

## CHAPTER ONE

### *BOOK FOUR*

#### BOOK FOUR

##### Telemachus Visits Menelaus in Sparta

[Telemachus and Peisistratus arrive at Menelaus' home in Sparta; Menelaus welcomes them, talks of Agamemnon and Odysseus; Helen questions Menelaus about the guests, drugs the wine, tells the story of Odysseus visiting Troy disguised as a beggar; Menelaus talks about the Trojan Horse; Telemachus' asks Menelaus' advice; 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, but Telemachus declines; the suitors hatch a plan to kill Telemachus; Penelope hears of their plans and is anxious; Athena sends her a phantom to reassure her; some of the suitors sail off to set an ambush for Telemachus.]

When Telemachus and Peisistratus reached  
the Spartan plain and its surrounding hills,  
they went straight to splendid Menelaus' palace.<sup>1</sup>  
They found him inside his house, at a marriage feast  
he was providing for his many relatives,  
in honour of his noble son and daughter.  
He was sending her away to Neoptolemus,  
son of man-destroying Achilles—back in Troy  
he had first promised he would offer her to him.

[10] He'd pledged his word, and now the gods were making sure  
the marriage would take place. He was seeing her off  
with chariots and horses for her journey  
to the famous city of the Myrmidons,  
whom her husband ruled. For his son, Menelaus  
was bringing Alector's daughter home to Sparta.

That son, mighty Megapenthes, born to a slave,  
 was his favourite, for the gods had granted Helen  
 no more children after she had given birth  
 to the lovely girl Hermione, as beautiful  
 [20] as golden Aphrodite. So they were feasting  
 in the massive palace with its high-pitched roof—  
 neighbours and relatives of glorious Menelaus,  
 all enjoying themselves. Among them was a singer,  
 accompanying his godlike song by playing the lyre.  
 As he began to sing, two tumblers ran and jumped  
 here and there, through the middle of the crowd.

As the two visitors, heroic Telemachus  
 and Nestor's noble son, stood at the palace gate  
 with their two horses, lord Eteoneus came out,  
 [30] a diligent attendant to splendid Menelaus.  
 When he noticed them, he went back inside the house,  
 to tell the shepherd of his people what he'd seen.  
 Standing close to Menelaus, he spoke to him—  
 his words had wings:

"Menelaus, raised by gods,  
 there are two strangers here, two men who look  
 as if they are descended from great Zeus.  
 So tell me if we should, on their behalf,  
 take their fast horses out of harness,  
 or send them off to find some other host  
 who'll welcome them as friends."

[40] These words he uttered  
 really irritated fair-haired Menelaus,  
 so he replied as follows:

"Before today,  
 Eteoneus, son of Boethous,  
 you haven't been a fool. But now you talk  
 just like a silly child. For both of us  
 often feasted on the hospitality  
 of other men before we got back here,  
 hoping that Zeus would give us some relief  
 from later suffering. So unhitch those horses  
 [50] the strangers brought, and bring the men inside,

so they may dine.”

Menelaus finished.

Then Eteoneus left, rushing from the hall  
and calling out to other diligent attendants  
to follow him. They took the sweating horses  
from the harness and hitched them in the stables,  
scattering wheat for them, mixed with white barley grains,  
leaned the chariot against the luminescent wall,  
and led the men into the godlike building.

Telemachus and Peisistratus were amazed

[60] by what they noticed in the regal palace—  
for the high-roofed home of splendid Menelaus,  
a man raised by Zeus, shimmered in the light,  
as if illuminated by the sun or moon.

When their eyes had gazed on it with great delight,  
they went in well-polished bathing tubs to wash.

After women servants had given them a bath,  
rubbed them down with oil, and helped them put on  
thick cloaks and tunics, they sat down on chairs  
right by Menelaus, son of Atreus. A serving woman

[70] carried in a lovely pitcher made of gold  
containing water for them to rinse their hands.

She poured it out into a silver basin,  
so they could wash. Then beside them she pulled up  
a polished table. A valued female servant  
brought in bread and set it down before them,  
and added many tasty delicacies as well,  
taking freely from the food she had in store.

A carver lifted platters with all sorts of meat  
and served them, then set down in front of the two men

[80] goblets made of gold. Fair-haired Menelaus  
welcomed both of them and said:

“Help yourselves.

Enjoy our food. And once you’ve had your meal,  
we’ll ask you who you are. For in you two  
your parents’ breeding has not been destroyed—  
since you are from a royal human stock,  
from god-nurtured kings who wield a sceptre.  
Worthless men could not father sons like you.”

Menelaus spoke. Then with his own hands he picked up  
the roasted meat and set it down in front of them,  
[90] the fat back cut of beef they'd placed in front of him,  
a mark of honour. So the two men helped themselves,  
eating the fine meal prepared and set before them.  
When they'd had their heart's content of food and drink,  
Telemachus leaned his head close to Nestor's son,  
so no one else could hear, and spoke to him:

"Son of Nestor, who brings my heart such joy,  
look at how, throughout this echoing hall,  
there's so much sparkling bronze and gold,  
electrum, silver, ivory—to me  
[100] it's the interior of Zeus' home  
on Mount Olympus, so much untold wealth—  
I'm amazed just looking at it."2

As he said this,  
fair-haired Menelaus heard his words and spoke  
to both of them—his words had wings:

"Dear lads,  
no mortal man can really rival Zeus,  
since his possessions and his palaces  
endure forever. But among human beings,  
someone else might challenge me or not  
about our wealth. I carried riches back  
[110] inside my ships, after we'd endured so much  
while we were wandering. We made it home—  
it took us more than seven years. We roamed  
to Cyprus, Egypt, and Phoenicia.  
We even reached the Ethiopians,  
Sidonians, and Erembi—Lydia, too,  
where lambs are born with horns and ewes give birth  
three times in one full year. No master there,  
nor any shepherd, ever lacks sweet milk  
or cheese or meat, and through the entire year  
[120] their flocks are ready to produce their milk.  
While I was wandering around these lands,  
gathering all sorts of goods, another man  
slaughtered my own brother unexpectedly,  
in secret, thanks to the duplicity

of his murderous wife. So you can understand  
there is no joy for me in being king  
of these possessions. You may have heard this  
from your fathers, whoever they may be.  
I suffered many troubles and allowed  
[130] a really well-established home, endowed  
with many noble riches, to collapse.  
I wish I could live with one third my wealth  
here in my home, if those men could be safe,  
the ones who died in the wide land of Troy,  
far from horse-breeding Argos. And yet,  
although I often sit here in my house  
feeling sorry and in mourning for them all,  
sometimes groaning to relieve my spirit  
and sometimes calling for a end to moaning,  
[140] for one can quickly get too much of sorrow,  
still, for all my grieving, I do not lament  
all those men as much as I do one man,  
who, when I think of him, makes me despise  
both sleep and food, for of all Achaeans  
no one toiled as hard as did Odysseus,  
who took so much upon himself. For him,  
it seems, there would be no end of trouble,  
and I cannot forget to grieve for him.  
He's been away so long. And we don't know  
[150] if he's alive or dead. Old man Laertes,  
I would think, is in mourning for him,  
and so is sensible Penelope,  
and Telemachus, as well, whom he left  
a new-born child at home."

Menelaus spoke.

His words stirred up a desire in Telemachus  
to lament his father. So from his eyelids  
he shed a tear onto the ground, as he heard  
what Menelaus said about Odysseus.  
With both his hands he pulled up the purple cloak  
[160] to hide his eyes. Noticing this, Menelaus  
debated in his mind and heart: Should he allow  
Telemachus to speak about his father,  
or should he first question him and sound him out  
on each and every detail? As he thought of this

in his mind and heart, Helen came into the room,  
 emerging from her fragrant high-roofed chamber.  
 She looked like golden-arrowed goddess Artemis.  
 Adreste came in, too. She set in place for her  
 a finely crafted chair. Alcippe carried in  
 [170] a soft wool rug. Phylo brought a silver basket,  
 which Helen had been given by Alcandre,  
 wife to Polybus, who lived in Thebes in Egypt,  
 where the most massive hoards of rich possessions  
 lie in people's homes. He'd given Menelaus  
 a pair of tripods and two silver bathing tubs,  
 as well as ten gold talents. In addition,  
 his wife presented Helen with some lovely gifts—  
 a golden spinning staff and silver basket,  
 with wheels below and rims of plated gold.  
 [180] The servant woman Phylo brought this basket in  
 and placed it by her side, filled with fine-spun yarn.  
 On it lay the spinning rod full of purple wool.  
 Helen sat down on the chair, a stool beneath her feet.  
 At once she started speaking to her husband,  
 asking detailed questions.

“Do we know,  
 my divinely cherished Menelaus,  
 who these men who've come into our home  
 claim to be? Shall I speak up and pretend,  
 or shall I tell the truth? My heart tells me  
 [190] I must be frank. I can't say I've ever seen  
 someone who looks so much like someone else,  
 whether man or woman. When I see it,  
 I'm amazed—this man looks just like the son  
 of brave Odysseus—I mean Telemachus,  
 whom he left at home a new-born child,  
 when, because I'd acted so disgracefully,  
 you Achaeans all marched off to Troy,  
 your hearts intent on brutal warfare.”

Fair-haired Menelaus then said in reply:

[200] “This likeness you've just noticed, my dear wife,  
 I've observed, as well. His feet are similar,  
 as are his hands, the glances from his eyes,

his head, and his hair on top. And just now,  
as I was remembering Odysseus,  
discussing all the troubles he'd endured  
because of me, he let a bitter tear  
fall from his eyes and raised the purple cloak  
across his eyelids."

Then Peisistratus, Nestor's son,  
spoke out and said:

"Menelaus, son of Atreus,  
[210] Zeus-fostered leader of your people,  
this man here is indeed, as you have said,  
Odysseus' son. But he's a prudent man—  
in his heart he's too ashamed to come  
on his first visit here and put on a show  
with some assertive speech in front of you,  
whose voice we listen to with great delight,  
as if it were a god's. I've been sent here  
by Geranian horseman Nestor as his guide.  
He wants to see you and get your advice,  
[220] in word or deed. For with his father gone,  
a child has many troubles in his home,  
and there is no one there to help him.  
That is what's happened with Telemachus.  
His father's vanished, and there's no one else  
to protect his house from ruin."

Fair-haired Menelaus  
then answered Peisistratus, saying:

"Well now,  
this is strange indeed—to my home has come  
the offspring of a man I cherish, someone  
who, on my behalf, endured much hardship.  
[230] If he'd returned, I thought I'd welcome him  
above all other Argives, should far-seeing Zeus  
on Mount Olympus let the two of us  
make it home by sea in our swift ships.  
I would have given him an Argive city  
and built a home for him, where he could live,  
bringing him from Ithaca with all his wealth,

his son, and his own people. I'd have emptied  
 some neighbouring city in the region,  
 whose people all acknowledge me as king.  
 [240] Then we could live here and be together,  
 and nothing would have separated us.  
 We could have often entertained each other,  
 getting joy from one another's company,  
 until Death's black cloud came to embrace us.  
 But god himself must have been envious,  
 to make that unlucky man the only one  
 who didn't get back home."

Menelaus finished.  
 What he'd just said made them all feel like weeping.  
 Argive Helen, daughter of Zeus, began to cry,  
 [250] as did Telemachus and Menelaus, too,  
 son of Atreus. Nestor's son could not keep the tears  
 out of his eyes. In his heart he was remembering  
 valiant Antilochus, killed by Dawn's courageous son.<sup>3</sup>  
 With him in mind, Peisistratus spoke—his words had wings:

"Son of Atreus, old warrior Nestor  
 used to say, when we conversed together  
 and your name was mentioned in our home,  
 that, as far as sound thinking was concerned,  
 you were preeminent among all men.  
 [260] So, if it seems somehow appropriate,  
 you should listen to me now. I don't enjoy  
 weeping at dinner time, and early Dawn  
 will soon be here. I don't think it shameful  
 to cry for any mortal man who's died  
 and met his fate. In fact, this ritual  
 is the only ceremony we give  
 for these unhappy men—we cut our hair  
 and let the tears run down our cheeks. I have  
 a brother who was killed, not the worst man  
 [270] among the Argives. Perhaps you knew him.  
 I never met him, never even saw him,  
 but they say Antilochus surpassed all men  
 in running fast and fighting well."

