

BOOK TEN

AEOLUS, THE LAESTRYGONIANS, AND CIRCE

[Odysseus continues his narrative: he and his ships reach Aeolia, home of Aeolus, god of the winds; Aeolus welcomes them and gives Odysseus a bag with all the winds tied up inside it; Odysseus sails from Aeolia, but his men open the bag, bringing on a storm which drives them back to Aeolia; Aeolus refuses Odysseus' request for further help and orders him off the island; Odysseus and his men reach the land of the Laestrygonians, who attack them and destroy all the ships except Odysseus' vessel; that one ship sails to the island of Aeaea, land of Circe; Odysseus kills a stag for a meal; half the men go to Circe's house and are changed into pigs; Eurylochus brings the news to Odysseus; Odysseus meets Hermes, who gives him an antidote to Circe's spells; Circe tries to bewitch Odysseus and fails; they go to bed together; Circe changes the men back to human beings; they stay there one year, and then sail on, heading for Hades' home.]

“Next we reached Aeolia, a floating island,
where Aeolus lived, son of Hippotas,
whom immortal gods hold dear.¹ Around it,
runs an impenetrable wall of bronze,
and cliffs rise up in a sheer face of rock.
His twelve children live there in the palace,
six daughters as well as six full-grown sons.
He gave the daughters to the sons in marriage,
and they are always at a banquet feasting,
[10] beside their dear father and good mother,
with an infinite supply of tasty food
set out before them. The smells of cooking
fill the house all day. The courtyard echoes
to the sounds of celebration. At night,
they go to sleep beside their faithful wives,
on coverlets and beds well strung with cord.²

“We reached the splendid palace in the city,
and for one whole month he entertained me,
always asking questions about everything—
[20] Troy, Argive ships, how Achaeans made it home—
and I told him all from start to finish.
When, for my part, I asked to take my leave

and told him he should send me on my way,
he denied me nothing and helped me go.
He gave me a bag made out of ox-hide,
flayed from a creature nine years old,
and tied up in it all the winds that blow
from every quarter, for Cronos' son
has made Aeolus keeper of the winds,
[30] and he could calm or rouse them, as he wished.
With a shining silver cord he lashed that bag
inside my hollow ship, so as to stop
even the smallest breath from getting out.
He also got a West Wind breeze to blow
to carry ships and men on their way home.
But that's not how things happened to turn out—
we ruined everything with our own folly.

“For nine whole days and nights we held our course,
and on the tenth we glimpsed our native land.
[40] We came in so close we could see the men
who tend the beacon fires.³ But then sweet Sleep
came over me—I was too worn out.
All that time my hands had gripped the sail rope—
I'd not let go of it or passed it on
to any shipmate, so that we'd get home
more quickly. But as I slept, my comrades
started talking to each other, claiming
I was taking gold and silver back with me,
gifts of Aeolus, brave son of Hippotas.
[50] Glancing at the man who sat beside him,
one of them would say something like this:

‘It's not fair. Everyone adores this man
and honours him, no matter where he goes,
to any city, any land. From Troy
he's taking a huge stash of glorious loot—
but those of us who've been on the same trip
are coming home with empty hands. And now,

Aeolus, because he's a friend of his,
has freely given him these presents.
[60] Come on, let's see how much gold and silver
he has in this bag.'

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

"We went ashore there and brought back water.
My crew had a quick meal beside the ships.
After we'd had something to eat and drink,
I set off for Aeolus' splendid palace,
taking with me one comrade and a herald.
[80] I found him feasting with his wife and children.
So we went into the house and sat down
on the threshold, right beside the door posts.
In their hearts they were amazed. They asked me

'Odysseus, how is it you've come back here?
What cruel god has been attacking you?
We took great care to send you on your way
so you'd get home, back to your native land
or any other place, just as you wished.'

"That's what they asked. With a heavy heart,

I answered them:

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

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

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

“Once he’d said this, he sent me from his house,
for all my heavy groans. Then, sick at heart,
we sailed on further, my crewmen’s spirits
worn down by the weary work of rowing.
Because we’d been such fools, there was no breeze
to help us on our way. We went on like this
for six whole days and nights. On the seventh
we came to Telepylus, great citadel
[110] of Lamus, king of Laestrygonians,
where the herdsman driving in his flock
salutes the herdsman moving his beasts out.⁴
There a man who had no need of sleep
could earn two wages—one for tending cattle,
one for grazing sheep. Day and night-time trails
lie close together.⁵ We came up there,
into a lovely harbour, with a sheer cliff
around it on both sides. Jutting headlands
facing one another extended out
[120] beyond the harbour mouth, a narrow entrance.

