

BOOK ELEVEN

Odysseus Meets the Shades of The Dead

[Odysseus continues his narrative: Odysseus and his men sail to Oceanus, land there, and make a sacrifice; the shades of the dead come up out of the hole; Elpenor's shade appears first and asks for burial; then Odysseus' mother appears; Odysseus has a conversation with Teiresias, who prophesies his future and his death; Odysseus talks with his mother, who gives him news of his family; a series of female shades appears: Tyro, Antiope, Alcmene, Megara, Jocasta, Chloris, Leda, Iphimedeia, Phaedra, Procis, Ariadne, Maera, Clymene, and Eriphyle; Odysseus interrupts his narrative to discuss his leaving Phaeacia with Alcinous; Odysseus resumes his story and tells of his encounters with Agamemnon, Achilles, and Ajax; Odysseus describes Minos and Orion and the punishments of Tityus, Tantalus, and Sisyphus; the final shade to appear and speak to Odysseus is the image of Hercules; Odysseus and men return to the ship and sail away from Oceanus.]

“When we reached our boat down on the beach,
we dragged it out into the glittering sea,
set up the mast and sail in our black ship,
led on the sheep, and then embarked ourselves,
still full of sorrow, shedding many tears.
But that fearful goddess with a human voice,
fair-haired Circe, sent us a welcome breeze,
blowing from behind our dark-prowed ship—
it filled the sail, an excellent companion.

[10] Once we'd checked the gear all through the ship,
we just sat—wind and helmsman held the course.
All day long, the sail stayed full, and we sped on
across the sea, until the sun went down,
and all sea routes grew dark. Our ship then reached
the boundaries of deep-flowing Oceanus,
where Cimmerians have their lands and city,
a region always wrapped in mist and cloud.
Bright Helios never gazes down on them,
not when he rises into starry heaven,
[20] or when he turns again from heaven to earth.
Fearful Night envelops wretched mortals.
We sailed in there, dragged our ship on land,

and walked along the stream of Oceanus,
until we reached the place Circe described.

“Perimedes and Eurylochos held the sheep,
our sacrificial victims, while I unsheathed
the sharp sword on my thigh and dug a hole,
two feet each way. I poured out libations
to all the dead—first with milk and honey,
[30] then sweet wine, and then a third with water.
Around the pit I sprinkled barley meal.
Then to the powerless heads of the departed
I offered many prayers, with promises
I’d sacrifice, once I returned to Ithaca,
a barren heifer in my home, the best I had,
and load the altar with fine gifts, as well.
To Teiresias in a separate sacrifice
I’d offer up a ram, for him alone,
the finest in my flocks. With prayers and vows
[40] I called upon the families of the dead.
Next I held the sheep above the hole
and slit their throats. Dark blood flowed down.

“Then out of Erebus came swarming up
shades of the dead—brides, young unmarried men,
old ones worn out with toil, young tender girls,
with hearts still new to sorrow, and many men
wounded by bronze spears, who’d died in war,
still in their blood-stained armour. Crowds of them
came thronging in from all sides of the pit,
[50] with amazing cries. Pale fear took hold of me.
Then I called my comrades, ordering them
to flay and burn the sheep still lying there,
slain by cruel bronze, and pray to the gods,
to mighty Hades and dread Persephone.
And then I drew the sharp sword on my thigh
and sat there, stopping the powerless heads
of all the dead from getting near the blood,

until I'd asked Teiresias my questions.

“The first shade to appear out of the pit
[60] was my companion Elpenor, whose corpse
had not been buried in the broad-tracked earth.
We'd left his body back in Circe's house,
without lament or burial—at the time
another need was driving us away.
When I saw him, I wept. My heart felt pity.
So I spoke to him—my words had wings:

‘Elpenor, how did you come to this place,
this gloomy darkness? You got here on foot
faster than I did, sailing my black ship.’

