

*THE ODYSSEY*

Translated by Robert Fitzgerald

The ten-year war waged by the Greeks against Troy, culminating in the overthrow of the city, is now itself ten years in the past. Helen, whose flight to Troy with the Trojan prince Paris had prompted the Greek expedition to seek revenge and reclaim her, is now home in Sparta, living harmoniously once more with her husband Menelāos (Menelaus). His brother Agamémnon, commander in chief of the Greek forces, was murdered on his return from the war by his wife and her paramour. Of the Greek chieftains who have survived both the war and the perilous homeward voyage, all have returned except Odysseus, the crafty and astute ruler of Ithaka (Ithaca), an island in the Ionian Sea off western Greece. Since he is presumed dead, suitors from Ithaka and other regions have overrun his house, paying court to his attractive wife Penélopê, endangering the position of his son, Telémakhos (Telemachus), corrupting many of the servants, and literally eating up Odysseus' estate. Penélopê has stalled for time but is finding it increasingly difficult to deny the suitors' demands that she marry one of them; Telémakhos, who is just approaching young manhood, is becoming actively resentful of the indignities suffered by his household.

Many persons and places in the *Odyssey* are best known to readers by their Latinized names, such as *Telemachus*. The present translator has used forms (*Telémakhos*) closer to the Greek spelling and pronunciation. A slanted accent mark (´) indicates stress; thus *Agamémnon* is accented on the third syllable. A circumflex accent (ˆ) indicates that the vowel sound is long; thus *Kêrês* is pronounced "Care-ace." A dieresis (¨) indicates pronunciation as a separate syllable; thus, *Thoösa* has three syllables rather than two. [Editors' headnote.]

## BOOK ONE: A GODDESS INTERVENES

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story  
of that man skilled in all ways of contending,  
the wanderer, harried for years on end,  
after he plundered the stronghold  
on the proud height of Troy.<sup>1</sup>

He saw the townlands  
and learned the minds of many distant men,  
and weathered many bitter nights and days  
in his deep heart at sea, while he fought only  
to save his life, to bring his shipmates home.  
But not by will nor valor could he save them,  
for their own recklessness destroyed them all—

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<sup>1</sup>These lines contain the traditional epic "opening formula" that includes the invocation of the inspiring Muse, the statement of the theme, the identification of the hero (in this case Odysseus), and a glance at the significance of the story.

children and fools, they killed and feasted on  
the cattle of Lord Hêlios,<sup>2</sup> the Sun,  
and he who moves all day through heaven  
took from their eyes the dawn of their return.

Of these adventures, Muse, daughter of Zeus,  
tell us in our time, lift the great song again.  
Begin when all the rest who left behind them  
headlong death in battle or at sea  
had long ago returned, while he alone still hungered  
for home and wife. Her ladyship Kalypso  
clung to him in her sea-hollowed caves—  
a nymph, immortal and most beautiful,  
who craved him for her own.

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And when long years and seasons  
wheeling brought around that point of time  
ordained for him to make his passage homeward,  
trials and dangers, even so, attended him  
even in Ithaka,<sup>3</sup> near those he loved.  
Yet all the gods had pitied Lord Odysseus,  
all but Poseidon,<sup>4</sup> raging cold and rough  
against the brave king till he came ashore  
at last on his own land.

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But now that god  
had gone far off among the sunburnt races,  
most remote of men, at earth's two verges,  
in sunset lands and lands of the rising sun,  
to be regaled by smoke of thighbones burning,  
haunches of rams and bulls, a hundred fold.  
He lingered delighted at the banquet side.

In the bright hall of Zeus upon Olympos  
the other gods were all at home, and Zeus,  
the father of gods and men, made conversation.  
For he had meditated on Aigísthos,<sup>5</sup> dead  
by the hand of Agamémnon's son, Orestês,  
and spoke his thought aloud before them all:

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"My word, how mortals take the gods to task!  
All their afflictions come from us, we hear.

<sup>2</sup>The offense against Hêlios is described in Book XII.

<sup>3</sup>Odysseus' island homeland, in the Ionian Sea off western Greece (sometimes the spelling is *Ithaca*).

<sup>4</sup>God of the ocean and brother of the chief of the gods who dwelled on Mount Olympos (Olympus), Zeus.

<sup>5</sup>While the Greek commander Agamémnon was away fighting against Troy, Aigísthos (Aegisthus) entered into an adulterous union with Klytaimnéstra (Clytaemnestra), Agamémnon's wife; they murdered Agamémnon upon his return. The murder was later avenged by Orestês, son of Agamémnon and Klytaimnéstra, as is related in Aeschylus' trilogy of plays known as the *Oresteia*.

And what of their own failings? Greed and folly  
 double the suffering in the lot of man.  
 See how Aigísthos, for his double portion,  
 stole Agamémnon's wife and killed the soldier  
 on his homecoming day. And yet Aigísthos  
 knew that his own doom lay in this. We gods  
 had warned him, sent down Hermês Argeiphontês,<sup>6</sup>  
 our most observant courier, to say:  
 'Don't kill the man, don't touch his wife,  
 or face a reckoning with Orestês  
 the day he comes of age and wants his patrimony.'  
 Friendly advice—but would Aigísthos take it?  
 Now he has paid the reckoning in full."

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The grey-eyed goddess Athena replied to Zeus:

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"O Majesty, O Father of us all,  
 that man is in the dust indeed, and justly.  
 So perish all who do what he had done.  
 But my own heart is broken for Odysseus,  
 the master mind of war, so long a castaway  
 upon an island in the running sea;  
 a wooded island, in the sea's middle,  
 and there's a goddess in the place, the daughter  
 of one whose baleful mind knows all the deeps  
 of the blue sea—Atlas,<sup>7</sup> who holds the columns  
 that bear from land the great thrust of the sky.  
 His daughter will not let Odysseus go,  
 poor mournful man; she keeps on coaxing him  
 with her beguiling talk, to turn his mind  
 from Ithaka. But such desire is in him  
 merely to see the hearthsmoke leaping upward  
 from his own island, that he longs to die.  
 Are you not moved by this, Lord of Olympos?  
 Had you no pleasure from Odysseus' offerings  
 beside the Argive<sup>8</sup> ships, on Troy's wide seaboard?  
 O Zeus, what do you hold against him now?"

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To this the summoner of cloud replied:

"My child, what strange remarks you let escape you.  
 Could I forget that kingly man, Odysseus?  
 There is no mortal half so wise; no mortal  
 gave so much to the lords of open sky.  
 Only the god who laps the land in water,

<sup>6</sup> God of messengers and messenger of the gods; he was also associated sometimes with the wind. "Argeiphontês" connotes brightness or the ability to clear the sky of clouds.

<sup>7</sup> In myth, Atlas is the titanic being who supports the sky. Here he is described as father of the nymph Kalypso, who is holding Odysseus prisoner on her island, Ogygia.

<sup>8</sup> The collective name for the Greek forces who fought under Agamémnon against Troy.

Poseidon, bears the fighter an old grudge  
 since he poked out the eye of Polyphêmos,  
 brawniest of the Kyklopês.<sup>9</sup> Who bore 90  
 that giant lout? Thoösa, daughter of Phorkys,  
 an offshore sea lord: for this nymph had lain  
 with Lord Poseidon in her hollow caves.  
 Naturally, the god, after the blinding—  
 mind you, he does not kill the man;  
 he only buffets him away from home.  
 But come now, we are all at leisure here,  
 let us take up this matter of his return,  
 that he may sail. Poseidon must relent  
 for being quarrelsome will get him nowhere, 100  
 one god, flouting the will of all the gods.”

The grey-eyed goddess Athena answered him:

“O Majesty, O Father of us all,  
 if it now please the blissful gods  
 that wise Odysseus reach his home again,  
 let the Wayfinder, Hermês, cross the sea  
 to the island of Ogýgia; let him tell  
 our fixed intent to the nymph with pretty braids,  
 and let the steadfast man depart for home.  
 For my part, I shall visit Ithaka 110  
 to put more courage in the son, and rouse him  
 to call an assembly of the islanders,  
 Akhaian<sup>10</sup> gentlemen with flowing hair.  
 He must warn off that wolf pack of the suitors  
 who prey upon his flocks and dusky cattle.  
 I’ll send him to the mainland then, to Sparta  
 by the sand beach of Pylos;<sup>11</sup> let him find  
 news of his dear father where he may  
 and win his own renown about the world.”

She bent to tie her beautiful sandals on, 120  
 ambrosial, golden, that carry her over water  
 or over endless land on the wings of the wind,  
 and took the great haft of her spear in hand—  
 that bronzeshod spear this child of Power can use  
 to break in wrath long battle lines of fighters.

Flashing down from Olympos’ height she went  
 to stand in Ithaka, before the Manor,

<sup>9</sup>The encounter with these one-eyed giants (also spelled *Polyphemus* and *Cyclops*) is described in Book IX.

<sup>10</sup>In a general sense, “Greek”; more especially, descriptive of men living in a region not far from Ithaka.

<sup>11</sup>A city and region of southern Greece ruled by Nestor, an aged king and counselor.

just at the doorsill of the court. She seemed  
 a family friend, the Taphian captain, Mentês,  
 waiting, with a light hand on her spear.  
 Before her eyes she found the lusty suitors  
 casting dice inside the gate, at ease  
 on hides of oxen—oxen they had killed.  
 Their own retainers made a busy sight  
 with houseboys, mixing bowls of water and wine,  
 or sopping water up in sponges, wiping  
 tables to be placed about in hall,  
 or butchering whole carcasses for roasting.

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Long before anyone else, the prince Telémakhos  
 now caught sight of Athena—for he, too,  
 was sitting there, unhappy among the suitors,  
 a boy, daydreaming. What if his great father  
 came from the unknown world and drove these men  
 like dead leaves through the place, recovering  
 honor and lordship in his own domains?  
 Then he who dreamed in the crowd gazed out at Athena.  
 Straight to the door he came, irked with himself  
 to think a visitor had been kept there waiting,  
 and took her right hand, grasping with his left  
 her tall bronze-bladed spear. Then he said warmly:

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“Greetings, stranger! Welcome to our feast.  
 There will be time to tell your errand later.”

He led the way, and Pallas Athena followed  
 into the lofty hall. The boy reached up  
 and thrust her spear high in a polished rack  
 against a pillar, where tough spear on spear  
 of the old soldier, his father, stood in order.  
 Then, shaking out a splendid coverlet,  
 he seated her on a throne with footrest—all  
 finely carved—and drew his painted armchair  
 near her, at a distance from the rest.  
 To be amid the din, the suitors’ riot,  
 would ruin his guest’s appetite, he thought,  
 and he wished privacy to ask for news  
 about his father, gone for years.

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A maid  
 brought them a silver finger bowl and filled it  
 out of a beautiful spouting golden jug,  
 then drew a polished table to their side.  
 The larder mistress with her tray came by  
 and served them generously. A carver lifted  
 cuts of each roast meat to put on trenchers<sup>12</sup>  
 before the two. He gave them cups of gold,

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<sup>12</sup> Plates.

and these the steward as he went his rounds  
filled and filled again.

Now came the suitors,  
young bloods trooping in to their own seats  
on thrones or easy chairs. Attendants poured  
water over their fingers, while the maids  
piled baskets full of brown loaves near at hand,  
and houseboys brimmed the bowls with wine.  
Now they laid hands upon the ready feast  
and thought of nothing more. Not till desire  
of food and drink had left them were they mindful  
of dance and song, that are the grace of feasting.  
A herald gave a shapely cithern harp  
to Phêmios,<sup>13</sup> whom they compelled to sing—  
and what a storm he plucked upon the strings  
for prelude! High and clear the song arose.

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Telémakhos now spoke to grey-eyed Athena,  
his head bent close, so no one else might hear:

“Dear guest, will this offend you, if I speak?  
It is easy for these men to like these things,  
harping and song; they have an easy life,  
scot free, eating the livestock of another—  
a man whose bones are rotting somewhere now,  
white in the rain on dark earth where they lie,  
or tumbling in the groundswell of the sea.  
If he returned, if these men ever saw him,  
faster legs they’d pray for, to a man,  
and not more wealth in handsome robes or gold.  
But he is lost; he came to grief and perished,  
and there’s no help for us in someone’s hoping  
he still may come; that sun has long gone down.  
But tell me now, and put it for me clearly—  
who are you? Where do you come from? Where’s your home  
and family? What kind of ship is yours,  
and what course brought you here? Who are your sailors?  
I don’t suppose you walked here on the sea.  
Another thing—this too I ought to know—  
is Ithaka new to you, or were you ever  
a guest here in the old days? Far and near  
friends knew this house; for he whose home it was  
had much acquaintance in the world.”

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To this  
the grey-eyed goddess answered:

<sup>13</sup>The house bard, or minstrel.

“As you ask,  
 I can account most clearly for myself.  
 Mentês I’m called, son of the veteran  
 Ankhíalos; I rule seafaring Taphos.  
 I came by ship, with a ship’s company,  
 sailing the winedark<sup>14</sup> sea for ports of call  
 on alien shores—to Témesê, for copper,  
 bringing bright bars of iron in exchange. 220  
 My ship is moored on a wild strip of coast  
 in Reithron Bight, under the wooded mountain.  
 Years back, my family and yours were friends,  
 as Lord Laërtês<sup>15</sup> knows; ask when you see him.  
 I hear the old man comes to town no longer,  
 stays up country, ailing, with only one  
 old woman to prepare his meat and drink  
 when pain and stiffness take him in the legs  
 from working on his terraced plot, his vineyard.  
 As for my sailing here— 230  
 the tale was that your father had come home,  
 therefore I came. I see the gods delay him.  
 But never in this world is Odysseus dead—  
 only detained somewhere on the wide sea,  
 upon some island, with wild islanders;  
 savages, they must be, to hold him captive.  
 Well, I will forecast for you, as the gods  
 put the strong feeling in me—I see it all,  
 and I’m no prophet, no adept in bird-signs.  
 He will not, now, be long away from Ithaka, 240  
 his father’s dear land; though he be in chains  
 he’ll scheme a way to come; he can do anything.