All my shipmates brought their curved ships up
and moored them inside the hollow harbour
in a tightly clustered group—in that spot
there were never any waves, large or small.
Everything was calm and bright around them.
But I moored my black ship all by itself
outside the harbour, right against the land,
tying it to the rock. I clambered up the cliff
and stood there, on a rugged outcrop,
[130] looking round. I could see no evidence
of human work or ploughing, only smoke
arising from the land. I sent some comrades out
to learn what the inhabitants were like,
the men who ate the food this land produced.
I chose two men, with a third as herald.
They left the ships and came to a smooth road,
which wagons used to haul wood to the town
from high mountain slopes. Outside the city
they met a young girl collecting water,
[140] the noble daughter of Antiphates,
a Laestrygonian. She'd come down there
to the fine flowing spring Artacia,
where the townsfolk went to draw their water.
The men walked up and spoke to her. They asked
who ruled the people here and who they were.
She quickly pointed out her father's lofty home.
They reached the splendid house and found his wife,
a gigantic woman, like a mountain peak.
They were appalled. She called her husband,
[150] strong Antiphates, out of a meeting,
and he arranged a dreadful death for them—
he seized one of my shipmates and prepared
to make a meal of him. The other two
jumped up, ran off, and came back to the ships.
Antiphates then raised a hue and cry
throughout the city. Once they heard his call,
the powerful Laestrygonians poured out,

thronging in countless numbers from all sides—
not like men at all, but Giants. From the cliffs
[160] they hurled rocks down on us, the largest stones
a man can lift. The clamour rising from the ships
was dreadful—men were being destroyed,
ships were smashing into one another,
with those monsters spearing men like fish,
and taking them to eat a gruesome meal.
While they were slaughtering the sailors there,
trapped in the deep harbour, I grabbed my sword,
pulled it from my thigh, and cut the cables
on my dark-prowed ship, yelling to my crew,
[170] ordering them to put their oars to work,
so we could get away from this disaster.
They all churned the water with their oar-blades,
terrified of being killed. We were relieved,
as my ship left the beetling cliffs behind,
moving out to sea. But all the other ships,
moored together in the harbour, were destroyed.

“We sailed on from there with heavy hearts,
grieving for dear shipmates we had lost,
though glad we had avoided death ourselves,
[180] until we reached the island of Aeaea,
where fair-haired Circe lived, fearful goddess
with a human voice—sister by blood
to bloody minded Aeetes, both children
of sun god Helios, who gives men light.⁶
Perse, child of Oceanus, was their mother.
Here, in silence, we brought our ship to land,
inside a harbour with fine anchorage.
Some god was guiding us. Then we disembarked
and laid up in that spot two days and nights,
[190] our hearts consumed with weariness and pain.

“When fair-haired Dawn gave birth to the third day,
with my sharp sword and spear I quickly climbed

above the ships up to a vantage point,
to see if I could notice signs of men
or hear their voices. From the rocky lookout
where I stood, I could see smoke rising
from the spacious grounds of Circe's home
through dense brush and trees. Seeing the smoke,
my mind and heart considered going down
[200] to look around. But as I thought about it,
the best initial action seemed to be
to get back to our swift ship by the shore,
let my comrades eat, then send them out
to reconnoiter. On my way back there,
in a lonely place close to our curved ship,
some god pitied me and sent across my path
a huge stag with massive antlers, on its way
from pastures in the woods towards the river
for a drink—the sun's heat forced it down.
[210] As it came out, I struck it in the spine,
the middle of its back. My bronze-tipped spear
sliced right through—with a groan the stag collapsed
down in the dust, and its spirit left the beast.
Planting my foot, I pulled my bronze spear
out of the wound and left it lying there,
on the ground. I picked up some willow shoots
and wove a rope about six feet in length,
by plaiting them together back and forth,
until they were well twisted. After that,
[220] I tied the huge creature's feet together,
and, carrying it across my back, returned
to my black ship. I had to support myself
by leaning on my spear—there was no way
I could just sling a beast as large as that
and hold it on my shoulder with one hand.⁷
I tossed the stag down right before our ship
and cheered up my crew with words of comfort,
standing by each man in turn:

‘My friends,
we’re not going down to Hades’ house just yet,
[230] although we’re grieving, not until the day
our fate confronts us. So come on now,
while there’s food and drink in our swift ship,
let’s think of eating, so we don’t waste away
and die of hunger.’

