

The Odyssey

BOOK TWELVE

The Sirens, Scylla And Charybdis, The Cattle Of The Sun

[Odysseus continues his story in Phaeacia: the ship sails from Oceanus back to Circe's island where they bury Elpenor; Circe advises Odysseus about future adventures; Odysseus and his crew leave Circe and sail past the Sirens; then they encounter Scylla and Charybdis and lose six men; the ship then sails on to Thrinacia, where the herds and flocks of Helios graze; Odysseus' men swear not to touch the animals; winds keep them on the island; desperate with hunger the crewmen round up some of the animals and kill them; they leave the island, and Zeus sends on a storm as punishment; the boat is destroyed and all of Odysseus' shipmates drown; Odysseus drifts back on a temporary raft to Charybdis, but manages to escape; he reaches Calypso's island; the tale of his past adventures concludes.]

“Our ship sailed on, away from Ocean's stream,
across the great wide sea, and reached Aeaea,
the island home and dancing grounds of Dawn.¹
We sailed in, hauled our ship up on the beach,
then walked along the shore beside the sea.
There, waiting for bright Dawn, we fell asleep.

“As soon as rose-fingered early Dawn appeared,
I sent my comrades off to Circe's house
to fetch the body of the dead Elpenor.
[10] Then, after quickly cutting down brush wood,
we buried him where the land extended
furthest out to sea. Overcome with grief,
we shed many tears. After we had burned
the dead man's corpse and armour, we piled up
a mound, raised a pillar, then planted there,
above the mound, his finely fashioned oar.

“While we were occupied with all these tasks,
Circe was well aware of our return
from Hades' home. Dressed in her finery,
[20] she quickly came to us. With her she brought
servants carrying bread, plenty of meat,
and bright red wine. Then the lovely goddess

stood in our midst and spoke to us:

‘You reckless men,
you’ve gone to Hades’ home while still alive,
to meet death twice, when other men die once.
But come, eat this food and drink this wine.
Take all day. As soon as Dawn arrives,
you’ll sail. I’ll show you your course and tell you
each sign to look for, so you’ll not suffer,
[30] or, thanks to vicious plans of sea and land,
endure great pain.’

“Circe finished speaking.
And our proud hearts agreed with what she’d said.
So all that day until the sun went down
we sat there eating rich supplies of meat
and drinking down sweet wine. The sun then set,
and darkness came. So we lay down and slept
beside stern cables of our ship. But Circe
took me by the hand and led me off,
some distance from the crew. She made me sit,
[40] while she lay there on the ground beside me.
I told her every detail of our trip,
describing all of it from start to finish.
Then queen Circe spoke to me and said:

‘All these things have thus come to an end.
But you must listen now to what I say—
a god himself will be reminding you.
First of all, you’ll run into the Sirens.
They seduce all men who come across them.
Whoever unwittingly goes past them
[50] and hears the Sirens’ call never gets back.
His wife and infant children in his home
will never stand beside him full of joy.
No. Instead, the Sirens’ clear-toned song
will captivate his heart. They’ll be sitting

in a meadow, surrounded by a pile,
a massive heap, of rotting human bones
encased in shriveled skin. Row on past them.
Roll some sweet wax in your hand and stuff it
in your companions' ears, so none of them
[60] can listen. But if you're keen to hear them,
make your crew tie you down in your swift ship.
Stand there with hands and feet lashed to the mast.
They must attach the rope ends there as well.
Then you can hear both Sirens as they sing.
You'll enjoy their song. If you start to beg
your men, or order them, to let you go,
make sure they lash you there with still more rope.
When your crew has rowed on past the Sirens,
I cannot tell you which alternative
[70] to follow on your route—for you yourself
will have to trust your heart. But I'll tell you
the options. One has overhanging rocks,
on which dark-eyed Amphitrite's great waves
smash with a roar. These cliffs the blessed gods
have called the Planctae. No birds pass through there,
not even timid doves who bring ambrosia
to father Zeus. The sheer rock precipice
snatches even these away. And then Zeus
sends out another to maintain their count.
[80] No human ship has ever reached this place
and got away. Instead, waves from the sea
and deadly blasts of fire carry away
a whirling mass of timbers from the boat
and human bodies. Only one ocean ship,
most famous of them all, has made it through,
the Argo, sailing on her way from Aeetes,
and waves would soon have smashed that vessel, too,
against the massive rocks, had not Hera
sent her through. For Jason was her friend.²
[90] On the other route there are two cliffs.
One has a sharp peak jutting all the way