But tell me this now, make it clear to me:  
 You must be, by your looks, Odysseus’ boy?  
 The way your head is shaped, the fine eyes—yes,  
 how like him! We took meals like this together  
 many a time, before he sailed for Troy  
 with all the lords of Argos in the ships.  
 I have not seen him since, nor has he seen me.”

And thoughtfully Telémakhos replied:

“Friend, let me put it in the plainest way.  
 My mother says I am his son; I know not  
 surely. Who has known his own engendering?  
 I wish at least I had some happy man  
 as father, growing old in his own house—

<sup>14</sup>This adjective is repeatedly used by Homer to describe the sea. Such “Homeric epithets” are taken as one sign that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were designed for oral delivery.

<sup>15</sup>Father of Odysseus. At this point Laërtês is living in retirement on a farm.

but unknown death and silence are the fate  
of him that, since you ask, they call my father.”

Then grey-eyed Athena said:

“The gods decreed  
no lack of honor in this generation:  
such is the son Penélopê bore in you. 260  
But tell me now, and make this clear to me:  
what gathering, what feast is this? Why here?  
A wedding? Revel? At the expense of all?  
Not that, I think. How arrogant they seem,  
these gluttons, making free here in your house!  
A sensible man would blush to be among them.”

To this Telémakhos answered:

“Friend, now that you ask about these matters,  
our house was always princely, a great house,  
as long as he of whom we speak remained here. 270  
But evil days the gods have brought upon it,  
making him vanish, as they have, so strangely.  
Were his death known, I could not feel such pain—  
if he had died of wounds in Trojan country  
or in the arms of friends, after the war.  
They would have made a tomb for him, the Akhaians,  
and I should have all honor as his son.  
Instead, the whirlwinds got him, and no glory.  
He’s gone, no sign, no word of him; and I inherit  
trouble and tears—and not for him alone, 280  
the gods have laid such other burdens on me.  
For now the lords of the islands,  
Doulíkhion and Samê, wooded Zakynthos,  
and rocky Ithaka’s young lords as well,  
are here courting my mother; and they use  
our house as if it were a house to plunder.  
Spurn them she dare not, though she hates that marriage,  
nor can she bring herself to choose among them.  
Meanwhile they eat their way through all we have,  
and when they will, they can demolish me.” 290

Pallas Athena was disturbed, and said:

“Ah, bitterly you need Odysseus, then!  
High time he came back to engage these upstarts.  
I wish we saw him standing helmeted  
there in the doorway, holding shield and spear,  
looking the way he did when I first knew him.  
That was at our house, where he drank and feasted  
after he left Ephyra, homeward bound  
from a visit to the son of Mérmeris, Ilos.



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He took his fast ship down the gulf that time  
 for a fatal drug to dip his arrows in  
 and poison the bronze points; but young Ilos  
 turned him away, fearing the gods' wrath.  
 My father gave it, for he loved him well.  
 I wish these men could meet the man of those days!  
 They'd know their fortune quickly: a cold bed.  
 Aye! but it lies upon the gods' great knees  
 whether he can return and force a reckoning  
 in his own house, or not.

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If I were you,  
 I should take steps to make these men disperse.  
 Listen, now, and attend to what I say:  
 at daybreak call the islanders to assembly,  
 and speak your will, and call the gods to witness:  
 the suitors must go scattering to their homes.  
 Then here's a course for you, if you agree:  
 get a sound craft afloat with twenty oars  
 and go abroad for news of your lost father—  
 perhaps a traveller's tale, or rumored fame  
 issued from Zeus abroad in the world of men.  
 Talk to that noble sage at Pylos, Nestor,  
 then go to Meneláos,<sup>16</sup> the red-haired king  
 at Sparta, last man home of all the Akhaians.  
 If you should learn your father is alive  
 and coming home, you could hold out a year.  
 Or if you learn that he is dead and gone,  
 then you can come back to your own dear country  
 and raise a mound for him, and burn his gear,  
 with all the funeral honors due the man,  
 and give your mother to another husband.

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When you have done all this, or seen it done  
 it will be time to ponder  
 concerning these contenders<sup>17</sup> in your house—  
 how you should kill them, outright or by guile.  
 You need not bear this insolence of theirs,  
 you are a child no longer. Have you heard  
 what glory young Orestês won  
 when he cut down that two-faced man, Aigísthos,  
 for killing his illustrious father?  
 Dear friend, you are tall and well set up, I see;  
 be brave—you, too—and men in times to come  
 will speak of you respectfully.

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<sup>16</sup>Brother of Agamémnon and husband of Helen of Troy. Also spelled *Menelaus*. Helen's elopement with their Trojan guest, Paris, precipitated the Trojan War.

<sup>17</sup>Suitors for the hand in marriage of the presumably widowed Penélopê, wife of Odysseus.

Now I must join my ship;  
my crew will grumble if I keep them waiting.  
Look to yourself; remember what I told you.”

Telémakhos replied:

“Friend, you have done me  
kindness, like a father to his son,  
and I shall not forget your counsel ever.  
You must get back to sea, I know, but come  
take a hot bath, and rest; accept a gift  
to make your heart lift up when you embark—  
some precious thing, and beautiful, from me,  
a keepsake, such as dear friends give their friends.”

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But the grey-eyed goddess Athena answered him:

“Do not delay me, for I love the sea ways.  
As for the gift your heart is set on giving,  
let me accept it on my passage home,  
and you shall have a choice gift in exchange.”

With this Athena left him  
as a bird rustles upward, off and gone.  
But as she went she put new spirit in him,  
a new dream of his father, clearer now,  
so that he marvelled to himself  
divining that a god had been his guest.  
Then godlike in his turn he joined the suitors.

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The famous minstrel still sang on before them,  
and they sat still and listened, while he sang  
that bitter song, the Homecoming of Akhaians—  
how by Athena’s will they fared from Troy;  
and in her high room careful Penélopê,  
Ikários’ daughter, heeded the holy song.  
She came, then, down the long stairs of her house,  
this beautiful lady, with two maids in train  
attending her as she approached the suitors;  
and near a pillar of the roof she paused,  
her shining veil drawn over across her cheeks,  
the two girls close to her and still,  
and through her tears spoke to the noble minstrel:

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“Phêmos, other spells you know, high deeds  
of gods and heroes, as the poets tell them;  
let these men hear some other; let them sit  
silent and drink their wine. But sing no more  
this bitter tale that wears my heart away.  
It opens in me again the wound of longing

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for one incomparable, ever in my mind—  
his fame all Hellas<sup>18</sup> knows, and midland Argos.”

But Telémakhos intervened and said to her:

“Mother, why do you grudge our own dear minstrel  
joy of song, wherever his thought may lead?  
Poets are not to blame, but Zeus who gives  
what fate he pleases to adventurous men.  
Here is no reason for reproof: to sing  
the news of the Danaans!<sup>19</sup> Men like best  
a song that rings like morning on the ear.  
But you must nerve yourself and try to listen.  
Odysseus was not the only one at Troy  
never to know the day of his homecoming.  
Others, how many others, lost their lives!”

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The lady gazed in wonder and withdrew,  
her son’s clear wisdom echoing in her mind.  
But when she had mounted to her rooms again  
with her two handmaids, then she fell to weeping  
for Odysseus, her husband. Grey-eyed Athena  
presently cast a sweet sleep on her eyes.

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Meanwhile the din grew loud in the shadowy hall  
as every suitor swore to lie beside her,  
but Telémakhos turned now and spoke to them:

“You suitors of my mother! Insolent men,  
now we have dined, let us have entertainment  
and no more shouting. There can be no pleasure  
so fair as giving heed to a great minstrel  
like ours, whose voice itself is pure delight.  
At daybreak we shall sit down in assembly  
and I shall tell you—take it as you will—  
you are to leave this hall. Go feasting elsewhere,  
consume your own stores. Turn and turn about,  
use one another’s houses. If you choose  
to slaughter one man’s livestock and pay nothing,  
this is rapine; and by the eternal gods  
I beg Zeus you shall get what you deserve:  
a slaughter here, and nothing paid for it!”

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By now their teeth seemed fixed in their under-lips,  
Telémakhos’ bold speaking stunned them so.  
Antínoös, Eupéithês’ son, made answer:

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<sup>18</sup> Greece.

<sup>19</sup> The Greeks who fought against the Trojans.

“Telémakhos, no doubt the gods themselves  
are teaching you this high and mighty manner.  
Zeus forbid you should be king in Ithaka,<sup>20</sup>  
though you are eligible as your father’s son.”

Telémakhos kept his head and answered him:

“Antínoös, you may not like my answer,  
but I would happily be king, if Zeus  
conferred the prize. Or do you think it wretched?  
I shouldn’t call it bad at all. A king  
will be respected, and his house will flourish.  
But there are eligible men enough,  
heaven knows, on the island, young and old,  
and one of them perhaps may come to power  
after the death of King Odysseus.  
All I insist on is that I rule our house  
and rule the slaves my father won for me.”

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Eurýmakhos, Pólybos’ son, replied:

“Telémakhos, it is on the gods’ great knees  
who will be king in sea-girt Ithaka.  
But keep your property, and rule your house,  
and let no man, against your will, make havoc  
of your possessions, while there’s life on Ithaka.  
But now, my brave young friend,  
a question or two about the stranger.  
Where did your guest come from? Of what country?  
Where does he say his home is, and his family?  
Has he some message of your father’s coming,  
or business of his own, asking a favor?  
He left so quickly that one hadn’t time  
to meet him, but he seemed a gentleman.”

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Telémakhos made answer, cool enough:

“Eurýmakhos, there’s no hope for my father.  
I would not trust a message, if one came,  
nor any forecaster my mother invites  
to tell by divination of time to come.  
My guest, however, was a family friend,  
Mentês, son of Ankhíalos.  
He rules the Taphian people of the sea.”

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So said Telémakhos, though in his heart  
he knew his visitor had been immortal.

<sup>20</sup>At the time of the poem’s action, the rulership of most Greek city-states was not automatically passed from father to son.

But now the suitors turned to play again  
with dance and haunting song. They stayed till nightfall,  
indeed black night came on them at their pleasure,  
and half asleep they left, each for his home.

Telémakhos' bedroom was above the court,  
a kind of tower, with a view all round;  
here he retired to ponder in the silence,  
while carrying brands of pine alight beside him  
Eurýkleia went padding, sage and old. 470  
Her father had been Ops, Peisênor's son,  
and she had been a purchase of Laërtès  
when she was still a blossoming girl. He gave  
the price of twenty oxen<sup>21</sup> for her, kept her  
as kindly in his house as his own wife,  
though, for the sake of peace, he never touched her.  
No servant loved Telémakhos as she did,  
she who had nursed him in his infancy.  
So now she held the light, as he swung open 480  
the door of his neat freshly painted chamber.  
There he sat down, pulling his tunic off,  
and tossed it into the wise old woman's hands.  
She folded it and smoothed it, and then hung it  
beside the inlaid bed upon a bar;  
then, drawing the door shut by its silver handle  
she slid the catch in place and went away.  
And all night long, wrapped in the finest fleece,  
he took in thought the course Athena gave him.

## BOOK TWO: A HERO'S SON AWAKENS

When primal Dawn spread on the eastern sky  
her fingers of pink light, Odysseus' true son  
stood up, drew on his tunic and his mantle,  
slung on a sword-belt and a new-edged sword,  
tied his smooth feet into good rawhide sandals,  
and left his room, a god's brilliance upon him.  
He found the criers with clarion voices and told them  
to muster the unshorn<sup>1</sup> Akhaians in full assembly.  
The call sang out, and the men came streaming in;  
and when they filled the assembly ground, he entered, 10  
spear in hand, with two quick hounds at heel;  
Athena lavished on him a sunlit grace

<sup>21</sup>In the Greek civilization of Homeric times, the ox was a common standard of value. Articles of clothing, weapons, women taken as war prizes, and servants were evaluated in terms of how many oxen they were worth.

<sup>1</sup>Having long or flowing hair.

that held the eye of the multitude. Old men  
made way for him as he took his father's chair.

Now Lord Aigýptios, bent down and sage with years,  
opened the assembly. This man's son  
had served under the great Odysseus, gone  
in the decked ships with him to the wild horse country  
of Troy—a spearman, Ántiphos by name.  
The ravenous Kyklops in the cave destroyed him<sup>2</sup>  
last in his feast of men. Three other sons  
the old man had, and one, Eurýnomos,  
went with the suitors; two farmed for their father;  
but even so the old man pined, remembering  
the absent one, and a tear welled up as he spoke:

20

“Hear me, Ithakans! Hear what I have to say.  
No meeting has been held here since our king,  
Odysseus, left port in the decked ships.  
Who finds occasion for assembly, now?  
one of the young men? one of the older lot?  
Has he had word our fighters are returning<sup>3</sup>—  
news to report if he got wind of it—  
or is it something else, touching the realm?  
The man has vigor, I should say; more power to him.  
Whatever he desires, may Zeus fulfill it.”

30

The old man's words delighted the son of Odysseus,  
who kept his chair no longer but stood up,  
eager to speak, in the midst of all the men.  
The crier, Peisênor, master of debate,  
brought him the staff<sup>4</sup> and placed it in his hand;  
then the boy touched the old man's shoulder, and said:

40

“No need to wonder any more, Sir,  
who called this session. The distress is mine.  
As to our troops returning, I have no news—  
news to report if I got wind of it—  
nor have I public business to propose;  
only my need, and the trouble of my house—  
the troubles.