“That’s what I said. My words
soon won them over. Uncovering their heads,
they were amazed at the stag lying there,
such a huge beast beside the restless sea.
Once they’d had their fill of looking at it,
they washed their hands and made a splendid meal.
[240] So all day long until the sun went down
we sat feasting on that huge supply of meat
and on sweet wine. When the sun had set
and darkness came, we lay down on the shore.

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

‘Shipmates, though you’re all feeling our distress,
listen now to what I have to tell you.
My friends, how far east or west we are
we just don’t know, or how far away
[250] from where the Sun, who brings men light,
goes down underneath the earth or rises.⁸
But let’s quickly put our heads together
to see if we have any options left.
I don’t think we do. I climbed a rocky crag,
and from that vantage point spied out the land.
It’s an island with deep water round it,
low-lying and flat. I saw with my own eyes
smoke rising in the middle of the island,
through dense brush and trees.’

“That’s what I said.

[260] But their spirits fell, as they remembered
what Laestrygonian Antiphates had done
and the violence of great Polyphemus,
that man-eating Cyclops. They wept aloud,
shedding frequent tears. But their laments
were not much help to us. So I split up
my well-armed comrades in two separate groups,
each with its own leader. I commanded one,
and godlike Eurylochus led the other.
We shook our tokens in a bronze helmet.

[270] When brave Eurylochus’ lot fell out,
he set off with twenty-two companions,
all in tears, leaving us behind to grieve.
In a forest clearing they found Circe’s house—
built of polished stone, with views in all directions.
There were mountain wolves and lions round it,
all bewitched by Circe’s wicked potions.
But these beasts made no attack against my men.
No. They stood on their hind legs and fawned,
wagging their long tails. Just as dogs will beg

[280] around their master when he comes from dinner—
since he keeps bringing scraps to please their hearts—
that’s how the wolves and sharp-clawed lions there
kept fawning round those men, who were afraid
just looking at those fearful animals.
They stood in fair-haired Circe’s gateway
and heard her sweet voice singing in the house,
as she went back and forth before her loom,
weaving a huge, immortal tapestry,
the sort of work which goddesses create,

[290] finely woven, luminous, and beautiful.
Then Polites, one of the men’s leaders,
the man I trusted most and cherished
more than any of my comrades, spoke:

‘My friends, someone’s in there moving to and fro,

before a giant tapestry, and singing
so sweetly the floor echoes to her song—
perhaps a goddess, or maybe a woman—
come, let's call out to her right now.'

"He spoke,
and they all started shouting, calling her.
[300] She came out at once, opened the bright doors,
and asked them in. In their foolishness,
they all accompanied her. Eurylochus
was the only one who stayed outside—
he thought it could be something of a trick.
She led the others in and sat them down
on stools and chairs, then made them a drink
of cheese and barley meal and yellow honey
stirred into Pramnian wine. But with the food
she mixed a vicious drug, so they would lose
[310] all memories of home. When they'd drunk down
the drink she gave them, she took her wand,
struck each man, then penned them in her pigsties.
They had bristles, heads, and voices just like pigs—
their bodies looked like swine—but their minds
were as before, unchanged. In their pens they wept.
In front of them Circe threw down feed,
acorns, beech nuts, cornel fruit, the stuff
pigs eat when they are wallowing in mud.
Eurylochus came back immediately
[320] to our swift black ship, bringing a report
of his comrades' bitter fate. But though he tried,
he couldn't say a single word, his heart
felt too much pain. His eyes were full of tears,
his mind transfixed with sorrow. When all of us,
astonished, questioned him, he spoke out,
telling us of his companions' fate:

'Lord Odysseus, we went through the woods,
as you had ordered and, in a clearing there,

found a splendid house built of polished stone,
[330] with a view in all directions. Inside,
someone was singing in a loud clear voice,
in front of an enormous piece of weaving,
moving back and forth—some god or woman.
They all shouted, calling her. She came out,
opened up her shining doors without delay,
and asked them in. In their foolishness,
they all accompanied her inside. But I,
thinking it might be a trick, remained behind.
Then the whole bunch disappeared, all of them.
[340] No one came out again. And I sat there
a long time, watching for them.’

