BOOK ONE
Athena Visits Ithaca

[The invocation to the Muse; the gods discuss Odysseus and decide he should return; Athena goes to Ithaca to encourage Telemachus, speaks to him disguised as Mentes, offering advice about dealing with his mother and the suitors and suggesting he go on a trip to Pylos and Sparta; Penelope speaks to Phemius, the singer, asking him to change the song; Telemachus criticizes her; Penelope goes upstairs; Eurycleia carries the lit torches to escort Telemachus to his rooms.]

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

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

But at that moment,
Poseidon was among the Ethiopians,
a long way off, those same Ethiopians,
the most remote of people, who live divided
in two different groups, one where Hyperion goes down,
the other where he rises. Poseidon went there
to receive a sacrificial offering to him—
bulls and rams—and was sitting at a banquet,
enjoying himself. But other gods had gathered
in the great hall of Olympian Zeus. Among them all,
the father of gods and men was first to speak.
In his heart he was remembering royal Aegisthus,
whom Orestes, Agamemnon's famous son,
had killed. With him in mind, Zeus addressed the gods:

"It's disgraceful how these humans blame the gods.
They say their tribulations come from us,
when they themselves, through their own foolishness,
bring hardships which are not decreed by Fate.
Now there's Aegisthus, who took for himself
the wife of Agamemnon, Atreus' son,
and then murdered him, once the man came home.
None of that was set by Fate. Aegisthus knew
his acts would bring on his total ruin.
We'd sent Hermes earlier to speak to him.
The keen-eyed killer of Argus told him
not to slay the man or seduce his wife,
for Orestes would avenge the son of Atreus,
once he grew up and longed for his own land.
That's what Hermes said, but his fine words
did not persuade Aegisthus in his heart.
So he has paid for everything in full."

Athena, goddess with the gleaming eyes, answered Zeus:

"Son of Cronos and father to us all,

[60] you who rule on high, yes indeed, Aegisthus
now lies dead, something he well deserved.
May any other man who does what he did
also be destroyed! But my heart is torn
for skillful Odysseus, ill-fated man,
who has had to suffer such misfortune
for so many years, a long way from friends.
He's on an island, surrounded by the sea,
the one that forms the ocean's navel stone.
In the forests of that island lives a goddess,
[70] daughter of tough-minded Atlas, who knows
the ocean depths and by himself holds up
those gigantic pillars which separate
earth and heaven. That's the one whose daughter
prevents the sad, unlucky man from leaving.
With soft seductive speech she keeps tempting him,
urging him to forget his Ithaca.
But Odysseus yearns to see even the smoke
rising from his native land and longs
for death. And yet, Olympian Zeus, your heart
[80] does not respond to him. Did not Odysseus
offer you delightful sacrifices
on Troy's far-reaching plain beside the ships?
Why then, Zeus, are you so angry with him?"

Cloud-gatherer Zeus then answered her and said:

"My child,
what a speech has passed the barrier of your teeth!
How could I forget godlike Odysseus,
preeminent among all mortal men
for his intelligence and offerings
to the immortal gods, who hold wide heaven?
[90] But Earthshaker Poseidon is a stubborn god,
constantly enraged about the Cyclops,
the one whose eye Odysseus destroyed,
godlike Polyphemus, the mightiest

of all the Cyclopes. Thoosa bore him,
a nymph, a daughter of that Phorcys
who commands the restless sea. Poseidon,
down in those hollow caves, had sex with her.
That's the reason Earthshaker Poseidon
makes Odysseus wander from his country.
Still, he has no plans to kill him. But come,
let's all of us consider his return,
so he can journey back to Ithaca.
Poseidon's anger will relent. He can't
fight the immortal gods all by himself,
not with all of us opposing him."