[70] “I spoke. He groaned and gave me his reply:

‘Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes' son,
and child of Zeus, some fatal deity
has brought me down—that and too much wine.
In Circe's house, after I'd been sleeping,
I didn't think of using the long ladder
to get back again. So I fell head first
down from the roof. My neck was broken,
shattering the spine. My shade departed,
going down to Hades' house. I beg you now,
[80] in the name of those we left behind,
the ones who are not with us, of your wife,
your father, who reared you as a child,
and Telemachus, whom you left at home,
your only son. I know that your fine ship,
once you leave here and sail from Hades' home,
will once more reach the island of Aeaea,
where, my lord, I ask you to remember me.
When you sail from there, don't leave me behind,
unburied, unlamented. Don't turn away,
[90] or I may bring gods' anger down on you.

Burn me with all the armour I possess.
Raise a mound for me by the gray sea shore,
memorial to an unfortunate man,
for those in times to come. Do this for me.
And on the tomb there fix the oar I used
while I lived and rowed with my companions.'

"He finished. I answered him and said:

'Unhappy man, I'll do this, complete it all.'

"So we two sat in gloomy conversation,
[100] I, on one side, holding out my sword
above the blood, and, on the other side,
the shade of my companion speaking out.

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

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

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

"Teiresias finished talking. I drew back

[120] and thrust my silver-studded sword inside its sheath.
When the blameless prophet had drunk dark blood,
he said these words to me:

‘Glorious Odysseus,
you ask about your honey-sweet return.
But a god will make your journey bitter.
I don’t think you can evade Poseidon,
whose heart is angry at you, full of rage
because you blinded his dear son. But still,
though you’ll suffer badly, you may get home,
if you will curb your spirit and your comrades.

[130] As soon as you’ve escaped the dark blue sea
and reached the island of Thrinacia
in your sturdy ship, you’ll find grazing there
the cattle and rich flocks of Helios,
who hears and watches over everything.
If you leave them unharmed and keep your mind
on your return, you may reach Ithaca,
though you’ll have trouble. But if you touch them,
then I foresee destruction for your crew,
for you, and for your ship. And even if

[140] you yourself escape, you’ll get home again
in distress and late, in someone else’s ship,
after losing every one of your companions.
There’ll be trouble in your home—arrogant men
eating up your livelihood and wooing
your godlike wife by giving courtship gifts.
But when you come, you’ll surely take revenge
for all their violence. Once you have killed
the suitors in your house with your sharp sword,
by cunning or in public, then take up

[150] a well-made oar and go, until you reach
a people who know nothing of the sea,
who don’t put salt on any food they eat,
and have no knowledge of ships painted red
or well-made oars that serve those ships as wings.

I'll tell you a sure sign you won't forget—
when someone else runs into you and says
you've got a shovel used for winnowing
on your broad shoulders, then fix that fine oar
in the ground there, and make rich sacrifice
[160] to lord Poseidon with a ram, a bull,
and a boar that breeds with sows. Then leave.
Go home, and there make sacred offerings
to the immortal gods, who hold wide heaven,
to all of them in order. Your death will come
far from the sea, such a gentle passing,
when you are bowed down with a ripe old age,
and your people prospering around you.³
In all these things I'm telling you the truth.'

"He finished speaking. Then I replied and said:

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

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

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

"After saying this,
the shade of lord Teiresias returned

to Hades' home, having made his prophecy.
But I stayed there undaunted, till my mother
came and drank dark blood. Then she knew me.
Full of sorrow, she spoke out—her words had wings:

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

“Once she'd finished, I answered her:

‘Mother,
[200] I had to come down here to Hades' home,
meet the shade of Teiresias of Thebes,
and hear his prophecy. I have not yet
come near Achaea's shores or disembarked
in our own land. I've been wandering around
in constant misery, ever since I left
with noble Agamemnon, bound for Troy,
that city celebrated for its horses,
to fight against the Trojans. But come now,
tell me—and make sure you speak the truth—
[210] What grievous form of death destroyed you?
A lingering disease, or did archer Artemis
attack and kill you with her gentle arrows?
And tell me of my father and my son,
whom I left behind. Do they still possess
my kingship, or has another man already
taken it, because they now are saying
I won't be coming back? Tell me of the wife

I married. What are her thoughts and plans?
Is she still there with her son, keeping watch
[220] on everything? Or has she been married
to the finest of Achaeans?’