“He spoke.
I slung my large bronze silver-studded sword
across my shoulder, grabbed my bow, and told him
to take me back there on the selfsame trail.
He gripped me with both hands, clasped my knees,
moaned, and spoke to me—his words had wings:

‘Child raised by Zeus, don’t take me there
against my will. Leave me here. I know
you won’t be coming back again yourself
[350] or bringing back the rest of your companions.
No. Let’s get out of here and quickly, too,
with these men here. We may still escape
this day’s disasters.’

“That’s what he said.
But I gave him this answer:

‘Eurylochus,
you can stay right here, in this very spot,
eating and drinking by our black hollow ship.
But I will go. I don’t have any choice.’

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

‘Where are you off to now, you poor man,
going through these hills all by yourself
and knowing nothing of the country here?
[370] Your comrades, over there in Circe’s house,
are penned up like swine in narrow stalls.
Are you intending now to set them free?
I don’t think you’ll make it back yourself—
you’ll stay there with the rest of them. But come,
I’ll keep you free from harm and save you.
Here, take a remedial potion with you.
Go in Circe’s house. It’s a protection
and will clear your head of any dangers
this day brings. Now I’ll describe for you
[380] each and every one of Circe’s fatal ploys.
She’ll mix a drink for you and with the food
include a drug. But she won’t have power
to cast a spell on you. This fine potion,
which I’ll provide you, won’t allow it.
I’ll tell you now in detail. When Circe
strikes you with her elongated wand,
then draw that sharp sword on your thigh and charge,
just as if you meant to slaughter her.
She’ll be afraid. And then she’ll order you
[390] to sleep with her. At that point don’t refuse
to share a goddess’ bed, if you want her
to free your crew and entertain you.
But tell her she must swear a solemn oath,

on all the blessed gods, not to make plans
to harm you with some other injury,
so when she's got you with your clothes off,
she won't change you to an unmanned weakling.'

"After saying this, the Killer of Argus
pulled a herb out of the ground, gave it to me,
[400] and explained its features. Its roots were black,
the flower milk-white. Moly the gods call it.⁹
It's hard for mortal men to pull it out,
but gods have power to do anything.
Then Hermes left, through the wooded island,
bound for high Olympus. I continued on
to Circe's home. As I kept going, my heart
was turning over many gloomy thoughts.
Once I'd made it over to the gateway
of fair-haired Circe's house, I just stood there
[410] and called out. The goddess heard my voice.
She came out at once, opened her bright doors,
and asked me in. So I went in with her,
heart full of misgivings. She led me in
and sat me on a silver-studded chair,
a lovely object, beautifully made,
with a stool underneath to rest my feet.
She mixed her potion in a golden cup
for me to drink. In it she placed the drug,
her heart still bent on mischief. She gave it me,
[420] and, when I'd drunk it, without being bewitched,
she struck me with her wand and said these words:

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

"She spoke.
But I pulled out the sharp sword on my thigh
and charged at Circe, as if I meant to kill her.
She gave a piercing scream, ducked, ran up,

and clasped my knees. Through her tears she spoke—
her words had wings:

‘What sort of man are you?

Where are you from? Where is your city?

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

“Once she said this,
I answered her and said:

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

[450] But I won’t agree to climb into your bed,
unless, goddess, you’ll agree to swear
a solemn oath that you’ll make no more plans
to injure me with some new mischief.’

“When I’d said this, she made the oath at once,
as I had asked, that she’d not harm me.
Once she’d sworn and finished with the oath,

I went up with Circe to her splendid bed.