My distinguished father is lost,  
who ruled among you once, mild as a father,  
and there is now this greater evil still:  
my home and all I have are being ruined.

50

<sup>2</sup>This incident is described in Book IX.

<sup>3</sup>Except for Odysseus and his Ithakans, all the Greek warriors against Troy had by this time returned home or were known to be dead.

<sup>4</sup>The emblem that, placed by the herald in the speaker's hand, gave him the right to speak as a public official.

Mother wanted no suitors, but like a pack  
 they came—sons of the best men here among them—  
 lads with no stomach for an introduction  
 to Ikários, her father across the sea;  
 he would require a wedding gift, and give her  
 to someone who found favor in her eyes.  
 No; these men spend their days around our house  
 killing our beeves and sheep and fatted goats,  
 carousing, soaking up our good dark wine,  
 not caring what they do. They squander everything. 60  
 We have no strong Odysseus to defend us,  
 and as to putting up a fight ourselves—  
 we'd only show our incompetence in arms.  
 Expel them, yes, if I only had the power;  
 the whole thing's out of hand, insufferable.  
 My house is being plundered: is this courtesy?  
 Where is your indignation? Where is your shame?  
 Think of the talk in the islands all around us,  
 and fear the wrath of the gods, 70  
 or they may turn, and send you some devilry.  
 Friends, by Olympian Zeus and holy Justice  
 that holds men in assembly and sets them free,  
 make an end of this! Let me lament in peace  
 my private loss. Or did my father, Odysseus,  
 ever do injury to the armed Akhaians?  
 Is this your way of taking it out on me,  
 giving free rein to these young men?  
 I might as well—might better—see my treasure  
 and livestock taken over by you all; 80  
 then, if you fed on them, I'd have some remedy,  
 and when we met, in public, in the town,  
 I'd press my claim; you might make restitution.  
 This way you hurt me when my hands are tied.”

And in hot anger now he threw the staff to the ground,  
 his eyes grown bright with tears. A wave of sympathy  
 ran through the crowd, all hushed; and no one there  
 had the audacity to answer harshly  
 except Antínoös, who said:

“What high and mighty  
 talk, Telémakhos! No holding you! 90  
 You want to shame us, and humiliate us,  
 but you should know the suitors are not to blame—  
 it is your own dear, incomparably cunning mother.  
 For three years now—and it will soon be four—  
 she has been breaking the hearts of the Akhaians,  
 holding out hope to all, and sending promises  
 to each man privately—but thinking otherwise.

Here is an instance of her trickery:  
 she had her great loom standing in the hall  
 and the fine warp of some vast fabric on it; 100  
 we were attending her, and she said to us:  
 ‘Young men, my suitors, now my lord is dead,  
 let me finish my weaving before I marry,  
 or else my thread will have been spun in vain.  
 It is a shroud I weave for Lord Laërtês,  
 when cold death comes to lay him on his bier.  
 The country wives would hold me in dishonor  
 if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.’  
 We have men’s hearts; she touched them; we agreed.  
 So every day she wove on the great loom— 110  
 but every night by torchlight she unwove it;  
 and so for three years she deceived the Akhaians.  
 But when the seasons brought the fourth around,  
 one of her maids, who knew the secret, told us;  
 we found her unraveling the splendid shroud.  
 She had to finish then, although she hated it.

Now here is the suitors’ answer—  
 you and all the Akhaians, mark it well:  
 dismiss your mother from the house, or make her marry  
 the man her father names and she prefers. 120  
 Does she intend to keep us dangling forever?  
 She may rely too long on Athena’s gifts—  
 talent in handicraft and a clever mind;  
 so cunning—history cannot show the like  
 among the ringleted ladies of Akhaia,  
 Mykênê with her coronet, Alkmênê, Tyro.  
 Wits like Penélopê’s never were before,  
 but this time—well, she made poor use of them.  
 For here are suitors eating up your property  
 as long as she holds out—a plan some god 130  
 put in her mind. She makes a name for herself,  
 but you can feel the loss it means for you.  
 Our own affairs can wait; we’ll never go anywhere else,  
 until she takes an Akhaian to her liking.”

But clear-headed Telémakhos replied:

“Antínoös, can I banish against her will  
 the mother who bore me and took care of me?  
 My father is either dead or far away,  
 but dearly I should pay for this  
 at Ikários’ hands, if ever I sent her back. 140  
 The powers of darkness would requite it, too,  
 my mother’s parting curse would call hell’s furies<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>In mythology, the primitive female agents of retribution for evil, especially for evil committed against blood kindred.



to punish me, along with the scorn of men.  
 No: I can never give the word for this.  
 But if your hearts are capable of shame,  
 leave my great hall, and take your dinner elsewhere,  
 consume your own stores. Turn and turn about,  
 use one another's houses. If you choose  
 to slaughter one man's livestock and pay nothing,  
 this is rapine; and by the eternal gods  
 I beg Zeus you shall get what you deserve:  
 a slaughter here, and nothing paid for it!"

150

Now Zeus who views the wide world sent a sign to him,  
 launching a pair of eagles from a mountain crest  
 in gliding flight down the soft blowing wind,  
 wing-tip to wing-tip quivering taut, companions,  
 till high above the assembly of many voices  
 they wheeled, their dense wings beating, and in havoc  
 dropped on the heads of the crowd—a deathly omen—  
 wielding their talons, tearing cheeks and throats;  
 then veered away on the right hand through the city.  
 Astonished, gaping after the birds, the men  
 felt their hearts flood, foreboding things to come.  
 And now they heard the old lord Halithersês,  
 son of Mastor, keenest among the old  
 at reading birdflight into accurate speech;  
 in his anxiety for them, he rose and said:

160

"Hear me, Ithakans! Hear what I have to say,  
 and may I hope to open the suitors' eyes  
 to the black wave towering over them. Odysseus  
 will not be absent from his family long:  
 he is already near, carrying in him  
 a bloody doom for all these men, and sorrow  
 for many more on our high seamar, Ithaka.  
 Let us think how to stop it; let the suitors  
 drop their suit; they had better, without delay.  
 I am old enough to know a sign when I see one,  
 and I say all has come to pass for Odysseus  
 as I foretold when the Argives massed on Troy,  
 and he, the great tactician, joined the rest.  
 My forecast was that after nineteen years,<sup>6</sup>  
 many blows weathered, all his shipmates lost,  
 himself unrecognized by anyone,  
 he would come home. I see this all fulfilled."

170

180

<sup>6</sup>These include the ten years of war against Troy.

But Pólybos' son, Eurýmakhos, retorted:

"Old man, go tell the omens for your children  
at home, and try to keep them out of trouble.  
I am more fit to interpret this than you are.  
Bird life aplenty is found in the sunny air,  
not all of it significant. As for Odysseus, 190  
he perished far from home. You should have perished with him—  
then we'd be spared this nonsense in assembly,  
as good as telling Telémakhos to rage on;  
do you think you can gamble on a gift from him?  
Here is what I foretell, and it's quite certain:  
if you, with what you know of ancient lore,  
encourage bitterness in this young man,  
it means, for him, only the more frustration—  
he can do nothing whatever with two eagles—  
and as for you, old man, we'll fix a penalty 200  
that you will groan to pay.

Before the whole assembly I advise Telémakhos  
to send his mother to her father's house;  
let them arrange her wedding there, and fix  
a portion suitable for a valued daughter.  
Until he does this, courtship is our business,  
vexing though it may be; we fear no one,  
certainly not Telémakhos, with his talk;  
and we care nothing for your divining, uncle,  
useless talk; you win more hatred by it. 210  
We'll share his meat, no thanks or fee to him,  
as long as she delays and maddens us.  
It is a long, long time we have been waiting  
in rivalry for this beauty. We could have gone  
elsewhere and found ourselves very decent wives."

Clear-headed Telémakhos replied to this:

"Eurýmakhos, and noble suitors all,  
I am finished with appeals and argument.  
The gods know, and the Akhaians know, these things.  
But give me a fast ship and a crew of twenty 220  
who will see me through a voyage, out and back.  
I'll go to sandy Pylos, then to Sparta,  
for news of Father since he sailed from Troy—  
some traveller's tale, perhaps, or rumored fame  
issued from Zeus himself into the world.  
If he's alive, and beating his way home,  
I might hold out for another weary year;  
but if they tell me that he's dead and gone,  
then I can come back to my own dear country  
and raise a mound for him, and burn his gear, 230  
with all the funeral honors that befit him,  
and give my mother to another husband."

The boy sat down in silence. Next to stand  
 was Mentor, comrade in arms of the prince Odysseus,  
 an old man now. Odysseus left him authority  
 over his house and slaves, to guard them well.  
 In his concern, he spoke to the assembly:

“Hear me, Ithakans! Hear what I have to say.  
 Let no man holding scepter as a king  
 be thoughtful, mild, kindly, or virtuous;  
 let him be cruel, and practice evil ways;  
 it is so clear that no one here remembers  
 how like a gentle father Odysseus ruled you.  
 I find it less revolting that the suitors  
 carry their malice into violent acts;  
 at least they stake their lives  
 when they go pillaging the house of Odysseus—  
 their lives upon it, he will not come again.  
 What sickens me is to see the whole community  
 sitting still, and never a voice or a hand raised  
 against them—a mere handful compared with you.”

240

250

Leókritos, Euênor's son, replied to him:

“Mentor, what mischief are you raking up?  
 Will this crowd risk the sword's edge over a dinner?  
 Suppose Odysseus himself indeed  
 came in and found the suitors at his table:  
 he might be hot to drive them out. What then?  
 Never would he enjoy his wife again—  
 the wife who loves him well; he'd only bring down  
 abject death on himself against those odds.  
 Madness, to talk of fighting in either case.  
 Now let all present go about their business!  
 Halithersês and Mentor will speed the traveller;  
 they can help him: they were his father's friends.  
 I rather think he will be sitting here  
 a long time yet, waiting for news on Ithaka;  
 that seafaring he spoke of is beyond him.”

260

On this note they were quick to end their parley.  
 The assembly broke up; everyone went home—  
 the suitors home to Odysseus' house again.  
 But Telémakhos walked down along the shore  
 and washed his hands in the foam of the grey sea,  
 then said this prayer:

270

“O god of yesterday,  
 guest in our house, who told me to take ship  
 on the hazy sea for news of my lost father,  
 listen to me, be near me:  
 The Akhaians only wait, or hope to hinder me,  
 the damned insolent suitors most of all.”

Athena was nearby and came to him,  
 putting on Mentor's figure and his tone, 280  
 the warm voice in a lucid flight of words:

"You'll never be fainthearted or a fool,  
 Telémakhos, if you have your father's spirit;  
 he finished what he cared to say,  
 and what he took in hand he brought to pass.  
 The sea routes will yield their distances  
 to his true son, Penélopé's true son,—  
 I doubt another's luck would hold so far.  
 The son is rare who measures with his father,  
 and one in a thousand is a better man, 290  
 but you will have the sap and wit  
 and prudence—for you get that from Odysseus—  
 to give you a fair chance of winning through.  
 So never mind the suitors and their ways,  
 there is no judgment in them, neither do they  
 know anything of death and the black terror  
 close upon them—doom's day on them all.  
 You need not linger over going to sea.  
 I sailed beside your father in the old days,  
 I'll find a ship for you, and help you sail her. 300  
 So go on home, as if to join the suitors,  
 but get provisions ready in containers—  
 wine in two-handled jugs and barley meal,  
 the staying power of oarsmen,  
 in skin bags, watertight. I'll go the rounds  
 and call a crew of volunteers together.  
 Hundreds of ships are beached on sea-girt Ithaka;  
 let me but choose the soundest, old or new,  
 we'll rig her and take her out on the broad sea."

This was the divine speech Telémakhos heard 310  
 from Athena, Zeus's daughter. He stayed no longer,  
 but took his heartache home,  
 and found the robust suitors there at work,  
 skinning goats and roasting pigs in the courtyard.  
 Antínoös came straight over, laughing at him,  
 and took him by the hand with a bold greeting:

"High-handed Telémakhos, control your temper!  
 Come on, get over it, no more grim thoughts,  
 but feast and drink with me, the way you used to.  
 The Akhaians will attend to all you ask for— 320  
 ship, crew, and crossing to the holy land  
 of Pylos, for the news about your father."

Telémakhos replied with no confusion:

"Antínoös, I cannot see myself again  
 taking a quiet dinner in this company.

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Isn't it enough that you could strip my house  
 under my very nose when I was young?<sup>2</sup>  
 Now that I know, being grown, what others say,  
 I understand it all, and my heart is full.  
 I'll bring black doom upon you if I can—  
 either in Pylos, if I go, or in this country.  
 And I will go, go all the way, if only  
 as someone's passenger. I have no ship,  
 no oarsmen: and it suits you that I have none."

330

Calmly he drew his hand from Antínoös' hand.  
 At this the suitors, while they dressed their meat,  
 began to exchange loud mocking talk about him.  
 One young toplofty gallant set the tone:

"Well, think of that!

Telémakhos has a mind to murder us.  
 He's going to lead avengers out of Pylos,  
 or Sparta, maybe; oh, he's wild to do it.  
 Or else he'll try the fat land of Ephyra—  
 he can get poison there, and bring it home,  
 doctor the wine jar and dispatch us all."

340

Another took the cue:

"Well now, who knows?

He might be lost at sea, just like Odysseus,  
 knocking around in a ship, far from his friends.  
 And what a lot of trouble that would give us,  
 making the right division of his things!  
 We'd keep his house as dowry for his mother—  
 his mother and the man who marries her."