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

‘You can be sure she’s waiting in your home,
her heart still faithful. But her nights and days
all end in sorrow, with her shedding tears.
As for your noble kingship rights, no one else
has taken them as yet. Telemachus
controls the land unchallenged and can feast
in banquets with his equals, or at least
[230] those which a man who renders judgment
should by rights attend. They all invite him.
As for your father, he stays on his farm
and never travels down into the city.
He has no bed or bedding—no cloaks
or shining coverlets. In wintertime,
he sleeps inside the house beside his slaves,
close to the fire in the dirt, and wears
disgraceful clothes. During the summer months
and in fruitful autumn, he makes his bed
[240] from fallen leaves scattered on the ground
here and there along his vineyard slopes.
There he lies in sorrow, nursing in his heart
enormous grief, longing you’ll come back.
A harsh old age has overtaken him.
That’s how I met my fate and died, as well.
I was not attacked and killed in my own home
by gentle arrows of the keen-eyed archer,
nor did I die of some disease which takes
the spirit from our limbs, as we waste away
[250] in pain. No. It was my longing for you,
glorious Odysseus, for your loving care,

that robbed me of my life, so honey sweet.’

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

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

“I spoke. My honoured mother quickly said:

‘My child, of all men most unfortunate,
no, Persephone, daughter of Zeus,
[270] is not deceiving you. Once mortals die,
this is what’s set for them. Their sinews
no longer hold the flesh and bone together.
The mighty power of blazing fire
destroys them, once our spirit flies from us,
from our white bones. And then it slips away,
and, like a dream, flutters to and fro.
But hurry to the light as quickly as you can.
Remember all these things, so later on
you can describe the details to your wife.’

[280] “As we talked together, some women came,
all wives and daughters of the noblest men,
sent out by queen Persephone. They flocked
by the black blood, throngs of them. I wondered

how I could get to question each of them.
To my heart the best idea seemed to be
to draw the sharp sword by my sturdy thigh
and stop them drinking dark blood all at once.
So they came forward one by one in turn,
and each of them described her lineage,
[290] and I could question every one of them.

“There I saw high-born Tyro first of all,
daughter, she said, of noble Samoneus,
and wife of Cretheus, son of Aeolus.
She’d loved the river god Enipeus,
most beautiful by far of all the streams
that flow on earth. She used to stroll along
beside the lovely waters of Enipeus.
But the Encircler and Shaker of the Earth,
taking on the form of Enipeus,
[300] lay with her in the foaming river mouth.⁶
A high dark wave rose arching over them,
like a mountain, keeping them concealed,
the mortal woman and the god. Poseidon
removed the virgin’s belt and made her sleep.
After he’d finished having sex with her,
the god then held her by the hand and said:

‘Woman, be happy about making love.
Before the year goes by, you’ll be giving birth
to marvelous children, for a god’s embrace
[310] does not lack power. Take good care of them,
and raise them well. But now you must go home.
Hold your tongue, and don’t tell anyone.
Know that I am Earthshaker Poseidon.’

“That said, he plunged into the surging sea.
Tyro conceived and then gave birth to sons,
Pelias and Neleus, and they became
two stalwart followers of mighty Zeus.

Pelias lived in spacious Iolcus,
where he owned many flocks, and Neleus
[320] made his home in sandy Pylos. Tyro,
queen among women, bore other children
to Cretheus—Aeson, Pheres, and Amythaon—
who loved to go to battle in a chariot.

“Then I saw Antiope, daughter of Asopus.
She boasted she’d made love with Zeus himself,
and borne two sons, Zethus and Amphion,
who first established seven-gated Thebes,
constructing walls around it—for all their strength,
they lacked the power to live in spacious Thebes,
[330] unless the place was fortified. After her,
I saw Alcmene, Amphitryon’s wife,
who had sex with powerful Zeus and bore
that great fighter, lion-hearted Hercules.
And I saw Megara, proud Creon’s daughter,
who married that son of Amphitryon,
a man whose fighting spirit never flagged.