“Meanwhile four women serving in her home
were busy in the hall, children of springs,
[460] groves, and sacred rivers flowing to the sea.
One of them threw lovely purple coverlets
across the chairs and spread linen underneath.
Another pulled silver tables over to each chair
and then placed silver baskets on them.
The third one mixed deliciously sweet wine
inside a silver bowl, then served it out
in cups of gold. The fourth brought water in,
lit a large fire under a huge cauldron,
and warmed the water up until it boiled
[470] inside the shining bronze. She sat me in a tub,
then, diluting water from that cauldron
so it was right for me, gave me a bath,
pouring water on my head and shoulders,
until the weariness that sapped my spirit
had left my limbs. After bathing me,
she rubbed me with rich oil, then dressed me
in a fine cloak and tunic and led me
to a handsome chair embossed with silver,
finely crafted, with a footstool underneath.
[480] A servant brought in a lovely golden jug,
poured water out into a silver basin,
so I could wash, and set a polished table
at my side. Then the worthy steward
brought in bread and set it there before me,
placing with it large quantities of food,
given freely from her stores. She bid me eat.
But in my heart I had no appetite.
So I sat there, thinking of other things,
my spirit sensing something ominous.
[490] When Circe noticed me just sitting there,
not reaching for the food, weighed down with grief,
she came up close and spoke winged words to me:

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

“When she said this,
I answered her and said:

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

“When I’d said this, Circe went through the hall,
her wand clutched in her hand, and opened up
the pig-sty doors. She drove the herd out.
They looked like full-grown pigs, nine years old,
[510] standing in front of her. She went through them,
smearing on each one another potion.
Those bristles brought on by that nasty drug
which they’d received from Circe earlier
fell from their limbs, and they were men again,
more youthful and much taller than before,
more handsome to the eye. Now they knew me.
Each man grabbed my hand, and all of them
were overcome with passionate weeping,
so the house around them echoed strangely.
[520] Circe herself was moved to pity then—
standing close to me, the lovely goddess said:

‘Son of Laertes, resourceful Odysseus,

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

“Her words persuaded my proud heart. I left,
going back to our swift ship beside the sea.

[530] I found my trusty comrades at the ship
lamenting miserably, shedding many tears.
Just as on a farm calves frisk around the herd
when cows, having had their fill of grazing,
return back to the yard—they skip ahead,
and pens no longer hold them, as they run,
mooing in a crowd around their mothers,
that’s how my shipmates, once they saw me,
thronged around, weeping—in their hearts it felt
as if they they’d got back to their native land,

[540] the rugged town of Ithaca itself,
where they were born and bred. In their distress
they spoke winged words to me:

‘You’re back,
you favourite of Zeus. We glad of that,
as if we had returned to Ithaca,
our native land. But come, tell us
how the rest of our comrades came to grief.’

“They spoke. I replied and calmed them down:

‘First of all, let’s drag the ship onshore,
stow all our goods and tackle in the caves.

[550] Then you can rouse yourselves and come with me,
see your comrades in Circe’s sacred home,
eating and drinking. They have lots of both.’

“The words I spoke quickly brought them round.

Of all my shipmates there, Eurylochus
was the only one to hesitate. He spoke—
his words to them had wings:

‘You wretched creatures,
where are you going? Are you so in love
with these disasters you’ll go back there,
to Circe’s house, where she’ll transform you all
[560] to pigs or wolves or lions, so we’ll be forced
to protect her great house for her? It’s like
what the Cyclops did, when our companions
went inside his cave with this reckless man,
Odysseus—thanks to his foolhardiness
those men were killed.’

“Eurylochus finished.
Then my heart considered drawing the long sword
hanging on my sturdy thigh and striking him,
slicing off his head and knocking it to earth,
even though he was a relative of mine,
[570] closely linked by marriage.¹⁰ But my crewmen,
one by one, relaxed me with their soothing words:

‘Child of Zeus, if you give the order,
we’ll leave him behind. He can stay here,
beside the ship, and stand guard over it,
while you lead us to Circe’s sacred home.’

“This said, they moved up from the ships and shore.
And Eurylochus was not left behind
at the hollow ship. He came along as well,
afraid I might reprimand him harshly.

[580] “Meanwhile, Circe had been acting kindly
to the rest of my companions in her home.
She’d given them baths, rubbed them with rich oil,
and dressed them in warm cloaks and tunics.

