fruit.  
We went ashore and carried water back.  
Then my companions quickly had a meal  
by our swift ships. We had our food and drink,  
and then I sent some of my comrades out 70  
to learn about the men who ate the food  
the land grew there. I chose two of my men  
and with them sent a third as messenger.  
They left at once and met the Lotus-eaters,  
who had no thought of killing my companions,  
but gave them lotus plants to eat, whose fruit,  
sweet as honey, made any man who sampled it

BOOK NINE

lose his desire to ever journey home  
or bring back word to us—they wished to stay,  
to remain among the Lotus-eaters,  
feeding on the plant, eager to forget  
about their homeward voyage. I forced them,  
eyes full of tears, into our hollow ships,  
dragged them underneath the rowing benches,  
and tied them up. Then I issued orders  
for my other trusty comrades to embark  
and sail away with speed in our fast ships,  
in case another man might eat a lotus  
and lose all thoughts about his journey back.

80

We sailed away from there with heavy hearts  
and reached the country of the Cyclopes,  
a crude and lawless people. They don't grow  
any plants by hand or plough the earth,  
but put their trust in the immortal gods,  
and though they never sow or work the land,  
every kind of crop springs up for them—  
wheat and barley and rich grape-bearing vines,  
and Zeus provides the rain to make them grow.  
They live without a council or assembly  
or any rule of law, in hollow caves  
among the mountain tops. Each one of them  
makes laws for his own wives and children,  
and they shun all dealings with each other.<sup>1</sup>

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Now, near the country of the Cyclopes,  
outside the harbour, there's a fertile island,  
covered in trees, some distance from the shore, but not too far away. Wild

<sup>1</sup>The Cyclopes (singular Cyclops) are hairy cannibal monsters, rather than people, with only one eye in the middle of their foreheads. They originated from the primal gods, Ouranos and Gaea, and had been imprisoned in Tartarus deep in the earth. But they helped Zeus in his fight against his father, Cronos, and Zeus freed them. Odysseus, one assumes, either doesn't know about the Cyclopes before this adventure or is not aware he is about to meet one, since he assumes he's moving into a place where the laws of hospitality apply. We learn later that the Cyclops Odysseus meets has a name (Polyphemus) and is, along with his neighbours, a son of Poseidon. Most geographical interpretations place the incident with the Cyclops in Sicily.

BOOK NINE

goats live there  
in countless numbers. They have no need  
to stay away from any human trails.

At the harbour head there is a water spring—  
a bright stream flows out underneath a cave.

110

Around it poplars grow. We sailed in there.  
Some god led us in through the murky night—  
we couldn't see a thing, and all our ships  
were swallowed up in fog. Clouds hid the moon,  
so there was no light coming from the sky.

Our eyes could not catch any glimpse of land  
or of the long waves rolling in onshore,  
until our well-decked ships had reached the beach.  
We hauled up our ships, took down all the sails,  
went up along the shore, and fell asleep,  
remaining there until the light of Dawn.

120

As soon as rose-fingered early Dawn appeared,  
I called a meeting and spoke to all the men:

‘My loyal comrades, stay here where you are.  
I’ll take my ship and my own company  
and try to find out who those people are,  
whether they are rough and violent,  
with no sense of law, or kind to strangers,  
with hearts that fear the gods.’

I said these words,  
then went down to my ship and told my crew  
to loose the cables lashed onto the stern  
and come onboard. They embarked with speed,  
and, seated at the oarlocks in their rows,  
struck the gray sea with their oars. And then,  
when we'd made the short trip to the island,  
on the coast there, right beside the sea,  
we saw a high cave, overhung with laurel.  
There were many flocks, sheep as well as goats,  
penned in there at night. All around the cave  
there was a high front courtyard made of stones  
set deep into the ground—with tall pine trees  
and towering oaks. At night a giant slept there,

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BOOK NINE

one that grazed his flocks all by himself,  
somewhere far off. He avoided others  
and lived alone, away from all the rest,  
a law unto himself, a monster, made  
to be a thing of wonder, not like man  
who lives by eating bread, no, more like  
a lofty wooded mountain crag, standing there  
to view in isolation from the rest.

150

I told the rest of my trustworthy crew  
to stay there by the ship and guard it,  
while I selected twelve of my best men  
and went off to explore. I took with me  
a goatskin full of dark sweet wine. Maron,  
Euanthes' son, one of Apollo's priests,  
the god who kept guard over Ismarus,  
gave it me because, to show respect,  
we had protected him, his wife, and child.  
Each time they drank that honey-sweet red wine,  
he'd fill one cup with it and pour that out  
in twenty cups of water, and the smell  
arising from the mixing bowl was sweet,  
astonishingly so—to tell the truth,  
no one's heart could then refuse to drink it.

160

We soon reached his cave but didn't find him.  
He was pasturing his rich flocks in the fields.  
We went inside the cave and looked around.  
It was astonishing—crates full of cheese,  
pens crammed with livestock—lambs and kids  
sorted into separate groups, with yearlings,  
older lambs, and newborns each in different pens.  
All the sturdy buckets, pails, and milking bowls  
were awash with whey. At first, my comrades  
urged me to grab some cheeses and return,  
then drive the lambs and kids out of their pens  
back to our swift ship and cross the water.  
But I did not agree, though if I had,  
things would've been much better. I was keen  
to see the man in person and find out  
if he would show me hospitality.

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BOOK NINE

We lit a fire and offered sacrifice.  
Then we helped ourselves to cheese and ate it.  
We stayed inside the cave and waited there,  
until he led his flocks back home. He came,  
bearing an enormous pile of dried-out wood  
to cook his dinner. He hurled his load  
inside the cave with a huge crash. In our fear,  
we moved back to the far end of the cave,  
into the deepest corner. He then drove  
his fat flock right inside the spacious cavern,  
just the ones he milked. Rams and billy goats  
he left outside, in the open courtyard.  
Then he raised up high a massive boulder  
and fixed it in position as a door.  
It was huge—twenty-two four-wheeled wagons,  
good ones, too, could not have shifted it  
along the ground—that’s how immense it was,  
the rock he planted right in his doorway.  
He sat down with his bleating goats and ewes  
and milked them all, each in turn, setting  
beside each one its young. Next, he curdled  
half the white milk and set aside the whey  
in wicker baskets, then put the other half  
in bowls for him to drink up with his dinner.  
Once he’d finished working at these tasks,  
he lit a fire. Then he spied us and said:

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‘Strangers,  
who are you? What sea route brought you here?  
Are you trading men, or wandering the sea  
at random, like pirates sailing anywhere,  
risking their lives to injure other men.’

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As he spoke, our hearts collapsed, terrified  
by his deep voice and monstrous size. But still,  
I answered him by saying:

‘We are Achaeans  
coming back from Troy and blown off course  
by various winds across vast tracts of sea.  
So, good sir, respect the gods. We’re here

BOOK NINE

as suppliants to you, and Zeus protects  
all suppliants and strangers—as god of guests,  
he cares for all respected visitors.’ 220

I finished speaking. He answered me at once—  
his heart was pitiless:

‘What fools you are, you strangers,  
or else you come from somewhere far away—  
telling me to fear the gods and shun their rage.  
The Cyclopes care nothing about Zeus,  
who bears the aegis, or the blessed gods.  
We are much more powerful than them.  
I wouldn’t spare you or your comrades  
to escape the wrath of Zeus, not unless 230  
my own heart prompted me to do it.  
But now, tell me this—when you landed here,  
where did you moor your ship, a spot close by  
or further off? I’d like to know that.’

He said this to throw me off, but his deceit  
could never fool me. I was too clever.  
So I gave him a misleading answer:

‘Earthshaker Poseidon broke my ship apart—  
driving it against the border of your island,  
on the rocks there. He brought us close to land, 240  
hard by the headland, then winds pushed us  
inshore from the sea. But we escaped—  
me and these men here. We weren’t destroyed.’

That’s what I said. But his ruthless heart  
gave me no reply. Instead, he jumped up,  
seized two of my companions in his fist,  
and smashed them on the ground like puppy dogs.  
Their brains oozed out and soaked the ground below.  
He tore their limbs apart to make a meal,  
and chewed them up just like a mountain lion— 250  
innards, flesh, and marrow—leaving nothing.  
We raised our hands to Zeus and cried aloud,  
to witness the horrific things he did,  
our hearts unable to do anything.

BOOK NINE

Once Cyclops had stuffed his massive stomach  
with human flesh and washed it down with milk,  
he lay down in the cave, stretched out there  
among his flocks. Then, in my courageous heart  
I formed a plan to move up close beside him,  
draw the sharp sword I carried on my thigh, 260  
and run my hand along his chest, to find  
exactly where his midriff held his liver,  
then stick him there. But I had second thoughts.  
We, too, would have been utterly destroyed,  
there in the cave—we didn't have the strength  
with our own hands to roll from the high door  
the massive rock he'd set there. So we groaned,  
and stayed there waiting for bright Dawn.

As soon as rose-fingered early Dawn appeared,  
he lit a fire and milked his flock, one by one, 270  
with a new-born placed beside each mother.  
When this work was over, he once again  
snatched two of my men and gorged himself.  
After his meal, he easily rolled back  
the huge rock door, drove his rich flock outside,  
and set the stone in place, as one might put  
a cap back on a quiver. Then Cyclops,  
whistling loudly, drove his fat flocks away  
towards the mountain. He left me there,  
plotting a nasty scheme deep in my heart, 280  
some way of gaining my revenge against him,  
if Athena would grant me that glory.

My heart came up with what appeared to me  
the best thing I could do. An enormous club  
belonging to Cyclops was lying there  
beside a stall, a section of green olive wood  
he'd cut to carry with him once it dried.  
To human eyes it seemed just like the mast  
on a black merchant ship with twenty oars,  
a broad-beamed vessel which can move across 290  
the mighty ocean—that's how long and wide  
that huge club looked. Moving over to it,  
I chopped off a piece, six feet in length,

BOOK NINE

gave it to my companions, telling them  
to smooth the wood. They straightened it, while I,  
standing at one end, chipped and tapered it  
to a sharp point. Then I picked up the stake  
and set it in the blazing fire to harden.  
That done, I placed it carefully to one side,  
concealing it beneath some of the dung  
which lay throughout the cave in massive piles. 300  
Then I told my comrades to draw lots  
to see which men would risk their lives with me—  
when sweet sleep came upon the Cyclops,  
we'd lift that stake and twist it in his eye.  
The crew drew lots and picked the very men  
I would have chosen for myself, four of them,  
with me included as fifth man in the group.

In the evening he came back, leading on  
his fine-skinned animals and bringing them  
inside the spacious cave, every sheep and goat 310  
in his rich flock—not leaving even one  
out in the open courtyard. Perhaps he had  
a sense of something wrong, or else a god  
had given him an order. He picked up  
and put his huge rock door in place, then sat  
to milk each ewe and bleating goat,  
one by one, setting beside each mother  
one of her young. When this task was over,  
he quickly seized two men and wolfed them down. 320  
Then I moved up and stood at Cyclops' side,  
holding in my hands a bowl of ivy wood  
full of my dark wine. I said:

‘Cyclops,  
take this wine and drink it, now you've had  
your meal of human flesh, so you may know  
the kind of wine we had on board our ship,  
a gift of drink I was carrying for you,  
in hope you'd pity me and send me off  
on my journey home. But your savagery  
is something I can't bear. You cruel man,  
how will any of the countless other men 330

BOOK NINE

ever visit you in future? How you act  
is so against all human law.'

I spoke.

He grabbed the cup and gulped down the sweet wine.  
Once he'd swallowed, he felt such great delight,  
he asked me for some more, a second taste.

'Be kind and give me some of that again.  
And now, without delay tell me your name,  
so, as my guest, I can offer you a gift,  
something you'll like. Among the Cyclopes,  
grain-bearing earth grows clusters of rich grapes,  
which Zeus' rain increases, but this drink—  
it's a stream of nectar and ambrosia.'

340

He spoke. So I handed him more fiery wine.  
Three times I poured some out and gave it to him,  
and, like a fool, he swilled it down. So then,  
once the wine had addled Cyclops' wits,  
I spoke these reassuring words to him:

'Cyclops, you asked about my famous name.  
I'll tell you. Then you can offer me a gift,  
as your guest. My name is Nobody.  
My father and mother, all my other friends—  
they call me Nobody.'

350

That's what I said.

His pitiless heart replied:

'Well, Nobody,  
I'll eat all your companions before you  
and have you at the end—my gift to you,  
since you're my guest.'

As he said this,  
he collapsed and toppled over on his back,  
lying with his thick neck twisted to one side.  
All-conquering sleep then overpowered him.  
In his drunken state he kept on vomiting,  
his gullet drooling wine and human flesh.  
So then I pushed the stake deep in the ashes,

360



BOOK NINE

From the cave mighty Polyphemus roared:

‘Nobody is killing me, my friends,  
by treachery, not using any force.’

They answered him—their words had wings:

‘Well, then,  
if nobody is hurting you and you’re alone,  
it must be sickness given by great Zeus,  
one you can’t escape. So say your prayers  
to our father, lord Poseidon.’

With these words,  
they went away, and my heart was laughing—  
my cunning name had pulled off such a trick. 410  
But Cyclops groaned, writhing in agony.  
Groping with his hands he picked up the stone,  
removed it from the door, and sat down there,  
in the opening. He stretched out his arms,  
attempting to catch anyone who tried  
to get out with the sheep. In his heart,  
he took me for a fool. But I was thinking  
the best thing I could do would be to find  
if somehow my crewmen and myself 420  
could escape being killed. I wove many schemes,  
all sorts of tricks, the way a man will do  
when his own life’s at stake—and we were faced  
with a murderous peril right beside us.  
To my heart the best plan was as follows:  
In Cyclops’ flocks the rams were really fat—  
fine, large creatures, with thick fleecy coats  
of deep black wool. I picked three at a time  
and, keeping quiet, tied them up together,  
with twisted willow shoots, part of the mat 430  
on which the lawless monster Polyphemus  
used to sleep. The middle ram carried a man.  
The two on either side were for protection.  
So for every man there were three sheep.  
I, too, had my own ram, the finest one  
in the whole flock by far. I grabbed its back  
then swung myself under its fleecy gut,



BOOK NINE

a short distance from the cave and courtyard,  
first I got out from underneath its gut  
and then untied by comrades. We rushed away,  
driving off those rich, fat, long-legged sheep,  
often turning round to look behind us,  
until we reached our ship—a welcome sight 480  
to fellow crewmen—we'd escaped being killed,  
although they groaned and wept for those who'd died.  
But I would not allow them to lament—  
with a scowl I told everyone to stop.  
I ordered them to quickly fling on board  
the many fine-fleeced sheep and then set sail  
across the salty sea. They climbed aboard  
at once, took their places on the rowing bench,  
and, sitting in good order in their rows,  
struck the gray sea with their oars. But then, 490  
when I was as far from land as a man's voice  
can carry when he yells. I cried out  
and mocked the Cyclops:

'Cyclops,  
it seems he was no weakling, after all,  
the man whose comrades you so wished to eat,  
using brute force in that hollow cave of yours.  
Your evil acts were bound to catch you out,  
you wretch—you didn't even hesitate  
to gorge yourself on guests in your own home.  
Now Zeus and other gods have paid you back.' 500

That's what I said. It made his heart more angry.  
He snapped off a huge chunk of mountain rock  
and hurled it. The stone landed up ahead of us,  
just by our ship's dark prow. As the stone sank,  
the sea surged under it, waves pushed us back  
towards the land, and, like a tidal flood,  
drove us on shore. I grabbed a long boat hook  
and pushed us off, encouraging the crew,  
and, with a nod of my head, ordering them  
to ply their oars and save us from disaster. 510  
They put their backs into it then and rowed.  
But when we'd got some distance out to sea,

BOOK NINE

about twice as far, I started shouting,  
calling the Cyclops, although around me  
my comrades cautioned me from every side,  
trying to calm me down:

‘That’s reckless.

Why are you trying to irritate that savage?  
He just threw a boulder in the sea  
and pushed us back on shore. We really thought  
he’d killed us there. If he’d heard us speak  
or uttering a sound, he’d have hurled down  
another jagged rock, and crushed our skulls,  
the timbers on this ship, as well. He’s strong,  
powerful enough to throw this far.’

520

That’s what they said.

But my warrior spirit didn’t listen.  
So, anger in my heart, I yelled again:

‘Cyclops, if any mortal human being  
asks about the injury that blinded you,  
tell them Odysseus destroyed your eye,  
a sacker of cities, Laertes’ son,  
a man from Ithaca.’

530

After I’d said this,

he stretched out his hands to starry heaven  
and offered this prayer to lord Poseidon:

‘Hear me, Poseidon, Enfolder of the Earth,  
dark-haired god, if I truly am your son  
and if you claim to be my father,  
grant that Odysseus, sacker of cities,  
a man from Ithaca, Laertes’ son,  
never gets back home. If it’s his destiny  
to see his friends and reach his native land  
and well-built house, may he get back late  
and in distress, after all his comrades  
have been killed, and in someone else’s ship.  
And may he find troubles in his house.’

540

That’s what he prayed. The dark-haired god heard him.  
Then Cyclops once again picked up a rock,

BOOK NINE

a much larger stone, swung it round, and threw it,  
using all his unimaginable force.

It landed right behind the dark-prowed ship  
and almost hit the steering oar. Its fall  
convulsed the sea, and waves then pushed us on,  
carrying our ship up to the further shore.

550

We reached the island where our well-decked ships  
were grouped together. Our comrades sat around them,  
in great sorrow, always watching for us.

We rowed in, drove our ship up on the sand,  
then climbed out through the surf. From the ship's hold  
we unloaded Cyclops' flock and shared it out.

I took great care to see that all men there  
received an equal part. But when the flock  
was being divided up, my well-armed comrades  
awarded me the ram, my special gift,  
one just for me. I sacrificed that ram,  
there on the shore, to Zeus, Cronos' son,  
lord of the dark cloud, ruler of all,  
offering him burnt pieces of the thigh.  
But he did not care for my sacrifice.  
Instead he started planning to destroy  
all my well-decked ships and loyal comrades.

560

As soon as rose-fingered early Dawn appeared,  
I roused my shipmates and ordered them aboard  
to untie cables fastened to the sterns.

570

They got in at once, moved to the rowing bench,  
and sitting in good order in their rows,  
they struck the gray sea with their oar blades.  
So we sailed away from there, sad at heart,  
happy to have avoided being destroyed,  
although some dear companions had been killed."

BOOK TEN  
AEOLUS, THE LAESTRYGONIANS, AND CIRCE

“Next we reached Aeolia, a floating island,  
where Aeolus lived, son of Hippotas,  
whom immortal gods hold dear. Around it,  
runs an impenetrable wall of bronze,  
and cliffs rise up in a sheer face of rock.  
His twelve children live there in the palace,  
six daughters as well as six full-grown sons.  
He gave the daughters to the sons in marriage,  
and they are always at a banquet feasting,  
beside their dear father and good mother,  
with an infinite supply of tasty food. 10

We reached the splendid palace in the city,  
and for one whole month he entertained me,  
always asking questions about everything—  
Troy, Argive ships, how Achaeans made it home—  
and I told him all from start to finish.  
When, for my part, I asked to take my leave  
and told him he should send me on my way,  
he denied me nothing and helped me go.  
He gave me a bag made out of ox-hide, 20  
flayed from a creature nine years old,  
and tied up in it all the winds that blow  
from every quarter, for Cronos’ son  
has made Aeolus keeper of the winds,  
and he could calm or rouse them, as he wished.  
With a shining silver cord he lashed that bag  
inside my hollow ship, so as to stop  
even the smallest breath from getting out.  
He also got a West Wind breeze to blow  
to carry ships and men on their way home. 30

For nine whole days and nights we held our course,  
and on the tenth we glimpsed our native land.  
We came in so close we could see the men  
who tend the beacon fires. But then sweet Sleep  
came over me—I was too worn out.  
All that time my hands had gripped the sail rope—  
I’d not let go of it or passed it on  
to any shipmate, so that we’d get home

BOOK TEN

more quickly. But as I slept, my comrades  
started talking to each other, claiming 40  
I was taking gold and silver back with me.  
Glancing at the man who sat beside him,  
one of them would say something like this:

‘It’s not fair. Everyone adores this man  
and honours him, no matter where he goes,  
to any city, any land. From Troy  
he’s taking a huge stash of glorious loot—  
but those of us who’ve been on the same trip  
are coming home with empty hands. And now,  
Aeolus, because he’s a friend of his, 50  
has freely given him these presents.  
Come on, let’s see how much gold and silver  
he has in this bag.’

As they talked like this,  
my companions’ greedy thoughts prevailed.  
They untied the bag. All the winds rushed out—  
storms winds seized them, swept them out to sea,  
in tears, away from their own native land.  
At that point I woke up. Deep in my heart  
I was of two minds—I could jump overboard  
and drown at sea or just keep going in silence, 60  
remain among the living. I stayed there  
and suffered on. Covering up my head,  
I lay down on the deck, while our ships,  
loaded with my whimpering companions,  
were driven by those wicked blasts of wind  
all the way back to Aeolus’ island.

I set off for Aeolus’ splendid palace.  
I found him feasting with his wife and children.  
So we went into the house and sat down  
on the threshold, right beside the door posts. 70  
In their hearts they were amazed. They asked me

‘Odysseus, how is it you’ve come back here?  
We took great care to send you on your way  
so you’d get home, back to your native land.’

BOOK TEN

That's what they asked. With a heavy heart,  
I answered them:

‘My foolish comrades,  
aided by malicious Sleep, have injured me.  
But, my friends, you can repair all this—  
that's in your power.’

I said these words  
to reassure them. But they stayed silent. 80  
Then their father gave me this reply:

‘Of all living men, you are the worst—  
so you must leave this island with all speed.  
It would violate all sense of what is right  
if I assisted or escorted on his way  
a man the blessed gods must hate. So leave.  
You're here because deathless gods despise you.’

Once he'd said this, he sent me from his house,  
for all my heavy groans. Then, sick at heart,  
we sailed on further, my crewmen's spirits 90  
worn down by the weary work of rowing.  
Because we'd been such fools, there was no breeze  
to help us on our way. We went on like this  
for six whole days and nights. On the seventh  
we came to Telepylus, great citadel  
of Lamus, king of Laestrygonians,  
into a lovely harbour, with a sheer cliff  
around it on both sides. Jutting headlands  
facing one another extended out  
beyond the harbour mouth, a narrow entrance.<sup>1</sup> 100  
All my shipmates brought their curved ships up  
and moored them inside the hollow harbor  
in a tightly clustered group—in that spot  
there were never any waves, large or small.  
Everything was calm and bright around them.  
But I moored my black ship all by itself

<sup>1</sup>The land of the Laestrygonians seems to be north of Sicily, possibly Corsica.

## BOOK TEN

outside the harbour, right against the land,  
tying it to the rock. I clambered up the cliff  
and stood there, on a rugged outcrop,  
looking round. I could see no evidence 120  
of human work or ploughing, only smoke  
arising from the land. I sent some comrades out  
to learn what the inhabitants were like.  
They left the ships and came to a smooth road,  
which wagons used to haul wood to the town  
from high mountain slopes. Outside the city  
they met a young girl collecting water,  
the noble daughter of Antiphates,  
a Laestrygonian. They asked the girl  
who ruled the people here and who they were. 130  
She quickly pointed out her father's lofty home.  
They reached the splendid house and found his wife,  
a gigantic woman, like a mountain peak.  
They were appalled. She called her husband,  
strong Antiphates, out of a meeting,  
and he arranged a dreadful death for them—  
he seized one of my shipmates and prepared  
to make a meal of him. The other two  
jumped up, ran off, and came back to the ships.  
Antiphates then raised a hue and cry 140  
throughout the city. Once they heard his call,  
the powerful Laestrygonians poured out,  
thronging in countless numbers from all sides—  
not like men at all, but Giants. From the cliffs  
they hurled rocks down on us, the largest stones  
a man can lift. The clamour rising from the ships  
was dreadful—men were being destroyed,  
ships were smashing into one another,  
with those monsters spearing men like fish,  
and taking them to eat a gruesome meal. 150  
While they were slaughtering the sailors there,  
trapped in the deep harbour, I grabbed my sword,  
pulled it from my thigh, and cut the cables  
on my dark-prowed ship, yelling to my crew,  
ordering them to put their oars to work,  
so we could get away from this disaster.