Fair-haired Menelaus



then answered Peisistratus, saying:

"My friend,  
you have truly mentioned everything  
a right-thinking man might say or do,  
even someone older than yourself.  
The kind of father you were born from  
enables you to speak so sensibly.

- [280] To recognize someone's inheritance  
is easy, when the son of Cronos spins  
good fortune's threads at marriage and at birth,  
the way he now has done for Nestor,  
granting him for all his days continually  
to reach a ripe old age in his own home,  
with sons who are, in turn, intelligent  
and great spear fighters, too. But we must stop  
and let that earlier weeping cease. Let's have  
water poured upon our hands, then once again  
[290] turn our minds to dinner. In the morning  
there'll be stories for Telemachus and me  
to tell each other to our heart's content."

He finished speaking. Then one of his attendants,  
diligent Asphalion, poured water on their hands,  
and they reached for the rich food spread out before them.

- Then Helen, Zeus' daughter, thought of something else.  
She quickly dropped into the wine they were enjoying  
a drug which eased men's pains and irritations,  
making them forget their troubles. A drink of this,  
[300] once mixed in with wine, would guarantee no man  
would let a tear fall on his cheek for one whole day,  
not even if his mother and his father died,  
or if, in his own presence, men armed with swords  
hacked down his brother or his son, as he looked on.  
Zeus' daughter had effective healing potions,  
like that drug, which she'd obtained from Polydamna,  
wife of Thon, who came from Egypt, where the fields,  
so rich in grain, produce the greatest crop of drugs,  
many of which, once mixed, are beneficial,  
[310] and many poisonous.<sup>4</sup> Every person there  
is a physician whose knowledge of these things

surpasses that of every other human group,  
 for through their ancestry they stem from Paeon.<sup>5</sup>  
 When Helen had stirred in the drug and told them  
 to serve the wine, she rejoined the conversation  
 and spoke up once again:

- “Menelaus, son of Atreus,  
 whom gods cherish, and you sons of noble men—  
 since both good and bad are given by Zeus,  
 sometimes to one man and, at other times,  
 [320] to someone else, for he is capable  
 of all things, you should now sit in the hall  
 and dine. After that, enjoy your stories.  
 I’ll tell you one I think is suitable.  
 I will not speak of, nor could I recite,  
 everything about steadfast Odysseus,  
 all hardships he went through. But there’s that time  
 when you Achaeans were in such distress  
 and that strong man endured and did so much—  
 right in homeland of those Trojans, too!  
 [330] With savage blows he battered his own body,  
 threw a ragged garment on his shoulders,  
 so he looked like a slave, and then sneaked in,  
 along the broad streets of that hostile city.  
 He hid his own identity, pretending  
 he was someone else, a beggar—something  
 he’d never been among Achaean ships—  
 and then went in the Trojans’ city. None of them  
 suspected anything. I was the only one  
 who recognized him, in spite of his disguise.  
 [340] I questioned him, but his skill in deception  
 made him evasive. Still, when I had bathed him,  
 rubbed him with oil, and was helping him get dressed—  
 once I’d sworn a mighty oath not to reveal  
 among the Trojans that he was Odysseus  
 until he’d reached the swift ships and the huts—  
 he told me all about Achaean plans.  
 Then his long sword slaughtered many Trojans,  
 and he returned, bringing the Achaeans,  
 lots of information. Other Trojan women  
 [350] began to cry aloud, but I was glad.  
 My heart by then had changed—it now desired

to go back. I was sorry for that blindness  
 Aphrodite brought, when she'd led me there,  
 far from my own land, abandoning my child,  
 my bridal room, and my own husband, too,  
 who lacked nothing in good looks or wisdom."

In reply to Helen, fair-haired Menelaus said:

"Yes, indeed, dear wife, everything you've said  
 is true. Before now, I've come to understand  
 [360] the minds and plans of many warriors.  
 I've roamed through many lands. But my eyes  
 have never seen a man to match Odysseus.  
 How I loved his steadfast heart! What about  
 the things that forceful man endured and did  
 in the wooden horse? Achaea's finest men—  
 all of us—were sitting in it, carrying  
 a lethal fate to Trojans. Then you came there,  
 perhaps instructed by some god who wished  
 to give great glory to the Trojans.  
 [370] And, where you walked, noble Deïphobus  
 followed, too.<sup>6</sup> Three times you circled round,  
 feeling that hollow trap. Your voice called out,  
 naming the best warriors among Danaans,  
 and you made it sound just like the voice  
 of each man's Argive wife. Now, I was there,  
 sitting with lord Odysseus in the middle,  
 and with Tydeus' son. We heard you call.  
 Two of us—Diomedes and myself—  
 were eager to get up and charge outside  
 [380] or else to answer back from where we were,  
 inside the horse. But Odysseus stopped us—  
 we were really keen, but he held us in check.  
 Then all the other sons of the Achaeans  
 kept their mouths shut, except for Anticlus,  
 the only one still keen to cry aloud  
 and answer you. Odysseus clapped his hand  
 firmly on Anticlus' mouth and held him,  
 thus rescuing all Achaeans. He kept  
 his grip on Anticlus until Athena  
 led you away."

[390] Then prudent Telemachus replied:

“Menelaus, son of Atreus, cherished by Zeus,  
leader of your people, that incident  
is more painful still—it could not save him  
from a bitter death, not even if the heart  
inside him had been made of iron.  
But come, send us to bed, so sweet Sleep  
can bring us joy, once we lie down to rest.”