We found them all quite cheerful, eating
in the hall. When my men saw each other
and recognized their shipmates face to face,
their crying and moaning echoed through the house.
The lovely goddess came to me and said:

‘Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes’ son
[590] and Zeus’ child, you should no longer rouse
an outburst of such grief. I know myself
every pain you’ve suffered on the fish-filled seas,
every wrong that hostile men have done on land.
But come now, eat my food, and drink my wine,
until you’ve got back that spirit in your chest
you had when you first left your native land
of rugged Ithaca. You’re exhausted now—
you have no spirit—you’re always brooding
on your painful wanderings. There’s no joy
[600] inside your hearts—you’ve been through so much.’

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

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

“My proud heart was persuaded by their words.
So all day long until the sun went down,
we sat there, feasting on huge amounts of meat
and on sweet wine. Once the sun had set
and darkness came, they lay down to sleep
in the shadowy hall. I went to Circe,

in her splendid bed, and clasped her knees.
The goddess listened to me as I begged,
speaking these winged words to her:

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

“I spoke. The lovely goddess answered me at once.

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

“As Circe finished, my spirit was breaking.
I sat weeping on her bed for my heart
no longer wished to live or glimpse the daylight.
But when I’d had enough of shedding tears
[640] and rolling in distress, I answered her:

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

“The lovely goddess gave me a quick answer:

‘Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes’ son
and Zeus’ child, don’t concern yourself
about a pilot for your ship. Raise the mast,

spread your white sail, and just take your seat.
Then the breath of North Wind Boreas
will take you on your way. But once your ship
[650] crosses flowing Oceanus, drag it ashore
at Persephone's groves, on the level beach,
where tall poplars grow, willows shed their fruit,
right beside deep swirling Oceanus.
Then you must go to Hades' murky home.
There Periphelethon and Cocytus,
a stream which branches off the river Styx,
flow into Acheron. There's a boulder
where these two foaming rivers meet. Go there,
heroic man, and follow my instructions—
[660] move close and dig a hole there two feet square.
Pour libations to the dead around it,
first with milk and honey, next sweet wine,
and then a third with water. And shake out
white barley meal. Then pray there in earnest
to many powerless heads of those who've died,
with a vow that, when you reach Ithaca,
at home you'll sacrifice a barren heifer,
the best you have, and will cram the altar
with fine gifts, and that you'll make an offering
[670] to Teiresias, a black ram just for him,
the finest creature in your flocks. And then,
when you've offered prayers of supplication
to celebrated nations of the dead,
you must sacrifice a ram and a black ewe,
twisting their heads down toward Erebus,
while you turn to face the flowing rivers,
looking backwards. At that point many spirits
will emerge—they're the shadows of the dead.
Then call your crew. Tell them to flay and burn
[680] the sheep lying there, killed by pitiless bronze.
Pray to the gods, to powerful Hades
and dread Persephone. Then from your thigh,
you must yourself draw that sharp sword out,

and, sitting there, prevent the powerless heads
of those who've died from coming near the blood,
until you've listened to Teiresias.
That prophet, the leader of his people,
will soon come to you. He'll tell you your course,
the distance you must go on your return,
[690] and how to sail across the fish-filled seas.'

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

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

"That what I said. And their proud hearts agreed.
But I could not lead my men off safely,
not even from that place. Of all of them
the youngest was Elpenor, in battle
not all that brave or clever. He'd lain down
in Circe's sacred home some distance off,
away from his companions. Heavy with wine,
he'd climbed onto the roof, seeking cooler air.
When he heard the noise and the commotion
[710] made by his shipmates as they moved around,
he jumped up on the spot, but then forgot
to use the long ladder to come down again.
He fell headfirst from the roof, snapped his neck,
and broke his spine. His spirit went to Hades.
As my men came out, I spoke to them and said:

'No doubt you now believe you're going home,

back to your dear native land. But Circe
has stated we must take a different route,
to Hades' home and dread Persephone,
[720] to meet the shade of Teiresias from Thebes.'

"That's what I said, and it broke their spirits.
Sitting down right where they were, they wept,
they tore their hair. But their laments were useless.
We moved down to our swift ship by the shore,
shedding many tears of grief. Meanwhile Circe
went out and tied a ram and a black ewe
by our black ship. She'd slipped past us with ease,
for who can see a god going back and forth,
if she has no desire to be observed?"