BOOK TEN

They all churned the water with their oar-blades,  
terrified of being killed. We were relieved,  
as my ship left the beetling cliffs behind,  
moving out to sea. But all the other ships,  
moored together in the harbour, were destroyed. 160

We sailed on from there with heavy hearts  
until we reached the island of Aeaëa,  
where fair-haired Circe lived, fearful goddess.  
Here, in silence, we brought our ship to land,  
inside a harbour with fine anchorage.  
Some god was guiding us. Then we disembarked  
and laid up in that spot two days and nights,  
our hearts consumed with weariness and pain.

As soon as rose-fingered early Dawn appeared, 170  
I called a meeting and addressed them all:

‘Shipmates, let’s quickly put our heads together  
to see if we have any options left.  
I don’t think we do. I climbed a rocky crag,  
and from that vantage point spied out the land.  
It’s an island with deep water round it,  
low-lying and flat. I saw with my own eyes  
smoke rising in the middle of the island,  
through dense brush and trees.’

That’s what I said.

But their spirits fell, as they remembered 180  
what Laestrygonian Antiphates had done  
and the violence of great Polyphemus,  
that man-eating Cyclops. They wept aloud,  
shedding frequent tears. But their laments  
were not much help to us. So I split up  
my well-armed comrades in two separate groups,  
each with its own leader. I commanded one,  
and godlike Eurylochus led the other.  
We shook our tokens in a bronze helmet.  
When brave Eurylochus’ lot fell out, 190  
he set off with twenty-two companions,  
all in tears, leaving us behind to grieve.  
In a forest clearing they found Circe’s house—

BOOK TEN

built of polished stone, with views in all directions.  
There were mountain wolves and lions round it,  
all bewitched by Circe's wicked potions.  
But these beasts made no attack against my men.  
No. They stood on their hind legs and fawned,  
wagging their long tails. Just as dogs will beg  
around their master when he comes from dinner—  
since he keeps bringing scraps to please their hearts—  
that's how the wolves and sharp-clawed lions there  
kept fawning round those men, who were afraid  
just looking at those fearful animals.  
They stood in fair-haired Circe's gateway  
and heard her sweet voice singing in the house,  
as she went back and forth before her loom,  
weaving a huge, immortal tapestry,  
the sort of work which goddesses create,  
finely woven, luminous, and beautiful.  
They all started shouting, calling her.  
She came out at once, opened the bright doors,  
and asked them in. In their foolishness,  
they all accompanied her. Eurylochus  
was the only one who stayed outside—  
he thought it could be something of a trick.  
She led the others in and sat them down  
on stools and chairs, then made them a drink  
of cheese and barley meal and yellow honey  
stirred into Pramnian wine. But with the food  
she mixed a vicious drug, so they would lose  
all memories of home. When they'd drunk down  
the drink she gave them, she took her wand,  
struck each man, then penned them in her pigsties.  
They had bristles, heads, and voices just like pigs—  
their bodies looked like swine—but their minds  
were as before, unchanged. In their pens they wept.  
In front of them Circe threw down feed,  
acorns, beech nuts, cornel fruit, the stuff  
pigs eat when they are wallowing in mud.

Eurylochus came back immediately  
to our swift black ship, bringing a report

BOOK TEN

of his comrades' bitter fate, eyes full of tears.  
I slung my large bronze silver-studded sword  
across my shoulder, grabbed my bow, and left.

But while I was moving through the sacred groves  
on my way to Circe's home, a goddess  
skilled in many magic potions, I met  
Hermes of the Golden Wand. I was going  
toward the house. He looked like a young man  
when the first growth of hair is on his lip,  
the age when youthful charm is at its height.  
He gripped my hand, spoke to me, and said:

240

'Your comrades, over there in Circe's house,  
are penned up like swine in narrow stalls.  
Are you intending now to set them free?  
I don't think you'll make it back yourself—  
you'll stay there with the rest of them. But come,  
I'll keep you free from harm and save you.  
Here, take a remedial potion with you,<sup>250</sup>  
go in Circe's house. It's a protection  
and will clear your head of any dangers  
this day brings. She won't have power  
to cast a spell on you. This fine potion,  
which I'll provide you, won't allow it.'

After saying this, the Killer of Argus  
pulled a herb out of the ground, gave it to me,  
and explained its features. Its roots were black,  
the flower milk-white. Moly the gods call it.  
Then Hermes left, through the wooded island,  
bound for high Olympus. I continued on  
to Circe's home. As I kept going, my heart  
was turning over many gloomy thoughts.  
Once I'd made it over to the gateway  
of fair-haired Circe's house, I just stood there  
and called out. The goddess heard my voice.  
She came out at once, opened her bright doors,  
and asked me in. So I went in with her,  
heart full of misgivings. She led me in  
and sat me on a silver-studded chair,

260

270

BOOK TEN

a lovely object, beautifully made,  
with a stool underneath to rest my feet.  
She mixed her potion in a golden cup  
for me to drink. In it she placed the drug,  
her heart still bent on mischief. She gave it me,  
and, when I'd drunk it, without being bewitched,  
she struck me with her wand and said these words:

‘Off now to your sty, and lie in there  
with the rest of your companions.’

She spoke. But I pulled out the sharp sword on my thigh 280  
and charged at Circe, as if I meant to kill her.  
She gave a piercing scream, ducked, ran up,  
and clasped my knees. Through her tears she spoke—  
her words had wings:

‘What sort of man are you?  
Where are you from? Where is your city?  
Your parents? I'm amazed you drank this drug  
and were not bewitched. No other man  
who's swallowed it has been able to resist,  
once it's passed the barrier of his teeth.  
In that chest of yours your mind holds out 290  
against my spell. You must be Odysseus,  
that resourceful man. The Killer of Argus,  
Hermes of the Golden Wand, always told me  
Odysseus in his swift black ship would come  
on his way back from Troy. Come, put that sword  
back in its sheath, and let the two of us  
go up into my bed. When we've made love,  
then we can trust each other.’

Once she said this,  
I answered her and said:

‘O Circe, 300  
how can you ask me to be kind to you?  
In your own home you've changed my crew to pigs  
and keep me here. You're plotting mischief now,  
inviting me to go up to your room,  
into your bed, so when I have no clothes,

BOOK TEN

you can do me harm, destroy my manhood.  
But I won't agree to climb into your bed,  
unless, goddess, you'll agree to swear  
a solemn oath that you'll make no more plans  
to injure me with some new mischief.'

When I'd said this, she made the oath at once,  
as I had asked, that she'd not harm me.  
Once she'd sworn and finished with the oath,  
I went up with Circe to her splendid bed. 310

Meanwhile four women serving in her home  
were busy in the hall, children of springs,  
groves, and sacred rivers flowing to the sea.  
One of them threw lovely purple coverlets  
across the chairs and spread linen underneath.  
Another pulled silver tables over to each chair  
and then placed silver baskets on them. 320

The third one mixed deliciously sweet wine  
inside a silver bowl, then served it out  
in cups of gold. The fourth brought water in,  
lit a large fire under a huge cauldron,  
and warmed the water up until it boiled  
inside the shining bronze. She sat me in a tub,  
then, diluting water from that cauldron  
so it was right for me, gave me a bath,  
pouring water on my head and shoulders,  
until the weariness that sapped my spirit  
had left my limbs. 330

After bathing me,  
she rubbed me with rich oil, then dressed me  
in a fine cloak and tunic and led me  
to a handsome chair embossed with silver,  
finely crafted, with a footstool underneath.  
A servant brought in a lovely golden jug,  
poured water out into a silver basin,  
so I could wash, and set a polished table  
at my side. Then the worthy steward  
brought in bread and set it there before me, 340  
placing with it large quantities of food,  
given freely from her stores. She bid me eat.  
But in my heart I had no appetite.

BOOK TEN

So I sat there, thinking of other things,  
my spirit sensing something ominous.  
When Circe noticed me just sitting there,  
not reaching for the food, weighed down with grief,  
she came up close and spoke winged words to me:

‘Odysseus, why are you sitting here like this,  
like someone who can’t speak, eating out your heart, 350  
never touching food or drink? Do you think  
this is another trick? You don’t need to fear—  
I’ve already made a solemn promise  
I won’t injure you.’

When she said this,

I answered her and said:

‘O Circe,  
what man with any self-respect would start  
to eat and drink before he had released  
his shipmates and could see them face to face?  
If you are being sincere in asking me  
to eat and drink, then set my comrades free, 360  
so my own eyes can see my trusty crew.’

When I’d said this, Circe went through the hall,  
her wand clutched in her hand, and opened up  
the pig-sty doors. She drove the herd out.  
They looked like full-grown pigs, nine years old,  
standing in front of her. She went through them,  
smearing on each one another potion.

Those bristles brought on by that nasty drug  
which they’d received from Circe earlier  
fell from their limbs, and they were men again, 370  
more youthful and much taller than before,  
more handsome to the eye. Now they knew me.  
Each man grabbed my hand, and all of them  
were overcome with passionate weeping,  
so the house around them echoed strangely.  
Circe herself was moved to pity then—  
standing close to me, the lovely goddess said:

BOOK TEN

‘Son of Laertes, resourceful Odysseus,  
born from Zeus, go now to the sea shore,  
back to your swift ship, drag it up on land, 380  
and stash your goods and all equipment  
in the caves. Then come back here in person,  
and bring your loyal companions with you.’

Her words persuaded my proud heart. I left,  
going back to our swift ship beside the sea.  
I found my trusty comrades at the ship  
lamenting miserably, shedding many tears.  
Just as on a farm calves frisk around the herd  
when cows, having had their fill of grazing,  
return back to the yard—they skip ahead, 390  
and pens no longer hold them, as they run,  
mooing in a crowd around their mothers,  
that’s how my shipmates, once they saw me,  
thronged around, weeping—in their hearts it felt  
as if they they’d got back to their native land,  
the rugged town of Ithaca itself.

Meanwhile, Circe had been acting kindly  
to the rest of my companions in her home.  
She’d given them baths, rubbed them with rich oil,  
and dressed them in warm cloaks and tunics. 400  
We found them all quite cheerful, eating  
in the hall. When my men saw each other  
and recognized their shipmates face to face,  
their crying and moaning echoed through the house.

The lovely goddess came to me and said:

‘Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes’ son  
come now, eat my food, and drink my wine,  
until you’ve got back that spirit in your chest  
you had when you first left your native land  
of rugged Ithaca. You’re exhausted now— 410  
you have no spirit—you’re always brooding  
on your painful wanderings. There’s no joy  
inside your hearts—you’ve been through so much.’

BOOK TEN

Our proud hearts were persuaded by her words.  
We stayed there, day by day, for one whole year,  
feasting on sweet wine and large supplies of meat.  
But as the months and seasons came and went,  
long spring days returned. A year had passed.  
My trusty comrades summoned me and said:

‘You god-driven man, now the time has come 420  
to think about your native land once more,  
if you are fated to be saved and reach  
your high-roofed home and your own country.’

My proud heart was persuaded by their words.  
So all day long until the sun went down,  
we sat there, feasting on huge amounts of meat  
and on sweet wine. Once the sun had set  
and darkness came, they lay down to sleep  
in the shadowy hall. I went to Circe,  
in her splendid bed and clasped her knees. 430  
The goddess listened to me as I begged,  
speaking these winged words to her:

‘Circe, grant me the promise which you made  
to send me home. My spirit’s keen to leave,  
as are the hearts in my companions, too,  
who, as they grieve around me, drain my heart,  
whenever you are not among us.’

I spoke. The lovely goddess answered me at once.

‘Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes’ son 440  
and Zeus’ child, if it’s against your will,  
you should not now remain here in my house.  
But first you must complete another journey—  
to the home of Hades and dread Persephone.  
Consult the shade of that Theban prophet,  
blind Teiresias. His mind is unimpaired.  
Even though he’s dead, Persephone  
has granted him the power to understand—  
the others flit about, mere shadows.’

As Circe finished, my spirit was breaking.  
I sat weeping on her bed, for my heart 450

BOOK TEN

no longer wished to live or glimpse the daylight.  
But when I'd had enough of shedding tears  
and rolling in distress, I answered her:

'Circe, who'll be the guide on such a journey?  
No one ever sailed a black ship down to Hades.'

The lovely goddess gave me a quick answer:

'Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes' son  
and Zeus' child, don't concern yourself  
about a pilot for your ship. Raise the mast,  
spread your white sail, and just take your seat. 460  
Then the breath of North Wind Boreas  
will take you on your way. But once your ship  
crosses flowing Oceanus, drag it ashore  
at Persephone's groves, on the level beach  
where tall poplars grow, willows shed their fruit,  
right beside deep swirling Oceanus.  
Then you must go to Hades' murky home.  
There Periphlegethon and Cocytus,  
a stream which branches off the river Styx,  
flow into Acheron.<sup>1</sup> There's a boulder 470  
where these two foaming rivers meet. Go there,  
heroic man, and follow my instructions—  
move close and dig a hole there two feet square.  
Pour libations to the dead around it,  
first with milk and honey, next sweet wine,  
and then a third with water. And shake out  
white barley meal. Then pray there in earnest  
to many powerless heads of those who've died,  
with a vow that, when you reach Ithaca,  
At home, you'll sacrifice a barren heifer, 480  
the best you have, and will cram the altar  
with fine gifts, and that you'll make an offering  
to Teiresias, a black ram just for him,

<sup>1</sup>Oceanus or Ocean is a river which in Homeric geography surrounds the lands and the sea. It is, as it were, the outer rim of the world (which is flat). The Periphlegeton, Cocytus, Styx, and Acheron are the rivers of the underworld, Hades.

## BOOK TEN

the finest creature in your flocks. And then,  
when you've offered prayers of supplication  
to celebrated nations of the dead,  
you must sacrifice a ram and a black ewe,  
twisting their heads down toward Erebus,  
while you turn to face the flowing rivers,  
looking backwards. At that point many spirits  
will emerge—they're the shadows of the dead. 490  
Then call your crew. Tell them to flay and burn  
the sheep lying there, killed by pitiless bronze.  
Pray to the gods, to powerful Hades  
and dread Persephone. Then from your thigh,  
you must yourself draw that sharp sword out,  
and, sitting there, prevent the powerless heads  
of those who've died from coming near the blood,  
until you've listened to Teiresias.<sup>1</sup>

Circe finished. Dawn soon came on her golden throne. 500  
The nymph then dressed me in a cloak and tunic  
and clothed her body in a long white robe,  
a lovely, finely woven garment, and tied  
a splendid golden belt around her waist.  
On her head she placed a veil. Then I went  
through her house, rousing my companions,  
going up to each man and reassuring him:

'No more sleeping now, no sweet slumbering.  
Let's go. Queen Circe's told me what to do.'

That's what I said. And their proud hearts agreed." 510

<sup>1</sup>Hades is the name of the underworld of the dead and also of the god of the under-world. Persephone is his divine queen. Teiresias is the most famous human prophet (now in Hades).

BOOK ELEVEN  
ODYSSEUS MEETS THE SHADES OF THE DEAD

“When we reached our boat down on the beach,  
we dragged it out into the glittering sea,  
set up the mast and sail in our black ship,  
led on the sheep, and then embarked ourselves,  
still full of sorrow, shedding many tears.  
All day long, the sail stayed full, and we sped on  
across the sea, until the sun went down  
and all sea routes grew dark. Our ship then reached  
the boundaries of deep-flowing Oceanus,  
a region always wrapped in mist and cloud. 10  
We sailed in there, dragged our ship on land,  
and walked along the stream of Oceanus,  
until we reached the place Circe described.

Perimedes and Eurylochus held the sheep,  
our sacrificial victims, while I unsheathed  
the sharp sword on my thigh and dug a hole,  
two feet each way. I poured out libations  
to all the dead—first with milk and honey,  
then sweet wine, and then a third with water  
Around the pit I sprinkled barley meal. 20  
Then to the powerless heads of the departed  
I offered many prayers, with promises  
I’d sacrifice, once I returned to Ithaca,  
a barren heifer in my home. With prayers and vows  
I called upon the families of the dead.  
Next I held the sheep above the hole  
and slit their throats. Dark blood flowed down.

Then out of Erebus came swarming up  
shades of the dead—brides, young unmarried men,  
old ones worn out with toil, young tender girls, 30  
with hearts still new to sorrow, and many men  
wounded by bronze spears, who’d died in war,  
still in their blood-stained armour. Crowds of them  
came thronging in from all sides of the pit,  
with amazing cries. Pale fear took hold of me.  
Then I called my comrades, ordering them  
to flay and burn the sheep still lying there,  
slain by cruel bronze, and pray to the gods,

BOOK ELEVEN

to mighty Hades and dread Persephone.  
And then I drew the sharp sword on my thigh  
and sat there, stopping the powerless heads  
of all the dead from getting near the blood,  
until I'd asked Teiresias my questions. 40

Then appeared the ghost of my dead mother,  
Anticleia, brave Autolycus' daughter.  
I'd left her still alive when I set off  
for sacred Troy. Once I caught sight of her,  
I wept, and I felt pity in my heart.  
But still, in spite of all my sorrow,  
I could not let her get too near the blood,  
until I'd asked Teiresias my questions. 50

Then came the shade of Teiresias from Thebes,  
holding a golden staff. He knew who I was  
and started speaking:

‘Resourceful Odysseus,  
Laertes' son and Zeus' child, what now,  
you unlucky man? Why leave the sunlight,  
come to this joyless place, and see the dead?  
Move from the pit and pull away your sword,  
so I may drink the blood and speak the truth.’

Teiresias finished talking. I drew back  
and thrust my silver-studded sword inside its sheath. 60  
When the blameless prophet had drunk dark blood,  
he said these words to me:

‘Glorious Odysseus,  
you ask about your honey-sweet return.  
But a god will make your journey bitter.  
As soon as you've escaped the dark blue sea  
and reached the island of Thrinacia  
in your sturdy ship, you'll find grazing there  
the cattle and rich flocks of Helios,  
who hears and watches over everything. 70  
If you leave them unharmed and keep your mind  
on your return, you may reach Ithaca,  
though you'll have trouble. But if you touch them,

BOOK ELEVEN

then I foresee destruction for your crew,  
for you, and for your ship. And even if  
you yourself escape, you'll get home again  
in distress and late, in someone else's ship,  
after losing every one of your companions.  
There'll be trouble in your home—arrogant men  
eating up your livelihood and wooing 80  
your godlike wife by giving courtship gifts.  
But when you come, you'll surely take revenge  
for all their violence. Once you have killed  
the suitors in your house with your sharp sword,  
by cunning or in public, then take up  
a well-made oar and go, until you reach  
a people who know nothing of the sea,  
who don't put salt on any food they eat,  
and have no knowledge of ships painted red  
or well-made oars that serve those ships as wings. 90  
I'll tell you a sure sign you won't forget—  
when someone else runs into you and says  
you've got a shovel used for winnowing  
on your broad shoulders, then fix that fine oar  
in the ground there, and make rich sacrifice  
to lord Poseidon with a ram, a bull,  
and a boar that breeds with sows. Then leave.<sup>1</sup>  
Go home, and there make sacred offerings  
to the immortal gods, who hold wide heaven,  
to all of them in order. Your death will come 100  
far from the sea, such a gentle passing,  
when you are bowed down with a ripe old age,  
and your people prospering around you.  
In all these things I'm telling you the truth.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>These remarks seem to suggest that Odysseus must finally propitiate Poseidon by going somewhere far inland, where people have never heard of that god and, in effect, make him known with the oar planted in the ground and a sacrifice. A winnowing shovel is a device for separating grain from chaff.

<sup>2</sup>This prophecy of the death of Odysseus has prompted much comment, especially the phrase “far from the sea,” which some interpreters wish to emend to read “from the sea” (i.e., someone will arrive by boat and bring about Odysseus' death). It's difficult to reconcile the

*[Footnote continues]*

BOOK ELEVEN

He finished speaking. Then I replied and said:

‘Teiresias, no doubt the gods themselves  
have spun the threads of this. But come, tell me—  
and speak the truth—I can see there the shade  
of my dead mother, sitting near the blood,  
in silence. She does not dare confront  
the face of her own son or speak to him.  
Tell me, my lord, how she may understand  
just who I am.’

110

When I’d finished speaking,  
Teiresias quickly gave me his reply:

‘I’ll tell you so your mind will comprehend.  
It’s easy. Whichever shadow of the dead  
you let approach the blood will speak to you  
and tell the truth, but those you keep away  
will once again withdraw.’

After saying this,  
the shade of lord Teiresias returned  
to Hades’ home, having made his prophecy.  
But I stayed there undaunted, till my mother  
came and drank dark blood. Then she knew me.  
Full of sorrow, she spoke out—her words had wings:

120

‘My son, how have you come while still alive  
down to this sad darkness? For living men  
it’s difficult to come and see these things—  
huge rivers, fearful waters, stand between us,  
first and foremost Oceanus, which no man  
can cross on foot. He needs a sturdy ship.  
Have you only now come here from Troy,  
after a long time wandering with your ship  
and your companions? Have you not reached  
Ithaca, nor seen your wife in your own home?’

130

idea of Odysseus being far from the sea with the mention of his people (i.e., those in Ithaca) living well all around him, unless, as some legends have it, he leaves Ithaca and becomes a ruler somewhere else.

BOOK ELEVEN

Once she'd finished, I answered her:

‘Mother,

I had to come down here to Hades' home,  
meet the shade of Teiresias of Thebes,  
and hear his prophecy. I have not yet  
come near Achaea's shores or disembarked  
in our own land. I've been wandering around 140  
in constant misery, ever since I left  
with noble Agamemnon, bound for Troy,  
to fight against the Trojans. But come now,  
tell me—and make sure you speak the truth—  
What grievous form of death destroyed you?  
A lingering disease, or did archer Artemis  
attack and kill you with her gentle arrows?  
And tell me of my father and my son,  
whom I left behind. Tell me of the wife  
I married. What are her thoughts and plans? 150  
Is she still there with her son, keeping watch  
on everything? Or has she been married  
to the finest of Achaeans?’

When I'd said this,  
my honoured mother answered me at once:

‘You can be sure she's waiting in your home,  
her heart still faithful. But her nights and days  
all end in sorrow, with her shedding tears.  
As for your father, he stays on his farm  
and never travels down into the city.  
There he lies in sorrow, nursing in his heart 160  
enormous grief, longing you'll come back.  
A harsh old age has overtaken him.  
That's how I met my fate and died, as well.  
I was not attacked and killed in my own home  
by gentle arrows of the keen-eyed archer,  
nor did I die of some disease which takes  
the spirit from our limbs, as we waste away  
in pain. No. It was my longing for you,  
glorious Odysseus, for your loving care,  
that robbed me of my life, so honey sweet.’ 170

BOOK ELEVEN

She finished. I considered how in my heart  
I wished to hold the shade of my dead mother.  
Three times my spirit prompted me to grasp her,  
and I jumped ahead. But each time she slipped  
out of my arms, like a shadow or a dream.  
The pain inside my heart grew even sharper.  
Then I spoke to her—my words had wings:

‘Mother, why do you not wait for me?  
I’d like to hold you, so that even here,  
in Hades’ home, we might throw loving arms  
around each other and then have our fill  
of icy lamentation. Or are you  
just a phantom royal Persephone has sent  
to make me groan and grieve still more?’

I spoke. My honoured mother quickly said:

‘My child, of all men most unfortunate,  
no, Persephone, daughter of Zeus,  
is not deceiving you. Once mortals die,  
this is what’s set for them. Their sinews  
no longer hold the flesh and bone together.  
The mighty power of blazing fire  
destroys them, once our spirit flies from us, from our white bones.  
And then it slips away,  
and, like a dream, flutters to and fro.’

*[Odysseus then describes how he saw a large number of shades of famous women from olden times.]*

Odysseus paused. All Phaeacians sat in silence,  
saying not a word, spellbound in the shadowy hall.  
The first to speak was white-armed Arete, who said:

“Phaeacians, how does this man seem to you  
for beauty, stature, and within himself,  
a fair, well-balanced mind? He is my guest,  
though each of you shares in this honour, too.  
So don’t be quick to send him on his way,  
and don’t hold back your gifts to one in need.”

BOOK ELEVEN

Then old warrior Echeneus addressed them all—  
one of the Phaeacian elders there among them:

“Friends, what our wise queen has just said to us,  
as we’d expect, is not wide of the mark.  
You must attend to her. But the last word  
and the decision rest with Alcinous.”

Once Echeneus finished, Alcinous spoke out:

210

“The queen indeed will have the final word,  
as surely as I live and am the king  
of the Phaeacians, men who love the oar.  
But though our guest is longing to return,  
let him try to stay until tomorrow.  
By then I’ll have completed all our gifts.”