350

That was the drift of it. Telémakhos  
 went on through to the storeroom of his father,  
 a great vault where gold and bronze lay piled  
 along with chests of clothes, and fragrant oil.  
 And there were jars of earthenware in rows  
 holding an old wine,  
 mellow, unmixed, and rare; cool stood the jars  
 against the wall, kept for whatever day  
 Odysseus, worn by hardships, might come home.  
 The double folding doors were tightly locked  
 and guarded, night and day, by the serving woman,  
 Eurýkleia, grand-daughter of Peisênor,  
 in all her duty vigilant and shrewd.  
 Telémakhos called her to the storeroom, saying:

360

"Nurse, get a few two-handled travelling jugs  
 filled up with wine—the second best, not that  
 you keep for your unlucky lord and king,

hoping he may have slipped away from death  
 and may yet come again—royal Odysseus.  
 Twelve amphorai<sup>7</sup> will do; seal them up tight.  
 And pour out barley into leather bags—  
 twenty bushels of barley meal ground fine.  
 Now keep this to yourself! Collect these things,  
 and after dark, when mother has retired  
 and gone upstairs to bed, I'll come for them.  
 I sail to sandy Pylos, then to Sparta,  
 to see what news there is of Father's voyage."

370

His loving nurse Eurýkleia gave a cry,  
 and tears sprang to her eyes as she wailed softly:

380

"Dear child, whatever put this in your head?  
 Why do you want to go so far in the world—  
 and you our only darling? Lord Odysseus  
 died in some strange place, far from his homeland.  
 Think how, when you have turned your back, these men  
 will plot to kill you and share all your things!  
 Stay with your own, dear, do. Why should you suffer  
 hardship and homelessness on the wild sea?"

But seeing all clear, Telémakhos replied:

"Take heart, Nurse, there's a god behind this plan.  
 And you must swear to keep it from my mother,  
 until the eleventh day, or twelfth, or till  
 she misses me, or hears that I am gone.  
 She must not tear her lovely skin lamenting."

390

So the old woman vowed by all the gods,  
 and vowed again, to carry out his wishes;  
 then she filled up the amphorai with wine  
 and sifted barley meal into leather bags.  
 Telémakhos rejoined the suitors.

Meanwhile  
 the goddess with grey eyes had other business:  
 disguised as Telémakhos, she roamed the town  
 taking each likely man aside and telling him:  
 "Meet us at nightfall at the ship!" Indeed,  
 she asked Noêmon, Phronios' wealthy son,  
 to lend her a fast ship, and he complied.  
 Now when at sundown shadows crossed the lanes  
 she dragged the cutter to the sea and launched it,  
 fitted out with tough seagoing gear,  
 and tied it up, away at the harbor's edge.

400

<sup>7</sup> Plural form of "amphora," a jar with two handles and a thin neck.

295

410

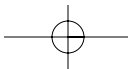
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the undying, the ever-new,  
most of all to the grey-eyed daughter of Zeus.  
And the prow sheared through the night into the dawn.



### BOOK THREE: THE LORD OF THE WESTERN APPROACHES

The sun rose on the flawless brimming sea  
into a sky all brazen—all one brightening  
for gods immortal and for mortal men  
on plowlands kind with grain.

And facing sunrise  
the voyagers now lay off Pylos town,  
compact stronghold of Neleus.<sup>1</sup> On the shore  
black bulls were being offered by the people  
to the blue-maned god who makes the islands tremble:  
nine congregations, each five hundred strong,  
led out nine bulls apiece to sacrifice,  
taking the tripes to eat, while on their altars  
thighbones in fat lay burning for the god.  
Here they put in, furled sail, and beached the ship;  
but Telémakhos hung back in disembarking,  
so that Athena turned and said:

10

“Not the least shyness, now, Telémakhos.  
You came across the open sea for this—  
to find out where the great earth hides your father  
and what the doom was that he came upon.  
Go to old Nestor, master charioteer,  
so we may broach the storehouse of his mind.  
Ask him with courtesy, and in his wisdom  
he will tell you history and no lies.”

20

But clear-headed Telémakhos replied:

“Mentor, how can I do it, how approach him?  
I have no practice in elaborate speeches, and  
for a young man to interrogate an old man  
seems disrespectful—”

But the grey-eyed goddess said:

“Reason and heart will give you words, Telémakhos;  
and a spirit will counsel others. I should say  
the gods were never indifferent to your life.”

30

She went on quickly, and he followed her  
to where the men of Pylos had their altars.  
Nestor appeared enthroned among his sons,

<sup>1</sup>Son of the sea god Poseidon (the “blue-maned god”), he was the founder of Pylos and the father of Nestor.



while friends around them skewered the red beef  
or held it scorching. When they saw the strangers  
a hail went up, and all that crowd came forward  
calling out invitations to the feast.

Peisistratos in the lead, the young prince,  
caught up their hands in his and gave them places  
on curly lambskins flat on the sea sand  
near Thrasymêdês, his brother, and his father;  
he passed them bits of the food of sacrifice,  
and, pouring wine in a golden cup,  
he said to Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus:

40

“Friend, I must ask you to invoke Poseidon:  
you find us at this feast, kept in his honor.  
Make the appointed offering then, and pray,  
and give the honeyed winecup to your friend  
so he may do the same. He, too,  
must pray to the gods on whom all men depend,  
but he is just my age, you are the senior,  
so here, I give the goblet first to you.”

50

And he put the cup of sweet wine in her hand.  
Athena liked his manners, and the equity  
that gave her precedence with the cup of gold,  
so she besought Poseidon at some length:

“Earthshaker, listen and be well disposed.  
Grant your petitioners everything they ask:  
above all, honor to Nestor and his sons;  
second, to every man of Pylos town  
a fair gift in exchange for this hekatomb;<sup>2</sup>  
third, may Telémakhos and I perform  
the errand on which last night we put to sea.”

60

This was the prayer of Athena—  
granted in every particular by herself.  
She passed the beautiful wine cup to Telémakhos,  
who tipped the wine and prayed as she had done.  
Meanwhile the spits were taken off the fire,  
portions of crisp meat for all. They feasted,  
and when they had eaten and drunk their fill, at last  
they heard from Nestor, prince of charioteers:

70

“Now is the time,”<sup>3</sup> he said, “for a few questions,  
now that our young guests have enjoyed their dinner.  
Who are you, strangers? Where are you sailing from,  
and where to, down the highways of sea water?”

<sup>2</sup>A grand public sacrifice and offering to the gods.

<sup>3</sup>Hospitality required that no such questions be asked of guests until they had been welcomed and fed.

Have you some business here? or are you, now,  
reckless wanderers of the sea, like those corsairs  
who risk their lives to prey on other men?"

Clear-headed Telémakhos responded cheerfully,  
for Athena gave him heart. By her design  
his quest for news about his father's wandering  
would bring him fame in the world's eyes. So he said:

"Nestor, pride of Akhaians, Neleus' son,  
you ask where we are from, and I can tell you:  
our home port is under Mount Neion, Ithaka.  
We are not here on Ithakan business, though,  
but on my own. I want news of my father,  
Odysseus, known for his great heart, and I  
will comb the wide world for it. People say  
he fought along with you when Troy was taken.  
As to the other men who fought that war,  
we know where each one died, and how he died;  
but Zeus allotted my father death and mystery.  
No one can say for sure where he was killed,  
whether some hostile landmen or the sea,  
the stormwaves on the deep sea, got the best of him.  
And this is why I come to you for help.  
Tell me of his death, sir, if perhaps  
you witnessed it, or have heard some wanderer  
tell the tale. The man was born for trouble.  
Spare me no part of it for kindness' sake,  
but put the scene before me as you saw it.  
If ever Odysseus my noble father  
served you by promise kept or work accomplished  
in the land of Troy, where you Akhaians suffered,  
recall those things for me the way they were."

Then Nestor, prince of charioteers, made answer:

"Dear friend, you take me back to all the trouble  
we went through in that country, we Akhaians:  
rough days aboard ship on the cloudy sea  
cruising away for pillage after Akhilleus;<sup>4</sup>  
rough days of battle around Priam's<sup>5</sup> town.  
Our losses, then—so many good men gone:  
Arês' great Aias<sup>6</sup> lies there, Akhilleus lies there,  
Patrôklos,<sup>7</sup> too, the wondrous counselor,  
and my own strong and princely son, Antilokhos—

<sup>4</sup>The foremost Greek warrior, central figure of the *Iliad*.

<sup>5</sup>King of Troy.

<sup>6</sup>Another great Greek warrior (also spelled *Ajax*), associated here with Arês, the god of war.

<sup>7</sup>The closest friend of Akhilleus; it was to avenge his death at the hand of the Trojan leader Hektor that Akhilleus—as is narrated in the *Iliad*—re-entered the battle and killed Hektor.

fastest man of them all, and a born fighter.  
 Other miseries, and many, we endured there.  
 Could any mortal man tell the whole story?  
 Not if you stayed five years or six to hear  
 how hard it was for the flower of the Akhaians;  
 you'd go home weary, and the tale untold.  
 Think: we were there nine years, and we tried everything,  
 all stratagems against them,  
 up to the bitter end that Zeus begrudged us.  
 And as to stratagems, no man would claim  
 Odysseus' gift for those. He had no rivals,  
 your father, at the tricks of war.

120

Your father?

Well, I must say I marvel at the sight of you:  
 your manner of speech couldn't be more like his;  
 one would say No; no boy could speak so well.  
 And all that time at Ilion,<sup>8</sup> he and I  
 were never at odds in council or assembly—  
 saw things the same way, had one mind between us  
 in all the good advice we gave the Argives.  
 But when we plundered Priam's town and tower  
 and took to the ships, God scattered the Akhaians.  
 He had a mind to make homecoming hard for them,  
 seeing they would not think straight nor behave,  
 or some would not. So evil days came on them,  
 and she who had been angered,  
 Zeus's dangerous grey-eyed daughter, did it,  
 starting a fight between the sons of Atreus.<sup>9</sup>  
 First they were fools enough to call assembly  
 at sundown, unheard of hour;  
 the Akhaian soldiers turned out, soaked with wine,  
 to hear talk, talk about it from their commanders:  
 Meneláos harangued them to get organized—  
 time to ride home on the sea's broad back, he said;  
 but Agamémnon wouldn't hear of it. He wanted  
 to hold the troops, make sacrifice, a hekatomb,  
 something to pacify Athena's rage.  
 Folly again, to think that he could move her.  
 Will you change the will of the everlasting gods  
 in a night or a day's time?  
 The two men stood there hammering at each other  
 until the army got to its feet with a roar,  
 and no decision, wanting it both ways.

130

140

150

<sup>8</sup>Troy.

<sup>9</sup>Atreus was father of Agamémnon and Meneláos, the brothers who commanded the Greek forces. Athena's hostility to the Greeks (whom she generally favored and aided) was occasioned by outrages committed against the Trojan princess and prophetess Cassandra, who during the sack of Troy had tried to take refuge at Athena's shrine.

That night no one slept well, everyone cursing  
 someone else. Here was the bane<sup>10</sup> from Zeus. 160  
 At dawn we dragged our ships to the lordly water,  
 stowed aboard all our plunder  
 and the slave women in their low hip girdles.  
 But half the army elected to stay behind  
 with Agamémnon as their corps commander;  
 the other half embarked and pulled away.  
 We made good time, the huge sea smoothed before us,  
 and held our rites when we reached Ténédos,<sup>11</sup>  
 being wild for home. But Zeus, not willing yet, 170  
 now cruelly set us at odds a second time,  
 and one lot turned, put back in the rolling ships,  
 under command of the subtle captain, Odysseus;  
 their notion was to please Lord Agamémnon.  
 Not I. I fled, with every ship I had;  
 I knew fate had some devilment brewing there.  
 Diomédês roused his company and fled, too,  
 and later Menelâos, the red-haired captain,  
 caught up with us at Lesbos,  
 while we mulled over the long sea route, unsure 180  
 whether to lay our course northward of Khios,  
 keeping the Isle of Psyria off to port,  
 or inside Khios, coasting by windy Mimas.  
 We asked for a sign from heaven, and the sign came  
 to cut across the open sea to Euboa,  
 and lose no time putting our ills behind us.  
 The wind freshened astern, and the ships ran  
 before the wind on paths of the deep sea fish,  
 making Geraistos before dawn. We thanked Poseidon  
 with many a charred thighbone for that crossing. 190  
 On the fourth day, Diomédês' company  
 under full sail put in at Argos port,  
 and I held on for Pylos. The fair wind,  
 once heaven set it blowing, never failed.

So this, dear child, was how I came from Troy,  
 and saw no more of the others, lost or saved.  
 But you are welcome to all I've heard since then  
 at home; I have no reason to keep it from you.  
 The Myrmidon spearfighters returned, they say,  
 under the son of lionhearted Akhilleus;  
 and so did Poias' great son, Philoktêtês. 200

<sup>10</sup> Ruin; poison

<sup>11</sup> The problem described by Nestor in the following lines is whether the part of the Greek fleet that decided to sail immediately should follow a circuitous course homeward among the islands of the Aegean Sea or head straight across it, by a course that was shorter but farther removed from ports.

Idómeneus brought his company back to Krete;<sup>12</sup>  
 the sea took not a man from him, of all  
 who lived through the long war.  
 And even as far away as Ithaka  
 you've heard of Agamémnon—how he came  
 home, how Aigísthos waited to destroy him  
 but paid a bitter price for it in the end.  
 That is a good thing, now, for a man to leave  
 a son behind him, like the son who punished  
 Aigísthos for the murder of his great father.  
 You, too, are tall and well set-up, I see;  
 be brave, you too, so men in times to come  
 will speak well of you."

210

Then Telémakhos said:

"Nestor, pride of Akhaians, Neleus' son,  
 that was revenge, and far and wide the Akhaians  
 will tell the tale in song for generations.  
 I wish the gods would buckle his arms on me!  
 I'd be revenged for outrage  
 on my insidious and brazen enemies.  
 But no such happy lot was given to me  
 or to my father. Still, I must hold fast."