“The next I saw was Oedipus’ mother,
fair Jocasta, who, against her knowledge,
undertook a monstrous act—she married
[340] her own son.⁷ Once he’d killed his father,
he made her his wife. And then the gods
showed everyone the truth. But Oedipus,
thanks to the fatal counsels of the gods,
for all his painful suffering, remained king
in lovely Thebes, ruling the Cadmeans.
But she descended down to Hades’ home,
the mighty gaoler. She tied a fatal noose
to a roof-beam high above her head and died,
overwhelmed with grief. But she left behind
[350] enormous agonies for Oedipus,
all that a mother’s Furies can inflict.⁸

“Next I saw lovely Chloris, whom Neleus
married because she was so beautiful,
after he’d given countless courtship gifts.
She was the youngest child of Amphion,
son of Iasus, once the mighty king
of Minyan Orchomenus. As queen in Pylos,
she bore her husband splendid children—
Nestor, Chromius, noble Periclymenus,
[360] and lovely Pero, a mortal wonder,
so much so that all the neighbouring men
sought her hand in marriage. But Neleus
wouldn’t give her to anyone except the man
who drove great Iphicles’ cattle herd
from Phylace—broad-faced beasts with spiral horns,
and hard to manage. A trusty prophet
was the only one who promised he would try,
but a painful fate determined by the gods
ensnared him—those savage cattle herders
[370] imprisoned him in cruel bondage.⁹
But as the days and months went by, bringing
a change in seasons, the new year rolled in,
and mighty Iphicles had him released—
after he’d told them all his prophecies,
and Zeus’ will then came to be fulfilled.

“Then I saw Leda, wife of Tyndareus.
She bore Tyndareus two stout-hearted sons,
horse-taming Castor and Polydeuces,
[380] the illustrious boxer.¹⁰ Life-giving earth
has buried them, although they live on still.
Even in the world below Zeus honours them.
On every other day they are alive
and then, on alternating days, are dead.
And they have won respect reserved for gods.

“After Leda, I saw Iphimedeia,
wife of Aloeus. Poseidon, she said,

had made love to her, and she'd had two sons,
godlike Otus and famed Ephialtes.
[390] Though neither one of them lived very long,
grain-giving Earth had raised them up to be
the tallest and handsomest men by far,
after glorious Orion. They stood,
at nine years old, twenty-two feet wide
and fifty-four feet high.¹¹ But they threatened
to bring the battle din of furious war
against the immortals on Olympus.
They wished to pile mount Ossa on Olympus,
then stack Pelion with its trembling forests
[400] on top of Ossa.¹² Then they could storm heaven.
And if they'd reached their full-grown height as men,
they might well have succeeded. But Zeus' son,
the one whom Leto bore, killed both of them,
before the hair below their temples grew
and hid their chins beneath a full-fledged beard.¹³

"I saw Phaedra, Procis, and fair Ariadne,
daughter of Minos, whose mind loved slaughter.
Theseus brought her once away from Crete
to the hill in sacred Athens. But he got
[410] no joy of her. Before he did, Artemis
on sea-girt Dia killed Ariadne,
because of something Dionysus said.¹⁴

"And I saw Maera and Clymene,
and hateful Eriphyle, too, who sold
her dear husband's life for precious gold.
I cannot mention all the woman I saw,
every wife and daughter of those heroes—
immortal night would end before I finished.
It's time to sleep, in my swift ship or here.
[420] How I am escorted from this place
is now up to you and to the gods."

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

“Phaeacians, how does this man seem to you
for beauty, stature, and within himself,
a fair, well-balanced mind? He is my guest,
though each of you shares in this honour, too.
So don’t be quick to send him on his way,
[430] and don’t hold back your gifts to one in need.
Thanks to favours from the gods, you have
many fine possessions stored away at home.”