Resourceful Odysseus then replied to him and said:

“Lord Alcinous, of all men most renowned,  
if you asked me to stay for one whole year,  
to organize my escort and give splendid gifts,  
then I would still agree. It’s far better  
to get back to one’s own dear native land  
with more wealth in hand. I’ll win more respect,  
more love from anyone who looks at me,  
whenever I return to Ithaca.”

220

Alcinous then answered him and said:

“Odysseus,  
when we look at you, we do not perceive  
that you’re in any way a lying fraud,  
like many men the black earth nourishes  
and scatters everywhere, who make up lies  
from things no man has seen. You speak so well,  
and you have such a noble heart inside.  
You’ve told your story with a minstrel’s skill,  
the painful agonies of all the Argives  
and your own, as well. Come then, tell me this—  
and speak the truth—did you see any comrades,  
those godlike men who went with you to Troy  
and met their fate there? This night before us

230

BOOK ELEVEN

will be lengthy, astonishingly so.  
It's not yet time to sleep here in the halls,  
so tell me of these marvellous events.”

240

Resourceful Odysseus then answered him  
and said these words:

“Lord Alcinous,  
If you are eager to hear even more,  
I will not hesitate to speak to you  
of other things more pitiful than these.  
I mean the troubles of those friends of mine  
who perished later, who managed to escape  
the Trojans frightening battle cries, but died  
when they returned, thanks to the deviousness  
of a malicious woman.

250

Once sacred Persephone  
dispersed those female shadows here and there,  
then the grieving shade of Agamemnon,  
son of Atreus, appeared. Around him  
other shades had gathered, all those who died  
and met their fate alongside Agamemnon  
in Aegisthus' house. He knew me at once.<sup>1</sup>  
When he'd drunk some blood, he wept aloud,  
shedding many tears, stretching out his hands,  
keen to reach me. But he no longer had  
any inner power or strength, not like  
the force his supple limbs possessed before.  
I looked at him and wept. Pity filled my heart.  
Then I spoke to him—my words had wings:

260

‘Lord Agamemnon, son of Atreus,  
king of men, what fatal net of grievous death  
destroyed you? Did Poseidon stir the winds  
into a furious storm and strike your ships?  
Or were you killed by enemies on land,

<sup>1</sup>Agamemnon, king of Argos, was the leader of the Achaean expedition against Troy. After capturing and destroying Troy, he returned home only to be murdered, along with his companions, by his wife, Clytaemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus.

BOOK ELEVEN

while you were cutting out their cattle  
or rich flocks of sheep? Or were you fighting  
to seize their city and their women?' 270

I paused, and he at once gave me his answer:

'Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes' son,  
and Zeus' child, Poseidon didn't kill me  
in my ships by rousing savage winds  
into a vicious storm. Nor was I killed  
by enemies on land. No. Aegisthus  
brought on my fatal end. He murdered me,  
and he was helped by my accursed wife, 280  
after he'd invited me into his home  
and prepared a feast for me, like an ox  
one butchers in its stall. And so I died  
the most pitiful of deaths. Around me  
they kept killing the rest of my companions,  
like white-tusked pigs. The saddest thing I heard  
was Cassandra, Priam's daughter, screaming.  
That traitor Clytaemnestra slaughtered her  
right there beside me. Though I was dying,  
I raised my arms to strike her with my sword, 290  
but that dog-faced bitch turned her back on me.  
Though I was on my way to Hades,  
she made no attempt to use her fingers  
to close my eyelids or to shut my mouth.'<sup>1</sup>

Agamemnon finished. I answered him at once:

'That's horrible. Surely wide-thundering Zeus  
for many years has shown a dreadful hate  
towards the family of Atreus,  
thanks to the conniving of some woman.  
Many died for Helen's sake, and then 300

<sup>1</sup>These actions were made out of respect for the dead on their way to Hades. The refusal to carry them out shows the greatest disrespect. Cassandra, daughter of Priam, king of Troy, was given to Agamemnon by the army as part of his share of the captured Trojan loot. The Helen mentioned a few lines later on is Helen of Troy, whose elopement with Paris was the immediate cause of the Trojan War.

BOOK ELEVEN

Clytaemnestra organized a trap for you,  
while you were somewhere far away.’

As we two stood there in sad conversation,  
full of sorrow and shedding many tears,  
Achilles’ shade came up, son of Peleus,  
with those of splendid Antilochus  
and Patroclus, too, as well as Ajax,  
who in his looks and body was the best  
of all Danaans, after Achilles,  
who had no equal. Then the shadow  
of the swift-footed son of Aeacus  
knew who I was, and with a cry of grief,  
he spoke to me—his words had wings:<sup>1</sup>

310

‘Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes’ son  
and Zeus’ child, what a bold man you are!  
What exploit will your heart ever dream up  
to top this one? How can you dare to come  
down into Hades’ home, the dwelling place  
for the mindless dead, shades of worn-out men?’

Achilles spoke. I answered him at once:

320

‘Achilles, son of Peleus, mightiest  
by far of the Achaeans, I came here  
because I had to see Teiresias.  
He might tell me a plan for my return  
to rugged Ithaca. I’ve not yet come near  
Achaean land. I’ve still not disembarked  
in my own country. I’m in constant trouble.  
But as for you, Achilles, there’s no man  
in earlier days who was more blest than you,  
and none will come in future. Before now,  
while you were still alive, we Argives  
honoured you as we did the gods. And now,  
since you’ve come here, you rule with power

330

<sup>1</sup>Achilles, son of Peleus, was the greatest Achaean warrior during the Trojan War. He is the hero of Homer’s *Iliad*. In honour of his grandfather, a son of Zeus, he is sometimes called “son of Aeacus.” Achilles died at Troy.

BOOK ELEVEN

among those who have died. So Achilles,  
you have no cause to grieve because you're dead.'

I paused, and he immediately replied:

'Don't try to comfort me about my death,  
glorious Odysseus. I'd rather live  
working as a wage-labourer for hire  
by some other man, one who had no land  
and not much in the way of livelihood,  
than lord it over all the wasted dead.'

With these words the shade of swift Achilles  
moved off through meadows filled with asphodel.

The other shadows of the dead and gone  
stood there in sorrow, all asking questions  
about the ones they loved. The only one  
who stood apart was the shade of Ajax,  
son of Telamon, still full of anger  
for my victory, when I'd bested him  
beside our ships, in that competition  
for Achilles' arms. His honoured mother  
had offered them as prizes. The judges  
were sons of Troy and Pallas Athena.  
How I wish I'd never won that contest!<sup>1</sup>  
Those weapons were the cause earth swallowed up  
the life of Ajax, such a splendid man,  
who, in his looks and actions, was the best  
of all Danaans after the noble son  
of Peleus. I called to him—my words  
were meant to reassure him:

'Ajax,  
worthy son of Telamon, can't you forget,  
even when you're dead, your anger at me

<sup>1</sup>Ajax, king of Salamis, (known as the Greater Ajax) was the finest Achaean warrior after Achilles. When Achilles died, there was a contest for his armour. The two main claim-ants were Odysseus and Ajax. When Odysseus was awarded the weapons by the judges, Ajax went berserk and later killed himself.

BOOK ELEVEN

over those destructive weapons? The gods  
made them a curse against the Argives,  
when they lost you, such a tower of strength.  
Now you've been killed, Achaeans mourn your death  
unceasingly, just as they do Achilles,  
son of Peleus. No one is to blame  
but Zeus, who in his terrifying rage  
against the army of Danaan spearmen  
brought on your death. Come over here, my lord,  
so you can hear me as I talk to you.  
Let your proud heart and anger now relent.'

370

I finished. He did not reply, but left,  
moving off toward Erebus, to join  
the other shadows of the dead and gone.  
For all his anger, he would have talked to me,  
or I to him, but in my chest and heart  
I wished to see more shades of those who'd died.

380

And I saw Tityus, son of glorious Earth,  
lying on the ground. His body covered  
nine acres and more.<sup>1</sup> Two vultures sat there,  
one on either side, ripping his liver,  
their beaks jabbing deep inside his guts.  
His hands could not fend them off his body.  
He'd assaulted Leto, Zeus' lovely wife,  
as she was passing through Panopeus,  
with its fine dancing grounds, towards Pytho.

Then I saw Tantalus in agony,  
standing in a pool of water so deep  
it almost reached his chin. He looked as if  
he had a thirst but couldn't take a drink.  
Whenever that old man bent down, so keen  
to drink, the water there was swallowed up

390

<sup>1</sup>Tityus was a giant son of Zeus (or of Ouranos). Hera persuaded Tityus to attack Leto, whose children, Apollo and Artemis, came to her help and killed him. The measurement describing his size is unclear.

BOOK ELEVEN

and vanished.<sup>1</sup> You could see black earth appear  
around his feet. A god dried up the place.  
Some high and leafy trees above his head  
were in full bloom—pears and pomegranates,  
apple trees—all with gleaming fruit—sweet figs  
and luscious olives. Each time the old man  
stretched out his arms to reach for them,  
a wind would raise them to the shadowy clouds. 400

And then, in his painful torment, I saw  
Sisyphus striving with both hands to raise  
a massive rock. He'd brace his arms and feet,  
then strain to push it uphill to the top.  
But just as he was going to get that stone  
across the crest, its overpowering weight  
would make it change direction. The cruel rock  
would roll back down again onto the plain. 410  
Then he'd strain once more to push it up the slope.  
His limbs dripped sweat, and dust rose from his head.<sup>2</sup>

And then I noticed mighty Hercules,  
or at least his image, for he himself  
was with immortal gods, enjoying their feasts.<sup>3</sup>  
Hebe with the lovely ankles is his wife,  
daughter of great Zeus and Hera, goddess  
of the golden sandals. Around him there  
the dead were making noises, like birds  
fluttering to and fro quite terrified. 420  
And like dark night, he was glaring round him,

<sup>1</sup>Tantalus was a son of Zeus. His punishment comes from some action he committed against the gods (stealing the gods' food or murdering his son Pelops and serving him to the gods for dinner).

<sup>2</sup>Sisyphus gave away the secrets of the gods and once tricked the god of death, so that the dead could not reach the underworld.

<sup>3</sup>Hercules, a mortal, had the very rare distinction of being admitted to heaven after death. Hence, Odysseus meets an "image" of Hercules. His later mention of having to serve an inferior man is a reference to the Labours of Hercules, work he had to carry out for king Eurystheus over a twelve-year period.

BOOK ELEVEN

his unsheathed bow in hand, with an arrow  
on the string, as if prepared to shoot.  
The strap across his chest was frightening,  
a golden belt inlaid with images—  
amazing things—bears, wild boars, and lions  
with glittering eyes, battles, fights, and murders,  
men being killed. I hope whoever made it,  
the one whose skill conceived that belt's design,  
never made or ever makes another.  
His eyes saw me and knew just who I was.  
With a mournful tone he spoke to me—  
his words had wings:

430

‘Resourceful Odysseus,  
son of Laertes and a child of Zeus,  
are you now bearing an unhappy fate  
below the sunlight, as I, too, did once?  
I was a son of Zeus, child of Cronos,  
and yet I had to bear countless troubles,  
forced to carry out labours for a man  
vastly inferior to me, someone  
who kept assigning me the harshest tasks.  
Once he sent me here to bring away  
Hades' hound. There was no other challenge  
he could dream up more difficult for me  
than that one. But I carried the dog off  
and brought him back from Hades with my guides,  
Hermes and gleaming-eyed Athena.’

440

With these words he returned to Hades' home.  
But I stayed at that place a while, in case  
one of those heroic men who perished  
in days gone by might come. I might have seen  
still more men from former times, the ones  
I wished to see—Theseus and Perithous,  
great children of the gods. Before I could,  
a thousand tribes of those who'd died appeared,  
with an astounding noise. Pale fear gripped me—  
holy Persephone might send at me

450

BOOK ELEVEN

a horrific monster, the Gorgon's head.<sup>1</sup>  
I quickly made my way back to the ship,  
told my crew to get themselves on board,  
and loosen off the cables at the stern.  
They went aboard at once and took their seats  
along each rowing bench. A rising swell  
carried our ship down Oceanus' stream.  
We rowed at first, but then a fair wind blew.”

460

<sup>1</sup>The Gorgons were three terrifying sisters, the most famous being Medusa, the only one who was not immortal. Her head, even when cut off, could turn men to stone.

BOOK TWELVE

THE SIRENS, SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS, THE CATTLE OF THE SUN

“Our ship sailed on, away from Ocean’s stream,  
across the great wide sea, and reached Aeaëa,  
the island home and dancing grounds of Dawn.  
We sailed in, hauled our ship up on the beach,  
then walked along the shore beside the sea.  
There, waiting for bright Dawn, we fell asleep.

Circe was well aware of our return  
from Hades’ home. Dressed in her finery,  
she quickly came to us. With her she brought  
servants carrying bread, plenty of meat,  
and bright red wine. Then the lovely goddess  
stood in our midst and spoke:

‘You reckless men,  
you’ve gone to Hades’ home while still alive,  
to meet death twice, when other men die once.  
But come, eat this food and drink this wine.  
Take all day. As soon as Dawn arrives,  
you’ll sail. I’ll show you your course and tell you  
each sign to look for, so you’ll not suffer,  
or, thanks to vicious plans of sea and land,  
endure great pain.’

Circe finished speaking.  
And our proud hearts agreed with what she’d said.  
So all that day until the sun went down  
we sat there eating rich supplies of meat  
and drinking down sweet wine. The sun then set,  
and darkness came. So we lay down and slept  
beside stern cables of our ship. But Circe  
took me by the hand and led me off,  
some distance from the crew. She made me sit,  
while she lay there on the ground beside me.  
I told her every detail of our trip,  
describing all of it from start to finish.  
Then queen Circe spoke to me and said:

‘All these things have thus come to an end.  
But you must listen now to what I say—  
a god himself will be reminding you.

## BOOK TWELVE

First of all, you'll run into the Sirens.  
They seduce all men who come across them.  
Whoever unwittingly goes past them  
and hears the Sirens' call never gets back.  
His wife and infant children in his home 40  
will never stand beside him full of joy.  
No. Instead, the Sirens' clear-toned song  
will captivate his heart. They'll be sitting  
in a meadow, surrounded by a pile,  
a massive heap, of rotting human bones  
encased in shrivelled skin. Row on past them.  
Roll some sweet wax in your hand and stuff it  
in your companions' ears, so none of them  
can listen. But if you're keen to hear them,  
make your crew tie you down in your swift ship. 50  
When your crew has rowed on past the Sirens,  
I cannot tell you which alternative  
to follow on your route—for you yourself  
will have to trust your heart. But I'll tell you  
the options. One has overhanging rocks,  
on which dark-eyed Amphitrite's great waves  
smash with a roar. These cliffs the blessed gods  
have called the Planctae. No birds pass through there.  
No human ship has ever reached this place  
and got away. Instead, waves from the sea 60  
and deadly blasts of fire carry away  
a whirling mass of timbers from the boat  
and human bodies. Only one ocean ship,  
most famous of them all, has made it through,  
the Argo, sailing on her way from Aeetes,  
and waves would soon have smashed that vessel, too,  
against the massive rocks, had not Hera  
sent her through. For Jason was her friend.<sup>1</sup>  
On the other route there are two cliffs.

<sup>1</sup>The Argo, a ship named after its builder Argus, carried Jason and his companions to Colchis on their trip to capture the Golden Fleece and back again. Aeetes was king of Colchis, father of Medea.

BOOK TWELVE

One has a sharp peak jutting all the way  
up to wide heaven. Around that mountain  
a dark cloud sits, which never melts away.  
No human being could climb up that rock  
and stand on top. Half way up the rock face  
there's a shadowy cave. It faces west,  
towards Erebus. You'll steer your ship at it.  
In there lives Scylla. She has a dreadful yelp.  
It's true her voice sounds like a new-born pup,  
but she's a vicious monster. Nobody  
would feel good seeing her, nor would a god  
who crossed her path. She has a dozen feet,  
all deformed, six enormously long necks,  
with a horrific head on each of them,  
and three rows of teeth packed close together,  
full of murky death. Her lower body  
she keeps out of sight in her hollow cave,  
but sticks her heads outside the fearful hole,  
and fishes there, scouring around the rock  
for dolphins, swordfish, or some bigger prey,  
whatever she can seize of all those beasts  
moaning Amphitrite keeps nourishing  
in numbers past all counting. No sailors  
can yet boast they and their ship sailed past her  
without getting hurt. Each of Scylla's heads  
carries off a man, snatching him away  
right off the dark-prowed ship. Then, Odysseus,  
you'll see the other cliff. It's not so high.  
There's a huge fig tree there with leaves in bloom.  
Just below that tree divine Charybdis  
sucks black water down. She spews it out  
three times a day, and then three times a day  
she gulps it down—a terrifying sight.  
May you never meet her when she swallows!  
Nothing can save you from destruction then,  
not even Poseidon, Shaker of the Earth.  
Make sure your ship stays close to Scylla's rock.  
Row past there quickly. It's much better  
to mourn for six companions in your ship  
than to have them all wiped out together.'

## BOOK TWELVE

Next you'll reach the island of Thrinacia, 110  
where Helios' many cattle graze,  
his rich flocks, too—seven herds of cattle  
and just as many lovely flocks of sheep,  
with fifty in each group. They bear no young  
and never die. Their herders are divine.  
Now, if you leave these animals unharmed  
and focus on your journey home, I think  
you may get back to Ithaca, although  
you'll bear misfortunes. But if you harm them,  
then I foresee destruction for your ship 120  
and crew. Even if you yourself escape,  
you'll get back home in great distress and late,  
after all your comrades have been killed.'

Circe finished speaking. When Dawn came up  
on her golden throne, the lovely goddess  
left to go up island. So I returned  
back to the ship and urged my comrades  
to get on board and loosen off the stern ropes.  
They quickly climbed into the ship, sat down  
in proper order at each rowing bench, 130  
and struck the gray sea with their oars. Fair winds  
began to blow behind our dark-prowed ship.

Then the wind died down. Everything was calm,  
without a breeze. Some god had stilled the waves.  
My comrades stood up, furled the sail, stowed it  
in the hollow ship, and then sat at their oars,  
churning the water white with polished blades  
carved out of pine. With my sharp sword I cut  
a large round chunk of wax into small bits,  
then kneaded them in my strong fingers. 140  
Once I'd plugged my comrades' ears with wax,  
they tied me hand and foot onto the ship,  
so I stood upright hard against the mast.  
They lashed the rope ends to the mast as well,  
then sat and struck the gray sea with their oars.  
But when we were about as far away  
as a man can shout, moving forward quickly,  
our swift ship did not get past the Sirens,

BOOK TWELVE

once it came in close, without being noticed.  
So they began their clear-toned cry:

‘Odysseus,  
150  
you famous man, great glory of Achaeans,  
come over here. Let your ship pause awhile,  
so you can hear the songs we two will sing.  
No man has ever rowed in his black ship  
past this island and not listened to us,  
sweet-voiced melodies sung from our lips.  
That brings him joy, and he departs from here  
a wiser man, for we two understand  
all the things that went on there in Troy,  
160  
all Trojan and Achaean suffering,  
thanks to what the gods then willed, for we know  
everything that happens on this fertile earth.’

They paused. The voice that reached me was so fine  
my heart longed to listen. I told my crew  
to set me free, sent them clear signals  
with my eyebrows. But they fell to the oars  
and rowed ahead. Then two of them got up,  
Perimedes and Eurylochus, bound me  
with more rope and lashed me even tighter.  
Once they’d rowed on well beyond the Sirens,  
170  
my loyal crewmates quickly pulled out wax  
I’d stuffed in each man’s ears and loosed my ropes.

But once we’d left the island far behind,  
I saw giant waves and smoke. Then I heard  
a crashing roar. The men were terrified.  
I went through the ship, cheering up the crew,  
standing beside each man and speaking words  
of reassurance:

‘Friends, up to this point,  
we’ve not been strangers to misfortunes.  
Surely the bad things now are nothing worse  
180  
than when the Cyclops with his savage force  
kept us his prisoners in his hollow cave.  
But even there, thanks to my excellence,  
intelligence, and planning, we escaped.

BOOK TWELVE

I think someday we'll be remembering  
these dangers, too. But come now, all of us  
should follow what I say. Stay by your oars,  
and keep striking them against the surging sea.  
Zeus may somehow let us escape from here.'

I spoke. They quickly followed what I'd said. 190  
I didn't speak a word of Scylla—she was  
a threat for which there was no remedy—  
in case my comrades, overcome with fear,  
might stop rowing and huddle together  
inside the boat. We kept sailing on,  
up the narrow strait, groaning as we moved.  
On one side lay Scylla; on the other one  
divine Charybdis terrified us all,  
by swallowing salt water from the sea.  
When she spewed it out, she seethed and bubbled 200  
uncontrollably, just like a cauldron  
on a massive fire, while high above our heads  
spray was falling on top of both the cliffs.  
When she sucked the salt sea water down,  
everything in there looked totally confused,  
a dreadful roar arose around the rocks,  
and underneath the dark and sandy ground  
was visible. Pale fear gripped my crewmen.  
When we saw Charybdis, we were afraid  
we'd be destroyed. Then Scylla snatched away 210  
six of my companions, right from the ship,  
the strongest and the bravest men I had.  
When I turned to watch the swift ship and crew,  
already I could see their hands and feet,  
as Scylla carried them high overhead.  
They cried out and screamed, calling me by name  
one final time, their hearts in agony.  
Then, in the entrance to her cave, Scylla  
devoured the men, who still kept screaming,  
stretching out their arms in my direction, 220  
as they met their painful deaths. Of all things  
my eyes have witnessed in my journeying

BOOK TWELVE

on pathways of the sea, the sight of them  
was the most piteous I've ever seen.

Once we'd made it past those rocks and fled,  
escaping Scylla and dread Charybdis,  
we reached the lovely island of the god,  
home of those splendid broad-faced cattle  
and numerous rich flocks belonging to  
Helios Hyperion, god of the sun.

230

While I was still at sea in my black ship,  
I heard the lowing cattle being penned  
and bleating sheep. There fell into my heart  
the speeches of Teiresias of Thebes,  
the sightless prophet—Circe's words, as well,  
on Aea. So with a heavy heart  
I spoke to my companions:

'Comrades,  
let all of you now swear this solemn oath—  
if by chance we find a herd of cattle  
or a large flock of sheep, not one of you  
will be so overcome with foolishness  
that you'll kill a cow or sheep. No. Instead,  
you'll be content to eat the food supplies  
which goddess Circe gave.'

240

Once I'd said this,  
they swore, as I had asked, they'd never kill  
those animals. When they had made the oath  
and finished promising, we moved our ship  
inside a hollow harbour, by a spring  
whose water tasted sweet. Then my crewmen  
disembarked and made a skilful dinner.  
When everyone had eaten food and drunk  
to his heart's ease, they wept as they recalled  
those dear companions Scylla snatched away  
out of the hollow ship and then devoured.  
As they cried there, sweet sleep came over them.

250

But when three-quarters of the night had passed  
and the stars had shifted their positions,  
cloud-gatherer Zeus stirred up a nasty wind

BOOK TWELVE

and an amazing storm, which hid in clouds  
both land and sea alike. And from heaven 260  
dark Night rushed down. Once rose-fingered Dawn arrived,  
we dragged up our ship and made it secure  
inside a hollow cave, a place nymphs used  
as a fine dancing and assembly ground.

But then, South Wind kept blowing one whole month.  
It never stopped. No other wind sprang up,  
except those times when East and South Wind blew.  
As long as the men had red wine and bread,  
they didn't touch the cattle. They were keen  
to stay alive. But once what we had stored 270  
inside our ship was gone, they had to roam,  
scouring around for game and fish and birds,  
whatever came to hand. They used bent hooks  
to fish, while hunger gnawed their stomachs.  
At that point I went inland, up island,  
to pray to the gods, hoping one of them  
would show me a way home. Once I'd moved  
across the island, far from my comrades,  
I washed my hands in a protected spot,  
a shelter from the wind, and said my prayers 280  
to all the gods who hold Mount Olympus.  
Then they poured sweet sleep across my eyelids.