220

To this Lord Nestor of Gerênia said:

"My dear young friend, now that you speak of it,  
 I hear a crowd of suitors for your mother  
 lives with you, uninvited, making trouble.  
 Now tell me how you take this. Do the people  
 side against you, hearkening to some oracle?  
 Who knows, your father might come home someday  
 alone or backed by troops, and have it out with them.  
 If grey-eyed Athena loved you  
 the way she did Odysseus in the old days,  
 in Troy country, where we all went through so much—  
 never have I seen the gods help any man  
 as openly as Athena did your father—  
 well, as I say, if she cared for you that way,  
 there would be those to quit this marriage game."

230

But prudently Telémakhos replied:

"I can't think what you say will ever happen, sir.  
 It is a dazzling hope. But not for me."

240

<sup>12</sup> The Myrmidons were Akhilleus' troops; his son was Pyrrhus, also called Neoptólemus. Philoktêtês was a Greek warrior who, after having been abandoned on the way to Troy because of a malodorous wound, later rejoined the Greek forces and was crucial to their success in the war. Idómeneus, an ally of the Greeks against the Trojans, was king of Krete (Crete).

It could not be—even if the gods willed it.”

At this grey-eyed Athena broke in, saying:

“What strange talk you permit yourself, Telémakhos.  
A god could save the man by simply wishing it—  
from the farthest shore in the world.  
If I were he, I should prefer to suffer  
years at sea, and then be safe at home;  
better that than a knife at my hearthside  
where Agamémnon found it—killed by adulterers.  
Though as for death, of course all men must suffer it:  
the gods may love a man, but they can’t help him  
when cold death comes to lay him on his bier.”<sup>13</sup>

250

Telémakhos replied:

“Mentor, grievously though we miss my father, why  
go on as if that homecoming could happen?  
You know the gods had settled it already,  
years ago, when dark death came for him.  
But there is something else I imagine Nestor  
can tell us, knowing as he does the ways of men.  
They say his rule goes back over three generations,  
so long, so old, it seems death cannot touch him.  
Nestor, Neleus’ son, true sage, say how  
did the Lord of the Great Plains, Agamémnon, die?  
What was the trick Aigísthos used  
to kill the better man? And Meneláos,  
where was he? Not at Argos<sup>14</sup> in Akhaia,  
but blown off course, held up in some far country,  
is that what gave the killer nerve to strike?”

260

Lord Nestor of Gerênia made answer:

“Well, now, my son, I’ll tell you the whole story.  
You know, yourself, what would have come to pass  
if red-haired Meneláos, back from Troy,  
had caught Aigísthos in that house alive.  
There would have been no burial mound for him,  
but dogs and carrion birds to huddle on him

270

<sup>13</sup> This final sentence is a definitive expression of the ancient Greek understanding of the difference between human beings and deities. Though gods may be champions and even comrades of mortals, the latter are doomed to die and the gods are not. The distinction has little to do with morality or metaphysics. The gods belong to a different order of beings, though not necessarily to a superior order.

<sup>14</sup> The region ruled by Agamémnon, brother to Meneláos, whose wife Helen had run off with the Trojan prince Paris. Homer’s account of the slaying of Agamémnon at his homecoming is at this point a fairly simple justification of Agamémnon and his avenging son Orestès; Aeschylus’ account in the *Oresteia* is more psychologically complex. For other accounts of the story, by the Ancient of the Salt Sea and by Agamémnon himself, see Books IV and XI of the *Odyssey*.

in the fields beyond the wall, and not a soul  
 bewailing him, for the great wrong he committed.  
 While we were hard-pressed in the war at Troy  
 he stayed safe inland in the grazing country,  
 making light talk to win Agamémnon's queen. 280  
 But the Lady Klytaimnéstra, in the first days,  
 rebuffed him, being faithful still;  
 then, too, she had at hand as her companion  
 a minstrel Agamémnon left attending her,  
 charged with her care, when he took ship for Troy.  
 Then came the fated hour when she gave in.<sup>15</sup>  
 Her lover tricked the poet and marooned him  
 on a bare island for the seabirds' picking,  
 and took her home, as he and she desired.  
 Many thighbones he burned on the gods' altars 290  
 and many a woven and golden ornament  
 hung to bedeck them, in his satisfaction;  
 he had not thought life held such glory for him.

Now Meneláos and I sailed home together  
 on friendly terms, from Troy,  
 but when we came off Sunion Point<sup>16</sup> in Attika,  
 the ships still running free, Onêtor's son  
 Phrontis, the steersman of Meneláos' ship,  
 fell over with a death grip on the tiller:  
 some unseen arrow from Apollo hit him. 300  
 No man handled a ship better than he did  
 in a high wind and sea, so Meneláos  
 put down his longing to get on, and landed  
 to give this man full honor in funeral.  
 His own luck turned then. Out on the winedark sea  
 in the murmuring hulls again, he made Cape Malea,<sup>17</sup>  
 but Zeus who views the wide world sent a gloom  
 over the ocean, and a howling gale  
 came on with seas increasing, mountainous,  
 parting the ships and driving half toward Krete 310  
 where the Kydonians live by Iardanos river,  
 Off Gortyn's coastline in the misty sea there  
 a reef, a razorback, cuts through the water,  
 and every westerly piles up a pounding  
 surf along the left side, going toward Phaistos—  
 big seas buffeted back by the narrow stone.

<sup>15</sup> This passage presents both Klytaimnéstra and her paramour Aigísthos as frivolous and irresponsible dalliers; in other versions of the story, notably in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, both these adulterers are given an understandable, if not necessarily justifiable, motive for revenge against Agamémnon.

<sup>16</sup> The tip of a promontory, near Athens, in southeastern Greece. The fleet is trying to sail westward around the southern coast.

<sup>17</sup> Located at the extreme southern point of the Greek mainland, directly north of the western end of the island of Krete.

They were blown here, and fought in vain for sea room;  
 the ships kept going in to their destruction,  
 slammed on the reef. The crews were saved. But now  
 those five that weathered it got off to southward, 320  
 taken by wind and current on to Egypt;  
 and there Menelâos stayed. He made a fortune  
 in sea traffic among those distant races,  
 but while he did so, the foul crime was planned  
 and carried out in Argos by Aigísthos,  
 who ruled over golden Mykênai<sup>18</sup> seven years.  
 Seven long years, with Agamémnon dead,  
 he held the people down, before the vengeance.  
 But in the eighth year, back from exile in Attika,  
 Orestês killed the snake who killed his father. 330  
 He gave his hateful mother and her soft man  
 a tomb together, and proclaimed the funeral day  
 a festal day for all the Argive people.  
 That day Lord Menelâos of the great war cry  
 made port with all the gold his ships could carry.  
 And this should give you pause, my son:  
 don't stay too long away from home, leaving  
 your treasure there, and brazen suitors near;  
 they'll squander all you have or take it from you,  
 and then how will your journey serve? 340  
 I urge you, though, to call on Menelâos,  
 he being but lately home from distant parts  
 in the wide world. A man could well despair  
 of getting home at all, if the winds blew him  
 over the Great South Sea—that weary waste,  
 even the wintering birds delay  
 one winter more before the northward crossing.  
 Well, take your ship and crew and go by water,  
 or if you'd rather go by land, here are  
 horses, a car, and my own sons for company 350  
 as far as the ancient land of Lakedaimon<sup>19</sup>  
 and Menelâos, the red-haired captain there.  
 Ask him with courtesy, and in his wisdom  
 he will tell you history and no lies."

While Nestor talked, the sun went down the sky  
 and gloom came on the land,  
 and now the grey-eyed goddess Athena said:

"Sir, this is all most welcome and to the point,  
 but why not slice the bulls' tongues now, and mix  
 libations for Poseidon and the gods? 360

<sup>18</sup> The capital city of the plain of Argos, ruled over by Agamémnon. Also spelled *Mycenae*.

<sup>19</sup> Sparta; in the far south of Greece. Also spelled *Lacedaemon*.



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Then we can all retire; high time we did;  
the light is going under the dark world's rim,  
better not linger at the sacred feast."

When Zeus's daughter spoke, they turned to listen  
and soon the squires brought water for their hands,  
while stewards filled the winebowls and poured out  
a fresh cup full for every man. The company  
stood up to fling the tongues and a shower of wine  
over the flames, then drank their thirst away.

Now finally Telémakhos and Athena  
bestirred themselves, turning away to the ship,  
but Nestor put a hand on each, and said:

370

"Now Zeus forbid, and the other gods as well,  
that you should spend the night on board, and leave me  
as though I were some pauper without a stitch,  
no blankets in his house, no piles of rugs,  
no sleeping soft for host or guest! Far from it!  
I have all these, blankets and deep-piled rugs,  
and while I live the only son of Odysseus  
will never make his bed on a ship's deck—  
no, not while sons of mine are left at home  
to welcome any guest who comes to us."

380

The grey-eyed goddess Athena answered him:

"You are very kind, sir, and Telémakhos  
should do as you ask. That is the best thing.  
He will go with you, and will spend the night  
under your roof. But I must join our ship  
and talk to the crew, to keep their spirits up,  
since I'm the only senior in the company.  
The rest are boys who shipped for friendship's sake,  
no older than Telémakhos, any of them.  
Let me sleep out, then, by the black hull's side,  
this night at least. At daybreak I'll be off  
to see the Kaukonians<sup>20</sup> about a debt they owe me,  
an old one and no trifle. As for your guest,  
send him off in a car, with one of your sons,  
and give him thoroughbreds, a racing team."

390

Even as she spoke, Athena left them—seeming  
a seahawk, in a clap of wings,—and all  
the Akhaïans of Pylos town looked up astounded.  
Awed then by what his eyes had seen, the old man  
took Telémakhos' hand and said warmly:

400

<sup>20</sup>A people who lived near Pylos.

“My dear child, I can have no fears for you,  
 no doubt about your conduct or your heart,  
 if, at your age, the gods are your companions.  
 Here we had someone from Olympos—clearly  
 the glorious daughter of Zeus, his third child,  
 who held your father dear among the Argives.  
 O, Lady, hear me! Grant an illustrious name  
 to me and to my children and my dear wife!  
 A noble heifer shall be yours in sacrifice,  
 one that no man has ever yoked or driven;  
 my gift to you—her horns all sheathed in gold.”

410

So he ended, praying; and Athena heard him.  
 Then Nestor of Gerênia led them all,  
 his sons and sons-in-law, to his great house;  
 and in they went to the famous hall of Nestor,  
 taking their seats on thrones and easy chairs,  
 while the old man mixed water in a wine bowl  
 with sweet red wine, mellowed eleven years  
 before his housekeeper uncapped the jar.  
 He mixed and poured his offering, repeating  
 prayers to Athena, daughter of royal Zeus.  
 The others made libation, and drank deep,  
 then all the company went to their quarters,  
 and Nestor of Gerênia showed Telémakhos  
 under the echoing eastern entrance hall  
 to a fine bed near the bed of Peisístratos,  
 captain of spearmen, his unmarried son.  
 Then he lay down in his own inner chamber  
 where his dear faithful wife had smoothed his bed.

420

430

When Dawn spread out her finger tips of rose,  
 Lord Nestor of Gerênia, charioteer,  
 left his room for a throne of polished stone,  
 white and gleaming as though with oil, that stood  
 before the main gate of the palace; Neleus here  
 had sat before him—masterful in kingship,  
 Neleus, long ago a prey to death, gone down  
 to the night of the underworld.  
 So Nestor held his throne and scepter now,  
 lord of the western approaches to Akhaia.  
 And presently his sons came out to join him,  
 leaving the palace: Ekhéphron and Stratíos,  
 Perseus and Arêtós and Thrasymêdês,  
 and after them the prince Peisístratos,  
 bringing Telémakhos along with him.  
 Seeing all present, the old lord Nestor said:

440

“Dear sons, here is my wish, and do it briskly  
 to please the gods, Athena first of all,

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my guest in daylight at our holy feast.  
 One of you must go for a young heifer  
 and have the cowherd lead her from the pasture.  
 Another call on Lord Telémakhos' ship  
 to invite his crewmen, leaving two behind;  
 and someone else again send for the goldsmith,  
 Laerkês, to gild the horns.  
 The rest stay here together. Tell the servants  
 a ritual feast will be prepared in hall.  
 Tell them to bring seats, firewood and fresh water."

450

Before he finished, they were about these errands.  
 The heifer came from pasture,  
 the crewmen of Telémakhos from the ship,  
 the smith arrived, bearing the tools of his trade—  
 hammer and anvil, and the precision tongs  
 he handled fiery gold with,—and Athena  
 came as a god comes, numinous, to the rites.

460

The smith now gloved each horn in a pure foil  
 beaten out of the gold that Nestor gave him—  
 a glory and delight for the goddess' eyes—  
 while Ekhéphron and Stratíos held the horns.  
 Arêtós brought clear lustral water  
 in a bowl quivering with fresh-cut flowers,  
 a basket of barley in his other hand.  
 Thrasymêdês, who could stand his ground in war,  
 stood ready, with a sharp two-bladed axe,  
 for the stroke of sacrifice, and Perseus  
 held a bowl for the blood. And now Nestor,  
 strewing the barley grains, and water drops,  
 pronounced his invocation to Athena  
 and burned a pinch of bristles from the victim.  
 When prayers were said and all the grain was scattered  
 great-hearted Thrasymêdês in a flash  
 swung the axe, at one blow cutting through  
 the neck tendons. The heifer's spirit failed.  
 Then all the women gave a wail of joy—  
 daughters, daughters-in-law, and the Lady Eurydíkê,  
 Klyménos' eldest daughter. But the men  
 still held the heifer, shored her up  
 from the wide earth where the living go their ways,  
 until Peisístratos cut her throat across,  
 the black blood ran, and life ebbed from her marrow.  
 The carcass now sank down, and they disjointed  
 shoulder and thigh bone, wrapping them in fat,  
 two layers, folded, with raw strips of flesh.  
 These offerings Nestor burned on the split-wood fire  
 and moistened with red wine. His sons took up  
 five-tined forks in their hands, while the altar flame

470

480

490

ate through the bones, and bits of tripe went round.  
Then came the carving of the quarters, and they spitted  
morsels of lean meat on the long sharp tines  
and broiled them at arm's length upon the fire.