up to wide heaven. Around that mountain
a dark cloud sits, which never melts away.
No blue sky ever shows around the peak,
not even in summer or at harvest time.
No human being could climb up that rock
and stand on top, not even if he had
twenty hands and feet. The cliff's too smooth,
like polished stone. Half way up the rock face
[100] there's a shadowy cave. It faces west,
towards Erebus. You'll steer your ship at it,
illustrious Odysseus. There's no man
powerful enough to shoot an arrow
from a hollow ship and reach that cavern.
In there lives Scylla. She has a dreadful yelp.
It's true her voice sounds like a new-born pup,
but she's a vicious monster. Nobody
would feel good seeing her, nor would a god
who crossed her path. She has a dozen feet,
[110] all deformed, six enormously long necks,
with a horrific head on each of them,
and three rows of teeth packed close together,
full of murky death. Her lower body
she keeps out of sight in her hollow cave,
but sticks her heads outside the fearful hole,
and fishes there, scouring around the rock
for dolphins, swordfish, or some bigger prey,
whatever she can seize of all those beasts
moaning Amphitrite keeps nourishing
[120] in numbers past all counting. No sailors
can yet boast they and their ship sailed past her
without getting hurt. Each of Scylla's heads
carries off a man, snatching him away
right off the dark-prowed ship. Then, Odysseus,
you'll see the other cliff. It's not so high.
The two are close together. You could shoot
an arrow from one cliff and hit the other.
There's a huge fig tree there with leaves in bloom.

Just below that tree divine Charybdis
[130] sucks black water down. She spews it out
three times a day, and then three times a day
she gulps it down—a terrifying sight.
May you never meet her when she swallows!
Nothing can save you from destruction then,
not even Poseidon, Shaker of the Earth.
Make sure your ship stays close to Scylla’s rock.
Row past there quickly. It’s much better
to mourn for six companions in your ship
than to have all of them wiped out together.’

[140] “Circe paused. I answered her directly:

‘Goddess, please tell me this, and speak the truth—
is there some way I can get safely through,
past murderous Charybdis, and protect
me and my crew when Scylla moves to strike.’

“I spoke. The lovely goddess then replied:

‘You reckless man, you think you’re dealing here
with acts of war or work? Why won’t you yield
to the immortal gods? She’s not human,
but a destroyer who will never die—
[150] fearful, difficult, and fierce—not someone
you can fight. There’s no defence against her.
The bravest thing to do is run away.
If you linger by the cliff to arm yourself,
I fear she’ll jump out once more, attack you
with all her heads and snatch away six men,
just as before. Row on quickly past her,
as hard as you can go. Send out a call
to Crataeis, her mother, who bore her
to menace human beings. She’ll restrain her—
[160] Scylla’s heads won’t lash out at you again.
Next you’ll reach the island of Thrinacia,

where Helios' many cattle graze,
his rich flocks, too—seven herds of cattle
and just as many lovely flocks of sheep,
with fifty in each group. They bear no young
and never die. Their herders are divine,
fair-haired nymphs Lampetie and Phaethusa.
Beautiful Neaera gave birth to them
from Helios Hyperion, god of the sun.

- [170] Once she'd raised them, their royal mother
sent them off to live on Thrinacia,
an island far away, where they could tend
their father's sheep and bent-horned cattle.
Now, if you leave these animals unharmed
and focus on your journey home, I think
you may get back to Ithaca, although
you'll bear misfortunes. But if you harm them,
then I foresee destruction for your ship
and crew. Even if you yourself escape,
[180] you'll get back home in great distress and late,
after all your comrades have been killed.'