Meanwhile Eurylochus began to give  
disastrous advice to my companions:

'Shipmates, although you're suffering distress,  
hear me out. For wretched human beings  
all forms of death are hateful. But to die  
from lack of food, to meet one's fate that way,  
is worst of all. So come, let's drive away  
the best of Helios' cattle, and then 290  
we'll sacrifice to the immortal gods  
who hold wide heaven. And if we get home,  
make it to Ithaca, our native land,  
for Helios Hyperion we'll build  
a splendid temple, and inside we'll put  
many wealthy offerings. If he's enraged

BOOK TWELVE

about his straight-horned cattle and desires  
to wreck our ship and other gods agree,  
I'd rather lose my life once and for all  
choking on a wave than starving to death  
on an abandoned island.'

300

Eurylochus spoke.

My other comrades agreed with what he'd said.  
They quickly rounded up the finest beasts  
from Helios' herd, which was close by,  
sleek, broad-faced animals with curving horns  
grazing near the dark-prowed ship. My comrades  
stood around them, praying to the gods.  
They broke off tender leaves from a high oak,  
for there was no white barley on the ship.<sup>1</sup>  
After their prayers, they cut the creature's throats,  
flayed them, and cut out portions of the thighs.  
These they covered in a double layer of fat  
and laid raw meat on top. They had no wine  
to pour down on the flaming sacrifice,  
so they used some water for libations  
and roasted all the entrails in the fire.  
Once the thigh parts were completely roasted  
and they'd had a taste of inner organs,  
they sliced up the rest and skewered it on spits.  
That was the moment sweet sleep left my eyes. 320  
I went down to our swift ship by the shore.  
As I drew closer to our curving ship,  
the sweet smell of hot fat floated round me.  
I groaned and cried out to immortal gods:

310

'Father Zeus and you other sacred gods,  
who live forever, you forced it on me,  
that cruel sleep, to bring about my doom.  
For my companions who remained behind  
have planned something disastrous.'

<sup>1</sup>The traditional sacrifice required white barley. But since the sailors are out of food, they have to substitute the leaves for the barley.

BOOK TWELVE

A messenger

quickly came to Helios Hyperion, 330  
long-robed Lampetie, bringing him the news—  
we had killed his cattle. Without delay,  
he spoke to the immortals, full of rage:

‘Father Zeus and you other blessed gods,  
who live forever, take your vengeance now  
on those companions of Odysseus,  
Laertes’ son, who, in their arrogance,  
have killed my animals, the very ones  
I always look upon with such delight  
whenever I move up to starry heaven 340  
and then turn back from there toward the earth.  
If they don’t pay me proper retribution  
for those beasts, then I’ll go down to Hades  
and shine among the dead.’

Cloud-gatherer Zeus

answered him and said:

‘Helios, I think  
you should keep on shining for immortals  
and for human beings on fertile earth.  
With a dazzling thunderbolt I myself  
will quickly strike at that swift ship of theirs  
and, in the middle of the wine-dark sea, 350  
smash it to tiny pieces.’

“I learned of this  
from fair Calypso, who said she herself  
had heard it from Hermes the Messenger.

I came down to the sea and reached the ship.  
Then I bitterly attacked my crewmen,  
each of them in turn, standing by the boat.  
But we couldn’t find a single remedy—  
the cattle were already dead. The gods  
immediately sent my men bad omens—  
hides crept along the ground, while on the spits 360  
the meat began to bellow, and a sound  
like cattle lowing filled the air.

## BOOK TWELVE

For six days,  
those comrades I had trusted feasted there,  
eating the cattle they had rounded up,  
the finest beasts in Helios' herd.  
But when Zeus, son of Cronos, brought to us  
the seventh day, the stormy winds died down.  
We went aboard at once, put up the mast,  
hoisted the white sail, and then set off,  
out on the wide sea.

Once we'd left that island,  
no other land appeared, only sky and sea. 370  
The son of Cronos sent us a black cloud,  
above our hollow ship, while underneath  
the sea grew dark. Our boat sailed on its course,  
but not for long. All at once, West Wind whipped up  
a frantic storm—the blasts of wind snapped off  
both forestays on the mast, which then fell back,  
and all our rigging crashed down in the hold.  
In the stern part of the ship, the falling mast  
struck the helmsman on his head, caving in 380  
his skull, every bone at once. Then he fell,  
like a diver, off the ship. His proud spirit  
left his bones. Then Zeus roared out his thunder  
and with a bolt of lightning struck our ship.  
The blow from Zeus' lightning made our boat  
shiver from stem to stern and filled it up  
with sulphurous smoke. My crew fell overboard  
and were carried in the waves, like cormorants,  
around our blackened ship, because the god  
had robbed them of their chance to get back home. 390

But I kept pacing up and down the ship,  
until the breaking seas had loosened off  
both sides of the keel. Waves were holding up  
the shattered ship but then snapped off the mast  
right at the keel. But the ox-hide backstay  
had fallen over it, and so with that  
I lashed them both together, mast and keel.  
I sat on these and then was carried off  
by those destructive winds. But when the storms

BOOK TWELVE

from West Wind ceased, South Wind began to blow, 400  
and that distressed my spirit—I worried  
about floating back to grim Charybdis.  
All night I drifted. When the sun came up,  
I reached Scylla's cliff and dread Charybdis  
sucking salt water from the sea.  
But I jumped up into the high fig tree  
and held on there, as if I were a bat.  
But there was nowhere I could plant my feet,  
nor could I climb the tree—its roots were spread  
far down below me, and its branches stretched 410  
above me, out of reach, immense and long,  
overshadowing Charybdis. I hung there,  
staunch in my hope that when she spewed again  
she'd throw up keel and mast. And to my joy,  
they finally appeared. My hands and feet let go,  
and from up high I fell into the sea  
beyond those lengthy spars. I sat on them  
and used my hands to paddle my way through.

I drifted for nine days. On the tenth night,  
the gods conducted me to Ogygia, 420  
the island where fair-haired Calypso lives,  
fearful goddess with the power of song.  
She welcomed and took good care of me.  
But why should I tell you that story now?  
It was only yesterday, in your home,  
I told it to you and your noble wife.  
And it's an irritating thing, I think,  
to re-tell a story once it's clearly told."

BOOK THIRTEEN  
ODYSSEUS LEAVES PHAECIA AND REACHES ITHACA

Odysseus paused. All Phaeacians sat in silence,  
without saying a word, spellbound in the shadowy hall.  
Then Alcinous again spoke up and said to him:

“Odysseus, since you’re visiting my home,  
with its brass floors and high-pitched roof, I think  
you won’t leave here and go back disappointed,  
although you’ve truly suffered much bad luck.  
Clothing for our guest is packed already,  
stored in a polished chest inlaid with gold,  
as well as all the other gifts brought here  
by Phaeacia’s counsellors.”

10

Mighty Alcinous  
dispatched a herald to conduct him to the sea  
and his fast ship. Once they’d come down to the ship,  
beside the sea, the noble youths accompanying him  
immediately took all the food and drink on board  
and stowed them in the hollow ship. They spread a rug  
and linen sheet on the deck inside the hollow ship,  
at the stern, so Odysseus could sleep in peace.  
He went aboard, as well, and lay down in silence.  
Each man sat in proper order at his oarlock.  
They loosed the cable from the perforated stone.  
Once they leaned back and stirred the water with their oars,  
a calming sleep fell on his eyelids, undisturbed  
and very sweet, something very similar to death.  
Just as four stallions yoked together charge ahead  
across the plain, all running underneath the lash,  
and jump high as they gallop quickly on their way,  
that’s how the stern of that ship leapt up on high,  
while in her wake the dark waves of the roaring sea  
were churned to a great foam, as she sped on her path,  
safe and secure. Not even a wheeling hawk,  
the swiftest of all flying things, could match her speed,  
as she raced ahead, slicing through the ocean waves,  
carrying a man whose mind was like a god’s.  
His heart in earlier days had endured much pain,

20

30

BOOK THIRTEEN

as he moved through men's wars and suffered on the waves.  
Now he slept in peace, forgetting all his troubles.

When the brightest of the stars rose up, the one  
which always comes to herald light from early Dawn,  
the sea-faring ship sailed in close to Ithaca.

40

Those rowers' arms had so much strength, half the boat,  
which was moving fast, was driven up on shore.

Once they climbed out of that well-built rowing ship  
onto dry land, first they took Odysseus out,

lifting him from the hollow ship still wrapped up  
in the linen sheet and splendid blanket, placed him,

fast asleep, down on the sand, then carried out  
the gifts Phaeacia's noblemen had given him,

thanks to the goodwill of great-hearted Athena,

when he was setting out for home. They put these gifts  
against the trunk of the olive tree, in a pile,

50

some distance from the path, in case someone came by,  
before Odysseus could wake up, stumbled on them,  
and robbed him. Then they set off, back to Phaeacia.

*[Poseidon complains to Zeus about what the Phaeacians are doing to help Odysseus, and Zeus tells him to punish them. So Poseidon turns the Phaeacian ship and crew to stone, just as the ship is about to reach home.]*

Meanwhile, Odysseus, asleep in his own land,  
woke up. He didn't recognize just where he was.

And so all things seemed unfamiliar to their king,  
the long straight paths, the harbour with safe anchorage,  
the sheer-faced cliffs, the trees in rich full bloom.

So he jumped up and looked out at his native land.

60

He groaned aloud and struck his thighs with both his palms,  
then expressed his grief, saying:

“Where am I now?

Whose country have I come to this time?

Are they violent, unjust, and cruel,

or do they welcome strangers? Do their minds

respect the gods? And all this treasure here,

where do I take that? Where do I go next?”

BOOK THIRTEEN

Then, overwhelmed with longing for his native land,  
he wandered on the shore beside the crashing sea,  
with many cries of sorrow. Then Athena came,  
moving close to him in the form of a young man.  
Odysseus, happy to catch sight of her, came up  
and spoke to her—his words had wings:

70

“My friend,  
since you’re the first one I’ve encountered here,  
tell me the truth, so I can understand—  
What country is this? Who are these people?  
Is it some sunny island or a headland  
of the fertile mainland reaching out to sea?”

Athena, goddess with the gleaming eyes, replied:

“Stranger, you’re a fool, or else you’ve come  
from somewhere far away, if you must ask  
about this land. It’s name is not unknown—  
not at all—many men have heard of it.  
The name of Ithaca is even known in Troy,  
a long way from Achaean land, they say.”

80

Athena spoke, and much-enduring lord Odysseus  
felt great joy, happy to learn of his ancestral lands.  
Bright-eyed Athena smiled and stroked him with her hand.  
Then she changed herself into a lovely woman,  
tall and very skilled in making splendid things.  
She spoke to him—her words had wings:

90

“Of all men you’re the best in making plans  
and giving speeches, and among all gods  
I’m well known for subtlety and wisdom.  
Still, you failed to recognize Pallas Athena,  
daughter of Zeus, who’s always at your side,  
looking out for you in every crisis.  
Yes, I made all those Phaeacians love you.  
Now I’ve come to weave a scheme with you  
and hide these goods Phaeacian noblemen  
gave you as you were setting out for home,  
thanks to my plans and what I had in mind.  
I’ll tell you what Fate has in store for you.

100

BOOK THIRTEEN

You'll find harsh troubles in your well-built home.  
Be patient, for you must endure them all.  
Don't tell anyone, no man or woman,  
you've returned from wandering around.  
Instead, keep silent. Bear the many pains,  
and, when men act savagely, do nothing.  
Now, let's not delay, but put away these goods  
in some hidden corner of this sacred cave,  
where they'll stay safely stored inside for you.  
And then let's think about how all these things  
may turn out for the best."

110

*[Athena and Odysseus hide the gifts Odysseus brought with him on the ship]*

Then the two of them  
sat down by the trunk of the sacred olive tree  
to think of ways to kill those arrogant suitors.  
Bright-eyed goddess Athena was the first to speak:

"Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes' son  
and child of Zeus, think how your hands may catch  
these shameless suitors, who for three years now  
have been lording it inside your palace,  
wooing your godlike wife and offering her  
their marriage gifts. She longs for your return.  
Although her heart is sad, she feeds their hopes,  
by giving each man words of reassurance.  
But her mind is full of other things."

120

Resourceful Odysseus then answered her and said:

"Goddess, if you had not told me all this,  
I would have shared the fate of Agamemnon,  
son of Atreus, and died in my own home.  
Come, weave a plan so I can pay them back.  
Stand in person by my side, and fill me  
with indomitable courage, as you did  
when we loosed the bright diadem of Troy."

130

Bright-eyed goddess Athena then answered him:

BOOK THIRTEEN

“You can be sure I’ll stand beside you.  
I won’t forget you when the trouble starts.  
I think the brains and blood of many suitors  
who consume your livelihood will spatter  
the wide earth. But come, I’ll transform you, 140  
so you’ll be unrecognizable to all.  
You must go first of all to see the swineherd,  
who tends your pigs. He’s well disposed to you  
and loves your son and wise Penelope.  
Ask him questions about everything.  
I’ll go to Sparta, land of lovely women,  
and there, Odysseus, I’ll summon back  
your dear son, Telemachus, who has gone  
to spacious Lacedaemon, to the home  
of Menelaus, to find out news of you, 150  
to learn if you are still alive somewhere.”

As she said this, Athena touched him with her staff.  
She wrinkled the fair skin on his supple limbs  
and took the dark hair from his head. His arms and legs  
she covered with an old man’s ancient flesh and dimmed  
his eyes, which had been so beautiful before.  
She dressed him in different clothes—a ragged cloak,  
a dirty tunic, ripped and dishevelled, stained  
with stinking smoke. Then she threw around him  
a large hairless hide from a swift deer and gave him 160  
a staff and a tattered leather pouch, full of holes  
and with a twisted strap.

When the two of them  
had made their plans, they parted, and Athena went  
to Lacedaemon to bring back Odysseus’ son.

BOOK FOURTEEN  
ODYSSEUS MEETS EUMAEUS

Odysseus left the harbour, taking the rough path into the woods and across the hills, to the place where Athena told him he would meet the swineherd, who was, of all the servants lord Odysseus had, the one who took best care of his possessions. He found him sitting in the front part of his house, a built-up courtyard with a panoramic view, a large, fine place, with cleared land all around. The swineherd built it by himself to house the pigs, property belonging to his absent master.

10

All of a sudden the dogs observed Odysseus. They howled and ran at him, barking furiously. Odysseus was alert enough to drop his staff and sit. Still, he'd have been severely mauled in his own farmyard, but the swineherd ran up fast behind them, dropping the leather in his hands. Charging through the gate and shouting at his dogs, he scattered them in a hail of stones here and there. Then he spoke out to his master:

“Old man,

those dogs would've ripped at you in no time,  
and then you'd have heaped the blame on me.  
Well, I've got other troubles from the gods,  
things to grieve about. For as I stay here,  
raising fat pigs for other men to eat,  
I'm full of sorrow for my noble master,  
who's probably going hungry somewhere,  
as he wanders through the lands and cities  
where men speak a foreign tongue, if, in fact,  
he's still alive and looking at the sunlight.  
But follow me, old man. Come in the hut.  
When you've had enough to eat and drink  
and your heart's satisfied, you can tell me  
where you come from, what troubles you've endured.”

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30

With these words, the loyal swineherd went inside the hut, brought Odysseus in, and invited him to sit,

BOOK FOURTEEN

Odysseus was glad to get this hospitality,  
so he addressed him, saying:

“Stranger,  
may Zeus and other gods who live forever  
give you what you truly want—you’ve welcomed me  
with such an open heart.”

Then, swineherd Eumaeus,  
you answered him and said:<sup>1</sup>

“It would be wrong,  
stranger, for me to disrespect a guest,  
even if one worse off than you arrived,  
for all guests and beggars come from Zeus.”

*[Eumaeus and Odysseus talk at length. Odysseus gives a long false story about how he is from Crete and about how he reached Ithaca]*

As these two were talking like this to each other,  
the other herdsmen came in with their swine.  
They shut the sows up in their customary pens,  
so they could sleep. The pigs gave out amazing squeals,  
as they were herded in. Then the trusty swineherd  
called out to his companions:

“Bring a boar in here,  
the best there is, so I can butcher it  
for this stranger from another country.  
We too will get some benefit from it,  
seeing that we’ve worked hard for such a long time  
and gone through troubles for these white-tusked pigs,  
while others gorge themselves on our hard work  
without paying anything.”

Once he’d said this,  
with his sharp bronze axe he chopped up wood for kindling,  
while others led in a big fat boar, five years old,

<sup>1</sup>Here the narrator of the poem makes an unexpected shift and addresses one of the characters in person (“you”). While this is not common in Homer, it does occur a few times, especially with reference to Eumaeus.

BOOK FOURTEEN

and stood him by the hearth. The swineherd's heart was sound, 60  
he did not forget the gods. So he began  
by throwing in the fire some bristles from the head  
of the white-tusked boar and praying to all the gods  
that wise Odysseus would come back to his own home.  
So resourceful Odysseus spoke to him and said:

“Eumaeus, may father Zeus treat you as well  
as you are treating me with this boar's chine,  
the very finest cut of meat, even though  
I'm just a beggar.”

Then, swineherd Eumaeus,  
you replied by saying:

“Eat up, god-guided stranger, 70  
and enjoy the kind of food we offer.  
A god gives some things and holds others back,  
as his heart prompts, for he can do all things.”

Eumaeus spoke and offered to eternal gods  
the first pieces he had cut. He poured gleaming wine  
as a libation, passed it over to Odysseus,  
sacker of cities, then sat to eat his portion.

Night came on, bringing storms. There was no moon.  
And Zeus sent blustery West Wind blowing in with rain.  
Eumaeus then jumped up and placed a bed 80  
for Odysseus near the fire. On the bed he threw  
some skins from sheep and goats. Odysseus lay down there.  
Eumaeus covered him with a huge thick cloak,  
which he kept there as a change of clothing,  
something to wear whenever a great storm blew.  
So Odysseus went to sleep there, and the young men  
slept around him. But Eumaeus had no wish  
to have his bed inside and sleep so far away  
from all his boars. So he prepared to go outside.  
First, Eumaeus slung his sharp sword from his shoulder 90  
and wrapped a really thick cloak all around him,  
to keep out the wind. Then he took a massive fleece  
from a well-fed goat and grabbed a pointed spear  
to fight off dogs and men. Then he left the hut,

BOOK FOURTEEN

going to lie down and rest where the white-tusked boars  
slept beneath a hollow rock, sheltered from North Wind.

BOOK FIFTEEN  
TELEMACHUS RETURNS TO ITHACA

*[Pallas Athena visits Telemachus in Sparta and tells him to return home and to visit the swineherd Eumaeus. In Ithaca Odysseus and Eumaeus continue to talk about the situation in the royal palace.]*

Meanwhile, Telemachus, summoned by Athena had left Sparta for Pylos and set sail for home. As Telemachus' comrades were approaching land, they furled the sail and quickly lowered the mast. Then, with their oars they rowed into an anchorage, tossed out mooring stones, and lashed the cables at the stern. They themselves then disembarked in the crashing surf, to prepare a meal and mix the gleaming wine. When they'd had food and drink to their heart's content, prudent Telemachus was the first to speak:

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“You men row the black ship to the city,  
while I check on the fields and herdsmen.  
I'll come to the city in the evening,  
after I've looked over my estates.  
In the morning I'll lay out a banquet  
as payment to you for the journey,  
a splendid meal of meat and sweetened wine.”

Telemachus tied sturdy sandals on his feet, then from the deck picked up his powerful spear with a sharp bronze point. The crew untied stern cables and then pushed out to sea, sailing to the city, as Telemachus, godlike Odysseus' dear son, had ordered them to do, while he strode quickly off, his feet carrying him onward, until he reached the farmyard and the pigs in countless numbers, among whom the worthy swineherd lay asleep, always thinking gentle thoughts about his master.

20

BOOK SIXTEEN  
ODYSSEUS REVEALS HIMSELF TO TELEMACHUS

Meanwhile at dawn Odysseus and the loyal swineherd, once they'd sent the herdsmen out with droves of pigs, made a fire in the hut and prepared their breakfast. As Telemachus came closer, the yelping dogs stopped barking and fawned around him. Lord Odysseus noticed what the dogs were doing and heard his footsteps. At once he spoke out to Eumaeus—his words had wings:

“Eumaeus, some comrade of yours is coming,  
or someone else you know. The dogs aren't barking  
and are acting friendly. I hear footsteps.”

10

He'd hardly finished speaking when his own dear son stood in the doorway. The swineherd, amazed, jumped up—the bowls he was using to mix the gleaming wine fell from his hands. He went up to greet his master, kissed his head, both his handsome eyes, his two hands. Then through his tears he spoke winged words to him:

“You've come, Telemachus, you sweet light.  
I thought I'd never see you any more,  
once you went off in that ship to Pylos.  
Come in now, dear boy, so that my heart  
can rejoice to see you here in my home,  
now you've just returned from distant places.”

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Once he'd said this, he took Telemachus' bronze spear, and let him enter. He crossed the stone threshold. As he approached, Odysseus, his father, got up to offer him his seat, but from across the room Telemachus stopped him and said:

“Stay put, stranger.  
We'll find a chair in the hut somewhere else.  
Here's a man who'll get one for us.”

He spoke. Odysseus went back and sat down again. Eumaeus piled up green brushwood on the floor and spread a fleece on top. Odysseus' dear son sat down there. The swineherd then set out before them platters of roast meat, left over from the meal

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BOOK SIXTEEN

they'd had the day before, and quickly heaped up baskets full of bread. In a wooden bowl he mixed wine sweet as honey, and then sat down himself, opposite godlike Odysseus. Their hands reached out to the fine meal prepared and spread before them. When they'd had food and drink to their heart's content, Telemachus then said to the splendid swineherd: 40

“Old friend, you must go quickly and report to wise Penelope that I've returned, I'm safely home from Pylos. I'll stay here, until you've given the news to her alone and come back here. No other Achaean must learn about it, for many of them are planning nasty things against me. After you've delivered your message, then come back here. Don't go wandering around the fields looking for Laertes. 50  
Instead, tell my mother to send her maid, the housekeeper, quickly and in secret. She can report the news to the old man.”

His words spurred on the swineherd. He took his sandals, tied them on his feet, and set off for the city.

Now, it did not escape the notice of Athena that swineherd Eumaeus was going from the farm. She approached the hut, appearing like a woman, beautiful, tall, and skilled in making lovely things. She stood just outside the entrance to the farm and was visible to no one but Odysseus. Telemachus did not see her face to face or notice she was there. For when gods appear, there's no way their form is perceptible to all. But Odysseus saw her. So did the dogs, as well. But they didn't bark. Instead, they crept away, whimpering in fear, to the far side of the hut. She signalled with her eyebrows. Lord Odysseus noticed and went out of the hut, past the large wall around the yard, and stood in front of her. 70  
Then Athena spoke to him:

BOOK SIXTEEN

“Son of Laertes,  
resourceful Odysseus, sprung from Zeus,  
Now is the time to speak to your own son—  
make yourself known and don’t conceal the facts,  
so you two can plan the suitors’ lethal fate,  
then go together to the famous city.  
I won’t be absent from you very long—  
I’m eager for the battle.”

As she said this, Athena  
touched Odysseus with her golden wand. To start with,  
she placed a well-washed cloak around his body,  
then made him taller and restored his youthful looks.  
His skin grew dark once more, his countenance filled out,  
and the beard around his chin turned black again.  
Once she’d done this, Athena left. But Odysseus  
returned into the hut. His dear son was amazed.  
He turned his eyes away, afraid it was a god,  
and spoke to him—his words had wings:

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“Stranger,  
you look different to me than you did before—  
you’re wearing different clothes, your skin has changed.  
You’re one of the gods who hold wide heaven.  
If so, be gracious, so we can give you  
pleasing offerings, well-crafted gifts of gold.  
But spare us.”

90

Long-suffering lord Odysseus  
then answered him and said:

“I’m not one of the gods.  
Why do you compare me to immortals?  
But I am your father, on whose account  
you grieve and suffer so much trouble,  
having to endure men’s acts of violence.”

Once he’d said this, he sat down, and Telemachus  
embraced his noble father, cried out, and shed tears.  
A desire to lament arose in both of them—  
they wailed aloud, as insistently as birds,  
like sea eagles or hawks with curving talons

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BOOK SIXTEEN

whose young have been carried off by country folk  
before they're fully fledged. That's how both men then  
let tears of pity fall from underneath their eyelids.  
And now light from the sun would've gone down on them,  
as they wept, if Telemachus had not spoken.  
He suddenly addressed his father:

“In what kind of ship, 110  
dear father, did sailors bring you here,  
to Ithaca? Who did they say they were?  
For I don't think you made it here on foot.”