500

Polykástê, a fair girl, Nestor's youngest,  
had meanwhile given a bath to Telémakhos—  
bathing him first, then rubbing him with oil.  
She held fine clothes and a cloak to put around him  
when he came godlike from the bathing place;  
then out he went to take his place with Nestor.  
When the best cuts were broiled and off the spits,  
they all sat down to banquet. Gentle squires  
kept every golden wine cup brimming full.  
And so they feasted to their heart's content,  
until the prince of charioteers commanded:

510

"Sons, harness the blood mares for Telémakhos;  
hitch up the car, and let him take the road."

They swung out smartly to do the work, and hooked  
the handsome horses to a chariot shaft.  
The mistress of the stores brought up provisions  
of bread and wine, with victuals fit for kings,  
and Telémakhos stepped up on the painted car.  
Just at his elbow stood Peisístratos,  
captain of spearmen, reins in hand. He gave  
a flick to the horses, and with streaming manes  
they ran for the open country. The tall town  
of Pylos sank behind them in the distance,  
as all day long they kept the harness shaking.

520

The sun was low and shadows crossed the lanes  
when they arrived at Phêrai.<sup>21</sup> There Dióklês,  
son of Ortílokhos whom Alpheios fathered,  
welcomed the young men, and they slept the night.  
But up when the young Dawn's finger tips of rose  
opened in the east, they hitched the team  
once more to the painted car,  
and steered out eastward through the echoing gate,  
whipping their fresh horses into a run.  
That day they made the grainlands of Lakedaimon,  
where, as the horses held to a fast clip,  
they kept on to their journey's end. Behind them  
the sun went down and all the roads grew dark.

530

<sup>21</sup>A stopping place on the eastward route from Pylos to Lakedaimon.

# BOOK FOUR: THE RED-HAIRED KING AND HIS LADY

By vales and sharp ravines in Lakedaimon  
the travellers drove to Meneláos' mansion,  
and found him at a double wedding feast  
for son and daughter.

Long ago at Troy  
he pledged her to the heir of great Akhilleus,  
breaker of men—a match the gods had ripened;  
so he must send her with a chariot train  
to the town and glory of the Myrmidons.  
And that day, too, he brought Alektor's daughter  
to marry his tall scion,<sup>1</sup> Megapénthês,  
born of a slave girl during the long war—  
for the gods had never after granted Helen  
a child to bring into the sunlit world  
after the first, rose-lipped Hermionê,  
a girl like the pale-gold goddess Aphroditê.<sup>2</sup>

10

Down the great hall in happiness they feasted,  
neighbors of Meneláos, and his kin,  
for whom a holy minstrel harped and sang;  
and two lithe tumblers moved out on the song  
with spins and handsprings through the company.  
Now when Telémakhos and Nestor's son  
pulled up their horses at the main gate,  
one of the king's companions in arms, Eteóneus,  
going outside, caught sight of them. He turned  
and passed through court and hall to tell the master,  
stepping up close to get his ear. Said he:

20

"Two men are here—two strangers,<sup>3</sup> Meneláos,  
but nobly born Akhaïans, they appear.  
What do you say, shall we unhitch their team,  
or send them on to someone free to receive them?"

30

The red-haired captain answered him in anger:

"You were no idiot before, Eteóneus,  
but here you are talking like a child of ten.  
Could we have made it home again—and Zeus  
give us no more hard roving!—if other men  
had never fed us, given us lodging?"

Bring  
these men to be our guests: unhitch their team!"

<sup>1</sup>Descendant; son.

<sup>2</sup>Goddess of love and beauty.

<sup>3</sup>The near-breach of hospitality by Eteóneus, which angers Meneláos, is probably explained by wariness; another guest, Paris, had once abducted Helen and thus set off the war.

Eteóneus left the long room like an arrow,  
 calling equerries<sup>4</sup> after him, on the run.  
 Outside, they freed the sweating team from harness,  
 stabled the horses, tied them up, and showered  
 bushels of wheat and barley in the feed box;  
 then leaned the chariot pole  
 against the gleaming entry wall of stone  
 and took the guests in. What a brilliant place  
 that mansion of the great prince seemed to them!  
 A-glitter everywhere, as though with fiery  
 points of sunlight, lusters of the moon.  
 The young men gazed in joy before they entered  
 into a room of polished tubs to bathe.  
 Maidservants gave them baths, anointed them,  
 held out fresh tunics, cloaked them warm; and soon  
 they took tall thrones beside the son of Atreus.  
 Here a maid tipped out water for their hands  
 from a golden pitcher into a silver bowl,  
 and set a polished table near at hand;  
 the larder mistress with her tray of loaves  
 and savories came, dispensing all her best,  
 and then a carver heaped their platters high  
 with various meats, and put down cups of gold.  
 Now said the red-haired captain, Meneláos,  
 gesturing:

“Welcome; and fall to; in time,  
 when you have supped, we hope to hear your names,  
 forbears and families—in your case, it seems,  
 no anonymities, but lordly men.  
 Lads like yourselves are not base born.”

At this,  
 he lifted in his own hands the king’s portion,  
 a chine of beef, and set it down before them.  
 Seeing all ready then, they took their dinner;  
 but when they had feasted well,  
 Telémakhos could not keep still, but whispered,  
 his head bent close, so the others might not hear:

“My dear friend, can you believe your eyes?—  
 the murmuring hall, how luminous it is  
 with bronze, gold, amber, silver, and ivory!  
 This is the way the court of Zeus must be,  
 inside, upon Olympos. What a wonder!”

<sup>4</sup>Men who tended to the horses.

But splendid Meneláos had overheard him  
and spoke out on the instant to them both:

“Young friends, no mortal man can vie with Zeus.

80

His home and all his treasures are for ever.

But as for men, it may well be that few  
have more than I. How painfully I wandered  
before I brought it home! Seven years at sea,  
Kypros, Phoinikia, Egypt, and still farther  
among the sun-burnt races.

I saw the men of Sidon<sup>5</sup> and Arabia

and Libya, too, where lambs are horned at birth.

In every year they have three lambing seasons,

90

so no man, chief or shepherd, ever goes

hungry for want of mutton, cheese, or milk—

all year at milking time there are fresh ewes.

But while I made my fortune on those travels

a stranger killed my brother, in cold blood,—

tricked blind, caught in the web of his deadly queen.

What pleasure can I take, then, being lord

over these costly things?

You must have heard your fathers tell my story,

whoever your fathers are; you must know of my life,

the anguish I once had, and the great house

100

full of my treasure, left in desolation.

How gladly I should live one third as rich

to have my friends back safe at home!—my friends

who died on Troy's wide seaboard, far

from the grazing lands of Argos.

But as things are, nothing but grief is left me

for those companions. While I sit at home

sometimes hot tears come, and I revel in them,

or stop before the surfeit makes me shiver.

And there is one I miss more than the other

110

dead I mourn for; sleep and food alike

grow hateful when I think of him. No soldier

took on so much, went through so much, as Odysseus.

That seems to have been his destiny, and this mine—

to feel each day the emptiness of his absence,

ignorant, even, whether he lived or died.

How his old father and his quiet wife,

Penélopê, must miss him still!

And Telémakhos, whom he left as a new-born child.”

Now hearing these things said, the boy's heart rose

120

in a long pang for his father, and he wept,

<sup>5</sup>An important city in Phoinikia (Phoenicia), an area along the Syrian coast noted for commerce and craftsmanship.

holding his purple mantle with both hands  
 before his eyes. Meneláos knew him now,  
 and so fell silent with uncertainty  
 whether to let him speak and name his father  
 in his own time, or to inquire, and prompt him.  
 And while he pondered, Helen came  
 out of her scented chamber, a moving grace  
 like Artemis,<sup>6</sup> straight as a shaft of gold.  
 Beside her came Adrastê, to place her armchair,  
 Alkippê, with a rug of downy wool,  
 and Phylo, bringing a silver basket, once  
 given by Alkandrê, the wife of Pólybos,  
 in the treasure city, Thebes of distant Egypt.  
 He gave two silver bathtubs to Meneláos  
 and a pair of tripods, with ten pure gold bars,  
 and she, then, made these beautiful gifts to Helen:  
 a golden distaff,<sup>7</sup> and the silver basket  
 rimmed in hammered gold, with wheels to run on.  
 So Phylo rolled it in to stand beside her,  
 heaped with fine spun stuff, and cradled on it  
 the distaff swathed in dusky violet wool.  
 Reclining in her light chair with its footrest,  
 Helen gazed at her husband and demanded:

130

140

“Meneláos, my lord, have we yet heard  
 our new guests introduce themselves? Shall I  
 dissemble what I feel? No, I must say it.  
 Never, anywhere, have I seen so great a likeness  
 in man or woman—but it is truly strange!  
 This boy must be the son of Odysseus,  
 Telémakhos, the child he left at home  
 that year the Akhaian host made war on Troy—  
 daring all for the wanton that I was.”

150

And the red-haired captain, Meneláos, answered:

“My dear, I see the likeness as well as you do.  
 Odysseus’ hands and feet were like this boy’s;  
 his head, and hair, and the glinting of his eyes.  
 Not only that, but when I spoke, just now,  
 of Odysseus’ years of toil on my behalf  
 and all he had to endure—the boy broke down  
 and wept into his cloak.”

160

Now Nestor’s son,  
 Peisístratos, spoke up in answer to him:

“My lord marshal, Meneláos, son of Atreus,  
 this is that hero’s son as you surmise,

<sup>6</sup> Goddess of the hunt.

<sup>7</sup> A staff used in spinning thread.



but he is gentle, and would be ashamed  
 to clamor for attention before your grace  
 whose words have been so moving to us both.  
 Nestor, Lord of Gerênia, sent me with him  
 as guide and escort; he had wished to see you,  
 to be advised by you or assisted somehow.  
 A father far from home means difficulty  
 for an only son, with no one else to help him;  
 so with Telémakhos:  
 his father left the house without defenders.”

170

The king with flaming hair now spoke again:

“His son, in my house! How I loved the man,  
 And how he fought through hardship for my sake!  
 I swore I’d cherish him above all others  
 if Zeus, who views the wide world, gave us passage  
 homeward across the sea in the fast ships.  
 I would have settled him in Argos, brought him  
 over with herds and household out of Ithaka,  
 his child and all his people. I could have cleaned out  
 one of my towns to be his new domain.  
 And so we might have been together often  
 in feasts and entertainments, never parted  
 till the dark mist of death lapped over one of us.  
 But God himself must have been envious,  
 to batter the bruised man so that he alone  
 should fail in his return.”

180

190

A twinging ache of grief rose up in everyone,  
 and Helen of Argos wept, the daughter of Zeus,<sup>8</sup>  
 Telémakhos and Meneláos wept,  
 and tears came to the eyes of Nestor’s son—  
 remembering, for his part, Antílokhos,  
 whom the son of shining Dawn<sup>9</sup> had killed in battle.  
 But thinking of that brother, he broke out:

“O son of Atreus, when we spoke of you  
 at home, and asked about you, my old father  
 would say you have the clearest mind of all.  
 If it is not too much to ask, then, let us not  
 weep away these hours after supper;  
 I feel we should not: Dawn will soon be here!  
 You understand, I would not grudge a man  
 right mourning when he comes to death and doom:  
 what else can one bestow on the poor dead?—

200

<sup>8</sup>Helen was daughter of Zeus by the mortal woman Lêda. (Lêda was ravished by the god, who took the form of a swan.)

<sup>9</sup>Memnon, an Ethiopian king, was the son of Eos, the goddess of the dawn.

a lock of hair sheared,<sup>10</sup> and a tear let fall.  
 For that matter, I, too,  
 lost someone in the war at Troy—my brother,  
 and no mean soldier, whom you must have known,  
 although I never did,—Antílokhos.  
 He ranked high as a runner and fighting man.”

210

The red-haired captain Meneláos answered:

“My lad, what you have said is only sensible,  
 and you did well to speak. Yes, that was worthy  
 a wise man and an older man than you are:  
 you speak for all the world like Nestor’s son.  
 How easily one can tell the man whose father  
 had true felicity, marrying and begetting!  
 And that was true of Nestor, all his days,  
 down to his sleek old age in peace at home,  
 with clever sons, good spearmen into the bargain.  
 Come, we’ll shake off this mourning mood of ours  
 and think of supper. Let the men at arms  
 rinse our hands again! There will be time  
 for a long talk with Telémakhos in the morning.”

220

The hero Meneláos’ companion in arms,  
 Asphalion, poured water for their hands,  
 and once again they touched the food before them.  
 But now it entered Helen’s mind  
 to drop into the wine that they were drinking  
 an anodyne, mild magic of forgetfulness.  
 Whoever drank this mixture in the wine bowl  
 would be incapable of tears that day—  
 though he should lose mother and father both,  
 or see, with his own eyes, a son or brother  
 mauled by weapons of bronze at his own gate.  
 The opiate of Zeus’s daughter bore  
 this canny power. It had been supplied her  
 by Polydamna, mistress of Lord Thôn,  
 in Egypt, where the rich plantations grow  
 herbs of all kinds, maleficent and healthful;  
 and no one else knows medicine as they do,  
 Egyptian heirs of Paian,<sup>11</sup> the healing god.  
 She drugged the wine, then, had it served, and said—  
 taking again her part in the conversation—

230

240

“O Meneláos, Atreus’ royal son,  
 and you that are great heroes’ sons, you know  
 how Zeus gives all of us in turn  
 good luck and bad luck, being all powerful.