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

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

Once Echeneus finished, Alcinous spoke out:

[440] “The queen indeed will have the final word,
as surely as I live and am the king
of the Phaeacians, men who love the oar.
But though our guest is longing to return,
let him try to stay until tomorrow.
By then I’ll have completed all our gifts.
His leaving here is everyone’s concern,
especially mine, since I control this land.”

Resourceful Odysseus then replied to him and said:

“Lord Alcinous, of all men most renowned,
[450] if you asked me to stay for one whole year,
to organize my escort and give splendid gifts,

then I would still agree. It's far better
to get back to one's own dear native land
with more wealth in hand. I'll win more respect,
more love from anyone who looks at me,
whenever I return to Ithaca."

Alcinous then answered him and said:

"Odysseus,
when we look at you, we do not perceive
that you're in any way a lying fraud,
[460] like many men the black earth nourishes
and scatters everywhere, who make up lies
from things no man has seen. You speak so well,
and you have such a noble heart inside.
You've told your story with a minstrel's skill,
the painful agonies of all the Argives
and your own, as well. Come then, tell me this—
and speak the truth—did you see any comrades,
those godlike men who went with you to Troy
and met their fate there? This night before us
[470] will be lengthy, astonishingly so.
It's not yet time to sleep here in the halls,
so tell me of these marvelous events.
I could stay here until bright Dawn arrives,
if you'd agree to tell me in this room
the tale of your misfortunes."

Resourceful Odysseus
then answered him and said:

"Lord Alcinous,
most renowned among all men, there's a time
for many stories and a time for sleep.
If you are eager to hear even more,
[480] I will not hesitate to speak to you
of other things more pitiful than these.

I mean the troubles of those friends of mine
who perished later, who managed to escape
the Trojans frightening battle cries, but died
when they returned, thanks to the deviousness
of a malicious woman.

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

[500] ‘Lord Agamemnon, son of Atreus,
king of men, what fatal net of grievous death
destroyed you? Did Poseidon stir the winds
into a furious storm and strike your ships?
Or were you killed by enemies on land,
while you were cutting out their cattle
or rich flocks of sheep? Or were you fighting
to seize their city and their women?’

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

‘Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes’ son,
[510] and Zeus’ child, Poseidon didn’t kill me
in my ships by rousing savage winds
into a vicious storm. Nor was I killed
by enemies on land. No. Aegisthus

brought on my fatal end. He murdered me,
and he was helped by my accursed wife,
after he'd invited me into his home
and prepared a feast for me, like an ox
one butchers in its stall. And so I died
the most pitiful of deaths. Around me
[520] they kept killing the rest of my companions,
like white-tusked pigs at some wedding feast,
communal meal, or fine drinking party
in a powerful and rich man's home.
You've encountered dying men before,
many of them, those slain in single combat
or the thick of war. But if you'd seen that,
your heart would've felt great pity. There we were,
lying in the hall among the mixing bowls
and tables crammed with food, the entire floor
[530] awash with blood. The saddest thing I heard
was Cassandra, Priam's daughter, screaming.
That traitor Clytaemnestra slaughtered her
right there beside me. Though I was dying,
I raised my arms to strike her with my sword,
but that dog-faced bitch turned her back on me.
Though I was on my way to Hades,
she made no attempt to use her fingers
to close my eyelids or to shut my mouth.¹⁵
The truth is, there's nothing more disgusting,
[540] more disgraceful, than a woman whose heart
is set on deeds like this—the way she planned
the shameless act, to arrange the murder
of the man she'd married. I really thought
I'd be warmly welcomed when I reached home
by my children and my slaves. That woman,
more than anyone, has covered herself
and women born in years to come with shame,
even the ones whose deeds are virtuous.'

"Agamemnon finished. I answered him at once:

[550] ‘That’s horrible. Surely wide-thundering Zeus
for many years has shown a dreadful hate
towards the family of Atreus,
thanks to the conniving of some woman.
Many died for Helen’s sake, and then
Clytaemnestra organized a trap for you,
while you were somewhere far away.’