- "Circe finished speaking. When Dawn came up
on her golden throne, the lovely goddess
left to go up island. So I returned
back to the ship and urged my comrades
to get on board and loosen off the stern ropes.
They quickly climbed into the ship, sat down
in proper order at each rowing bench,
and struck the gray sea with their oars. Fair winds
[190] began to blow behind our dark-prowed ship,
filling the sail, excellent companions
sent by fair-haired Circe, fearful goddess
who possessed the power of song. We checked out
the rigging on our ship and then sat down.
The wind and helmsman kept us on our course.
Then, with an aching heart, I addressed my crew:

‘Friends, it’s not right that only one or two
should know the prophecies revealed to me
by the lovely goddess Circe. And so,
[200] I’ll tell you all—once we understand them,
we may either die or ward off Death and Fate
and then escape. She told me first of all
we should guard against the wondrous voices
of the Sirens in their flowery meadows.
She said I alone should listen to them.
But you must tie me down with cruel bonds,
so I stay where I am and cannot move,
standing upright at the mast. You must fix
the rope at both its ends onto the mast.
[210] If I start ordering you to set me free,
you have to tie me down with still more rope.’

“I reviewed these things in every detail,
informing my companions. Our strong ship,
with a fair wind still driving us ahead,
came quickly to the island of the Sirens.
Then the wind died down. Everything was calm,
without a breeze. Some god had stilled the waves.
My comrades stood up, furled the sail, stowed it
in the hollow ship, and then sat at their oars,
[220] churning the water white with polished blades
carved out of pine. With my sharp sword I cut
a large round chunk of wax into small bits,
then kneaded them in my strong fingers.
This pressure and the rays of Helios,
lord Hyperion, made the wax grow warm.
Once I’d plugged my comrades’ ears with wax,
they tied me hand and foot onto the ship,
so I stood upright hard against the mast.
They lashed the rope ends to the mast as well,
[230] then sat and struck the gray sea with their oars.
But when we were about as far away
as a man can shout, moving forward quickly,

our swift ship did not get past the Sirens,
once it came in close, without being noticed.
So they began their clear-toned cry:

‘Odysseus,
you famous man, great glory of Achaeans,
come over here. Let your ship pause awhile,
so you can hear the songs we two will sing.
No man has ever rowed in his black ship
[240] past this island and not listened to us,
sweet-voiced melodies sung from our lips.
That brings him joy, and he departs from here
a wiser man, for we two understand
all the things that went on there in Troy,
all Trojan and Achaean suffering,
thanks to what the gods then willed, for we know
everything that happens on this fertile earth.’

“They paused. The voice that reached me was so fine
my heart longed to listen. I told my crew
[250] to set me free, sent them clear signals
with my eyebrows. But they fell to the oars
and rowed ahead. Then two of them got up,
Perimedes and Eurylochus, bound me
with more rope and lashed me even tighter.
Once they’d rowed on well beyond the Sirens,
my loyal crewmates quickly pulled out wax
I’d stuffed in each man’s ears and loosed my ropes.

“But once we’d left the island far behind,
I saw giant waves and smoke. Then I heard
[260] a crashing roar. The men were terrified.
The oars were snatched away, out of their hands,
and banged each other in the swirling sea.
Once they were no longer pulling hard
on their tapered oars, the boat stopped moving.
I went through the ship, cheering up the crew,

standing beside each man and speaking words
of reassurance:

‘Friends, up to this point,
we’ve not been strangers to misfortunes.
Surely the bad things now are nothing worse
[270] than when the Cyclops with his savage force
kept us his prisoners in his hollow cave.
But even there, thanks to my excellence,
intelligence, and planning, we escaped.
I think someday we’ll be remembering
these dangers, too. But come now, all of us
should follow what I say. Stay by your oars,
and keep striking them against the surging sea.
Zeus may somehow let us escape from here
and thus avoid destruction. You, helmsman,
[280] I’m talking, above all, to you, so hold
this in your heart—you control the steering
on this hollow ship. Keep us on a course
some distance from the smoke and breaking waves.
Hug the cliff, in case, before you know it,
our ship veers over to the other side,
and you throw us all into disaster.’