Goddess Athena with the gleaming eyes replied to Zeus:

"Son of Cronos and father to us all,
ruling high above, if the immortal gods
now find it pleasing for the wise Odysseus
to return back home, then let's send Hermes,
killer of Argus, as our messenger,
over to the island of Ogygia,
so he can quickly tell that fair-haired nymph
our firm decision—that brave Odysseus
will now leave and complete his voyage home.
I'll go to Ithaca and urge his son
to be more active, put courage in his heart,
so he will call those long-haired Achaeans
to assembly, and there address the suitors,
who keep on slaughtering his flocks of sheep
and shambling bent-horned cattle. I'll send him
on a trip to Sparta and sandy Pylos,
to learn about his father's voyage home—
he may hear of it somewhere—and to gain
a worthy reputation among men."

Athena spoke. Then she tied those lovely sandals
on her feet, the immortal, golden sandals

which carry her as fast as stormy blasts of wind
across the ocean seas and endless tracts of land.
She took with her that weighty, powerful spear—
immense and sturdy, with a point of sharpened bronze—
with which she conquers ranks of human warriors
when they annoy her, daughter of a mighty father.
She raced down from the peak of Mount Olympus,
sped across to Ithaca, and then just stood there,
at Odysseus' outer gate before the palace,
on the threshold, gripping the bronze spear in her fist.
She looked like Mentes, a foreigner, the chief
who ruled the Taphians. There she met the suitors,
those arrogant men, who were enjoying themselves
playing checkers right outside the door, sitting down
on hides of cattle they themselves had butchered.
Some heralds and attendants were keeping busy
blending wine and water in the mixing bowls.
Some were wiping tables down with porous sponges
and setting them in place, while others passed around
huge amounts of meat. Godlike Telemachus
observed Athena first, well before the others.
He was sitting with the suitors, his heart troubled,
picturing in his mind how his noble father
might get back, scatter the suitors from his home,
win honour for himself, and regain control
of his own household. As he thought about all this,
sitting there among the suitors, he saw Athena.
He immediately walked over to the outer gate,
for in his heart he considered it disgraceful
that a stranger should remain a long time at his door.
He moved up near Athena, grasped her right hand
and took her bronze-tipped spear. Then he spoke to her—
his words had wings:

"Welcome to you stranger.
You must enjoy our hospitality.
Then, after you have had some food to eat,

you can tell us what you need."

Saying this,
Telemachus led Pallas Athena into his home.
She followed. Once they'd come inside the high-roofed house,
he walked to a tall pillar carrying the spear
and set it in a finely-polished rack, which held
many other spears belonging to Odysseus.
He brought Athena in and sat her in a chair,
a beautifully crafted work. Under it
he rolled out a linen mat and then arranged
a footstool for her feet. Beside her he drew up
a lovely decorated chair for him to sit in.
They were some distance from the other people,
in case the noise the suitors made disturbed the guest
and made him hate the meal because he had to share
the company of overbearing men. Then, too,
Telemachus wanted to discuss his absent father.
A female servant carried in a fine gold jug
and poured water out into a silver basin,
so they could wash their hands. Beside them she set down
a polished table. Then the worthy housekeeper
brought in the bread and set it down before them.
Next, she laid out a wide variety of food,
drawing freely on supplies she had in store.
A carver sliced up many different cuts of meat
and served them. He set out goblets made of gold,
as a herald went back and forth pouring their wine.

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

for food and drink, their hearts craved something more—
dancing and song—the finest joys of dinner feasts.
A herald gave a splendid lyre to Phemius,
so he was forced to sing in front of all the suitors.
On the strings he plucked the prelude to a lovely song.
But then Telemachus, leaning his head over
close to Athena, so no one else could listen,
murmured to her:

"Dear stranger, my guest,
if I tell you something, will I upset you?
These men here, they spend all their time like this,
with songs and music—it's so easy for them,
because they gorge themselves on what belongs
to someone else, and with impunity,
a man whose white bones now may well be lying
on the mainland somewhere, rotting in the rain,
or in the sea, being tossed around by waves.
If they saw him return to Ithaca,
they'd all be praying they had swifter feet
rather than more wealth in gold or clothes.
But by now some evil fate has killed him,
and for us there is no consolation,
not even if some earthbound mortal man
should say that he will come. The day has passed
when he might have reached home. But tell me,
and speak candidly—Who are your people?
Who are you? What city do you come from?
What about your parents? What kind of ship
did you sail here in? And the sailors,
by what route did they bring you to Ithaca?
Who do they say they come from? For I know
there's no way you could reach me here on foot.
And I also need to understand one point,
so tell me the truth—this present visit,
is it your first journey here, or are you
a guest-friend of my father's? Many men

have come here to our home as strangers,
since he became a roaming wanderer
among all sorts of people."