Noble long-suffering Odysseus answered him:

“All right, my child, I'll tell you the truth.  
Phaeacians, those famous sailors, brought me.  
They escort other men, as well, all those  
who visit them. But come now,  
tell me about the number of the suitors,  
so I know how many men there are 120  
and what they're like. Then, once my noble heart  
has thought it over, I'll make up my mind,  
whether we two are powerful enough  
to take them on alone, without assistance,  
or whether we should seek out other men.”

Shrewd Telemachus answered him and said:

“Father, 130  
I've always heard about your great renown,  
a mighty warrior—your hands are very strong,  
your plans intelligent. But what you say  
is far too big a task. I'm astonished.  
Two men cannot fight against so many—  
and they are powerful. In an exact count,  
there are not just ten suitors or twice ten,  
but many more. Here, you can soon add up  
their numbers—from Dulichium there are  
fifty-two hand-picked young men, six servants  
in their retinue, from Same twenty-four,  
from Zacynthus twenty young Achaeans,  
and from Ithaca itself twelve young men,

BOOK SIXTEEN

all nobility. Medon, the herald,  
is with them, as is the godlike minstrel,  
and two attendants skilled in carving meat.  
If we move against all these men inside,  
I fear revenge may bring a bitter fate,  
now you've come home. So you should consider  
whether you can think of anyone who'll help,  
someone prepared to stand by both of us  
and fight with all his heart."

140

Then lord Odysseus,  
who had endured so much, answered him and said:

"All right, I'll tell you. Pay attention now,  
and listen. Do you believe Athena,  
along with Father Zeus, will be enough  
for the two of us, or should I think about  
someone else to help us?"

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Shrewd Telemachus  
then said in reply:

"Those two allies you mention  
are excellent. They sit high in the clouds,  
ruling others, men and immortal gods."

Long-suffering lord Odysseus answered him and said:

"The two of them won't stand apart for long  
from the great fight—we can be sure of that—  
when Ares' war-like spirit in my halls  
is put to the test between these suitors  
and ourselves. But for now, when Dawn arrives,  
go to the house, join those arrogant suitors.  
The swineherd will bring me to the city  
later on. I'll be looking like a beggar,  
old and wretched. If they're abusive to me,  
let that dear heart in your chest endure it,  
while I'm being badly treated, even if  
they drag me by my feet throughout the house  
and out the door or throw things and hit me.  
Keep looking on, and hold yourself in check.  
I'll tell you something else—keep it in mind.

160

170

BOOK SIXTEEN

When wise Athena puts it in my mind,  
I'll nod my head to you. When you see that,  
take all the weapons of war lying there,  
in the hall, and put them in a secret place,  
all of them, in the lofty storage room.  
But leave behind a pair of swords, two spears,  
and two ox-hide shields, for the two of us  
to grab up when we make a rush at them,  
while Pallas Athena and Counsellor Zeus  
will keep the suitors' minds preoccupied.  
I'll tell you something else—keep it in mind.  
If you are my son and truly of our blood,  
let no one hear Odysseus is back home.  
Don't let Laertes know or the swineherd,  
or any servants, or Penelope herself.”

180

So the two men talked about these things together.

Meanwhile, the well-built ship which brought Telemachus  
from Pylos with all his comrades had reached Ithaca.  
Once they'd come inside the deep water harbour,  
they hauled the black ship up on shore. Eager servants  
carried off their weapons and without delay  
took the splendid gifts to Clytius' home.  
They also sent a herald to Odysseus' house,  
to report to wise Penelope, telling her  
Telemachus had gone to visit the estates  
and had told the ship to sail off for the city,  
in case the noble queen might get sick at heart  
and shed some tears. This herald and the swineherd met  
because they'd both been sent off with the same report  
to tell the queen. When they reached the royal palace,  
the herald spoke out in front of female servants:

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“My queen, your dear son has just returned.”

But the swineherd came up close to Penelope  
and gave her all the details her dear son  
had ordered him to say. Once he'd told her  
every item he'd been asked to mention to her,  
he went off, leaving the courtyard and the hall,  
back to his pigs. The suitors were unhappy,

210

BOOK SIXTEEN

their hearts dismayed, and they departed from the hall,  
past the large courtyard wall. There, before the gates,  
they sat down. The first one of them to say something  
was Eurymachus, son of Polybus:

“O my friends,  
to tell the truth, in his great arrogance  
Telemachus has carried out his trip,  
a great achievement. We never thought  
he would complete it. So come on now,  
let’s launch a black ship, the best one we have, 220  
collect some sailors, a crew of rowers,  
so they can quickly carry a report  
to those other men to go home at once.”<sup>1</sup>

No sooner had he said all this, than Amphinomus,  
turning in his place, saw a ship in the deep harbour.  
Men were bringing down the sail, others holding oars.  
With a hearty laugh, he then addressed his comrades:

“Don’t bother with a message any more.  
Here they are back home. Either some god  
gave them news, or they saw his ship themselves, 230  
as it sailed past, but couldn’t catch it.”

He spoke. They all got up and went to the sea shore,  
then quickly dragged the black ship up onto dry ground,  
while eager attendants carried off their weapons.  
They themselves went to the meeting place together.  
No one else was allowed to sit there with them,  
no old or younger men. Then Antinous addressed them,  
son of Eupheithes:

“Well, this is bad news—  
the gods have delivered the man from harm.  
Our lookouts sat each day on windy heights, 240  
always in successive shifts. At sunset,  
we never spent the night on shore, but sailed

<sup>1</sup>“Those other men” are the suitors waiting out a sea to ambush Telemachus on his voyage home.

BOOK SIXTEEN

over the sea in our swift ship, waiting  
for sacred Dawn, as we set our ambush  
for Telemachus, so we could capture  
and then kill him. Meanwhile, some god  
has brought him home. But let's think about  
a sad end for Telemachus right here  
and ensure he doesn't get away from us.  
For as long as he's alive, I don't think  
we'll be successful in what we're doing. 250  
He himself is clever, shrewd in counsel,  
and now people don't regard us well at all.  
So come now, before he calls Achaeans  
to assembly. I don't think he will give up.  
He'll get angry and stand up to proclaim  
to everyone how we planned to kill him,  
and how we didn't get him. The people  
will resent us, once they learn about  
our nasty acts. Take care they do not harm us 260  
and force us out, away from our own land,  
until we reach a foreign country. And so,  
let's move first—capture him out in the fields,  
far from the city, or else on the road.  
If what I've been saying displeases you,  
and you'd prefer he should remain alive,  
retaining all the riches of his fathers,  
then let's not keep on gathering in this place,  
consuming his supply of pleasant things.  
Instead, let each man carry on his courtship 270  
from his own home, seeking to prevail with gifts.  
Then she can marry the one who offers most  
and comes to her as her destined husband.”

He finished. They all sat quiet, not saying a thing.  
Then Amphinomus spoke out and addressed them,  
splendid son of lord Nisus. With good intentions,  
he spoke to them and said:

“My friends,  
I wouldn't want to slay Telemachus.  
It's reprehensible to kill someone  
of royal blood. But first let's ask the gods 280

BOOK SIXTEEN

for their advice. If great Zeus' oracles  
approve the act, I myself will kill him  
and tell all other men to do so, too.  
But if the gods decline, I say we stop."

Amphinomus finished. They agreed with what he'd said.  
So they immediately got up and went away  
to Odysseus' house. Once they reached the palace,  
they sat down on the polished chairs in the great hall.

At evening the fine swineherd came to Odysseus  
and to his son, busy getting dinner ready.  
They'd killed a boar, one year old. Then Athena  
approached Odysseus, Laertes' son, and touched him  
with her wand and made him an old man once again.  
She put shabby clothes around his body, just in case  
the swineherd, by looking up, would recognize him  
and then go off to tell faithful Penelope,  
and thus fail to keep the secret in his heart.

290

BOOK SEVENTEEN  
ODYSSEUS GOES TO THE PALACE AS A BEGGAR

As soon as rose-fingered early Dawn appeared,  
Telemachus, dear son of god-like Odysseus,  
tied some fine sandals on his feet, took a strong spear,  
well suited to his grip, and, as he headed off  
towards the city, spoke out to the swineherd:

“Old friend, I’m leaving for the city,  
so my mother can observe me. I don’t think  
her dreadful grieving and her sorry tears  
will stop until she sees me for herself.  
So I’m telling you to do as follows—  
take this wretched stranger to the city.  
Once there, he can beg food from anyone  
who’ll offer him some bread and cups of water.  
I can’t take on the weight of everyone,  
not when I have these sorrows in my heart.  
As for the stranger, if he’s very angry,  
things will be worse for him.”

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Odysseus,  
that resourceful man, then answered him and said:

“Friend, I myself am not all that eager  
to be held back here. For a beggar man  
it’s better to ask people for a meal  
in the city instead of in the fields.  
Whoever’s willing will give me something.”

20

Odysseus finished. Telemachus walked away,  
across the farmyard, moving with rapid strides.  
He was sowing seeds of trouble for the suitors.  
When he entered the beautifully furnished house,  
Telemachus walked through the hall, gripping his spear.  
Two swift dogs went with him. The arrogant suitors  
thronged around him, making gentle conversation,  
but deep in their hearts they were planning trouble.

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*[A meal is prepared and set out in the hall]*

Telemachus’ mother sat across from him,  
by the door post of the hall, leaning from her seat

BOOK SEVENTEEN

to spin fine threads of yarn. They stretched out their hands  
to take the fine food prepared and set before them.  
When they'd had food and drink to their heart's content,  
the first to speak to them was wise Penelope:

“Telemachus, once I've gone up to my room,  
I'll lie down in bed, which has become for me  
a place where I lament, always wet with tears, 40  
ever since Odysseus went to Troy  
with Atreus' sons. Yet you don't dare  
to tell me clearly of your father's trip,  
even before the haughty suitors come  
into the house, no word of what you learned.”

Shrewd Telemachus then answered her and said:

“All right then, mother, I'll tell you the truth.  
We went to Pylos and reached Nestor,  
shepherd of his people. He welcomed us  
in his lofty home with hospitality 50  
and kindness, as a father for a son  
who's just returned from far-off places  
after many years—that's how Nestor  
and his splendid sons looked after me  
with loving care. But of brave Odysseus,  
alive or dead, he told me he'd heard nothing  
from any man on earth. He sent me off  
with horses and a well-built chariot  
to that famous spearman Menelaus,  
son of Atreus. There I saw Argive Helen 60  
for whom many Trojans and Achaeans  
struggled hard, because that's what gods had willed.  
Menelaus, skilled at war shouts, at once  
asked me why I'd come to lovely Sparta,  
what I was looking for. I told him the truth,  
all the details. He answered me and said:

“That's disgraceful! They want to lie down  
in the bed of a courageous warrior,  
when they themselves are cowards—just as if  
a doe has put two new-born suckling fawns 70  
in a mighty lion's thicket, so they can sleep,

BOOK SEVENTEEN

and roams mountain slopes and grassy valleys  
seeking pasture, and then the lion comes  
back to that lair and brings a dismal fate  
for both of them—that's how Odysseus  
will bring those men to their disastrous end.'

That's what famous spearman Menelaus said,  
the son of Atreus. When I was finished,  
I came home, and the immortals gave me  
favourable winds which quickly carried me  
back to my native land"

80

Meanwhile Odysseus  
and the loyal swineherd were hastening to leave,  
moving from the fields into the city.  
Eumaeus gave him a staff he liked, and then  
the two of them set off. The dogs and herdsmen  
stayed behind to guard the farmyard. The swineherd  
led his master to the city, like a beggar,  
leaning on a stick, an old and miserable man,  
with his body wrapped in wretched clothing.  
But as they walked along the rugged pathway,  
getting near the city, they reached a well-made spring,  
with a steady flow, where townsfolk drew their water.  
Here Melanthius, son of Dolius, met them—  
he was driving on some goats, the finest ones  
in all the herds, to serve as dinner for the suitors.  
Two herdsmen followed with him. When he saw them,  
Melanthius started yelling insults. What he said  
was shameful and abusive—it stirred Odysseus' heart.

90

"Now here we have a truly filthy man  
leading on another filthy scoundrel.  
As always, god matches like with like.  
You miserable swineherd, where are you going  
with this disgusting pig, this beggar man,  
a tedious bore who'll interrupt our feasts?"

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Melanthius finished, and after moving past them,  
strode ahead and quickly reached the royal palace.  
He went in at once and sat among the suitors,  
opposite Eurymachus, who was fond of him

BOOK SEVENTEEN

more than the others were. Those serving at the meal  
laid down a portion of the meat in front of him.  
The respected housekeeper brought in the bread  
and placed it there for him to eat.

110

Meanwhile Odysseus  
and the loyal swineherd paused as they came closer.  
Around them rang the music of the hollow lyre,  
for Phemius was striking up a song to sing.  
As the swineherd Eumaeus came inside the house,  
godlike Telemachus was the first to see him,  
well before the others. He quickly summoned him  
by nodding. Eumaeus looked around, then picked up  
a stool lying where a servant usually sat  
to carve large amounts of meat to serve the suitors,  
when they feasted in the house. He took this stool,  
placed it by Telemachus' table, facing him,  
and then sat down. Meanwhile, a herald brought him  
a portion of the meat, set it in front of him,  
and lifted some bread for him out of the basket.  
Odysseus came into the house behind Eumaeus,  
looking like an old and miserable beggar,  
leaning on his staff, his body dressed in rags.  
He sat on the ash wood threshold in the doorway,  
propping his back against a post of cypress wood,  
which a craftsman had once planed with skill  
and set in true alignment. Then the goatherd,  
Melanthius, spoke out to them:

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“Listen to me,  
those of you courting the glorious queen,  
about this stranger. I've seen him before.  
The swineherd was the one who brought him here.  
I don't know his identity for sure  
or the family he claims to come from.”

Once he'd said this, Antinous turned on Eumaeus,  
to reprimand him:

140

“You really are a man  
who cares for pigs—why bring this fellow here  
into the city? As far as vagrants go,

BOOK SEVENTEEN

don't we have enough apart from him,  
greedy beggars who disrupt our banquets?"

Then, swineherd Eumaeus, you answered him and said:

"Antinous, you may be a noble man,  
but what you've said is not a worthy speech.  
You are abusive to Odysseus' slaves,  
more so than any of the other suitors,  
especially to me. But I don't care,  
not while faithful Penelope lives here,  
in these halls, and godlike Telemachus."

150

*[Odysseus moves around begging food from the suitors]*

Then Antinous spoke out and said:

"What god  
sent this nuisance to interrupt our feast?  
You're an insolent and shameless beggar—  
you come up to every man, one by one,  
and they give you things without holding back,  
for there's no check or scruple when one gives  
from someone else's goods, and each of them  
has plenty of supplies in front of him."

160

Resourceful Odysseus then moved back and replied:

"Well now, it seems as if that mind of yours  
doesn't match your looks—you'd refuse to give  
even a grain of salt from your own house  
to a follower of yours, and now you sit  
in someone else's house and do not dare  
to take some bread and offer it to me.  
And yet there's plenty right in front of you."

Odysseus finished. Antinous in his heart  
was even angrier than before. He glared at him,  
then, with a scowl, replied—his words had wings:

170

"I no longer think you'll leave this hall unharmed,  
now that you've begun to babble insults."

As he said this, he grabbed the stool and threw it.  
It hit the bottom of Odysseus' right shoulder,

BOOK SEVENTEEN

where it joins the back. But he stood firm, like a rock—  
what Antinous had thrown didn't make him stagger.  
He shook his head in silence, making cruel plans.  
He went back to the door and sat down there.

180

Penelope talked with her serving women,  
sitting in her room, while lord Odysseus ate.  
Then she called out to the loyal swineherd, saying:

“Good Eumaeus, go and ask the stranger  
to come here, so I can greet him warmly  
and ask if he perhaps has heard about  
my brave Odysseus, or caught sight of him  
with his own eyes. He looks like a man  
who's spent a long time wandering around.”

Penelope finished. Once Eumaeus heard her,  
he went off and, standing beside Odysseus,  
spoke to him—his words had wings:

190

“Honoured stranger,  
wise Penelope is summoning you,  
Telemachus' mother. For her heart,  
in spite of bearing much anxiety,  
is telling her to ask about her husband.”

Odysseus then replied:

“Eumaeus, I'll tell the truth,  
all the details, to wise Penelope,  
daughter of Icarus, and quickly, too.  
I know Odysseus well. Tell Penelope,  
for all her eagerness, to wait right now,  
there in the hall, until the sun goes down.  
Let her ask me then about her husband  
and the day of his return. And let me sit  
close to the fire, for the clothes I have  
are pitiful, as you know for yourself,  
since I came to you first of all for help.”

200

The loyal swineherd joined the crowd of suitors.  
He quickly spoke winged words to Telemachus,  
holding his head close to him, so others couldn't hear:

210

## BOOK SEVENTEEN

“Friend, I’m going to leave and guard the swine and other things, your livelihood and mine. You take charge of all the problems here. First and foremost, protect yourself. Your heart must stay alert, so you don’t suffer harm.”

Shrewd Telemachus then answered him and said:

“It will happen, old friend. Now, you should eat before you leave. Come here in the morning, and bring fine animals for sacrifice. Everything going on here is my concern, mine and the immortals.”

220

Telemachus spoke.

The swineherd sat down on the polished chair again. Once he’d filled his heart with food and drink, he left, returning to his pigs, through the courtyard and the hall full of banqueters, who were enjoying themselves with dance and song, for evening had already come.

BOOK EIGHTEEN  
ODYSSEUS AND IRUS THE BEGGAR

*[Irus, a beggar, comes to the palace and starts abusing Odysseus; they fight, and Odysseus knocks Irus out; Penelope encourages the suitors to bring presents for her, and they do so; Odysseus talks to the female servants, criticizing them for being sympathetic to and friendly with the suitors; Eurymachus makes fun of Odysseus and throws a stool at him but misses and hits the wine steward; the suitors continue feasting and then leave]*

BOOK NINETEEN  
EURYCLEIA RECOGNIZES ODYSSEUS

*[Telemachus and Odysseus remove the weapons from the hall and conceal them in a storage room.]*

Telemachus moved off, going through the hall,  
below the flaming torches, out into the room  
where he used to rest when sweet sleep came to him.  
Then he lay down there and waited for the dawn.  
Lord Odysseus remained behind, in the hall,  
thinking how to kill the suitors with Athena's help.

Then wise Penelope emerged out of her room,  
looking like Artemis or golden Aphrodite.  
Beside the fire where she used to sit, they placed  
a chair for her, inlaid with ivory and silver. 10  
Here wise Penelope sat, then spoke to Eurynome,  
her housekeeper, and said:

“Eurynome,  
bring a chair over here with a fleece on it,  
so the stranger can sit down and talk to me  
and hear me out. I want to question him.”

Once Penelope had spoken, Eurynome  
quickly brought a polished chair and placed it there.  
She threw a sheep fleece over it. Lord Odysseus,  
who'd been through so much, sat down in it. And then  
wise Penelope began their conversation: 20

“Stranger, first of all I'll ask this question—  
Who are you among men? Where are you from?  
From what city? And where are your parents?”

BOOK NINETEEN

Resourceful Odysseus then answered her:

“Noble lady,  
wife of Odysseus, all right, I’ll tell you.  
But you’ll be giving me more sorrows  
than those which grip me here—as is the rule  
when a man’s been absent from his native land  
as long as I have now, wandering around,  
through many towns of mortal men, suffering  
great distress. Still, I’ll answer what you ask, 30  
the questions you have posed. There’s a place  
in the middle of the wine-dark sea called Crete,  
where I was born, son of king Deucalion,  
son of Minos. I saw Odysseus there  
and gave him welcoming gifts. The wind’s force  
brought him to Crete, as he was sailing on,  
bound for Troy. So I invited him  
into my house and entertained him well,  
with a kind welcome, using the rich store 40  
of goods inside my house.”

As Odysseus spoke,  
he made the many falsehoods seem like truth.  
Penelope listened with tears flowing down.  
Her flesh melted—just as on high mountains  
snow melts away under West Wind’s thaw,  
once East Wind blows it down, and, as it melts,  
the flowing rivers fill—that’s how her fair cheeks  
melted then, as she shed tears for her husband,  
who was sitting there beside her. Odysseus  
felt pity in his heart for his grieving wife, 50  
but his eyes stayed firm between his eyelids,  
like horn or iron. and he kept up his deceit  
to conceal his tears. But then, when Penelope  
had had enough of crying and mourning,  
she spoke to him once more:

“Now, stranger,  
I think I’d really like to test you out,  
to see if you did, in fact, entertain  
my husband and his fine companions there,

BOOK NINETEEN

in your halls, as you just claimed. So tell me  
what sort of clothes he had on his body 60  
and the kind of man he was. And tell me  
about his comrades who went there with him.”

Resourceful Odysseus then answered her and said:

“Lady, it’s difficult to tell you this  
for any man who’s been away so long—  
it’s now the twentieth year since he went off  
and left my country. But I’ll describe for you  
how my heart pictures him. Lord Odysseus  
wore a woollen purple cloak, a double one.  
The brooch on it was made of gold—it had 70  
a pair of clasps and a fine engraving  
on the front, a dog held in its forepaws  
a dappled fawn, gripping it as it writhed.  
Everyone who saw it was astonished  
at those gold animals—the dog held down  
the fawn, as he throttled it, and the fawn  
was struggling with its feet, trying to flee.  
I noticed the tunic on his body—  
glistening like the skin of a dry onion—  
it was so soft and shone out like the sun.” 80

As Odysseus spoke, in Penelope he roused  
desire to weep still more, because she recognized  
in what Odysseus said signs that he spoke the truth.  
But then, when she’d had enough of tearful sorrow,  
she answered him and said these words:

“Stranger,  
though I pitied you before, in my home  
you’ll now find genuine welcome and respect.  
I was the one who gave him that clothing  
you talk about. I brought it from the room,  
folded it, and pinned on the shining brooch 90  
to be an ornament for him. But now,  
I’ll not be welcoming him here again,  
when he returns to his dear native land.”

Resourceful Odysseus then answered her and said:

BOOK NINETEEN

“Noble wife of Odysseus, Laertes’ son,  
don’t mar your lovely skin or waste your heart  
by weeping for your husband. End your crying,  
and listen to my words. I’ll tell you the truth,  
hiding nothing—for I’ve already heard  
about Odysseus’ return. He’s close by,  
in the wealthy land of Thesprotians,  
still alive and bringing much fine treasure.”

100

Wise Penelope then answered him:

“O stranger,  
I wish what you have said might come about.  
You’d soon come to recognize my friendship,  
so many gifts from me that any man  
who met you would call you truly blessed.  
But my heart has a sense of what will be—  
Odysseus won’t be coming home again,  
and you’ll not find a convoy out of here,  
because there are no leaders in this house,  
not the quality of man Odysseus was.  
But, you servant women, wash this stranger,  
and prepare a place to sleep—a bed, cloaks,  
bright coverlets—so in warmth and comfort  
he may reach Dawn with her golden throne.”

110

Resourceful Odysseus then answered her and said:

“Honoured wife of Odysseus, Laertes’ son,  
I’ve hated cloaks and shining coverlets  
since I first left the mountain snows of Crete,  
when I departed on my long-oared ship.  
So I’ll lie down, as I’ve been doing before  
through sleepless nights. I’ve lain many nights  
on foul bedding, awaiting bright-throned Dawn.  
And having my feet washed brings no delight  
into my heart. No woman in your household  
will touch my feet, none of the serving women  
in your home, unless there is an old one,  
who knows true devotion and has suffered  
in her heart as many pains as I have.  
I’d not resent it if she touched my feet.”

120

130

BOOK NINETEEN

Wise Penelope then answered him and said:

“Dear stranger, no guest from distant lands  
who’s come into my house has ever been  
as wise as you or more welcome—your words  
are all so sensible and thoughtful. I do have  
an old woman with a understanding heart.  
She gave my helpless husband her fine care  
the day his mother first gave birth to him.  
Although she’s weak and old, she’ll wash your feet.  
So come now, stand up, wise Eurycleia,  
and bathe a man the same age as your master.”

140

Penelope spoke, and the old woman held her hands  
and then said to Odysseus.

“And I’m willing.  
For Penelope’s sake I’ll bathe your feet.”