Once Telemachus spoke, Helen told her slaves  
to set up mattresses within the corridor  
[400] and spread out lovely purple blankets over them,  
with rugs on top, and over these some woollen cloaks.  
The women left the hall with torches in their hands  
and arranged the beds. A herald led the guests away.  
And so they slept there in the palace vestibule,  
prince Telemachus and Nestor’s noble son.  
The son of Atreus slept in an inner room,  
inside the high-roofed home, with long-robed Helen,  
goddess among women, lying there beside him.

As soon as rose-fingered early Dawn appeared,  
[410] Menelaus, skilled at war shouts, got out of bed  
and put his clothes on, slinging a sharp sword  
around his shoulders. He laced up lovely sandals  
over his sleek feet. Then, looking like some god,  
he left his room. He sat beside Telemachus  
and then addressed him, saying:

“Prince Telemachus,  
what do you need that’s brought you all this way  
on the sea’s broad back to lovely Sparta?  
Is it a public or a private matter?  
Tell me about it, and be frank.”

Shrewd Telemachus  
then said in reply:

[420] “Menelaus, son of Atreus,  
cherished by Zeus and leader of your people,  
I’ve come to see if you could give me news

about my father. My home's being eaten up,  
 my rich estates destroyed. My house is full  
 of enemies who keep on butchering  
 flocks of sheep and shambling bent-horned cattle.  
 They are suitors for my mother—their pride  
 makes them supremely arrogant. That's why  
 I've now come to your knee, to see if you  
 [430] perhaps can tell me of his mournful death—  
 in case your own eyes witnessed it somewhere,  
 or else you've found out from some other man  
 the story of his wandering. For his mother  
 delivered him into a life of sorrow,  
 more so than other men. And do not speak  
 from pity, or give me words of consolation,  
 but tell me truly how you chanced to see him.  
 I'm begging you, if ever in word or deed  
 my father, brave Odysseus, over there,  
 [440] on Trojan soil, where you Achaeans men  
 endured so much, made you a promise  
 and then kept his word, speak to me now,  
 and give me the truth."

Fair-haired Menelaus,  
 very annoyed by what he'd heard, replied:

"It's disgraceful  
 how such wretched cowards want to lie  
 in that brave warrior's bed, as if a deer  
 had lulled her new-born suckling fawns to sleep  
 in a mighty lion's den and then gone roaming  
 through mountain fields and grassy valleys  
 [450] in search of forage—then the lion comes  
 back to his lair and brings to both of them  
 a shameful death. That just how Odysseus  
 will bring those suitors their disgraceful doom.  
 O Father Zeus, Athena, and Apollo,  
 how I wish Odysseus would come back  
 and meet the suitors with the strength he had  
 when he stood up in well-built Lesbos once  
 in a wrestling match with Philomeleides.  
 Using his great power, he threw him down,  
 [460] and all Achaeans men rejoiced. Those suitors

would quickly find their bitter courtship  
ends in a swift death. But these things you ask,  
what you've begged me about, I'll not digress  
to speak of other things, nor will I lie.  
No. What the Old Man of the Sea told me—  
and did so truthfully—I'll not hide from you.  
I won't conceal a single word.

"In Egypt,  
though I was eager to get home, the gods  
prevented me—I had not offered them  
[470] a full and proper sacrifice, and gods  
always demand obedience to their orders.  
Now, just in front of Egypt there's an island,  
right in the crashing sea—it's called Pharos—  
as far off shore as a hollow ship can sail  
in one whole day, when a fine stiff breeze  
blows up behind her. There's a harbour there  
with excellent moorage, and from that spot  
men launch well-balanced ships into the sea,  
once they have taken on supplies of water.  
[480] For twenty days the gods detained me there.  
Not once was there a favourable wind,  
the sort of offshore breeze which makes men's ships  
race out across the broad back of the sea.  
Then my provisions would have all been spent,  
together with the spirit in my crew,  
if a goddess had not felt pity for me  
and rescued us—the goddess Eidothea,  
daughter of the Old Man of the Sea,  
great Proteus. For I had moved her heart,  
[490] more so than other men. When she met me,  
I was by myself, for I'd wandered off,  
away from my companions, who'd gone out,  
as they always did, to scour the island,  
fishing with bent hooks, their stomachs cramped  
from hunger. She came up close to me and said:

'Stranger, are you a slow-witted idiot,  
or are you happy just to let things go  
and find delight in your own suffering?  
You've been stranded so long on this island,

[500] unable to discover any sign of help,  
while your companions' spirits waste away.'

"That's what she said. So then I answered her:

'Whoever you may be among the gods,  
I'll tell you I have not been pent up here  
with my consent. Something must have happened  
to make me act against immortal gods,  
who occupy wide heaven. But tell me this—  
for gods know all things—which immortal one  
keeps my feet shackled here and blocks my way?

[510] Tell me how I find my way back home,  
how I sail across the fish-filled seas.'

"I finished speaking. The lovely goddess  
immediately gave me her answer:

'All right, stranger, I'll be truthful with you.  
The Old Man of the Sea comes here from Egypt,  
I mean infallible, eternal Proteus,  
a god who knows the depths of every sea,  
Poseidon's servant and, so people say,  
my father, too, the one who sired me.

[520] Now, if somehow you could set an ambush  
and catch hold of him, he'd show you your way.  
He'd chart the course for your return and map  
how you could sail across the fish-filled seas.  
And, Zeus-fostered man, if you were willing,  
he'd tell you all the good and evil things  
which have been taking place in your own house  
while you've been travelling away from home  
on such a long and arduous journey.'

"When she'd told me this, I replied and said:

[530] 'Could you yourself produce a strategy  
to ambush this divine old man, in case  
he sees me first and, knowing all my plans,  
escapes me. It's difficult for mortal men  
to overcome a god.'