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

"To you I will indeed speak openly.
I can tell you that my name is Mentes,
son of wise Anchialus, and king
of the oar-loving Taphians. I've come,
as you surmise, with comrades on a ship,
sailing across the wine-dark sea to men
whose style of speech is very different,
on my way to Temese for copper,
and carrying a freight of shining iron.
My ship is berthed some distance from the city,
close to the fields, in Reithron's harbour,
below Mount Neion's woods. We can both claim
that we are guest-friends, the two of us,
just as our fathers were so long ago.
If you want, go up and ask Laertes,
that old warrior, who, men say, no longer comes
down to the city, but who bears his troubles
in fields far out of town. But he has with him
an old attendant woman, who prepares
his food and drink, once his legs grow weary
hobbling up and down his vineyard hills.
I've come now because some people claim
your father has apparently come home.
But the gods are still preventing him
from returning home. For there is no chance
that brave Odysseus has died somewhere.
No. He's still alive but being detained
on an island, surrounded by the sea,
with wild and dangerous men restraining him,
holding him back against his will. But now,

let me tell you about a prophecy
the gods have set right here inside my heart,
which, I think, will happen—even though
I am no prophet and have no sure skills
in reading omens from the birds. I say
Odysseus will not stay away much longer
from his dear native land, not even if
he's chained in iron fetters. He'll devise
some way to get back home, for he's a man
of infinite resources. But come now,
tell me this, and speak straight and to the point.
Are you in truth Odysseus' son? You're tall,
your head and handsome eyes look just like his,
astonishingly so. We used to spend
a lot of time together, before he left
and sailed away to Troy, where other men,
the best of all the Argives, voyaged, too,
in their hollow ships. But since those days,
Odysseus and I have not seen each other."

Noble Telemachus then answered her and said:

"Stranger, I will speak quite frankly to you.
My mother says I am Odysseus' son.
I can't myself confirm that, for no man
has ever yet been sure about his parents.
I wish I'd been the son of some man blest
to reach old age among his own possessions,
for now—and I say this because you asked—
I'm the son of a man who is, they say,
of all mortal men, the most unfortunate."

Goddess Athena with the gleaming eyes answered him:

"Then at least the gods have given you
a family which, in days to come, will have
a celebrated name, since Penelope

has given birth to such a noble son.
But come, speak openly and tell me this—
What is this feast? Who are these crowds of men?
Why do you need this? Is it a wedding?
Or a drinking party? It seems clear enough
this is no meal where each man brings his share.
It strikes me that these men are acting here
in an insulting, overbearing way,
while dining in your home. Looking at them
and their disgraceful conduct, any man
who mingled with them, if he had good sense,
would lose his temper."

Noble Telemachus
then said to Athena in reply:

"Stranger,
since you've questioned me about the matter,
I'll tell you. Our house was once well on its way
to being rich and famous—at that time
Odysseus was alive among his people.
But now the gods with their malicious plans
have changed all that completely. They make sure
Odysseus stays where nobody can see him—
they've not done this to anyone before.
I would not show such grief if he were dead,
not if he'd died among his comrades
in the land of Troy, or if he'd perished
in his friends' arms, after finishing the war.
Then the Achaeans all would have put up
a tomb for him, and he'd have won great fame
in future days—so would his son, as well.
But as things stand, some spirits of the storm
have snatched him off and left no trace. He's gone
where people cannot see or hear him,
abandoning me to tears and sorrow.
But it's not him alone who makes me sad

and cry out in distress. For now the gods
have brought me other grievous troubles.
All the best young men who rule the islands,
Dulichium and wooded Zacynthus,
and Same, as well as those who lord it here
in rocky Ithaca—they are all now
wooing my mother and ravaging my house.
She won't turn down a marriage she detests,
but can't bring herself to make the final choice.
Meanwhile, these men are feasting on my home
and soon will be the death of me as well."