The old woman took the shining bowl to wash his feet.  
She poured in plenty of cold water and added  
warmer water to it. Odysseus then sat down  
some distance from the hearth and quickly turned around  
towards the darkness. For suddenly in his heart  
he was afraid that, when she touched him, she might see  
a scar he had, and then the truth would be revealed.  
She came up and began to wash her master.  
She recognized the scar immediately, a wound  
a boar’s white tusk had given him many years ago,  
when he’d gone to Parnassus, making a visit  
to Autolycus, his mother’s splendid father.  
She traced it out and recognized it. She dropped his foot.  
His leg fell in the basin, and the bronze rang out.  
It tipped onto its side. Water spilled out on the ground.  
All at once, joy and sorrow gripped her heart. Her eyes  
filled up with tears, and her full voice was speechless.  
She reached up to Odysseus’ chin and said:

150

160

“It’s true, dear child,  
You are Odysseus, and I didn’t know you,  
not until I’d touched all my master’s body.”

BOOK NINETEEN

She spoke, and her eyes glanced over at Penelope,  
anxious to tell her that her husband had come home.  
Then Odysseus' arms reached out for Eurycleia—  
with his right hand he grabbed her by the throat,  
and with the other pulled her closer to him.  
Then he said:

170

“Stay silent, so in these halls  
no one else finds out. I'll tell you something—  
and it will happen. If a god overpowers  
these arrogant suitors, sets them under me,  
I'll not spare you, though you are my nurse,  
when I kill other women in my home.”

Once Odysseus spoke, the old woman left the room  
to fetch water for his feet, since what she'd had before  
had all been spilled. When she'd finished bathing him,  
she rubbed him with rich oil. Then Odysseus once more  
pulled his chair closer to the fire to warm himself.  
He hid the scar under his rags. Wise Penelope  
began to speak. She said:

180

“Stranger,  
if you wished to sit beside me in these halls  
to bring me pleasure, sleep would never sit  
on these eyelids of mine. But there's no way  
men can go on forever without sleep.  
Immortal gods have set a proper time  
for every man on this grain-bearing earth.  
So now I'll go up to my upper room  
and lie down on the bed, which is for me  
a place for grieving, always wet with tears,  
since Odysseus went to wicked Iliion,  
a name which never should be mentioned.  
I'll lie down there. But you can stretch out here,  
in the house, putting bedding on the floor.  
Or let the servants make a bed for you.”

190

Once she'd said this, she went to her bright upper room,  
not alone, for two attendant women went with her.  
When she and her servants reached the upper room,

200

BOOK NINETEEN

she cried out for Odysseus, her dear husband,  
till bright-eyed Athena cast sweet sleep on her eyelids.

BOOK TWENTY  
ODYSSEUS PREPARES FOR HIS REVENGE

When Dawn arrived inside Odysseus' lovely home,  
women slaves were up and making tireless fire.  
Then the men who served Achaean lords arrived.  
Behind them came the swineherd, leading in three hogs,  
the best of all he had. He turned them loose to feed  
inside the splendid yard, while he talked to Odysseus,  
with words of reassurance:

“Stranger, these Achaeans—  
do they have any more regard for you?  
Or in these halls are they dishonouring you,  
they way they did before?”

Shrewd Odysseus  
then answered him and said:

10

“Well, Eumaeus,  
I hope the gods pay back the injuries  
arrogant men so recklessly have planned  
in someone else's home, with no sense of shame.”

As these two were saying these words to one another,  
Melanthius, the goatherd, came up close to them,  
leading the very finest she-goats in his flocks,  
part of the suitors' feast. Two herdsmen came with him.  
He tied the goats up by the echoing portico,  
then started hurling his insults at Odysseus:

20

“Stranger, are you still bothering us here,  
inside the house, begging from the people?  
Why don't you get out? I think it's clear  
the two of us won't say goodbye, until  
we've had a taste of one another's fists.  
The way you beg is not appropriate.  
Achaeans do have feasts in other places.”

Melanthius spoke, but shrewd Odysseus said nothing.  
He shook his head in silence. Deep in his heart  
he was planning trouble. Then a third one joined them,  
Philoetius, an outstanding man, bringing in  
a sterile heifer and plump she-goats for the suitors.

30

BOOK TWENTY

He tied these animals with care, approached Odysseus  
and spoke to him—his words had wings:

“Greetings, honoured stranger.  
Though you’re facing many troubles now,  
may you find happiness in future days.  
When I recall Odysseus and think of him,  
I start to sweat. My eyes fill up with tears.  
For he, too, I think, is dressed in rags like these,  
wandering among men somewhere, if indeed  
he’s still alive, looking at the sunlight.”

40

Resourceful Odysseus then answered him and said:

“Herdsman, you don’t appear to be a man  
who’s bad or one who lacks intelligence.  
I see for myself your understanding heart.  
And so I’ll swear a powerful oath to you.  
Odysseus will come home. With your own eyes,  
you’ll see the suitors killed, if that’s your wish,  
those men who act as if they own the place.”

The cattle herder answered him:

“Ah stranger, <sup>50</sup>  
how I wish Cronos’ son might bring about  
what you’ve just said. Then you’d find out  
how strong I am and what my hands can do.”

Eumaeus also prayed like that to all the gods  
for wise Odysseus’ return to his own home.

*[The suitors continue to feast and to abuse Odysseus in disguise]*

BOOK TWENTY-ONE  
THE CONTEST WITH ODYSSEUS' BOW

Bright-eyed Athena then placed inside the heart  
of wise Penelope, Icarius' daughter,  
the thought that she should set up in Odysseus' halls  
the bow and the gray iron axes for the suitors,  
as a competition and the prelude to their deaths.

*[Penelope goes to the storage chamber and collects Odysseus' bow and his axes]*

Once the lovely lady reached the suitors, she stood there,  
by the door post of the well-constructed hall,  
with a bright veil on her face. On either side  
stood loyal attendant women. Then Penelope  
addressed the suitors with these words:

“Listen to me,  
bold suitors, who've been ravaging this home  
with your incessant need for food and drink,  
since my husband's now been so long absent.  
The only story you could offer up  
as an excuse is that you all desire  
to marry me and take me as your wife.  
So come now, suitors, since I seem to be  
the prize you seek, I'll place this great bow here  
belonging to godlike Odysseus. And then,  
whichever one of you can grip this bow  
and string it with the greatest ease, then shoot  
an arrow through twelve axes, all of them,  
I'll go with him, leaving my married home,  
this truly lovely house and all these goods  
one needs to live—things I'll remember,  
even in my dreams.”<sup>1</sup>

10

20

<sup>1</sup>The details of this famous trial of shooting an arrow through a row of axes have been much discussed. Some interpreters have suggested that it makes sense of we imagine that there is a hole in the head of each axe and that they can be lined up so that an arrow might pass through them all, obviously a very difficult shot. Some ancient axes apparently had this feature. Others have suggested that the holes are rings at the bottom end of the shaft or that

*[Footnote continues]*

BOOK TWENTY ONE

When she'd said this,  
she then told Eumaeus, the loyal swineherd,  
to set the bow and gray iron axes for the suitors.  
Then among them all Telemachus spoke out  
with royal authority:

“Well now, Zeus,  
son of Cronos, must have made me foolish—  
my dear mother, although quite sensible,  
says she'll be leaving with another man,  
abandoning this home, and I just laugh.  
My witless heart finds that enjoyable.”

30

After he'd said this, Telemachus threw off  
the purple cloak covering his back, jumped up,  
and removed the sharp sword from his shoulders.  
First, he set up the axes. He dug a trench,  
one long ditch for all of them, in a straight line.  
Then he stamped the earth down flat around them.  
Amazement gripped all those observing him  
to watch him organize those axes properly,  
although before that time he'd never seen them.

40

Then Antinous, Eupheithes' son, addressed them:

“All you comrades, get up in order now,  
from left to right, beginning from the place  
where the steward pours the wine.”

Antinous spoke,

and what he'd just proposed they found agreeable.  
The first to stand up was Leiodes, son of Oenops,  
their soothsayer. He always sat furthest away,  
beside the lovely mixing bowl. That was the man  
who first picked up the bow and the swift arrow.  
After moving to the threshold and standing there,  
he tried the bow, but couldn't string it. His hands,  
which were delicate and weak, grew weary,

50

the holes are those which normally hold the axe shaft, so that the line of axes is actually a line of axe heads with the shaft removed.

BOOK TWENTY ONE

before he could succeed in stringing up the bow.  
He then spoke out among the suitors:

“My friends,  
I’m not the man to string this bow. So now,  
let someone else take hold of it. This bow  
will take away from many excellent men  
their lives and spirits, since it’s far better  
to die than live and fail in the attempt  
to have what we are gathered here to get,  
always waiting here in hope day after day.”

60

Then he sat again on the chair he’d risen from.  
But Antinous took issue with what he’d just said,  
talking directly to him:

“Leiodes,  
what wretched, sorry words! As I listened,  
it made me angry—as if this bow would,  
in fact, take away the lives and spirits  
of the very finest men, just because  
you couldn’t string it. Your royal mother  
did not produce in you the sort of man  
who has sufficient strength to draw a bow.  
and shoot an arrow. But some other men  
among these noble suitors will soon string it.”

70

This said, Antinous called out to Melanthius,  
the goatherd:

“Come now, Melanthius,  
light a fire in the hall. Set beside it  
a large chair with a fleece across it.  
And bring a hefty piece of fat—there’s some  
inside the house—so the young men here  
can warm the bow and rub grease into it,  
then test the bow and end this contest.”

80

When he’d said this, Melanthius quickly lit  
a tireless fire. Then he brought a large chair up,  
draped a fleece on it, and set it down beside the fire  
and from inside the house fetched a large piece of fat.  
Then the young men warmed the bow and tested it.

90

BOOK TWENTY ONE

But they couldn't string it—whatever strength they had was far too little. Antinous and godlike Eurymachus, the suitors' leaders, still remained—the two of them with their abilities, were the finest men by far.

Now, the cattle herder and the keeper of the swine belonging to godlike Odysseus had gone out, both together, so lord Odysseus himself left the house to follow after them. And then, when they'd gone beyond the gates and courtyard, he spoke, addressing them with reassuring words:

100

“You there, cattleman and swineherd, shall I tell you something or keep it to myself? My spirit tells me I should speak to you. If Odysseus were to come back suddenly, brought from somewhere by a god, would you two be the sort of men who would defend him? Would you support the suitors or Odysseus?”

Then the cattle herder answered him:

“O Father Zeus,

would that you might fulfill this very wish—  
may that man come, and led on by some god.  
Then you would know the kind of strength I have  
and how my hands can show my power.”

110

And then Eumaeus, too, made the same sort of prayer to all the gods that wise Odysseus would come back to his own home. Once Odysseus had clearly seen how firm their minds were, he spoke to them again, saying these words:

“Well, here I am in person—  
after suffering much misfortune, I've come home,  
back in the twentieth year to my own land.  
Of those who work for me, I recognize  
that you're the only two who want me back.  
Among the rest, I've heard no one praying  
that my return would bring me home again.  
I'll tell you both how this is going to end—

120

BOOK TWENTY ONE

and I'll speak the truth—if, on my behalf  
some god will overcome those noble suitors,  
I'll bring you each a wife, and I'll provide  
possessions and a house built near my own.  
Then you'll be my companions—and kinsmen  
of Telemachus. Come, I'll show you something, 130  
a sure sign, so you will clearly know it's me  
and trust me in your hearts—here's the old scar  
I got from a boar's white tusk, when I'd gone  
to Parnassus with Autolycus' sons."

As he said this, Odysseus pulled aside his rags,  
exposing the great scar. Once those two had seen it  
and noted every detail, they threw their arms  
around the wise Odysseus, burst into tears,  
and welcomed him, kissing his head and shoulders.  
Odysseus did the same—he kissed their heads and hands. 140  
They would have kept on crying until sunset,  
if Odysseus himself hadn't called a halt and said:

"Stop these laments. Let's have no more crying.  
Someone might come out from the hall, see us,  
and tell the people in the house. Let's go in,  
one by one, not all together. I'll go first.  
You come later. And let's make this our sign.  
All those other men, the noble suitors,  
will not allow the quiver and the bow  
to be given to me. But, good Eumaeus, 150  
as you're carrying that bow through the house,  
put it in my hands, and tell the women  
to lock their room."

After he'd said this,  
Odysseus went into the stately home and sat down  
on the chair from which he'd risen. The two men,  
godlike Odysseus' servants, then went in as well.  
Eurymachus already had the bow in hand,  
warming it here and there in the firelight.  
But even doing that, he could not string it.  
Then his noble heart gave out a mighty groan, 160  
and he spoke to them directly—he was angry.

BOOK TWENTY ONE

“It’s too bad. I’m frustrated for myself  
and for you all. I’m not that unhappy  
about the marriage, though I am upset.  
There are many more Achaean women—  
some here in sea-girt Ithaca itself,  
others in different cities. But if we are  
so weak compared to godlike Odysseus  
that we can’t string his bow, it’s a disgrace  
which men will learn about in years to come.”

170

Antinous, Eupheithes’ son, then answered him:

“Eurymachus, that’s not going to happen  
You yourself know it. At this moment,  
in the country there’s a feast day, sacred  
to the god. So who would bend the bow? No,  
set it to one side without saying anything.  
So come, let the steward begin to pour  
wine in the cups, so we can make libations.  
Set the curved bow aside. In the morning,  
we’ll test the bow and end the contest.”

180

Antinous finished. Once they’d poured libations  
and drunk wine to their heart’s content, Odysseus,  
a crafty man who had a trick in mind, spoke out:

“Suitors of the splendid queen, listen to me,  
so I can say what the heart inside my chest  
is prompting me to state. It’s a request,  
a plea, especially to Eurymachus  
and godlike Antinous, since what he said  
was most appropriate—that for the moment  
you should stop this business with the bow  
and turn the matter over to the gods.  
Give me the polished bow, so here among you  
I can test my power and arms and see  
if I still have strength in my supple limbs  
the way I used to have, or if my travels  
and my lack of food have quite destroyed it.”

190

Odysseus finished. They were all extremely angry,  
afraid that he might string the polished bow.

BOOK TWENTY ONE

Then Antinous, speaking to him directly,  
took Odysseus to task:

“You wretched stranger, 200  
your mind lacks any sense—you’ve none at all.  
Aren’t you content to share a feast with us,  
such illustrious men, without being disturbed  
or lacking any food, and then to hear  
what we say to one another as we speak?”

Wise Penelope then answered him and said:

“Antinous, it’s neither good nor proper  
to deny guests of Telemachus a chance,  
no matter who it is comes to this house.  
And if, trusting in his strength and power, 210  
the stranger strings Odysseus’ great bow,  
do you think he’ll take me to his home  
and make me his wife? I’m sure he himself  
carries no such hope in that chest of his.  
So none of you should be at dinner here  
with sorrow in his heart because of him.  
That would be undignified.”

Shrewd Telemachus then answered her and said:

“Among Achaeans, no man has a right  
stronger than my own to give the bow 220  
to anyone I wish or to withhold it—  
none of those who rule in rocky Ithaca  
or in the islands neighbouring Elis,  
where horses graze. Among these men, no one  
will deny my will by force, if I wish  
to give the bow, even to this stranger  
as an outright gift to take away with him.  
But you should go up to your own chamber  
and keep busy with your proper work,  
the loom and spindle, and tell your women 230  
to go about their tasks. The bow will be  
a matter for the men, especially me,  
since the power in this house is mine.”

BOOK TWENTY ONE

Penelope, astonished, went back to her rooms,  
taking to heart the prudent words her son had said.

The worthy swineherd had picked up the curving bow  
and was carrying it. He came to shrewd Odysseus,  
and placed it in his hands. Then he called the nurse,  
Eurycleia, and said to her:

“Wise Eurycleia,  
Telemachus is telling you to lock up  
the closely fitted doorway to this hall. 240  
If anyone hears groans inside this room  
or any noise from men within these walls,  
she’s not to run outside, but stay where she is,  
carrying out her work in silence.”<sup>1</sup>

After he’d said this, her words could find no wings.  
So she locked the doors of that well-furnished hall.  
And Philoetius, without a word, slipped outside  
and locked the courtyard gates, then went inside,  
sat down again on the seat where he’d got up, 250  
and observed Odysseus, who already had the bow.  
He was turning it this way and that, testing it  
in different ways to see if, while its lord was gone,  
worms had nibbled on the horns. Shrewd Odysseus,  
once he’d raised the bow and looked it over  
on all sides, then—just as someone really skilled  
at playing the lyre and singing has no trouble  
when he loops a string around a brand-new peg,  
tying the twisted sheep’s gut down at either end—  
that’s how easily Odysseus strung that great bow. 260  
Holding it in his right hand, he tried the string.  
Then he picked up a swift arrow lying by itself  
on the table there beside him. He set it  
against the bow, on the bridge, pulled the notched arrow  
and the bow string back—still sitting in his seat—  
and with a sure aim let the arrow fly. It did not miss,

<sup>1</sup>The doorway in question is the entrance to the women’s quarters. They are to be locked in so that they don’t interrupt the revenge killings or run off to raise a general alarm.

BOOK TWENTY ONE

not even a single top on all the axe heads.  
The arrow, weighted with bronze, went straight through  
and out the other end. And then Odysseus  
called out to Telemachus:

“Telemachus, the stranger 270  
sitting in your halls has not disgraced you.  
I did not miss my aim or work too long  
to string that bow. My strength is still intact,  
in spite of all the suitors’ scornful gibes.  
Now it’s time to get a dinner ready  
for these Achaeans, while there’s still some light,  
then entertain ourselves in different ways,  
with singing and the lyre. These are things  
which should accompany a banquet.”

As he spoke, he gave a signal with his eyebrows. 280  
Telemachus, godlike Odysseus’ dear son,  
cinched up his sword, closed his fist around a spear,  
moved close beside his father, right by his seat,  
and stood there, fully armed with glittering bronze.

BOOK TWENTY-TWO  
THE KILLING OF THE SUITORS

Then shrewd Odysseus stripped off his rags, grabbed up the bow and quiver full of arrows, and sprang over to the large doorway. He dumped swift arrows right there at his feet and then addressed the suitors:

“This competition to decide the issue is now over. But there’s another target— one no man has ever struck—I’ll find out if I can hit it. May Apollo grant I get the glory.”

As Odysseus spoke,  
he aimed a bitter arrow straight at Antinous, 10  
who was just about to raise up to his lips  
a fine double-handled goblet he was holding  
in his hands, so he could drink some wine. In his heart  
there was no thought of slaughter. Among those feasting,  
who would ever think, in such a crowd of people,  
one man, even with truly outstanding strength,  
would bring himself an evil death, his own black fate?  
Odysseus took aim and hit him with an arrow  
in the throat. Its point passed through his tender neck.  
He slumped onto his side, and, as he was hit, 20  
the cup fell from his hand. A thick spurt of human blood  
came flowing quickly from his nose. Then, suddenly  
he pushed the table from him with his foot, spilling  
food onto the floor—the bread and roasted meat  
were ruined. When the suitors saw Antinous fall,  
they raised an uproar. They began to shout,  
yelling words of anger at Odysseus:

“Stranger,  
you’ll pay for shooting arrows at this man.  
It’s certain you’ll be killed once and for all.  
You’ve killed a man, by far the finest youth 30  
in all of Ithaca. And now the vultures  
are going to eat you up right here.”

They did not think  
he’d killed the man on purpose. In their foolishness,

BOOK TWENTY TWO

they didn't realize they'd all become enmeshed  
in destruction's snare. Shrewd Odysseus scowled at them  
and gave his answer:

“You dogs, because you thought  
I'd not come back from Troy to my own home,  
you've been ravaging my house, raping women,  
and in your devious way wooing my wife,  
while I was still alive, with no fear of the gods,  
who hold wide heaven, or of any man  
who might take his revenge in days to come.  
And now a fatal net has caught you all.”

40

As Odysseus said these words, pale fear seized everyone.  
Each man looked around to see how he might flee  
complete destruction. Only Eurymachus spoke—  
he answered him and said:

“If, in fact, it's true  
that you're Odysseus of Ithaca,  
back home again, you're right in what you say  
about the actions of Achaeans here,  
their frequent reckless conduct in your home,  
their many foolish actions in the fields.  
But the man responsible for all these things  
now lies dead—I mean Antinous.  
Now he himself has died, as he deserved.  
At this point you should spare your people.  
Later on we'll collect throughout the land  
repayment for all we've had to eat and drink  
inside your halls, and every man will bring  
compensation on his own, in an amount  
worth twenty oxen, paying you back in gold  
and bronze until your heart is mollified.”

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Shrewd Odysseus glared at him and then replied:

“Eurymachus, if you offered me  
all the goods you got from your own fathers,  
everything which you now own, and added  
other assets you could obtain elsewhere,  
not even then would I hold back my hands

BOOK TWENTY TWO

from slaughter, not until the suitors pay  
for all their arrogance. Now you've a choice—  
to fight here face to face or, if any man  
wishes to evade his death and lethal fate,  
to run away. But I don't think there's one  
who will escape complete destruction.”

70

Once Odysseus spoke, their knees and hearts went slack  
right where they stood. Then Eurymachus spoke once more,  
calling out to them:

“Friends, this man won't check  
those all-conquering hands of his. Instead,  
now he's got the polished bow and quiver,  
from that smooth threshold he'll just shoot at us  
until he's killed us all. So let's think now  
about how we should fight. Pull out your swords,  
and set tables up to block those arrows—  
they bring on death so fast. And then let's charge,  
go at him all together in a group.”

80

With these words, Eurymachus pulled out his sword,  
a sharp two-edged blade of bronze, and then charged out  
straight at Odysseus, with a blood-curdling shout.

As he did so, lord Odysseus shot an arrow.

It struck him in the chest beside the nipple  
and drove the swift shaft straight down into his liver.  
Eurymachus' sword fell from his hand onto the ground.

90

He bent double and then fell, writhing on the table,  
knocking food and two-handled cups onto the floor.

His forehead kept hammering the earth, his heart  
in agony, as both his feet kicked at the chair  
and made it shake. A mist fell over both his eyes.

Then Amphinomus went at glorious Odysseus,  
charging straight for him. He'd drawn out his sharp sword,  
to see if he would somehow yield the door to him.

100

But Telemachus moved in too quickly for him—

he threw a bronze-tipped spear and hit him from behind  
between the shoulders. He drove it through his chest.

With a crash, Amphinomus fell, and his forehead  
struck hard against the ground. Telemachus jumped back,

BOOK TWENTY TWO

leaving his spear in Amphinomus, afraid that, if he tried to pull out the long-shadowed spear, some Achaean might attack and stab him with a sword or strike him while he was stooping down. And so he quickly ran away and then moved across to his dear father. Standing close to him, he spoke—his words had wings:

110

“Father, now I’ll bring you a shield, two spears, and a bronze helmet, one that fits your temples. When I get back, I’ll arm myself and hand out other armour to the swineherd and the keeper of the goats. It’s better if we fully arm ourselves.”

Quick-witted Odysseus answered him and said:

“Get them here fast, while I still have arrows to protect myself, in case they push me from the doors, since I’m here by myself.”

120

Odysseus spoke, and Telemachus obeyed his dear father. He went off to the storeroom where their splendid weapons lay. From the place he took four shields, eight spears, and four bronze helmets with thick horsehair plumes. He went out carrying these and came back to his dear father very quickly. First he armed himself with bronze around his body, and the two servants did the same, putting on the lovely armour. Then they took their places on either side of skilled and sly Odysseus, who, as long as he had arrows to protect him, kept on aiming at the suitors in his house, shooting at them one by one. As he hit them, they fell down in heaps. But once he’d used his arrows, the king could shoot no more. So he leaned the bow against the doorpost of the well-constructed wall, and let it stand beside the shining entrance way. Then he grabbed two heavy bronze-tipped spears. In that well-constructed wall there was a passage, shut off with close-fitting doors. So Odysseus

130

140

BOOK TWENTY TWO

told the worthy swineherd to stand beside this door  
and watch, for there was just one way of reaching it.

Then Agelaus spoke, calling all the suitors:

“Friends, can someone climb up to that side door  
and tell the men to raise a quick alarm?

Then this man won’t be shooting anymore.”