“I spoke. They quickly followed what I’d said.
I didn’t speak a word of Scylla—she was
a threat for which there was no remedy—
[290] in case my comrades, overcome with fear,
might stop rowing and huddle together
inside the boat. At that point I forgot
Circe’s hard command, when she’d ordered me
not to arm myself. After I’d put on
my splendid armour, I took two long spears
and moved up to the foredeck of the ship,
where, it seemed to me, I could see Scylla
as soon as she appeared up on the rock
and brought disaster down on my companions.

[300] I couldn't catch a glimpse of her at all.
My eyes grew weary as I searched for her
all around that misty rock. We sailed on,
up the narrow strait, groaning as we moved.
On one side lay Scylla; on the other one
divine Charybdis terrified us all,
by swallowing salt water from the sea.
When she spewed it out, she seethed and bubbled
uncontrollably, just like a cauldron
on a massive fire, while high above our heads

[310] spray was falling on top of both the cliffs.
When she sucked the salt sea water down,
everything in there looked totally confused,
a dreadful roar arose around the rocks,
and underneath the dark and sandy ground
was visible. Pale fear gripped my crewmen.
When we saw Charybdis, we were afraid
we'd be destroyed. Then Scylla snatched away
six of my companions, right from the ship,
the strongest and the bravest men I had.

[320] When I turned to watch the swift ship and crew,
already I could see their hands and feet,
as Scylla carried them high overhead.
They cried out and screamed, calling me by name
one final time, their hearts in agony.
Just as an angler on a jutting rock
casts out some bait with his long pole to snare
small fish and lets the horn from some field ox
sink down in the sea, then, when he snags one,
throws it quivering on shore, that's how those men

[330] wriggled as they were raised towards the rocks.³
Then, in the entrance to her cave, Scylla
devoured the men, who still kept screaming,
stretching out their arms in my direction,
as they met their painful deaths. Of all things
my eyes have witnessed in my journeying
on pathways of the sea, the sight of them

was the most piteous I've ever seen.

“Once we'd made it past those rocks and fled,
escaping Scylla and dread Charybdis,
[340] we reached the lovely island of the god,
home of those splendid broad-faced cattle
and numerous rich flocks belonging to
Helios Hyperion, god of the sun.
While I was still at sea in my black ship,
I heard the lowing cattle being penned
and bleating sheep. There fell into my heart
the speeches of Teiresias of Thebes,
the sightless prophet—Circe's words, as well,
on Aeaea. They had both strictly charged
[350] that I should at all costs miss this island,
the property of Helios, who brings
such joy to men. So with a heavy heart,
I spoke to my companions:

‘Comrades,
though you have endured a lot of trouble,
hear what I have to say, so I can speak
about the prophecies Teiresias made
and Circe, too, on Aeaea. They both
strictly charged me to avoid this island,
which Helios owns, who gives men such joy.
[360] Here, she said, we face our gravest danger.
So row our black ship past this island.’

“I paused. The spirit in my crew was shattered.
Then Eurylochus answered me. His words
were full of spite:

‘You're a hard man,
Odysseus, with more strength than other men.
Your limbs are never weary. One would think
you were composed entirely of iron,

if you refuse to let your shipmates land,
when they're worn out with work and lack of sleep.

[370] Here on this sea-girt island, we could make
a tasty dinner. You tell us instead
to wander on like this through the swift night.
But harsh winds which destroy men's ships arise
out of the night. And how could we avoid
total disaster, if we chance to meet
unexpected blasts from stormy South Wind
or from blustering West Wind, the ones
most likely to completely wreck our ship,
no matter what the ruling gods may wish?

[380] Surely we should let black night persuade us,
and now prepare a meal, while we stay put
alongside our swift ship. When morning comes,
we'll go on board, set off on the wide sea.'

"Eurylochus spoke. My other comrades
all agreed. So then I understood too well
some god was planning trouble. I replied—
my words had wings:

'It seems, Eurylochus,
you're forcing me to stand alone. But come,
let all of you now swear this solemn oath—

[390] if by chance we find a herd of cattle
or a large flock of sheep, not one of you
will be so overcome with foolishness
that you'll kill a cow or sheep. No. Instead,
you'll be content to eat the food supplies
which goddess Circe gave.'