This made Pallas Athena angry—she said to him:

"It's bad Odysseus has wandered off
when you need him here so much! He could lay
his hands upon these shameless suitors.
I wish he'd come home now and make a stand
right at the outer gate, with helmet on,
two spears and his own shield—the sort of man
he was when I first saw him in our house,
drinking and enjoying himself. At that time,
he was returning from the home of Ilus,
the son of Mermerus, from Ephyre.
Odysseus had gone there in his fast ship,
seeking a man-killing poison, something
he could smear on his bronze arrow points.
However, Ilus did not give him any,
for he revered the gods who live forever.
But my father did, because he felt
a very strong affection for Odysseus.
How I wish Odysseus from way back then
would now return and mingle with the suitors.
They'd all come to a speedy end and find
their courtship painful. But all these matters
lie in the laps of gods—he may return
and take out his revenge in his own hall,

or he may not. But I'd encourage you
to think of ways to force these suitors out,
to rid your halls of them. So hear me out.
Listen now to what I'm going to tell you.
Tomorrow you must call Achaea's warriors
to an assembly and address them all,
appealing to the gods as witnesses.
Tell the suitors to return to their own homes.
As for your mother, if her heart is set
on getting married, then let her return
to where her father lives, for he's a man
of power with great capabilities.
He'll organize the marriage and arrange
the wedding gifts, as many as befit
a well-loved daughter. Now, as for yourself,
if you'll listen, I have some wise advice.
Get yourself a crew of twenty rowers
and the best boat you possess. Then leave here—
set off in search of news about your father,
who's been gone so long. Some living mortal
may tell you something, or you may hear
a voice from Zeus, which often brings men news.
Sail first to Pylos—speak to noble Nestor.
After you've been there, proceed to Sparta
and fair-haired Menelaus, the last one
of all bronze-clad Achaeans to get home.
If you hear reports your father is alive
and coming home, you could hang on a year
still wasting his resources. But if you hear
that he is dead and gone, then come back here,
to your dear native land, build him a tomb,
and carry out as many funeral rites
as are appropriate. Give your mother
over to a husband. When you've done that
and brought these matters to a close, then think,
deep in your mind and heart, how you might kill
these suitors in your home, either openly

or by some trick. You must not keep on acting
like a child—you're now too old for that.
Have you not heard how excellent Orestes
won fame among all men when he cut down
his father's murderer, sly Aegisthus,
because he had killed his famous father?
You are fine and strong, I see, and you, too,
should be brave, so people born in future years
will say good things of you. I must go now,
down to my swift ship and to my comrades.
I suspect they're getting quite impatient
waiting for me. Make sure you act with care—
and think about what I've been telling you."

Prudent Telemachus then answered her:

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

Goddess Athena with the gleaming eyes then said to him:

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

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

In her upper room, the daughter of Icarius,
wise Penelope, heard the man's inspired song.
She came down the towering staircase from her room,
but not alone—two female servants followed her.
When beautiful Penelope reached the suitors,
she stayed beside the door post in the well-built room,
with a small bright veil across her face. On either side
her two attendants stood. With tears streaming down,
Penelope addressed the famous singer:

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

Sensible Telemachus answered her and said:

"Mother, why begrudge the faithful singer
delighting us in any way his mind
may prompt him? One cannot blame the singers.
It seems to me it's Zeus' fault. He hands out
to toiling men, each and every one of them,
whatever he desires. There's nothing wrong
with this man's singing of the evil fate
of the Danaans, for men praise the most
the song which they have heard most recently.
Your heart and spirit should endure his song.
For Odysseus was not the only man
at Troy who lost his chance to see the day
he would come back. Many men were killed.
Go up to your rooms and keep busy there
with your own work, the spindle and the loom.
Tell your servants to perform their duties.
Talking is a man's concern, every man's,
but especially mine, since in this house
I'm the one in charge."