“Once I’d said this,  
the lovely goddess answered right away:

- ‘Stranger, I’ll be frank—tell you the truth  
in everything. When the sun has made its way  
up into the middle of the heavens,  
that infallible Old Man of the Sea  
[540] emerges from the brine, where he’s concealed  
by dark waves stirred up by the West Wind’s breath.  
Once he gets here, he lies down to rest  
in these hollow caves, and around him sleeps  
a herd of seals—they are the offspring  
of the lovely daughter of the sea and swim up  
out of the grey water. Their breath gives off  
the sharp salt smell of the deep sea. At daybreak,  
I’ll take you there and organize an ambush.  
You must carefully select three comrades,  
[550] the best men in those well-decked ships of yours.  
Now I’ll describe for you all the sly tricks  
that old man has. First, he’ll inspect the seals.  
He’ll count them, numbering them off by fives.  
Once he’s looked them over, he’ll lie down  
in their midst, like a shepherd with his sheep.  
As soon as you see him stretched out to sleep,  
then you must use all your strength and courage  
to hold him there for all his desperate moves,  
as he struggles to escape. For he’ll attempt  
[560] to change himself into all sorts of shapes  
of everything that crawls over the earth,  
or into water or a sacred flame.  
You must not flinch—keep up your grip on him—  
make it even tighter. And finally,  
when he begins to speak and questions you  
in the same shape you saw him go to sleep,  
then, warrior king, you can relax your grip  
and let the old man go. Ask him which god  
is angry at you and how you’ll get back,  
[570] charting a course across the fish-filled seas.’

“Saying this, she plunged into the crashing sea.  
I went to where my ships were on the beach—  
my dark heart thinking, as I walked, of many things.



Once I'd reached the ships along the shore,  
 we prepared and ate our evening meal.  
 When immortal night arrived, we lay down  
 beside the breaking surf. Then, as the streaks  
 of rose-fingered early Dawn appeared,  
 I walked along the shores of that wide sea  
 [580] praying in earnest to the gods. Then I took  
 three comrades, the ones I trusted most  
 in any enterprise. That sea goddess,  
 who'd plunged into the bosom of the sea,  
 brought up four seal skins from the ocean depths,  
 each one freshly skinned, then set up the plot  
 against her father. She scooped out in the sand  
 some pits to hide in, and then waited there.  
 Once we'd come up really close beside her,  
 she made us lie down in a row and threw  
 [590] a seal skin over each of us. That ambush  
 would have been too horrible to bear,  
 for the atrocious stench of sea-born seals  
 was dreadful. Who would let himself lie down  
 with creatures from the sea? But Eidothea  
 personally helped us out by thinking up  
 a useful remedy—she got ambrosia,  
 sweet-smelling oil of the immortal gods,  
 and put it under each man's nose. That killed  
 the foul stink coming from those animals.  
 [600] With patient hearts we waited there all morning.  
 Crowds of seals emerged and then lay down  
 in rows along the seashore. At noon,  
 the old man came up out of the water,  
 discovered the plump seals, looked at each one,  
 and made his count, beginning first with us,  
 whom he included with the animals.  
 His heart did not suspect there was a trick.  
 Then he lay down. We charged up with a shout  
 and grabbed him in our arms. But the old man  
 [610] did not forget his skilful tricks. At first,  
 he turned himself into a hairy lion,  
 and then into a serpent and a leopard,  
 then a huge wild boar. He changed himself  
 to flowing water and a towering tree.  
 We didn't flinch but kept our grip on him.

Our hearts were resolute. When the old man,  
for all his devious skills, got tired out,  
he spoke up, asking me some questions:

[620] ‘Son of Atreus, which god helped your plan  
and forged a scheme so you could lie in wait  
and ambush me against my will? And why?  
What do you need?’

“When he’d said this to me,  
I answered him and said:

‘You know that, old man,  
so why mislead me with such questioning?  
I’ve been stranded too long on this island  
and can’t discover any sign of help.  
The heart is growing faint inside me.  
So tell me, for you gods know everything,  
which one of the immortals chains my feet  
[630] and blocks my way. And speak to me as well  
about my journey back, how I may sail  
across the fish-filled seas.’

“When I’d said that,  
he answered me at once:

‘Before you left,  
you should have offered a fine sacrifice  
to Zeus and other gods, so you could sail  
across the wine-dark sea and then arrive  
in your own land as fast as possible.  
Your fate decrees you will not see your friends  
or reach your homeland or your well-built house,  
[640] until you’ve gone back once more to Egypt,  
to the waters of that Zeus-fed river,  
and made holy sacrifices to the gods,  
the immortal ones who hold wide heaven.  
The gods will then give you that journey home  
which you so yearn for.’

“As the old man spoke,  
my fond heart broke apart inside me,

because he'd told me I must go once more  
across the misty seas, on that long trip  
to Egypt, a painful journey. But still,  
I answered him and spoke these words:

[650] 'Old man,  
I will carry out what you have told me.  
But come now, tell me—and speak truthfully—  
did Achaeans in those ships get safely back,  
all those men Nestor and myself left there  
when we set out from Troy? Did any die  
a bitter death on board, or in the arms  
of those who loved them, after they'd tied up  
the loose threads of the war?'

"That's what I asked,  
and he gave me his answer right away:

[660] 'Son of Atreus, why question me on this?  
You don't need to know or to read my mind.  
For once you've learned the details of all this,  
you'll not hold back your tears for very long.  
Many of those warriors were destroyed,  
and many men survived. Among Achaeans,  
armed in bronze, only two leading warriors  
were killed on their way home. As for the fights,  
you were there yourself. There is one leader  
held back by the sea somewhere, but still alive.