250

<sup>10</sup>To strew a lock of one’s hair on the dead was a customary part of funeral ritual.

<sup>11</sup>An epithet for Apollo in his role as god of physicians.

So take refreshment, take your ease in hall,  
 and cheer the time with stories. I'll begin.  
 Not that I think of naming, far less telling,  
 every feat of that rugged man, Odysseus,  
 but here is something that he dared to do  
 at Troy, where you Akhaians endured the war.  
 He had, first, given himself an outrageous beating  
 and thrown some rags on—like a household slave—  
 then slipped into that city of wide lanes  
 among his enemies. So changed, he looked 260  
 as never before upon the Akhaian beachhead,  
 but like a beggar, merged in the townspeople;  
 and no one there remarked him. But I knew him—  
 even as he was, I knew him,  
 and questioned him. How shrewdly he put me off!  
 But in the end I bathed him and anointed him,  
 put a fresh cloak around him, and swore an oath  
 not to give him away as Odysseus to the Trojans,  
 till he got back to camp where the long ships lay.  
 He spoke up then, and told me 270  
 all about the Akhaians, and their plans—  
 then sworded many Trojans through the body  
 on his way out with what he learned of theirs.  
 The Trojan women raised a cry—but my heart  
 sang—for I had come round, long before,  
 to dreams of sailing home, and I repented  
 the mad day Aphroditê  
 drew me away from my dear fatherland,  
 forsaking all—child, bridal bed, and husband—  
 a man without defect in form or mind.” 280

Replied the red-haired captain, Menelâos:

“An excellent tale, my dear, and most becoming.  
 In my life I have met, in many countries,  
 foresight and wit in many first rate men,  
 but never have I seen one like Odysseus  
 for steadiness and a stout heart. Here, for instance,  
 is what he did—had the cold nerve to do—  
 inside the hollow horse,<sup>12</sup> where we were waiting,  
 picked men all of us, for the Trojan slaughter,  
 when all of a sudden, you came by—I dare say 290  
 drawn by some superhuman  
 power that planned an exploit for the Trojans;  
 and Deïphobos,<sup>13</sup> that handsome man, came with you.  
 Three times you walked around it, patting it everywhere,

<sup>12</sup> The Greeks had hidden some of their best warriors inside a huge wooden horse, which the Trojans hauled into their city, thus precipitating its overthrow. For a detailed version of the incident, see Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book II.

<sup>13</sup> By the time of the fall of Troy, Helen had been married to this Trojan prince.

and called by name the flower of our fighters,  
 making your voice sound like their wives, calling.  
 Diomêdês and I crouched in the center  
 along with Odysseus; we could hear you plainly;  
 and listening, we two were swept  
 by waves of longing—to reply, or go.  
 Odysseus fought us down, despite our craving,  
 and all the Akhaïans kept their lips shut tight,  
 all but Antiklos. Desire moved his throat  
 to hail you, but Odysseus' great hands clamped  
 over his jaws, and held. So he saved us all,  
 till Pallas Athena led you away at last.”

300

Then clear-headed Telémakhos addressed him:

“My lord marshal, Meneláos, son of Atreus,  
 all the more pity, since these valors  
 could not defend him from annihilation—  
 not if his heart were iron in his breast.  
 But will you not dismiss us for the night now?  
 Sweet sleep will be a pleasure, drifting over us.”

310

He said no more, but Helen called the maids  
 and sent them to make beds, with purple rugs  
 piled up, and sheets outspread, and fleecy  
 coverlets, in the porch inside the gate.  
 The girls went out with torches in their hands,  
 and presently a squire led the guests—  
 Telémakhos and Nestor's radiant son—  
 under the entrance colonnade, to bed.  
 Then deep in the great mansion, in his chamber,  
 Meneláos went to rest, and Helen,  
 queenly in her long gown, lay beside him.

320

When the young Dawn with finger tips of rose  
 made heaven bright, the deep-lunged man of battle  
 stood up, pulled on his tunic and his mantle,  
 slung on a swordbelt and a new edged sword,  
 tied his smooth feet into fine rawhide sandals  
 and left his room, a god's brilliance upon him.  
 He sat down by Telémakhos, asking gently:

330

“Telémakhos, why did you come, sir, riding  
 the sea's broad back to reach old Lakedaimon?  
 A public errand or private? Why, precisely?”

Telémakhos replied:

“My lord marshal Meneláos, son of Atreus,  
 I came to hear what news you had of Father.  
 My house, my good estates are being ruined.

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317

Each day my mother's bullying suitors come  
 to slaughter flocks of mine and my black cattle;  
 enemies crowd our home. And this is why  
 I come to you for news of him who owned it.  
 Tell me of his death, sir, if perhaps  
 you witnessed it, or have heard some wanderer  
 tell the tale. The man was born for trouble.  
 Spare me no part for kindness' sake; be harsh;  
 but put the scene before me as you saw it.  
 If ever Odysseus my noble father  
 served you by promise kept or work accomplished  
 in the land of Troy, where you Akhaians suffered,  
 recall those things for me the way they were."

340

350

Stirred now to anger, Meneláos said:

"Intolerable—that soft men, as those are,  
 should think to lie in that great captain's bed.  
 Fawns in a lion's lair! As if a doe  
 put down her litter of sucklings there, while she  
 quested a glen or cropped some grassy hollow.  
 Ha! Then the lord returns to his own bed  
 and deals out wretched doom on both alike.  
 So will Odysseus deal out doom on these.  
 O Father Zeus, Athena, and Apollo!  
 I pray he comes as once he was, in Lesbos,  
 when he stood up to wrestle Philomeleidês—  
 champion and Island King—  
 and smashed him down. How the Akhaians cheered!  
 If only that Odysseus met the suitors,  
 they'd have their consummation, a cold bed!  
 Now for your questions, let me come to the point.  
 I would not misreport it for you; let me  
 tell you what the Ancient of the Sea,<sup>14</sup>  
 who is infallible, said to me—every word.

360

370

During my first try at a passage homeward  
 the gods detained me, tied me down to Egypt—  
 for I had been too scant in hekatombs,  
 and gods will have the rules each time remembered.  
 There is an island washed by the open sea  
 lying off Nile mouth—seamen call it Pharos—  
 distant a day's sail in a clean hull  
 with a brisk land breeze behind. It has a harbor,  
 a sheltered bay, where shipmasters  
 take on dark water for the outward voyage.  
 Here the gods held me twenty days becalmed.

380

<sup>14</sup>Proteus, who is described in the following passage.

No winds came up, seaward escorting winds  
 for ships that ride the sea's broad back, and so  
 my stores and men were used up; we were failing  
 had not one goddess intervened in pity—  
 Eidothea, daughter of Proteus,  
 the Ancient of the Sea. How I distressed her!  
 I had been walking out alone that day—  
 my sailors, thin-bellied from the long fast,  
 were off with fish hooks, angling on the shore—  
 then she appeared to me, and her voice sang:

390

'What fool is here, what drooping dunce of dreams?  
 Or can it be, friend, that you love to suffer?  
 How can you linger on this island, aimless  
 and shiftless, while your people waste away?'

To this I quickly answered:

'Let me tell you,  
 goddess, whatever goddess you may be,  
 these doldrums are no will of mine. I take it  
 the gods who own broad heaven are offended.  
 Why don't you tell me—since the gods know everything—  
 who has me pinned down here?  
 How am I going to make my voyage home?'

400

Now she replied in her immortal beauty:

'I'll put it for you clearly as may be, friend.  
 The Ancient of the Salt Sea haunts this place,  
 immortal Proteus of Egypt; all the deeps  
 are known to him; he serves under Poseidon,  
 and is, they say, my father.  
 If you could take him by surprise and hold him,  
 he'd give you course and distance for your sailing  
 homeward across the cold fish-breeding sea.  
 And should you wish it, noble friend, he'd tell you  
 all that occurred at home, both good and evil,  
 while you were gone so long and hard a journey.'

410

To this I said:

'But you, now—you must tell me  
 how I can trap this venerable sea-god.  
 He will elude me if he takes alarm;  
 no man—god knows—can quell a god with ease.'

That fairest of unearthly nymphs replied:

420

'I'll tell you this, too, clearly as may be.  
 When the sun hangs at high noon in heaven,  
 the Ancient glides ashore under the Westwind,

hidden by shivering glooms on the clear water,  
 and rests in caverns hollowed by the sea.  
 There flippered seals, brine children, shining come  
 from silvery foam in crowds to lie around him,  
 exhaling rankness from the deep sea floor.  
 Tomorrow dawn I'll take you to those caves  
 and bed you down there. Choose three officers  
 for company—brave men they had better be—  
 the old one has strange powers, I must tell you.  
 He goes amid the seals to check their number,  
 and when he sees them all, and counts them all,  
 he lies down like a shepherd with his flock.  
 Here is your opportunity: at this point  
 gather yourselves, with all your heart and strength,  
 and tackle him before he bursts away.  
 He'll make you fight—for he can take the forms  
 of all the beasts, and water, and blinding fire;  
 but you must hold on, even so, and crush him  
 until he breaks the silence. When he does,  
 he will be in that shape you saw asleep.  
 Relax your grip, then, set the Ancient free,  
 and put your questions, hero:  
 Who is the god so hostile to you,  
 and how will you go home on the fish-cold sea.'

430

440

At this she dove under a swell and left me.  
 Back to the ships in the sandy cove I went,  
 my heart within me like a high surf running;  
 but there I joined my men once more  
 at supper, as the sacred Night came on,  
 and slept at last beside the lapping water.  
 When Dawn spread out her finger tips of rose  
 I started, by the sea's wide level ways,  
 praying the gods for help, and took along  
 three lads I counted on in any fight.  
 Meanwhile the nereid<sup>15</sup> swam from the lap of Ocean  
 laden with four sealskins, new flayed  
 for the hoax she thought of playing on her father.  
 In the sand she scooped out hollows for our bodies  
 and sat down, waiting. We came close to touch her,  
 and, bedding us, she threw the sealskins over us—  
 a strong disguise; oh, yes, terribly strong  
 as I recall the stench of those damned seals.  
 Would any man lie snug with a sea monster?  
 But here the nymph, again, came to our rescue,  
 dabbing ambrosia under each man's nose—  
 a perfume drowning out the bestial odor.

450

460

<sup>15</sup>A sea nymph.

So there we lay with beating hearts all morning  
 while seals came shoreward out of ripples, jostling  
 to take their places, flopping on the sand.  
 At noon the Ancient issued from the sea  
 and held inspection, counting off the sea-beasts.  
 We were the first he numbered; he went by,  
 detecting nothing. When at last he slept  
 we gave a battlecry and plunged for him,  
 locking our hands behind him. But the old one's  
 tricks were not knocked out of him; far from it.  
 First he took on a whiskered lion's shape,  
 a serpent then; a leopard; a great boar;  
 then sousing water; then a tall green tree.  
 Still we hung on, by hook or crook, through everything,  
 until the Ancient saw defeat, and grimly  
 opened his lips to ask me:

470

480

‘Son of Atreus,  
 who counselled you to this? A god: what god?  
 Set a trap for me, overpower me—why?’

He bit it off, then, and I answered:

‘Old one,  
 you know the reason—why feign not to know?  
 High and dry so long upon this island  
 I'm at my wits' end, and my heart is sore.  
 You gods know everything; now you can tell me:  
 which of the immortals chained me here?  
 And how will I get home on the fish-cold sea?’

490

He made reply at once:

‘You should have paid  
 honor to Zeus and the other gods, performing  
 a proper sacrifice before embarking:  
 that was your short way home on the winedark sea.  
 You may not see your friends, your own fine house,  
 or enter your own land again,  
 unless you first remount the Nile in flood  
 and pay your hekatomb to the gods of heaven.  
 Then, and then only,  
 the gods will grant the passage you desire.’

500

Ah, how my heart sank, hearing this—  
 hearing him send me back on the cloudy sea  
 in my own track, the long hard way of Egypt.  
 Nevertheless, I answered him and said:

‘Ancient, I shall do all as you command.  
 But tell me, now, the others—  
 had they a safe return, all those Akhaians

510



who stayed behind when Nestor and I left Troy?  
Or were there any lost at sea—what bitterness!—  
any who died in camp, after the war?’

To this he said:

‘For you to know these things  
goes beyond all necessity, Meneláos.  
Why must you ask?—you should not know my mind,  
and you will grieve to learn it, I can tell you.  
Many there were who died, many remain,  
but two high officers alone were lost—  
on the passage home, I mean; you saw the war.  
One is alive, a castaway at sea;  
the other, Aías, perished with all hands—  
though first Poseidon landed him on Gyrai<sup>16</sup>  
promontory, and saved him from the ocean.  
Despite Athena’s hate, he had lived on,  
but the great sinner in his insolence  
yelled that the gods’ will and the sea were beaten,  
and this loud brag came to Poseidon’s ears.  
He swung the trident<sup>17</sup> in his massive hands  
and in one shock from top to bottom split  
that promontory, toppling into the sea  
the fragment where the great fool sat.  
So the vast ocean had its will with Aías,  
drunk in the end on salt spume as he drowned.  
Meanwhile your brother left that doom astern  
in his decked ships—the Lady Hera<sup>18</sup> saved him;  
but as he came round Malea  
a fresh squall caught him, bearing him away  
over the cold sea, groaning in disgust,  
to the Land’s End of Argos, where Thyestês<sup>19</sup>  
lived in the days of old, and then his son,  
Aigísthos. Now, again, return seemed easy:  
the high gods wound the wind into the east,  
and back he sailed, this time to his own coast.  
He went ashore and kissed the earth in joy,  
hot tears blinding his eyes at sight of home.