"Once I'd said this,
they swore, as I had asked, they'd never kill
those animals. When they had made the oath
and finished promising, we moved our ship
inside a hollow harbour, by a spring

[400] whose water tasted sweet. Then my crewmen
disembarked and made a skilful dinner.
When everyone had eaten food and drunk
to his heart's ease, they wept as they recalled
those dear companions Scylla snatched away
out of the hollow ship and then devoured.
As they cried there, sweet sleep came over them.

“But when three-quarters of the night had passed
and the stars had shifted their positions,
cloud-gatherer Zeus stirred up a nasty wind
[410] and an amazing storm, which hid in clouds
both land and sea alike. And from heaven
the night rushed down. Once rose-fingered Dawn arrived,
we dragged up our ship and made it secure
inside a hollow cave, a place nymphs used
as a fine dancing and assembly ground.
Then I called a meeting of the men and said:

‘My friends, in our ship we have meat and drink,
so let's not touch those cattle, just in case
that causes trouble for us. For these cows
[420] and lovely sheep belong to Helios,
a fearful god, who spies out all there is
and listens in on everything as well.’

“These words of mine won over their proud hearts.
But then South Wind kept blowing one whole month.
It never stopped. No other wind sprang up,
except those times when East or South Wind blew.
As long as the men had red wine and bread,
they didn't touch the cattle. They were keen
to stay alive. But once what we had stored
[430] inside our ship was gone, they had to roam,
scouring around for game and fish and birds,
whatever came to hand. They used bent hooks
to fish, while hunger gnawed their stomachs.

At that point I went inland, up island,
to pray to the gods, hoping one of them
would show me a way home. Once I'd moved
across the island, far from my comrades,
I washed my hands in a protected spot,
a shelter from the wind, and said my prayers
[440] to all the gods who hold Mount Olympus.
Then they poured sweet sleep across my eyelids.
Meanwhile Eurylochus began to give
disastrous advice to my companions:

‘Shipmates, although you’re suffering distress,
hear me out. For wretched human beings
all forms of death are hateful. But to die
from lack of food, to meet one’s fate that way,
is worst of all. So come, let’s drive away
the best of Helios’ cattle, and then
[450] we’ll sacrifice to the immortal gods
who hold wide heaven. And if we get home,
make it to Ithaca, our native land,
for Helios Hyperion we’ll build
a splendid temple, and inside we’ll put
many wealthy offerings. If he’s enraged
about his straight-horned cattle and desires
to wreck our ship and other gods agree,
I’d rather lose my life once and for all
choking on a wave than starving to death
on an abandoned island.’

[460] “Eurylochus spoke.
My other comrades agreed with what he’d said.
They quickly rounded up the finest beasts
from Helios’ herd, which was close by,
sleek, broad-faced animals with curving horns
grazing near the dark-prowed ship. My comrades
stood around them, praying to the gods.
They broke off tender leaves from a high oak,

for there was no white barley on the ship.⁴
After their prayers, they cut the creature's throats,
[470] flayed them, and cut out portions of the thighs.
These they covered in a double layer of fat
and laid raw meat on top. They had no wine
to pour down on the flaming sacrifice,
so they used some water for libations
and roasted all the entrails in the fire.
Once the thigh parts were completely roasted
and they'd had a taste of inner organs,
they sliced up the rest and skewered it on spits.
That was the moment sweet sleep left my eyes.
[480] I went down to our swift ship by the shore.
As I drew closer to our curving ship,
the sweet smell of hot fat floated round me.
I groaned and cried out to immortal gods:

'Father Zeus and you other sacred gods,
who live forever, you forced it on me,
that cruel sleep, to bring about my doom.
For my companions who remained behind
have planned something disastrous.'