“I spoke,
and he immediately replied, saying:

‘That’s why you should never treat them kindly,
not even your own wife. Never tell her
[560] all the things you’ve determined in your mind.
Tell her some, but keep the rest well hidden.
But in your case, Odysseus, death won’t come
at your wife’s hand, for wise Penelope,
Icarius’ daughter, is a virtuous woman,
with an understanding heart. When we left
to go to war, she’d not been married long.
She had a young lad at her breast, a child,
who now, I think, sits down among the men,
happy his dear father will notice him
[570] when he comes back home. Then he’ll welcome him
in an appropriate way. But my wife
didn’t let my eyes feast on my own son.
Before I could do that, she slaughtered me,
her husband. But I’ll tell you something else—
keep this firmly in your mind. Bring your ship
back to your dear native land in secret,
without public display. For there’s no trust
in women any more. But come, tell me—
and speak the truth—whether you chanced to hear
[580] where my son’s living now. He may well be
in Orchomenus or in sandy Pylos,
or perhaps in Sparta with Menelaus.

For noble Orestes has not yet died
up there on the earth.'

"Once Agamemnon paused,
I gave him my answer right away:

'Son of Atreus, why ask me that question?
I don't know whether he's alive or dead.
And there's no point in prattling like the wind.'

"So we two stood there in sad conversation,
[590] full of sorrow and shedding many tears.
Then Achilles' shade came up, son of Peleus,
with those of splendid Antilochus
and Patroclus, too, as well as Ajax,
who in his looks and body was the best
of all Danaans, after Achilles,
who had no equal. Then the shadow
of the swift-footed son of Aeacus
knew who I was, and with a cry of grief,
he spoke to me—his words had wings:16

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

"Achilles spoke. I answered him at once:

'Achilles, son of Peleus, mightiest
by far of the Achaeans, I came here
because I had to see Teiresias.
[610] He might tell me a plan for my return
to rugged Ithaca. I've not yet come near
Achaean land. I've still not disembarked

in my own country. I'm in constant trouble.
But as for you, Achilles, there's no man
in earlier days who was more blest than you,
and none will come in future. Before now,
while you were still alive, we Argives
honoured you as we did the gods. And now,
since you've come here, you rule with power
[620] among those who have died. So Achilles,
you have no cause to grieve because you're dead.'

"I paused, and he immediately replied:

'Don't try to comfort me about my death,
glorious Odysseus. I'd rather live
working as a wage-labourer for hire
by some other man, one who had no land
and not much in the way of livelihood,
than lord it over all the wasted dead.
But come, tell me of my noble son—
[630] whether he went off to war or not.
Did he become a leader? Talk to me
about great Peleus, if there's something
you have heard. Is he still held in honour
among the many Myrmidons? Do men
disparage him in Greece and Phthia
because old age now grips his hands and feet?
I am not there, living in the sunlight,
to help him with the power I once had
in spacious Troy, when I killed their best men
[640] and kept the Argives safe. But if I came
back to my father's house with strength like that,
though only for the briefest moment,
those who act with disrespect against him,
denying him honour, would soon come to fear
my force, these overpowering hands of mine.'

"Achilles spoke. I answered him at once:

‘To tell the truth, I’ve heard nothing at all
of worthy Peleus. As for your son,
dear Neoptolemus, I can tell you
[650] the entire truth, just as you requested.
I myself brought him in my fine ship
from Scyros, to join well-armed Achaeans.
And when we discussed our strategies
around the Trojans’ city, I tell you,
he was always first to state his own ideas,
and when he talked, he never missed the mark.
The only ones superior to him
were godlike Nestor and myself. And then,
on the Trojan plain when we Achaeans fought,
[660] he never stayed back in the crowds of men
with ranks of soldiers. No. He ran ahead,
far out in front. No man’s strength matched his.
In fearful battles he killed many men.
I can’t give you the names of all of them,
those he slew while fighting for the Argives.
But his sword cut down the son of Telephus,
brave Eurypylus. What a man he was!
Many of his comrades, the Ceteians,
were also slaughtered there around him
[670] because a certain woman wanted gifts.¹⁷
He was the finest looking man I saw
after noble Memnon. And then, when we,
the noblest Argives, were climbing in
the wooden horse crafted by Epeius,
with me in overall command, telling men
to open up or close our well-built trap,
many other Danaan counsellors
and leaders, too, were brushing tears aside,
and each man’s legs were trembling—even then
[680] my eyes never saw his fair skin grow pale
or watched him wipe his cheeks to clear off tears.
He begged me many times to let him loose,