But Melanthius the goatherd answered him and said:

“It can’t be done, divinely raised Agelaus.  
The fine gate to the yard is awfully near,  
and the passage entrance hard to get through.  
One man could block the way for everyone,  
if he were brave. But come, let me bring you  
armour from the storeroom. You can put it on.  
It’s in the house, I think—there’s nowhere else  
Odysseus and his noble son could store  
their weapons.”<sup>1</sup>

150

Once goatherd Melanthius said this,  
he climbed a flight of stairs inside the palace,  
up to Odysseus’ storerooms. There he took twelve shields,  
as many spears, as many helmets made of bronze  
with bushy horsehair plumes. Once he’d made it back,  
carrying the weapons, as quickly as he could  
he gave them to the suitors. When Odysseus saw them  
putting armour on and their hands brandishing  
long spears, his knees and his fond heart went slack.  
His task appeared enormous. He called out quickly  
to Telemachus—his words had wings:

160

“Telemachus,  
it seems one of the women in the house  
is stirring up a nasty fight against us,  
or perhaps Melanthius might be the one.”

170

Shrewd Telemachus then said in reply:

<sup>1</sup>For the architectural details of Odysseus’ house, check here.

BOOK TWENTY TWO

“Father, I bear the blame for this myself.  
It’s no one else’s fault. I left it open—  
the close-fitting door of that storage room.  
One of them has keener eyes than I do.  
Come, good Eumaeus, shut the storeroom door.  
And try to learn if one of the women  
has done this, or if it’s Melanthius,  
son of Dolius. I suspect it’s him.”

While they were saying these things to one another,  
Melanthius the goatherd went back once more  
to carry more fine armour from the storeroom.  
But the loyal swineherd saw him and spoke out,  
saying a quick word to Odysseus, who was close by:

180

“Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes son,  
raised from Zeus, there’s that man again,  
the wretch we think is visiting the storeroom.  
Give me clear instructions—Should I kill him,  
if I prove the stronger man, or should I  
bring him to you here?—he can pay you back  
for the many insolent acts he’s done,  
all those schemes he’s thought up in your home.”

190

Resourceful Odysseus then answered him and said:

“These proud suitors Telemachus and I  
will keep penned up here inside the hall,  
no matter how ferociously they fight.  
You two twist Melanthius’ feet and arms  
behind him, throw him in the storeroom,  
then lash boards against his back.”

As Odysseus said this,  
they listened eagerly and then obeyed his words.  
They moved off to the storeroom, without being seen  
by the man inside. He was, as it turned out, searching  
for weapons in a corner of the room. So then,  
when Melanthius the goatherd was coming out  
across the threshold, the two men jumped out  
and grabbed him. They dragged him inside by the hair,  
threw him on the ground—the man was terrified—

200

BOOK TWENTY TWO

and tied his feet and hands with heart-wrenching bonds.  
They lashed them tight behind his back, as Odysseus,  
Laertes' royal son, who had endured so much, 210  
had told them. They fixed a twisted rope to him,  
yanked him up the lofty pillar, and raised him  
near the roof beams. They left Melanthius there,  
tied up and hanging in bonds which would destroy him.  
The two put on their armour, closed the shining door,  
and made their way to wise and crafty Odysseus.  
Filled with fighting spirit, they stood there, four of them  
on the threshold, with many brave men in the hall.

The suitors were being urged on by Agelaus,  
Damastor's son, by Eurynomus, Amphimedon, 220  
Demoptolemus, Peisander, Polyctor's son,  
and clever Polybus. Among the suitors still alive  
these were the finest men by far. Odysseus' bow  
and his swift arrows had destroyed the others.  
Agelaus spoke to them, addressing everyone:

“Friends, this man's hands have been invincible,  
but now they'll stop. Don't throw those spears at them,  
not all at once. Come, you six men throw first,  
to see if Zeus will let us strike Odysseus  
and win the glory. Those others over there 230  
will be no trouble after he's collapsed.”

The suitors kept throwing spears with frantic haste,  
but, though there were many, Athena made them miss.  
One man struck the door post of the well-built hall.  
Another hit the closely fitted door. One ash spear,  
weighted down with bronze, fell against the wall.  
But Amphimedon did hit Telemachus' hand  
a glancing blow across the wrist. The bronze point  
cut the surface of his skin. And with his long spear  
Ctessipus grazed Eumaeus' shoulder above his shield, 240  
but the spear veered off and fell down on the ground.

At close range Odysseus wounded Damastor's son  
with his long spear, and Telemachus injured  
Leocritus, son of Evenor—he struck him  
with his spear right in the groin and drove the bronze

BOOK TWENTY TWO

straight through—so Leocritus fell on his face,  
his whole forehead smashing down onto the ground.  
Just as falcons with hooked talons and curved beaks  
fly down from mountains, chasing birds and driving them  
well below the clouds, as they swoop along the plain, 250  
and then pounce and kill them, for there's no defence,  
no flying away, while men get pleasure from the chase,  
that's how Odysseus and his men pursued the suitors  
and struck them down, one by one, throughout the hall.  
As they smashed their heads in, dreadful groans arose,  
and the whole floor was awash in blood.

And then the minstrel Phemius, son of Terpes,  
who'd been compelled to sing before the suitors,  
kept trying to get away from his own murky fate.  
So he set the hollow lyre down on the ground, 260  
between the mixing bowl and silver-studded chair,  
rushed out in person to clasp Odysseus' knees,  
and pleaded with him—his words had wings:

“I implore you, Odysseus, show me respect  
and pity. There'll be sorrow for you later,  
if you kill me, a minstrel, for I sing  
to gods and men. I am self taught. The god  
has planted in my heart all kinds of songs,  
and I'm good enough to sing before you,  
as to a god. Don't be too eager then 270  
to cut my throat. Your dear son Telemachus  
could tell you that it wasn't my desire  
nor did I need to spend time at your house,  
singing for the suitors at their banquets.  
But their greater power and numbers  
brought me here by force.”

As Phemius said this,  
royal Telemachus heard him and spoke up,  
calling to his father, who was close by:

“Hold on. Don't let your sword injure this man.  
He's innocent. We should save Medon, too, 280  
the herald, who always looked out for me  
inside the house when I was still a child,

BOOK TWENTY TWO

unless Philoetius has killed him,  
or the swineherd, or he ran into you  
as you were on the rampage in the hall.”

Telemachus spoke. Medon, whose mind was clever,  
heard him, for he was cowering underneath a chair,  
his skin covered by a new-flayed ox-hide, trying  
to escape his own black fate. He quickly jumped out  
from beneath the chair, threw off the ox-hide,  
rushed up to clasp Telemachus’ knees, and begged—  
his words had wings:

290

“Here I am, my friend!  
Stop! And tell your father to restrain himself,  
in case, as he exults in his great power,  
he slaughters me with that sharp bronze of his,  
in his fury with the suitors, those men  
who consumed his goods here in his own hall,  
those fools who did not honour you at all.”

Resourceful Odysseus then smiled at him and said:

“Cheer up! This man here has saved your life.  
He’s rescued you, so you know in your heart  
and can tell someone else how doing good  
is preferable by far to acting badly.”

300

After Odysseus spoke, the two men went away,  
outside the hall, and sat down there, by the altar  
of great Zeus, peering round in all directions,  
always thinking they’d be killed.

Odysseus, too,  
looked round the house to check if anyone  
was hiding there, still alive, trying to escape  
his own dark fate. But every man he looked at—  
and there were plenty—had fallen in blood and dust,  
like fish which, in the meshes of a net, fishermen  
have pulled from the gray sea up on the curving beach,  
lying piled up on the sand, longing for sea waves,  
while the bright sun takes away their life—that’s how  
the suitors then were lying in heaps on one another.

310

BOOK TWENTY TWO

Resourceful Odysseus then said to Telemachus:

“Telemachus, go and call the nurse in here,  
Eurycleia, so I can speak to her.  
Something’s on my mind—I want to tell her.”

320

Once Odysseus spoke, Telemachus obeyed  
what his dear father said. He shook the door and called  
to Eurycleia, saying:

“Get up, old woman,  
born so long ago—the one in charge  
of female servants in the palace.  
Come out. My father’s calling for you.  
He’s got something he wants to say.”

He spoke. But Eurycleia’s words could find no wings.  
She opened up the door of the well-furnished hall  
and came out. Telemachus went first and led the way.  
There she found Odysseus with the bodies of the dead,  
spattered with blood and gore, like a lion moving off  
from feeding on a farmyard ox, his whole chest  
and both sides of his muzzle caked with blood,  
a terrifying sight, that’s how Odysseus looked,  
with bloodstained feet and upper arms. Eurycleia,  
once she saw the bodies and huge amounts of blood,  
was ready to cry out for joy now that she’d seen  
such a mighty act. But Odysseus held her back  
and checked her eagerness. He spoke to her—  
his words had wings:

330

340

“Old woman, you can rejoice  
in your own heart—but don’t cry out aloud.  
Restrain yourself. For it’s a sacrilege  
to boast above the bodies of the slain.  
Divine Fate and their own reckless acts  
have killed these men, who failed to honour  
any man on earth who came among them,  
bad or good. And so through their depravity  
they’ve met an evil fate. But come now,  
tell me about the women in these halls,

350

BOOK TWENTY TWO

the ones who disrespect me and the ones  
who bear no blame.”

His dear nurse Eurycleia  
then answered him and said:

“All right my child,  
I’ll tell you the truth. In these halls of yours,  
there are fifty female servants, women  
we have taught to carry out their work,  
to comb out wool and bear their slavery.  
Of these, twelve in all have gone along  
without a sense of shame and no respect  
for me or even for Penelope.”

Resourceful Odysseus  
then answered her:

“Those women who before all this  
behaved so badly, tell them to come here.”

Odysseus then called Telemachus to him,  
together with Eumaeus and Philoetius.  
He spoke to them—his words had wings:

“Start carrying those corpses outside now,  
and then take charge of the servant women.  
Have these splendid chairs and tables cleaned,  
wiped with porous sponges soaked in water.  
Once you’ve put the entire house in order,  
then take those servants from the well-built hall  
to a spot outside between the round house  
and the sturdy courtyard wall and kill them.  
Slash them with long swords, until the life is gone  
from all of them, and they’ve forgotten  
Aphrodite and how they loved the suitors  
when they had sex with them in secret.”<sup>1</sup>

360

370

<sup>1</sup>The round house is in one corner of the courtyard. Telemachus hangs the servant women from a cable attached to the top of the round house and to a nearby pillar.

BOOK TWENTY TWO

Odysseus spoke. Then the crowd of women came,  
wailing plaintively and shedding many tears.  
First they gathered up the corpses of the dead 380  
and laid them out underneath the portico,  
leaning them against each other in the well-fenced yard.  
Odysseus himself gave them their instructions  
and hurried on the work. The women were compelled  
to carry out the dead. After that, they cleaned  
the splendid chairs and tables, wiping them down  
with water and porous sponges. Telemachus,  
along with Philoetius and Eumaeus,  
with shovels scraped the floor inside the well-built hall,  
and women took the dirt and threw it in the yard. 390  
When they'd put the entire hall in order,  
they led the women out of the sturdy house  
to a place between the round house and fine wall  
around the courtyard, herding them into a narrow space  
where there was no way to escape. Shrewd Telemachus  
began by speaking to the other two:

“I don't want  
to take these women's lives with a clean death.  
They've poured insults on my head, on my mother,  
and were always sleeping with the suitors.”

He spoke, then tied the cable of a dark-prowed ship 400  
to a large pillar, threw one end above the round house,  
then pulled it taut and high, so no woman's foot  
could reach the ground. Just as doves or long-winged thrushes  
charge into a snare set in a thicket, as they seek out  
their roosting place, and find out they've been welcomed  
by a dreadful bed, that's how those women held their heads  
all in a row, with nooses fixed around their necks,  
so they'd have a pitiful death. For a little while  
they twitched their feet, but that did not last long.

Then they brought Melanthius out through the doorway 410  
into the yard. With pitiless bronze they sliced away  
his nose and ears, then ripped off his cock and balls  
as raw meat for dogs to eat, and in their rage  
hacked off his hands and feet. After they'd done that,

BOOK TWENTY TWO

they washed their hands and feet and went inside the house,  
back to Odysseus. Their work was done. But he  
called out to Eurycleia, his dear nurse:

“Old woman,  
bring sulphur here to purify the house.  
And bring me fire so I can purge the hall.  
Ask Penelope to come here with her slaves,  
and get all the women in the house to come.”

420

Dear nurse Eurycleia then followed what he'd said.  
She brought fire and sulphur, so Odysseus  
purged the house and yard completely. Eurycleia  
went back through Odysseus' splendid home to tell  
the women what had happened and to order them  
to reappear. They came out holding torches,  
then gathered round Odysseus, embracing him.  
They clasped and kissed his head, his hands, and shoulders,  
in loving welcome. A sweet longing seized him  
to sigh and weep, for in his heart he knew them all.

430

BOOK TWENTY-THREE  
ODYSSEUS AND PENELOPE

Old Eurycleia went up to an upstairs room,  
laughing to herself, to inform her mistress  
her beloved husband was inside the house.  
She stood beside her lady's head and spoke to her:

“Wake up, Penelope, my dear child,  
so you can see for yourself with your own eyes  
what you've been wanting each and every day.  
Odysseus has arrived. He may be late,  
but he's back in the house. And he's killed  
those arrogant suitors who upset this home,  
used up his goods, and victimized his son.”

10

Penelope rejoiced. She jumped up out of bed,  
hugged the old woman, tears falling from her eyelids,  
then she spoke to her—her words had wings:

“Come now,  
dear nurse, tell me the truth. If he's really here,  
back home as you claim, then how could he  
turn his hands against those shameless suitors?  
He was alone, and in this house those men  
were always in a group.”

Her dear nurse Eurycleia  
then answered her:

“I didn't see or hear about it.  
I only heard the groans of men being killed.  
I found Odysseus standing with the bodies—  
dead men on the hard earth all around him,  
lying on each other, a heart-warming sight—  
and he was there, covered with blood and gore,  
just like a lion. Now, come along with me,  
so you two can be happy in your hearts.  
You've been through so much misfortune, and now  
what you've been looking forward to so long  
has come about at last. He's come himself,  
to his own hearth while still alive—he's found  
you and your son inside these halls and taken

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30

BOOK TWENTY THREE

his revenge on all suitors in his home,  
men who acted harmfully against him.”

Wise Penelope then answered Eurycleia:

“But this story can’t be true, not the way  
you’ve told it. One of the immortal gods  
has killed the noble suitors out of rage  
at their heart-rending pride and wicked acts.  
They’ve met disaster through their foolishness. 40  
But in some place far away Odysseus  
has forfeited his journey to Achaea,  
and he himself is lost. You find it hard  
to grasp the plans of the eternal gods,  
even though you’re really shrewd. But let’s go  
to my son, so I can see the suitors  
now they’re dead—and the man who killed them.”

Penelope spoke, then went down from the upper room.

Crossing the stone threshold, she went in  
and sat down in the firelight opposite Odysseus,  
beside the further wall. He was sitting there 50  
by a tall pillar, looking at the ground, waiting  
to learn if his noble wife would speak to him  
when her own eyes caught sight of him. She sat there  
a long time in silence. Amazement came in her heart—  
sometimes her eyes gazed at him full in the face,  
but other times she failed to recognize him,  
he had such shabby clothing covering his body.  
Telemachus spoke up, addressing a rebuke  
directly to her:

“Mother, you’re a cruel woman,  
with an unfeeling heart. Why turn aside  
from my father in this way? Why not sit  
over there, close to him, ask him questions?  
No other woman’s heart would be so hard  
to make her keep her distance from a husband  
who’s come home to her in his native land  
in the twentieth year, after going through  
so many harsh ordeals. That heart of yours  
is always harder than a stone.” 60

BOOK TWENTY THREE

Wise Penelope

then answered him:

“My child, inside my chest  
my heart is quite amazed. I cannot speak  
or ask questions, or look directly at him.  
If indeed it’s true he is Odysseus  
and is home again, surely the two of us  
have more certain ways to know each other.  
We have signs only we two understand.  
Other people will not recognize them.”

70

As she spoke, lord Odysseus, who’d been through so much,  
smiled and immediately spoke to Telemachus—  
his words had wings:

“Telemachus, let your mother  
test me in these halls. She will soon possess  
more certain knowledge. Right now I’m filthy,  
with disgusting clothing on my body.  
That’s why she rejects me and will not say  
I am Odysseus.”

80

Once he said this, Eurynome,  
the housekeeper, gave brave Odysseus a bath,  
rubbed him with oil, and put a tunic on him,  
a fine cloak, as well. Athena poured beauty on him  
in large amounts to make him taller, more robust  
to look at, and on his head she made his hair  
flow in curls resembling a hyacinth in bloom.  
He sat back down in the chair from which he’d risen,  
opposite his wife, and said to her:

90

“Strange lady,  
to you those who live on Mount Olympus  
have given, more so than to other women,  
an unfeeling heart. No other woman  
would harden herself and keep her distance  
from her husband, who, in the twentieth year,  
came back to her in his own native land,  
after going through so much misfortune.  
So come, nurse, spread out a bed for me,

100

BOOK TWENTY THREE

so I can lie down by myself. The heart  
inside her breast is made of iron.”

Wise Penelope then answered him:

“Strange man,  
I am not making too much of myself,  
or ignoring you. Nor is it the case  
that I’m particularly offended.  
I know well the sort of man you were  
when you left Ithaca in your long-oared ship.  
So come, Eurycleia, set up for him  
outside the well-built bedroom that strong bed  
he made himself. Put that sturdy bedstead  
out there for him and throw some bedding on,  
fleeces, cloaks, and shining coverlets.”

110

Penelope said this to test her husband.  
But Odysseus, angry at his true-hearted wife,  
spoke out:

“Woman, those words you’ve just uttered  
are very painful. Who’s shifted my bed  
to some other place? That would be difficult,  
even for someone really skilled, unless  
a god came down in person—for he could,  
if he wished, set it elsewhere easily.  
But among men there is no one living,  
no matter how much energy he has,  
who would find it easy to shift that bed.  
For built into the well-constructed bedstead  
is a great symbol which I made myself  
with no one else. A long-leaved olive bush  
growing in the yard. It was in bloom  
and flourishing—it looked like a pillar.  
I built my bedroom round this olive bush,  
till I had finished it with well-set stones.  
I put a good roof over it, then added  
closely fitted jointed doors. After that,  
I cut back the foliage, by removing  
branches from the long-leaved olive bush.  
I trimmed the trunk off, upward from the root,

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130

cutting it skilfully and well with bronze,  
 so it followed a straight line. Once I'd made  
 the bedpost, I used an augur to bore out  
 the entire piece. That was how I started. 140  
 Then I carved out my bed, till I was done.  
 And that's the symbol I describe for you.  
 But, lady, I don't know if that bed of mine  
 is still in place or if some other man  
 has cut that olive tree down at its base  
 and set the bed up in a different spot."

Odysseus spoke, and sitting there, Penelope  
 went weak at the knees, and her heart grew soft.  
 For she recognized that it was true—that symbol 150  
 Odysseus had described to her. Eyes full of tears,  
 she ran to him, threw her arms around his neck,  
 kissed his head, and said:

"Don't be angry, Odysseus,  
 not with me. In all other matters  
 you've been the cleverest of men. The gods  
 have brought us sorrows—they were not willing  
 the two of us should stay beside each other  
 to enjoy our youth and reach together  
 the threshold of old age. Now's not the time  
 to rage at me, resenting what I've done 160  
 because I didn't welcome you this way  
 when I first saw you. For there are many men  
 who dream up wicked schemes. Argive Helen,  
 a child of Zeus, would never have had sex  
 with a man who came from somewhere else,  
 if she'd known Achaea's warrior sons  
 would bring her back to her dear native land.  
 But now you've mentioned that clear symbol,  
 our bed, which no one else has ever seen,  
 other than the two of us, you and me, 170  
 and a single servant woman, Actoris,  
 whom my father gave me when I came here.  
 For both of us she kept watch at the doors  
 of our strong bedroom. You've now won my heart,  
 though it's been truly stubborn."

BOOK TWENTY THREE

Penelope spoke  
and stirred in him an even more intense desire  
to weep. As he held his loyal and loving wife,  
he cried. And rose-fingered early Dawn  
would've appeared with them still weeping there,  
if goddess Athena with the gleaming eyes, 180  
had not thought of something else—she prolonged  
the lengthy night as it came to an end, keeping  
Dawn and her golden throne waiting by Ocean's stream.

While they went on talking to each other in this way,  
Eurynome and the nurse prepared the bed  
with soft coverlets, by light from flaming torches.  
Once they'd quickly covered up the sturdy bed,  
the old nurse went back to her room to rest,  
and the bedroom servant, Eurynome, led them  
on their way to bed, a torch gripped in her hands. 190  
When she'd brought them to the room, then she returned.  
Odysseus and Penelope approached with joy  
the place where their bed stood from earlier days.

Odysseus and Penelope, once they'd had the joy  
of making love, then entertained each other  
telling stories, in mutual conversation.  
The lovely lady talked of all she'd been through  
in the house, looking at that destructive group,  
the suitors, who, because of her, had butchered  
so many cattle and fat sheep and drained from jars 200  
so much wine. Odysseus, born from Zeus, then told  
all the troubles he'd brought down on men, all the grief  
he'd had to work through on his own. Penelope  
was happy listening, and sleep did not come down  
across her eyelids until he'd told it all.

Then Athena, goddess with the gleaming eyes,  
came up with something else. When she thought Odysseus  
had had his heart's fill of pleasure with his wife and slept,  
from Ocean she quickly stirred up early Dawn  
on her golden throne to bring her light to men. 210  
Odysseus rose from his soft bed and told his wife:

BOOK TWENTY THREE

“Now that we’ve come back to the bed we love,  
you should tend to our wealth inside the house.  
As for the flocks those arrogant suitors stole,  
I’ll seize many beasts as plunder on my own,  
and Achaeans will give others, till they fill up  
each and every pen. Now I’m going to go  
out to my forest lands, and there I’ll see  
my noble father, who on my behalf  
has suffered such anxiety. Lady,  
since I know how intelligent you are,  
I’m asking you to follow these instructions—  
once sunrise comes, the story will be out  
about the suitors slaughtered in our home.  
So you should go up to your upper room  
with your female attendants. Then sit there.  
Don’t look in on anyone or ask questions.”

220

Once he’d said this, he put his lovely armour on,  
around his shoulders, and roused Telemachus,  
Philoetius, and Eumaeus, and told them all  
to get weapons in their hands to fight a war.  
They did not disobey, but dressed themselves in bronze,  
opened the doors, and went outside, with Odysseus  
in the lead. By now light was shining on the ground,  
but Athena kept them hidden by the night,  
as she led them quickly from the city.

230

BOOK TWENTY-FOUR  
ZEUS AND ATHENA END THE FIGHTING

Once Odysseus and his men had left the city,  
they soon reached Laertes' fine, well-managed farm,  
which Laertes had once won by his own efforts,  
working really hard. His house was there, with sheds  
surrounding it on every side, where his servants,  
bonded slaves who worked to carry out his wishes,  
ate and sat and slept. An old Sicilian woman  
lived inside his house, looking after the old man,  
caring for him at the farm, far from the city.  
Odysseus then spoke to his servants and his son:

10

“You should go inside the well-built home.  
Hurry up and kill the finest pig there is,  
so we can eat. I'll sound out my father,  
to find out if he can recognize me,  
see who I am, once he's laid eyes on me,  
or if he doesn't know me anymore,  
since I've been away so long.”

Odysseus spoke,  
then gave his battle weapons to his servants.  
In the well-established vineyard he found his father.  
He was digging round a plant, all by himself,  
dressed in a filthy, shabby, patched-up tunic.  
Around his legs he'd tied shin pads stitched from ox-hide  
to protect himself from scratches, and on his hands  
he was wearing gloves, since there were thistles in that spot.  
On his head he wore a goatskin hat. In these clothes  
he was dealing with his grief. He stirred Odysseus' heart.  
Already, as he looked at his dear father, sharp pains  
were shooting up his nostrils. He jumped over,  
embraced Laertes, kissed him, and then said:

20

“Father,  
I'm here—back home in the twentieth year,  
in my own native land. Stop your grieving,  
these tearful moans. I'll tell you everything,  
though it's essential we move really fast.  
I've killed the suitors in our home, avenged  
their heart-rending insolence, their evil acts.”

30

BOOK TWENTY FOUR

Laertes then answered him and said:

“If that’s true,  
if you are indeed my son Odysseus  
and have come back, show me some evidence,  
something clear so I can be quite certain.”

Resourceful Odysseus replied to him and said:

40

“First, let your eyes inspect this scar—a boar  
inflicted that on me with its white tusk,  
when I went to Parnassus, sent there  
by you and by my honourable mother,  
to her cherished father, Autolycus,  
so I could get the gifts he’d promised me,  
what he’d agreed to give when he was here.”