Astonished at his words,
Penelope went back to her own chambers,
setting in her heart the prudent words her son had said.
With her attendant women she climbed the stairs
up to her rooms and there wept for Odysseus,
her dear husband, until bright-eyed Athena
cast sweet sleep upon her eyelids.

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

"You suitors of my mother, who all have
such insolent arrogance, let us for now
enjoy our banquet. But no more shouting,
for it's grand to listen to a singer

as fine as this one—his voice is like a god's.
Then in the morning let us all assemble,
sit down for a meeting, so I can speak
and tell you firmly to depart my home.
Make yourself some different meals which eat up
your own possessions, moving house to house.
But if you think it's preferable and better
for one man's livelihood to be consumed
without paying anything, I'll call upon
the immortal gods to see if Zeus
will bring about an act of retribution.
And if you are destroyed inside my home,
you will not be avenged."

Telemachus finished.
They all bit their lips, astonished at the boldness
in his words. Then, Antinous, son of Eupeithes,
declared:

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

Shrewd Telemachus then answered him and said:

"Antinous, will you be angry with me,
if I say something? I would be happy
to accept that, if Zeus gave it to me.
Are you claiming that becoming king
is the very worst of trials for men?
No. To be king is not something evil.
One's family gets rich immediately,
and one receives more honours for oneself.
But there are other kings of the Achaeans,

many of them here in sea-girt Ithaca,
young and old, one of whom could well be king,
since lord Odysseus is dead, but I
will rule our home and slaves, battle spoils
which brave Odysseus won for me."

Then Eurymachus, son of Polybus, replied:

"Telemachus, these matters surely lie
in the gods' laps—which of the Achaeans
will rule sea-girt Ithaca. But you can keep
all your possessions for yourself as king
in your own home. Let no man come with force
and seize your property against your will,
no, not while men still live in Ithaca.
But I would like to ask you, my good man,
about that stranger. Where does he come from?
From what country does he claim to be?
Where are his family, his paternal lands?
Does he bring news of your father's coming,
or is he here pursuing his own business?
He jumped up so fast and left so quickly!
He did not stay to let himself get known.
And yet to look at him, he did not seem
a worthless man."

Prudent Telemachus
then answered him and said:

"Eurymachus,
my father's journey back to Ithaca
is no doubt done for. I no longer trust
in messages, no matter what the source.
Nor do I care for any prophecy
my mother picks up from those soothsayers
she summons to these halls. That stranger
is a guest-friend of my father's. He says

that he's from Taphos. His name is Mentes,
son of wise Anchialus. He rules as king
over oar-loving Taphians."

He said this,
but in his heart Telemachus had recognized
the immortal goddess. At that point, the suitors
switched to dancing and to singing lovely songs.
They amused themselves until dark evening came.
Then each man went to his own house to sleep.
Telemachus moved up to where his room was built,
high in the splendid courtyard, with a spacious view,
his mind much preoccupied on his way to bed.
Accompanying him, quick-minded Eurycleia
held two flaming torches. She was Ops's daughter,
son of Peisenor. Some years ago Laertes
had purchased her with his own wealth—at the time,
she was in her early youth—paying twenty oxen.
In his home he honoured her the way he did
his noble wife, but not once did he have sex with her,
because he wanted to avoid annoying his wife.
She was now carrying two blazing torches for him.
Of all the female household slaves she was the one
who loved him most, for she had nursed him as a child.
He opened the doors of the well-constructed room,
sat on the bed, and pulled off his soft tunic,
handed it to the wise old woman, who smoothed it out,
and folded it, then hung the tunic on a peg
beside the corded bedstead. Then she left the room,
pulling the door shut by its silver handle.
She pulled the bolt across, using its leather thong.
Telemachus lay there all night long, wrapped up
in sheep's wool, his mind thinking of the journey
which Athena had earlier proposed to him.