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.1
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.
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
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,
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."

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
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
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
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
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,
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
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
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
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
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,
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
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
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
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.
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
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:

"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,
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,

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.
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.
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,
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.3
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.
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
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.
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.4 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 Paeeon.5
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,
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!
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.
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
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
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.
And, where you walked, noble Deïphobus
followed, too.6 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
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:

"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
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,
on Trojan soil, where you Achaean 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
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,
and all Achaean 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
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.
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,
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,
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?
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.
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:

'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
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,
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
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,
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
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
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.
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
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:

'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
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,
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:

'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:

'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.
Ajax perished among his long-oared ships—
at Gyrae Poseidon first propelled his boat
against huge rocks, then saved him from the sea.7
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
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
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.8 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
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
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—
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
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
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.'

"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
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.'9

"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.
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
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:

"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,
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.
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
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.
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,
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
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, Eupeithes' 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,
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,
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.
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
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
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
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,
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,
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,
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,
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
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,
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.
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,
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.

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,
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,
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,
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,
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
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
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
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
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,
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
in both directions. The Achaeans waited there
and set up their ambush for Telemachus.