[670] Ajax perished among his long-oared ships—  
at Gyrae Poseidon first propelled his boat  
against huge rocks, then saved him from the sea.<sup>7</sup>  
Though Athena hated him, he'd have been saved,  
if he'd not grown insanely foolish—  
he stated he had managed to escape  
the sea's huge depths, in spite of all the gods.  
Poseidon heard him make this boastful claim.  
Immediately those mighty hands of his  
picked up his trident and then brought it down

[680] on that rock at Gyrae, splitting it apart.  
One piece stayed in place—the other one  
sheared off and fell into the sea, the part  
where Ajax sat when his mind first became

so utterly deluded. He fell down  
 into the endless surging waves and died  
 by swallowing salt water. But your brother  
 escaped that fate—he and his hollow ships  
 survived, for queen Hera rescued him.  
 And then, when he was just about to reach  
 [690] the steep height at Malea, storm winds caught him.  
 As he groaned in distress, they carried him  
 across the fish-filled seas to the remotest part  
 of where Thyestes used to live, now the home  
 of Thyestes' son Aegisthus.<sup>8</sup> But then,  
 once the gods had changed the wind's direction,  
 it seemed that he could make it safely back.  
 So he got home. And he was full of joy  
 to set foot on his native land once more.  
 He embraced the earth and kissed it—shedding  
 [700] numerous warm tears—he was so delighted  
 at the sight. But a watchman spied him out,  
 someone Aegisthus had placed as lookout,  
 to promote his plot, promising the man,  
 as his reward, two gold talents. He'd been there,  
 on watch, for one whole year, just in case  
 Agamemnon should succeed in getting back  
 without being noticed and remind them all  
 of his ferocious power. The watchman went  
 straight to the palace to report the news  
 [710] to the shepherd of the people. So then,  
 Aegisthus came up with a treacherous plan.  
 He picked out twenty men, the best there were  
 in the whole state, and set up an ambush.  
 Then, in another section of the house,  
 he had a feast made ready and went off  
 with chariot and horses to escort back  
 Agamemnon, shepherd of his people,  
 all the while intending to destroy him.  
 Aegisthus then accompanied him home—  
 [720] he suspected nothing of the murder—  
 and then, after the feast, he butchered him,  
 just as one might slay an ox in its own stall.  
 Of those companions of the son of Atreus  
 who followed him, not one was left alive.  
 Nor were any of Aegisthus' comrades—

they were all slaughtered in the palace.'

"The old man finished speaking. My fond heart  
was shattered, and, as I sat in the sand,  
I wept—my spirit had no wish to live  
[730] or gaze upon the light of day. But then,  
when I'd had my fill of rolling in the sand  
and weeping, the Old Man of the Sea  
spoke frankly to me, saying,

'Son of Atreus,  
you must not spend so much time like this,  
in constant weeping. That's no help to us.  
You must strive, as quickly as you can,  
to get back to your native land. It may be  
you'll find Aegisthus is still living there,  
or else Orestes has preceded you  
[740] and killed the man. If so, then there's a chance  
you'll get back for Aegisthus' funeral feast.'

"The old man finished speaking. In my chest  
my heart and spirit, for all my grieving,  
felt strong once again. So I answered him—  
my words had wings:

'Now I understand  
what's happened to these men. But tell me  
about the third one—whether he still lives,  
held back by the wide sea, or has been killed.  
I wish to hear that, for all my sorrow.'

[750] "I spoke, and he at once replied, saying,

'You mean Laertes' son, from Ithaca.  
I saw him on an island. He was weeping  
in the palace of the nymph Calypso,  
who keeps him there by force. He has no way  
of getting back to his own land—he lacks  
companions and ships equipped with oars,  
to carry him across the sea's broad back.  
As for you, Zeus-fostered Menelaus,  
it's not ordained that you will meet your fate

[760] and die in horse-rich Argos. No. The gods  
 will send you off to the Elysian fields,  
 and to the outer limits of the earth—  
 the place where fair-haired Rhadamanthus lives  
 and life for human beings is really easy—  
 there's no snow or heavy storms or even rain,  
 and Oceanus sends a steady breeze,  
 as West Wind blows to keep men cool and fresh.  
 Helen is your wife—that's why they'll do this,  
 because they see you as the man who married  
 Zeus daughter.'<sup>9</sup>

[770] "With these words,  
 the old man plunged back in the surging sea.  
 I went to my ships and godlike ship mates.  
 As I walked, my heart was darkly troubled,  
 but once I'd reached my ships beside the sea  
 and we'd prepared a meal, immortal night  
 came down, and we slept there on the shore."

"As soon as rose-fingered early Dawn appeared,  
 we dragged our boats into the sacred sea,  
 then fitted masts and sails on our trim ships.

[780] The men climbed in, went to their rowing seats,  
 and, sitting well in order, raised their oars  
 and struck the grey salt sea. So I sailed back  
 to Egypt's heaven-fed river once again,  
 and there I offered a full sacrifice.

Once I'd appeased the anger of those gods  
 who live forever, I made a funeral mound  
 for Agamemnon, to make sure his fame  
 would never die, and when I'd finished that,  
 I set off on my journey home. The gods

[790] gave me fair winds and brought me with all speed  
 back to the native land I love.

"But come now,  
 you must stay with me in my palace here  
 ten or eleven days, and after that  
 I'll send you off with honour. I'll give you  
 lovely gifts—a finely polished chariot  
 and three horses, too, and, as well as these,

a gorgeous cup, so you can pour libations  
to eternal gods and remember me  
for all your days to come."

Shrewd Telemachus  
then said to Menelaus in reply:

- [800] "Son of Atreus,  
you must not hold me up for very long.  
To tell the truth, I'd like to stay right here,  
sitting in your palace an entire year,  
and I'd not miss my parents or my home,  
for I get such astonishing delight  
from what you say and from your stories.  
But my companions are already restless  
back in sacred Pylos, and time has passed  
while you've detained me here. As for gifts,  
[810] give me whatever you wish, just let it be  
something you treasure. But I'll not take  
those horses back with me to Ithaca—  
I'll leave them here to bring you pleasure.  
For you are king of an extensive plain  
in which huge quantities of lotus grow,  
with sedge, broad-eared white barley, wheat, and rye.  
But there are no wide plains in Ithaca,  
no meadows. It has grazing land for goats,  
something I prefer to lush horse pasture.  
[820] No island sloping down into the sea  
has meadows fit for raising horses,  
and that's especially true of Ithaca."

Then the great war-shouter Menelaus smiled,  
patted Telemachus with his hand, and said:

- "My lad, the way you've spoken out proclaims  
your noble blood. So I'll exchange those gifts.  
That I can do. Of all the things stored up  
here in my home, I'll give you the finest,  
the most expensive one. I'll offer you  
[830] a beautifully crafted mixing bowl.  
It's all silver, with rims of hammered gold.  
Hephaestus made it. Warrior Phaedimus,

the Sidonians' king, presented it to me  
when I went there and his home sheltered me.  
Now I'd like to give that mixing bowl to you."