"A messenger
quickly came to Helios Hyperion,
[490] long-robed Lampetie, bringing him the news—
we had killed his cattle. Without delay,
he spoke to the immortals, full of rage:

'Father Zeus and you other blessed gods,
who live forever, take your vengeance now
on those companions of Odysseus,
Laertes' son, who, in their arrogance,
have killed my animals, the very ones
I always look upon with such delight
whenever I move up to starry heaven
[500] and then turn back from there toward the earth.

If they don't pay me proper retribution
for those beasts, then I'll go down to Hades
and shine among the dead.'

"Cloud-gatherer Zeus
answered him and said:

'Helios, I think
you should keep on shining for immortals
and for human beings on fertile earth.
With a dazzling thunderbolt I myself
will quickly strike at that swift ship of theirs
and, in the middle of the wine-dark sea,
smash it to tiny pieces.'

[510] "I learned of this
from fair Calypso, who said she herself
had heard it from Hermes the Messenger.

"I came down to the sea and reached the ship.
Then I bitterly attacked my crewmen,
each of them in turn, standing by the boat.
But we couldn't find a single remedy—
the cattle were already dead. The gods
immediately sent my men bad omens—
hides crept along the ground, while on the spits
[520] the meat began to bellow, and a sound
like cattle lowing filled the air.

"For six days,
those comrades I had trusted feasted there,
eating the cattle they had rounded up,
the finest beasts in Helios' herd.
But when Zeus, son of Cronos, brought to us
the seventh day, the stormy winds died down.
We went aboard at once, put up the mast,
hoisted the white sail, and then set off,

out on the wide sea

“Once we’d left that island,
[530] no other land appeared, only sky and sea.
The son of Cronos sent us a black cloud,
above our hollow ship, while underneath
the sea grew dark. Our boat sailed on its course,
but not for long. All at once, West Wind whipped up
a frantic storm—the blasts of wind snapped off
both forestays on the mast, which then fell back,
and all our rigging crashed down in the hold.
In the stern part of the ship, the falling mast
struck the helmsman on his head, caving in
[540] his skull, every bone at once. Then he fell,
like a diver, off the ship. His proud spirit
left his bones. Then Zeus roared out his thunder
and with a bolt of lightning struck our ship.
The blow from Zeus’ lightning made our boat
shiver from stem to stern and filled it up
with sulphurous smoke. My crew fell overboard
and were carried in the waves, like cormorants,
around our blackened ship, because the god
had robbed them of their chance to get back home.

[550] “But I kept pacing up and down the ship,
until the breaking seas had loosened off
both sides of the keel. Waves were holding up
the shattered ship but then snapped off the mast
right at the keel. But the ox-hide backstay
had fallen over it, and so with that
I lashed them both together, mast and keel.
I sat on these and then was carried off
by those destructive winds. But when the storms
from West Wind ceased, South Wind began to blow,
[560] and that distressed my spirit—I worried
about floating back to grim Charybdis.
All night I drifted. When the sun came up,

I reached Scylla's cliff and dread Charybdis
sucking down salt water from the sea.
But I jumped up into the high fig tree
and held on there, as if I were a bat.
But there was nowhere I could plant my feet,
nor could I climb the tree—its roots were spread
[570] above me, out of reach, immense and long,
overshadowing Charybdis. I hung there,
staunch in my hope that when she spewed again,
she'd throw up keel and mast. And to my joy
they finally appeared. Just at the hour
a man gets up for dinner from assembly,
one who adjudicates the many quarrels
young men have, who then seek judgment,
that's when those timbers first came into view
out from Charybdis.⁵ My hands and feet let go
[580] and from up high I fell into the sea
beyond those lengthy spars. I sat on them
and used my hands to paddle my way through.
As for Scylla, the father of gods and men
would not let her catch sight of me again,
or else I'd not have managed to escape
being utterly destroyed.

“From that place
I drifted for nine days. On the tenth night,
the gods conducted me to Ogygia,
the island where fair-haired Calypso lives,
[590] fearful goddess with the power of song.
She welcomed and took good care of me.
But why should I tell you that story now?
It was only yesterday, in your home,
I told it to you and your noble wife.
And it's an irritating thing, I think,
to re-tell a story once it's clearly told.