to leave the horse, and he kept reaching for
his sword hilt and his spear of heavy bronze.
That's how keen he was to kill the Trojans.
Once we'd ravaged Priam's lofty city,
he took his share of loot and a fine prize,
when he went to his ship. He was unhurt—
no blows from sharp bronze spears or other wounds
[690] from fighting hand-to-hand, the sort one gets
so frequently in battle. For Ares,
when he's angry, does not discriminate.'

"I spoke. Then the shade of swift Achilles
moved off with massive strides through meadows
filled with asphodel, rejoicing that I'd said
his son was such a celebrated man.

"The other shadows of the dead and gone
stood there in sorrow, all asking questions
about the ones they loved. The only one
[700] who stood apart was the shade of Ajax,
son of Telamon, still full of anger
for my victory, when I'd bested him
beside our ships, in that competition
for Achilles' arms. His honoured mother
had offered them as prizes. The judges
were sons of Troy and Pallas Athena.¹⁸
How I wish I'd never won that contest!
Those weapons were the cause earth swallowed up
the life of Ajax, such a splendid man,
[710] who, in his looks and actions, was the best
of all Danaans after the noble son
of Peleus. I called to him—my words
were meant to reassure him:

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

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

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

"Next I saw Minos, glorious son of Zeus,
sitting there, holding a golden sceptre
and passing judgments on the dead, who stood
and sat around the king, seeking justice,
throughout the spacious gates of Hades' home.¹⁹

"After him I noticed huge Orion
rounding up across a field of asphodel
[740] wild creatures he himself had hunted down
in isolated mountains. In his hand,
he clutched his still unbreakable bronze club.

"And I saw Tityus, son of glorious Earth,
lying on the ground. His body covered
nine acres and more. Two vultures sat there,
one on either side, ripping his liver,
their beaks jabbing deep inside his guts.
His hands could not fend them off his body.

He'd assaulted Leto, Zeus' lovely wife,
[750] as she was passing through Panopeus,
with its fine dancing grounds, towards Pytho.²⁰

“Then I saw Tantalus in agony,
standing in a pool of water so deep
it almost reached his chin. He looked as if
he had a thirst but couldn't take a drink.
Whenever that old man bent down, so keen
to drink, the water there was swallowed up
and vanished. You could see black earth appear
around his feet. A god dried up the place.
[760] Some high and leafy trees above his head
were in full bloom—pears and pomegranates,
apple trees—all with gleaming fruit—sweet figs
and luscious olives. Each time the old man
stretched out his arms to reach for them,
a wind would raise them to the shadowy clouds.

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

“And then I noticed mighty Hercules,
or at least his image, for he himself
was with immortal gods, enjoying their feasts.
Hebe with the lovely ankles is his wife,
[780] daughter of great Zeus and Hera, goddess
of the golden sandals. Around him there
the dead were making noises, like birds

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

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

“With these words he returned to Hades' home.
But I stayed at that place a while, in case
one of those heroic men who perished
in days gone by might come. I might have seen
still more men from former times, the ones
I wished to see—Theseus and Perithous,

great children of the gods. Before I could,
a thousand tribes of those who'd died appeared,
with an astounding noise. Pale fear gripped me—
[820] holy Persephone might send at me
a horrific monster, the Gorgon's head.
I quickly made my way back to the ship,
told my crew to get themselves on board,
and loosen off the cables at the stern.
They went aboard at once and took their seats
along each rowing bench. A rising swell
carried our ship down Oceanus' stream.
We rowed at first, but then a fair wind blew.