So these men kept conversing with each other.

Meanwhile, back in Telemachus' Ithaca,  
the banqueters had reached the royal palace,  
driving sheep there and carrying strong wine.  
[840] Their well-dressed wives were sending bread for them.  
As these men were in the hall preparing dinner,  
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,  
[850] in our hearts do we truly know or not  
when Telemachus will be coming back  
from sandy Pylos? He went away  
taking a ship of mine which I now need  
to make the trip across to spacious Elis,  
where I have twelve mares and sturdy mules  
still sucking on the teat, not yet broken.  
I want to fetch and break in one of them."

He finished. In their hearts the suitors were amazed.  
They had no idea Telemachus had gone  
[860] to Pylos, land of Neleus, and still believed  
he was somewhere with the flocks on his estates  
or with the swineherd. So in answer to Noemon,  
Antinous, Eupheithes' son, spoke up:

"Tell me the truth—  
when did he leave? What young men went with him?  
Did he take citizens of Ithaca,  
or were those men his slaves and servants?  
That's something he could do. And tell me this—



I want the truth, so I know what happened—  
 did he take that black ship against your will,  
 [870] by force, or did you volunteer to give it,  
 because he begged you to?"

Noemon, son of Phronius,  
 then answered Antinous:

"I agreed to give it to him.  
 Would anyone have acted otherwise,  
 when a man like him, with a grief-stricken heart,  
 makes a request? It would be difficult  
 to deny him what he asked. The young men—  
 the ones who went with him—are excellent,  
 except for us, the best this land affords.  
 As they embarked, I observed their leader,  
 [880] Mentor, or some god who looks just like him.  
 I'm surprised at that—at dawn yesterday  
 I saw lord Mentor, though by that time  
 he'd already gone on board for Pylos."

Once he finished speaking, Noemon went away,  
 back to his father's house. But those two suitors,  
 Antinous and Eurymachus, had angry hearts.  
 They quickly got the suitors to give up their games  
 and had them sit down all together in a group.  
 Antinous, Eupeithes' son, then spoke to them.  
 [890] He was annoyed, his black heart filled with rage,  
 his flashing eyes a fiery blaze:

"Here's trouble.  
 In his overbearing way Telemachus,  
 with this voyage of his, has now achieved  
 significant success. And we believed  
 he'd never see it through. Against our will,  
 this mere youngster has simply gone away,  
 launching a ship and choosing our best men,  
 the finest in the land. He'll soon begin  
 creating problems for us. I hope Zeus  
 [900] will sap his strength before he comes of age  
 and reaches full maturity. 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."

When Antinous had finished,  
all of them agreed, and they instructed him  
to carry out what he'd proposed. Then they got up  
[910] and went back inside the palace of Odysseus.

Now, Penelope was not ignorant for long  
of what those suitors were scheming in their hearts.  
For the herald Medon told her. He'd been listening  
outside the hall, as they were making plans inside,  
weaving their plot. He proceeded through the house  
to tell Penelope the news. As he came out  
just across the threshold, Penelope called him:

"Herald, why have these noble suitors  
sent you out here? Are you supposed to tell  
[920] the female household slaves of lord Odysseus  
to stop their work and then make them a feast?  
After this whole courtship, I hope they never  
get together somewhere else. And today,  
may they make the banquet in this house  
their latest and their last, all those of you  
who by gathering here consume so much,  
the wealth of wise Telemachus. It seems,  
when you were children all that time ago,  
you didn't pay attention to your fathers,  
[930] as they talked about the kind of man  
Odysseus was among their generation—  
in Ithaca he never did or said  
a hurtful thing to anyone, unlike  
the usual habits of our godlike kings,  
who hate one man and love another one.  
He never did the slightest injury  
to any man. But your heart and wicked acts  
are plain to see—you show no gratitude  
for kindness shown to you in earlier days."

[940] Then Medon, an intelligent man, said to her:

“My queen, I wish that what you’ve just described were the worst of it. But now these suitors are planning something much more dangerous and troubling—I hope the son of Cronos never permits them to succeed. They mean to kill Telemachus with their sharp swords, as he comes home. He’s sailed off to Pylos and then to sacred Sparta, seeking news about his father.”

As Medon spoke, Penelope

[950] felt her heart and knees give way where she was standing. For some time she couldn’t speak a word to him—both her eyes were full of tears, and she lost her voice. But finally she spoke to him and said:

“Herald, why did my son leave? There was no need for him to go on board swift-moving ships, men’s salt-water horses, to sail across enormous seas. Did he do it to make sure he’d never leave a name among all men?”

Wise Medon then answered Penelope and said:

[960] “I don’t know if some god was urging him or if his own heart prompted him to sail for Pylos, to learn about his father—whether he was coming home again or had met his fate.”

After saying this, Medon went away, down through Odysseus’ home. A cloud of heart-destroying grief fell on Penelope. She lacked the strength to sit down on a chair—and there were many in the room. She collapsed, crouching on the threshold of that splendid room,

[970] moaning in distress. Around her, all her servants cried out, too, all those inside the house, young and old. Still weeping with that group, Penelope spoke out:

“Friends, listen. For Zeus has given me  
 more sorrows than any other woman  
 born and raised with me. Some time ago  
 I lost my noble husband—a man  
 who had a lion’s heart and qualities  
 which made him stand out among Danaans  
 in all sorts of ways, a courageous man,  
 [980] whose famous name is well known far and wide  
 throughout all Greece and middle Argos.  
 And now, without a word, storm winds sweep  
 my son, whom I so love, away from home,  
 and I don’t even hear about his journey.  
 You are too cruel. In your minds, not one of you  
 thought to rouse me from my bed, though you knew,  
 deep in your hearts, the moment he embarked  
 in his black hollow ship. If I had known  
 he was going to undertake this journey,  
 [990] he would have stayed here. He really would,  
 for all his eagerness to make the trip.  
 Or else I would have perished in these rooms  
 before he left me. But now one of you  
 must quickly summon old man Dolius,  
 my servant, whom my father gave to me  
 before I ever came to Ithaca,  
 the one who tends my orchard full of trees,  
 so he may go as quickly as he can,  
 to sit beside Laertes and tell him  
 [1000] all these things. Perhaps Laertes then  
 in his mind can somehow weave a plan,  
 then go and weep his case before those men  
 intent on wiping out his family,  
 the race of heavenly Odysseus.”