As Odysseus spoke, his father’s fond heart and knees  
gave way—he clearly recognized the evidence  
Odysseus had presented. He threw both his arms  
around the son he loved and struggled hard to breathe.  
Lord Odysseus, who had endured so much, held him.  
After he’d revived and his spirit came once more  
into his chest, Laertes spoke again and said:

50

“Father Zeus, it seems you gods are still  
on high Olympus, if it’s true those suitors  
have paid the price of their proud arrogance.  
But now my heart contains a dreadful fear—  
all the men of Ithaca will soon come here  
against us, and they’ll send out messengers  
all through Cephallenia, to every city.”

60

Resourceful Odysseus then answered him and said:

“Take courage, and don’t allow these things  
to weigh down your heart. Let’s go to the house,  
the one close to the orchard, where I sent  
Telemachus, together with the swineherd  
and the keeper of the goats, so they could  
prepare a meal as soon as possible.”

After they’d talked like this, they went to the fine house.  
Once they reached Laertes’ well-furnished home, they found

70

BOOK TWENTY FOUR

Telemachus with the swineherd and goat keeper  
carving lots of meat and mixing gleaming wine.

Meanwhile, the other men had finished working  
Dinner was prepared. So they sat down one by one  
on stools and chairs. As they were reaching for the food,  
old Dolius appeared. The old man's sons were with him,  
tired out from work. The ancient Sicilian woman,  
their mother, had gone outside and summoned them.  
Dolius went straight up to him, both arms outstretched,  
grabbed Odysseus' hand and kissed it on the wrist.  
Then he spoke to him—his words had wings:

80

"My friend,  
you're back with us, who longed for your return  
but never thought to see it! The gods themselves  
must have been leading you. Joyful greetings!  
May gods grant you success!"

Then Dolius' sons  
also came up around glorious Odysseus,  
clasping his hands with words of welcome.

Meanwhile, Rumour the Messenger  
sped swiftly through the entire city, speaking  
of the suitors' dreadful death, their destiny.  
People heard about it all at once and came in  
from all directions, gathering with mournful groans  
before Odysseus' home. Each one brought his dead  
outside the house and buried them. All the men  
from other cities they sent home, placing them  
aboard swift ships to be escorted back by sailors.  
Then, with sorrowful hearts, they went in person  
to meet in an assembly. Once they'd got there  
together in a group, Eupheithes rose to speak.  
Constant grief lay on his heart for his own son,  
Antinous, the first man killed by lord Odysseus.  
Weeping for him, he spoke to the assembly:

90

100

"My friends, this man has planned and carried out  
dreadful acts against Achaeans. He led  
many fine courageous men off in his fleet,

BOOK TWENTY FOUR

then lost his hollow ships, with all men dead.  
Now he's come and killed our finest men by far  
among the Cephalenians. So come on,  
before he can quickly get to Pylos  
or to holy Elis, where Epeians rule,  
let's get started. If not, in future days  
we'll be eternally disgraced, since men  
yet to be born will learn about our shame,  
if we don't act to take out our revenge  
on those murderers of our sons and brothers.  
As far as I'm concerned, the life we'd live  
would not be sweet. I rather die right now  
and live among the dead. So let us go,  
in case those men have a head start on us  
and get across the sea."

110

As Eupeithes said this,  
he wept, and all Achaeans were seized by pity.  
Then Medon and the godlike singer, released  
from sleep, approached them from Odysseus' house,  
and stood up in their midst. They were astonished.  
Then Medon, a shrewd man, spoke out.

120

"Men of Ithaca,  
now hear me. Odysseus didn't plan these acts  
without the gods' consent. I myself observed  
an immortal god who stood beside him,  
looking in every detail just like Mentor.  
The deathless god appeared before Odysseus  
at that time to spur him on to action,  
and, at another time, charged through the hall,  
terrifying the suitors. They collapsed in droves."

130

He ended. Some men stayed together in their seats,  
but others, more than half, jumped up with noisy shouts.  
Their hearts had not responded to what he'd just said.  
They'd been won over by Eupeithes. And so,  
they quickly rushed away to get their weapons.  
Then Athena spoke to Zeus, Cronos' son, saying:

“Father of us all and son of Cronos,  
 highest of all those who rule, answer me  
 when I ask this—What are you concealing  
 in that mind of yours? Will you be creating  
 further brutal war and dreadful battle,  
 or bring both sides together here as friends?” 140

Cloud-gatherer Zeus then answered her and said:

“My child, why are you asking this of me?  
 Why these questions? Were you not the one  
 who devised this plan all on your own,  
 so Odysseus could take out his revenge  
 against these men, after he got back? 150  
 Do as you wish. But I’ll lay out for you  
 what I think is right. Since lord Odysseus  
 has paid back the suitors, let them swear  
 a binding oath that he’ll remain their king  
 all his life, and let’s make them forget  
 the killing of their sons and brothers.  
 Let them love each other as they used to do,  
 and let there be wealth and peace in plenty.”

His words stirred up Athena, who was already keen. 160  
 She swooped down from the heights of Mount Olympus.

Meanwhile, once his group had eaten their hearts’ fill  
 of food as sweet as honey, lord Odysseus,  
 who had endured so much, was the first to speak:

“Someone should go outside to look around,  
 see whether they are getting close to us.”

Once he said this, a son of Dolius went out,  
 as he had ordered. He stood in the doorway  
 and saw all those men approaching. At once  
 he called out to Odysseus—his words had wings: 170

“They’re here, close by. Let’s get our weapons—  
 we’d better hurry!”

At these words, they leapt up  
 and put on their armour. Odysseus and his men  
 were four, the sons of Dolius six, and with them

BOOK TWENTY FOUR

Dolius and Laertes, though they had gray hair,  
were dressed in armour, too, forced to be warriors.  
When they'd put glittering bronze around their bodies,  
they opened up the doors and went outside. Odysseus  
led them out. But then Athena, Zeus' daughter,  
with the shape and voice of Mentor, came up to them.  
stood by Laertes, and said to him:

180

“Child of Arcesius,  
by far the dearest of all those I cherish,  
pray to the young girl with the flashing eyes  
and to Father Zeus, then without delay  
raise that long spear of yours and throw it.”

Pallas Athena spoke and then breathed into him  
enormous power. Laertes said a prayer  
to great Zeus' daughter, and quickly lifting up  
his long-shadowed spear, he threw it. It hit home,  
through the bronze cheek piece on Eupheithes' helmet,  
which didn't stop the spear—the bronze point went on through.  
Eupheithes fell down with a thud, his armour  
crashing round him. Odysseus and his splendid son  
charged at the fighters in the front, striking them  
with swords and two-edged spears. They'd have killed them all,  
cut them down so none of them returned, had not  
Athena, daughter of aegis-bearing Zeus, cried out—  
her voice held back every man in that whole army.

190

“Men of Ithaca, stop this disastrous war,  
so you can quickly go your separate ways  
without spilling any blood.”

200

Athena spoke,  
and pale fear gripped the men. They were so terrified  
they dropped their weapons and all fell on the ground,  
at that goddess' resounding voice. They turned round,  
back towards the city, eager to save their lives.  
Then much-enduring lord Odysseus gave out  
a fearful shout, gathered himself, and swooped down  
like an eagle from on high. But at that moment,  
Zeus, son of Cronos, shot a fiery thunderbolt.  
It struck at the feet of the bright-eyed daughter

210

BOOK TWENTY FOUR

of that mighty father. And then Athena,  
goddess with the glittering eyes, said to Odysseus:

“Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes’ son,  
and child of Zeus, hold back. Stop this fight,  
this impartial war, in case thundering Zeus,  
who sees far and wide, grows angry with you.”

Once Athena spoke, Odysseus obeyed,  
joy in his heart. And then Pallas Athena,  
daughter of aegis-bearing Zeus, in shape and form  
looking just like Mentor, had both parties swear  
a solemn treaty designed to last forever.

220

## GLOSSARY

The following glossary includes the names of the main characters and places in this abridged *Odyssey* and a few others.

ACHAEANS: a collective name of the Greeks (used interchangeably with Danaans and Argives)

ACHILLES: son of Peleus, greatest of the Achaean warriors at Troy, where he died and was buried.

AEGISTHUS: son of Thyestes, lover of Clytaemnestra and murderer of Agamemnon.

AEOLUS: son of Hippotas, god of the winds, living on the island Aeolia.

AGAMEMNON: son of Atreus, king of Argos, leader of the Achaean forces which attacked and destroyed Troy.

AGELAUS: son of Damastor, one of the Suitors.

AJAX: son of Telamon, greatest Achaean warrior after Achilles at Troy, where he died and was buried..

ALCINOUS: son of Nausithous, husband of Arete, king of the Phaeacians.

AMPHIMEDON: son of Melaneus, one of the Suitors.

AMPHINOMUS: son of Nisus, one of the Suitors from Dulichium.

ANTICLEIA: daughter of Autolycus, mother of Odysseus.

ANTINOUS: son of Eupheithes, one of the leaders of the Suitors.

ANTIPHATES: king of the Laestrygonians.

APHRODITE: divine daughter of Zeus and Hera, goddess of erotic love.

APOLLO: divine son of Zeus and Leto, often called Phoebus or Phoebus Apollo.

ARES: divine son of Zeus and Hera, god of war.

ARETE: wife of Alcinous, queen of the Phaeacians.

ARGIVES: see ACHAEANS.

ARTEMIS: divine daughter of Zeus and Leto, goddess of the hunt.

ATHENA: divine daughter of Zeus, goddess of wisdom.

CALYPSO: daughter of Atlas, goddess living on the island of Ogygia.

## GLOSSARY

- CEPHALLENIA: an island close to Ithaca, part of Odysseus' kingdom, often applied to that kingdom and its people generally.
- CHARYBDIS: a divine sea monster which acts as a whirlpool.
- CICONES: inhabitants of Ismarus, a city close to Troy.
- CIRCE: a goddess living on the island of Aeaea.
- CLYTAEMNESTRA: daughter of Tyndareus, wife of Agememnon.
- CYCLOPES (singular CYCLOPS): monstrous creatures with one eye.
- CRONOS: father of Zeus, overthrown by his son and imprisoned deep in the earth.
- DEMODOCUS: the blind minstrel in the court of Alcinous in Phaeacia.
- DOLIUS: an old servant of Laertes and Penelope.
- DULICHIUM: an island close to Ithaca, part of Odysseus' kingdom.
- EUMAEUS: a servant of Odysseus, keeper of pigs.
- EUPEITHES: father of Antinous (one of the Suitors).
- EURYCLEIA: daughter of Ops, elderly family servant to Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus.
- EURYOCHUS: one of Odysseus' companions, related to him by marriage.
- EURYMACHUS: son of Polybus, one of the leading Suitors.
- EURYNOME: housekeeper in Odysseus' and Penelope's home.
- HEPHAESTUS: divine son of Zeus and Hera, god of the forge, divine artisan.
- HERCULES: mortal son of Zeus, made into a god after his death.
- HERMES: divine son of Zeus and the nymph Maia, messenger god, often called "killer of Argus."
- HYPERION: god of the sun (also called HELIOS)
- ILION: another name for TROY.
- ITHACA: island off the west coast of mainland Greece, kingdom ruled by Odysseus.
- LAERTES: son of Arcesius, father of Odysseus.

## GLOSSARY

- LAESTRYGONIANS: race of giants living in Telpylus.
- LEIODES: son of Oenops, one of the Suitors, a soothsayer.
- LEOCRITUS: son of Euenor, one of the Suitors.
- MEDON: a herald in Odysseus' palace.
- MELANTHIUS: son of Dolius, a goatherd friendly to the Suitors.
- MENELAUS: son of Atreus, brother of Agamemnon, husband of Helen, king of Sparta.
- MENTOR: son of Alcimus, steward of Odysseus' place, an old companion of Odysseus.
- NAUSICAA: daughter of Arete, princess of the Phaeacians.
- NESTOR: son of Neleus, king of Pylos.
- OCEANUS: the river running around the outer rim of the world.
- ODYSSEUS: king of Ithaca, son of Laertes, husband of Penelope, father of Telemachus.
- OLYMPUS: mountain in northern Greece where the major deities live (the Olympians).
- OGYGIA: island where Calypso lives and where she detains Odysseus.
- ORESTES: son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, killer of Aegisthus.
- PENELOPE: daughter of Icarius, wife of Odysseus, mother of Telemachus.
- PERSEPHONE: wife of Hades, goddess of the underworld.
- PHAEACIANS: inhabitants of Scheria, master sailors.
- PHEMIUS: son of Terpes, the professional minstrel in Odysseus' palace.
- PHILOETIUS: a goat and cattle herder on Ithaca friendly to Odysseus.
- POLYPHEMUS: a cyclops, son of Poseidon.
- PONTONOUS: a herald in the court of Alcinous in Phaeacia.
- POSEIDON: god of the sea, brother of Zeus, often called "encircler of the earth" or "Earthshaker."
- PRIAM: king of Troy, killed when the city was captured by Achaeans.

## GLOSSARY

PYLOS: city state in the south Peloponnese ruled by Nestor.

PYTHO: the location of the shrine of Apollo.

SAME: an island close to Ithaca, part of Odysseus' kingdom.

SCHERIA: distant land where the Phaeacians live.

SCYLLA: a monster with many heads.

SIRENS: two singers who lure sailors to their destruction.

SPARTA: city in the central Peloponnese ruled by Menelaus.

STYX: river in Hades by which the gods swear their most solemn oaths.

SUITORS: aristocratic young men courting Penelope in hopes of marrying her.

TEIRESIAS: a blind prophet from Thebes.

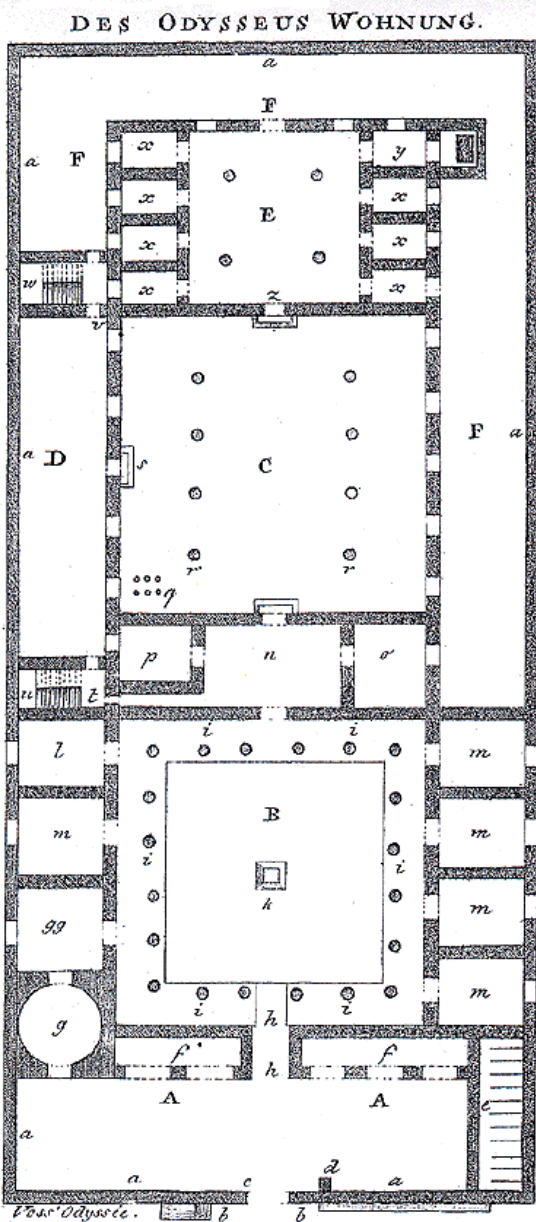
TELEMACHUS: son of Odysseus and Penelope.

TROY: city in Asia Minor, near the Hellespont, besieged by the Achaean (Greek) forces for ten years.

ZACYNTHUS: an island close to Ithaca, part of Odysseus' kingdom.

ZEUS: major divine presence on Olympus, often called "son of Cronos."

POSSIBLE FLOOR PLAN OF ODYSSEUS HOUSE (VOSS 1820)

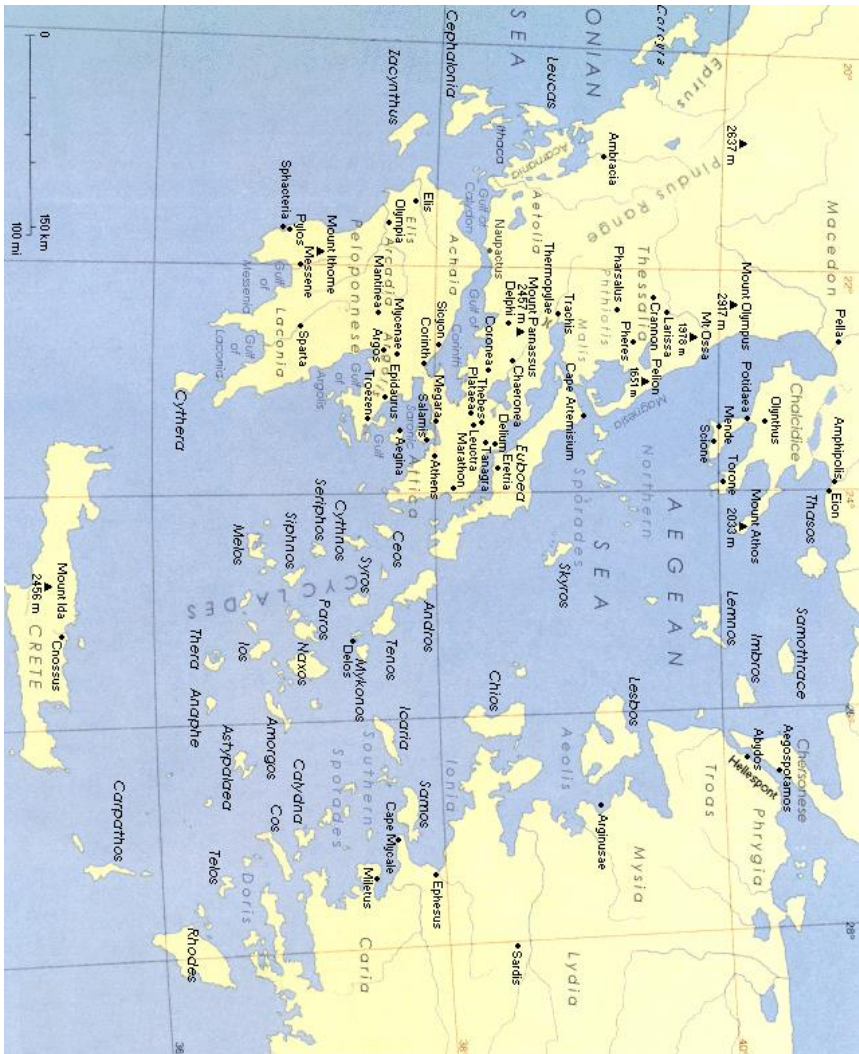


EXPLANATION OF DIAGRAM ON THE FACING PAGE

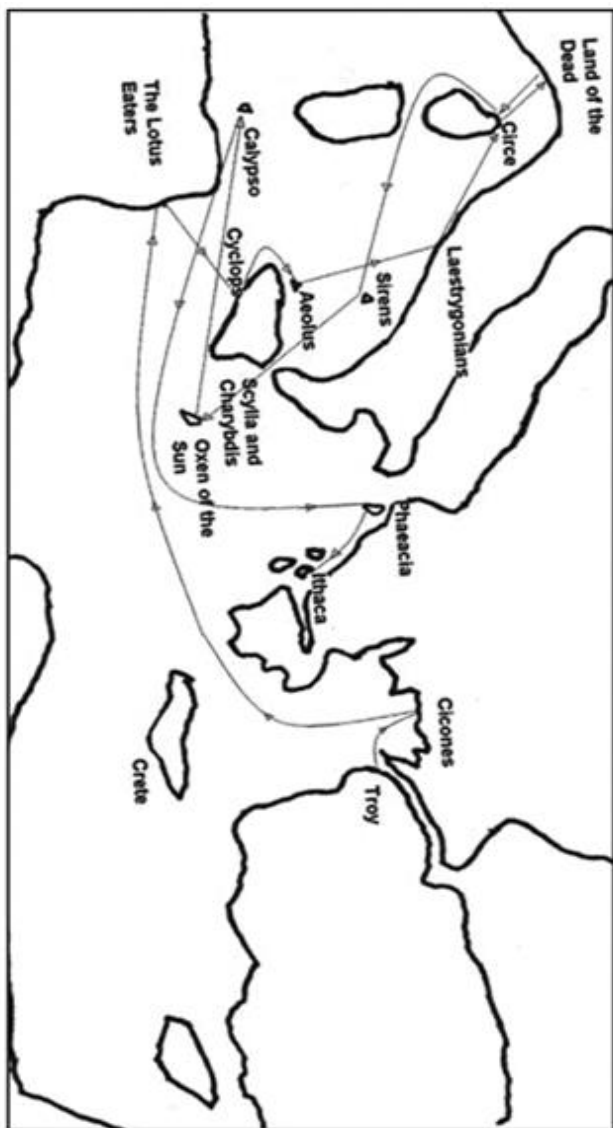
- a. the outer wall
- b. the entrance
- c. the gates
- d. location of the dog Argus
- e. standing place for mules
- f. two halls
- g. the dome
- h. the entrance to the court
- i. the hall
- k. Zeus' altar in the court
- l. Telemachus' room
- m. various rooms
- n. vestibule
- o. room for bathing
- p. activity room
- q. wine preparation room
- r. pillars
- s. simple doors
- t. door from vestibule
- u. stair to Odysseus' rooms
- v. door to women's rooms
- w. stairs to Penelope's room
- x. ground floor rooms
- y. Penelope's bedroom
- z. door
- A. courtyard and fence
- B. level middle court
- C. the hall
- D. passage by-passing the hall
- E. Penelope's work room
- F. rear courtyard

When Odysseus kills the Suitors he is standing with his bow at the lower entrance to the main hall, C. The doors to the women's quarters (at v and z) have been locked. The only way out for the Suitors is a small door at s, which leads to the passageway D. Odysseus places Eumaeus at the end of the passage (at point t) to prevent any Suitor getting out into the courtyard B.

## ANCIENT GREECE AND WESTERN ASIA MINOR



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**One Possible Representation of Odysseus' Journey Home.  
 The most questionable location is Calypso's island, which may be  
 further west or in the east.**

## A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATOR

Ian Johnston is an Emeritus Professor at Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* and of *Essays and Arguments: A Handbook for Writing Student Essays*. He also translated a number of works, including the following:

Aeschylus, *Oresteia (Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, Eumenides)*  
Aeschylus, *Persians*  
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*  
Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*  
Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*  
Aristophanes, *Birds*  
Aristophanes, *Clouds*  
Aristophanes, *Frogs*  
Aristophanes, *Knights*  
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*  
Aristophanes, *Peace*  
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics (Abridged)*  
Cuvier, *On the Revolutionary Upheavals on the Surface of the Earth*  
Descartes, *Discourse on Method*  
Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*  
Diderot, *A Conversation Between D'Alembert and Diderot*  
Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*  
Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*  
Euripides, *Bacchae*  
Euripides, *Electra*  
Euripides, *Hippolytus*  
Euripides, *Medea*  
Euripides, *Orestes*  
Homer, *Iliad (Complete and Abridged)*  
Homer, *Odyssey (Complete and Abridged)*  
Kafka, *Metamorphosis*  
Kafka, *Selected Shorter Writings*  
Kant, *Universal History of Nature and Theory of Heaven*  
Kant, *On Perpetual Peace*  
Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy, Volume I*  
Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*  
Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*  
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*  
Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*  
Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life*  
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*  
Rousseau, *On the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men [Second Discourse]*  
Rousseau, *On the Sciences and the Arts [First Discourse]*  
Rousseau, *Social Contract*  
Sophocles, *Antigone*  
Sophocles, *Ajax*

Sophocles, *Electra*  
Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*  
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*  
Sophocles, *Philoctetes*  
Wedekind, *Castle Wetterstein*  
Wedekind, *Marquis of Keith*.

Most of these translations have been published as books or audiobooks (or both)—by Richer Resources Publications, Broadview Press, Naxos, Audible, and others.

Ian Johnston maintains a web site where texts of these translations are freely available to students, teachers, artists, and the general public. The site includes a number of Ian Johnston's lectures on these (and other) works, handbooks, curricular materials, and essays, all freely available.

The addresses where these texts are available are as follows:

<https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/>  
<http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/index.html>