The good nurse Eurycleia answered Penelope:

“Dear lady, you may kill me with a sword  
 or keep me in the house, but I’ll not hide  
 a word from you. For I knew all this.  
 I gave him everything he asked for,  
 [1010] bread and sweet wine, too. He made me swear  
 a mighty oath I would not tell you,

not until he'd been away eleven days  
 or you yourself should miss him and find out  
 he'd left—in case you harmed your lovely skin  
 with weeping. But you should have a bath,  
 put clean clothing on your body, then go—  
 take your servants to your room upstairs  
 and make your prayers there to Athena,  
 daughter of great Zeus who bears the aegis.

[1020] She may rescue him from death. Don't bother  
 that old man with still more troubles.  
 I don't think the family of Arcesius  
 is so completely hated by the gods,  
 that one of them cannot still somehow  
 protect this high-roofed home and its estates,  
 so rich and far away."

Eurycleia spoke.

What she said eased the sorrow in Penelope,  
 whose eyes stopped weeping. She left to bathe herself,  
 put fresh clothing on her body, and went away,

[1030] taking her female servants to her room upstairs.  
 She placed some grains of barley in a basket  
 and then prayed to Athena:

"O untiring child  
 of aegis-bearing Zeus, hear my prayer.  
 If resourceful Odysseus in his home  
 ever burned a sacrifice to you—  
 plump cattle thighs or sheep—recall that now,  
 I pray. Save my dear son and guard him well  
 from those suitors and their murderous pride."

With these words, Penelope raised a sacred cry,  
 and the goddess heard her prayer.

[1040] But the suitors  
 were still carousing in those shadowy halls.  
 One overbearing youth would say something like this:

"Ah ha, our queen with many suitors  
 is really getting ready for the marriage,  
 knowing nothing of the preparations

for the killing of her son.”

That’s the sort of thing  
any one of them would say, in his ignorance  
of how things finally would end. Then Antinous  
addressed them all and said:

“Noble lords,  
[1050] you must not speak out so intemperately—  
no more talk like that. Someone may report it,  
especially to those inside the house.  
Come now, let’s get up quietly and work  
to carry out that plan which all our hearts  
responded to with such delight.”

After saying this, Antinous picked out his men,  
twenty of the best. They went down to the shore  
and dragged a swift black ship into deep water.  
They set the mast in place, carried sails on board,  
[1060] and fitted oars into their leather rowing loops,  
all in due order, then spread the white sail out.  
Their proud attendants brought up weapons for them.  
They moored the ship quite near the shore, then disembarked  
and ate a meal there, waiting until evening fell.

Wise Penelope lay there in her upstairs room,  
taking no food—she would not eat or drink—  
worrying if her fine son could avoid being killed,  
or if those arrogant suitors would slaughter him.  
Just as a lion grows tense, overcome with fear,  
[1070] when encircled by a crowd of crafty hunters,  
that’s how her mind was working then, as sweet sleep  
came over her. Then she lay back and got some rest,  
and all her limbs relaxed.

But then Athena,  
goddess with the glittering eyes, thought of something else.  
She made a phantom shape, exactly like a woman,  
Iphthime, daughter of the brave Icarius  
and wife to Eumelus, who lived in Pherae.  
Athena sent this shape to lord Odysseus’ home,  
while Penelope was in distress and grieving,

[1080] to tell her she should end her tears and sorrow.

The phantom passed through the thong which held the bolt  
and went into Penelope's room. Standing there  
above her head, it spoke to her, saying:

"Penelope,  
is your heart anxious as you lie asleep?  
It shouldn't be. The gods who live at ease  
will not bring you distress and suffering—  
your son will still get home. For he's someone  
who's never been offensive to the gods."

Wise Penelope remained in her sweet sleep  
[1090] beside the gate of dreams. But she replied and said:

"Sister, why have you come here? Up to now  
you haven't visited—your home's so far away.  
You tell me to end my cries and suffering,  
all the pains which grieve my mind and heart.  
But I've already lost my noble husband,  
that lion-hearted man, whose qualities  
made him preeminent among Danaans  
in all sorts of ways—a courageous warrior,  
whose fame is widely known throughout wide Greece  
[1100] and middle Argos. And now the son I love  
has set off in a hollow ship—poor child—  
with no idea of how men struggle on  
or conduct themselves in meetings. That's why  
I grieve for him much more than for my husband.  
He makes me tremble—I am so afraid  
he'll run into troubles with those people  
in the land he's visiting or at sea.  
Many enemies are now devising schemes  
to hurt him, in their eagerness to kill him  
[1110] before he gets back to his native land."

The dim phantom then answered Penelope:

"Be brave. And do not let your mind and heart  
succumb to fear too much. He has with him  
the sort of guide whom other men have prayed  
to stand beside them, and she has power—

yes, Pallas Athena. While you've been grieving,  
she's taken pity on you. She's the one  
who sent me here to tell you this."

Wise Penelope  
then spoke out in reply:

"If you're indeed a god  
[1120] and have listened to that goddess when she speaks,  
then tell me news of that ill-fated man.  
I'm begging you. Is Odysseus still alive  
and looking at the sunlight, or is he dead,  
already down in Hades' home?"

The faint image then answered Penelope and said:

"No, no. I cannot talk of him in any detail  
and tell you whether he's alive or dead.  
It's a bad thing to chatter like the wind."

Once it said this, the phantom slipped away,  
[1130] through the door bolt out into a breath of wind.  
The daughter of Icarius woke from her sleep,  
her heart encouraged that so clear a dream  
had raced towards her in the dead of night.

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  
[1140] in both directions. The Achaeans waited there  
and set up their ambush for Telemachus.