520

530

540

<sup>16</sup>An island in the Aegean. Aías, who in the following lines is described as punished for his insolent and sacrilegious boasting, is the “lesser,” “Locrian” Aías (Ajax), the son of Oileus; he is not the “greater” Aías, who was the son of Télamon.

<sup>17</sup>The three-pronged spear wielded by the sea god Poseidon.

<sup>18</sup>Consort of Zeus; queen of the gods. She consistently sided with the Greeks against the Trojans.

<sup>19</sup>Brother of Atreus (the father of Agamémnon and Meneláos). See the headnote to Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. Homer’s account here of the murder of Agamémnon differs considerably from the version in Aeschylus; in the *Oresteia*, Agamémnon’s wife Klytaimnéstra plays a more significant role than does Aigísthos in the murder.

But there were eyes that watched him from a height—  
 a lookout, paid two bars of gold to keep  
 vigil the year round for Aigísthos' sake,  
 that he should be forewarned, and Agamémnon's  
 furious valor sleep unroused.

550

Now this man with his news ran to the tyrant,  
 who made his crooked arrangements in a flash,  
 stationed picked men at arms, a score of men  
 in hiding; set a feast in the next room;  
 then he went out with chariots and horses  
 to hail the king and welcome him to evil.  
 He led him in to banquet, all serene,  
 and killed him, like an ox felled at the trough;  
 and not a man of either company  
 survived that ambush in Aigísthos' house.'

560

Before the end my heart was broken down.  
 I slumped on the trampled sand and cried aloud,  
 caring no more for life or the light of day,  
 and rolled there weeping, till my tears were spent.  
 Then the unerring Ancient said at last:

'No more, no more; how long must you persist?  
 Nothing is gained by grieving so. How soon  
 can you return to Argos? You may take him  
 alive there still—or else meanwhile Orestês  
 will have despatched him. You'll attend the feast.'

570

At this my heart revived, and I recovered  
 the self command to question him once more:

'Of two companions now I know. The third?  
 Tell me his name, the one marooned at sea;  
 living, you say, or dead? Even in pain  
 I wish to hear.'

And this is all he answered:

'Laërtês' son, whose home is Ithaka.  
 I saw him weeping, weeping on an island.  
 The nymph Kalypso has him, in her hall.  
 No means of faring home are left him now;  
 no ship with oars, and no ship's company  
 to pull him on the broad back of the sea.  
 As to your own destiny, prince Menelâos,  
 you shall not die in the bluegrass land of Argos;  
 rather the gods intend you for Elysion<sup>20</sup>

580

<sup>20</sup>As presented here in Homer, this realm (also called *Elysium*) is not part of the underground Hades which Odysseus visits later in the *Odyssey*. It is, rather, a happy land on the extreme western surface of the earth.

with golden Rhadamanthos<sup>21</sup> at the world's end,  
where all existence is a dream of ease.

Snowfall is never known there, neither long  
frost of winter, nor torrential rain,  
but only mild and lulling airs from Ocean  
bearing refreshment for the souls of men—  
the West Wind always blowing.

590

For the gods  
hold you, as Helen's lord, a son of Zeus.'

At this he dove under a swell and left me,  
and I went back to the ship with my companions,  
feeling my heart's blood in me running high;  
but in the long hull's shadow, near the sea,  
we supped again as sacred Night came on  
and slept at last beside the lapping water.

600

When Dawn spread out her finger tips of rose,  
in first light we launched on the courtly breakers,  
setting up masts and yards in the well-found ships;  
went all on board, and braced on planks athwart  
oarsmen in line dipped oars in the grey sea.  
Soon I drew in to the great stream<sup>22</sup> fed by heaven  
and, laying by, slew bulls in the proper number,  
until the immortal gods were thus appeased;  
then heaped a death mound on that shore against  
all-quenching time for Agamémnon's honor,  
and put to sea once more. The gods sent down  
a sternwind for a racing passage homeward.

610

So ends the story. Now you must stay with me  
and be my guest eleven or twelve days more.  
I'll send you on your way with gifts, and fine ones:  
three chariot horses, and a polished car;  
a hammered cup, too, so that all your days,  
tipping the red wine for the deathless gods,  
you will remember me."

Telémakhos answered:

620

"Lord, son of Atreus, no, you must not keep me.  
Not that a year with you would be too long:  
I never could be homesick here—I find  
your tales and all you say so marvellous.  
But time hangs heavy on my shipmates' hands  
at holy Pylos, if you make me stay.

<sup>21</sup>Ruler of Elysion (sometimes portrayed in ancient literature as a judge of the dead in Hades).

<sup>22</sup>The Nile, believed to have a divine source in the sky.

As for your gift, now, let it be some keepsake.  
 Horses I cannot take to Ithaka;  
 let me bestow them back on you, to serve  
 your glory here. My lord, you rule wide country,  
 rolling and rich with clover, galingale  
 and all the grains: red wheat and hoary barley.  
 home we have no level runs or meadows,  
 but highland, goat land—prettier than plains, though.  
 Grasses, and pasture land, are hard to come by  
 upon the islands tilted in the sea,  
 and Ithaka is the island of them all.”

630

At this the deep-lunged man of battle smiled.  
 Then he said kindly, patting the boy's hand:

“You come of good stock, lad. That was well spoken.  
 I'll change the gift, then—as indeed I can.  
 Let me see what is costliest and most beautiful  
 of all the precious things my house contains:  
 a wine bowl, mixing bowl, all wrought of silver,  
 but rimmed with hammered gold. Let this be yours.  
 It is Hephaistos'<sup>23</sup> work, given me by Phaidimos,  
 captain and king of Sidon. He received me  
 during my travels. Let it be yours, I say.”

640

This was their discourse on that morning. Meanwhile  
 guests were arriving at the great lord's house,  
 bringing their sheep, and wine, the ease of men,  
 with loaves their comely kerchiefed women sent,  
 to make a feast in hall.

650

At that same hour,  
 before the distant manor of Odysseus,  
 the suitors were competing at the discus throw  
 and javelin, on a measured field they used,  
 arrogant lords at play. The two best men,  
 Antínoös and Eurýmakhos, presided.  
 Now Phronios' son, Noêmon, came to see them  
 with a question for Antínoös. He said:

660

“Do any of us know, or not, Antínoös,  
 what day Telémakhos will be home from Pylos?  
 He took my ship, but now I need it back  
 to make a cruise to Elis, where the plains are.  
 I have a dozen mares at pasture there  
 with mule colts yet unweaned. My notion is  
 to bring one home and break him in for labor.”

<sup>23</sup> The god of fire and of metalworking. Also spelled *Hephaestus*.

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325

His first words made them stare—for they knew well  
 Télémakhos could not have gone to Pylos,  
 but inland with his flocks, or to the swineherd.  
 Eupéithês' son, Antínôos, quickly answered:

670

"Tell the story straight. He sailed? Who joined him—  
 a crew he picked up here in Ithaka,  
 or his own slaves? He might have done it that way.  
 And will you make it clear  
 whether he took the ship against your will?  
 Did he ask for it, did you lend it to him?"

Now said the son of Phronios in reply:

"Lent it to him, and freely. Who would not,  
 when a prince of that house asked for it, in trouble?  
 Hard to refuse the favor, it seems to me.  
 As for his crew, the best men on the island,  
 after ourselves, went with him. Mentor I noted  
 going aboard—or a god who looked like Mentor.  
 The strange thing is, I saw Lord Mentor here  
 in the first light yesterday—although he sailed  
 five days ago for Pylos."

680

Turning away,  
 Noëmon took the path to his father's house,  
 leaving the two men there, baffled and hostile.  
 They called the rest in from the playing field  
 and made them all sit down, so that Antínôos  
 could speak out from the stormcloud of his heart,  
 swollen with anger; and his eyes blazed:

690

"A bad business. Télémakhos had the gall  
 to make that crossing, though we said he could not.  
 So the young cub rounds up a first rate crew  
 in spite of all our crowd, and puts to sea.  
 What devilment will he be up to next time?—  
 Zeus blast the life out of him before he's grown!  
 Just give me a fast ship and twenty men;  
 I'll intercept him, board him in the strait  
 between the crags of Samê<sup>24</sup> and this island.  
 He'll find his sea adventure after his father  
 swamping work in the end!"

700

They all cried "Aye!"  
 and "After him!" and trailed back to the manor.

<sup>24</sup>An island, modern Cephalonia, south and west of Ithaka; also called Kephallênia in this poem.

Now not much time went by before Penélopê  
 learned what was afoot among the suitors.  
 Medôn the crier told her. He had been  
 outside the wall, and heard them in the court  
 conspiring. Into the house and up the stairs  
 he ran to her with his news upon his tongue—  
 but at the door Penélopê met him, crying:

710

“Why have they sent you up here now? To tell  
 the maids of King Odysseus—‘Leave your spinning:  
 Time to go down and slave to feed those men?’  
 I wish this were the last time they came feasting,  
 courting me or consorting here! The last!  
 Each day you crowd this house like wolves  
 to eat away my brave son’s patrimony.  
 When you were boys, did your own fathers tell you  
 nothing of what Odysseus was for them?  
 In word and act impeccable, disinterested  
 toward all the realm—though it is king’s justice  
 to hold one man abhorred and love another;  
 no man alive could say Odysseus wronged him.  
 But your own hearts—how different!—and your deeds!  
 How soon are benefactions all forgotten!”

720

Now Medôn, the alert and cool man, answered:

“I wish that were the worst of it, my Lady,  
 but they intend something more terrible—  
 may Zeus forfend and spare us!  
 They plan to drive the keen bronze through Telémakhos  
 when he comes home. He sailed away, you know,  
 to hallowed Pylos and old Lakedaimon  
 for news about his father.”

730

Her knees failed,  
 and her heart failed as she listened to the words,  
 and all her power of speech went out of her.  
 Tears came; but the rich voice could not come.  
 Only after a long while she made answer:

“Why has my child left me? He had no need  
 of those long ships on which men shake out sail  
 to tug like horses, breasting miles of sea.  
 Why did he go? Must he, too, be forgotten?”

740

Then Medôn, the perceptive man, replied:

“A god moved him—who knows?—or his own heart  
 sent him to learn, at Pylos, if his father  
 roams the wide world still, or what befell him.”

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He left her then, and went down through the house.  
 And now the pain around her heart benumbed her;  
 chairs were a step away, but far beyond her;  
 she sank down on the door sill of the chamber,  
 wailing, and all her women young and old  
 made a low murmur of lament around her,  
 until at last she broke out through her tears:

750

“Dearest companions, what has Zeus given me?  
 Pain—more pain than any living woman.  
 My lord, my lion heart, gone, long ago—  
 the bravest man, and best, of the Danaans,  
 famous through Hellas and the Argive midlands—  
 and now the squalls have blown my son, my dear one,  
 an unknown boy, southward. No one told me.  
 O brute creatures, not one soul would dare  
 to wake me from my sleep; you knew  
 the hour he took the black ship out to sea!  
 If I had seen that sailing in his eyes  
 he should have stayed with me, for all his longing,  
 stayed—or left me dead in the great hall.  
 Go, someone, now, and call old Dólios,  
 the slave my father gave me before I came,  
 my orchard keeper—tell him to make haste  
 and put these things before Laërtês; he  
 may plan some kind of action; let him come  
 to cry shame on these ruffians who would murder  
 Odysseus’ son and heir, and end his line!”

760

770

The dear old nurse, Eurýkleia, answered her:

“Sweet mistress, have my throat cut without mercy  
 or what you will; it’s true, I won’t conceal it,  
 I knew the whole thing; gave him his provisions;  
 grain and sweet wine I gave, and a great oath  
 to tell you nothing till twelve days went by,  
 or till you heard of it yourself, or missed him;  
 he hoped you would not tear your skin lamenting.  
 Come, bathe and dress your loveliness afresh,  
 and go to the upper rooms with all your maids  
 to ask help from Athena, Zeus’s daughter.  
 She it will be who saves this boy from death.  
 Spare the old man this further suffering;  
 the blissful gods cannot so hate his line,  
 heirs of Arkêsios; one will yet again  
 be lord of the tall house and the far fields.”

780

790

She hushed her weeping in this way, and soothed her.  
 The Lady Penélopê arose and bathed,  
 dressing her body in her freshest linen,

filled a basket with barley, and led her maids  
to the upper rooms, where she besought Athena:

“Tireless child of Zeus, graciously hear me!  
If ever Odysseus burned at our altar fire  
thighbones of beef or mutton in sacrifice,  
remember it for my sake! Save my son!  
Shield him, and make the killers go astray!”

800

She ended with a cry, and the goddess heard her.  
Now voices rose from the shadowy hall below  
where the suitors were assuring one another:

“Our so-long-courted Queen is even now  
of a mind to marry one of us, and knows  
nothing of what is destined for her son.”

Of what was destined they in fact knew nothing,  
But Antínoös addressed them in a whisper:

“No boasting—are you mad?—and no loud talk:  
someone might hear it and alarm the house.  
Come along now, be quiet, this way; come,  
we’ll carry out the plan our hearts are set on.”

810

Picking out twenty of the strongest seamen,  
he led them to a ship at the sea’s edge,  
and down they dragged her into deeper water,  
stepping a mast in her, with furled sails,  
and oars a-trail from thongs looped over thole pins,  
ready all; then tried the white sail, hoisting,  
while men at arms carried their gear aboard.  
They moored the ship some way off shore, and left her  
to take their evening meal there, waiting for night to come.

820

Penélopê at that hour in her high chamber  
lay silent, tasting neither food nor drink,  
and thought of nothing but her princely son—  
could he escape, or would they find and kill him?—  
her mind turning at bay, like a cornered lion  
in whom fear comes as hunters close the ring.  
But in her sick thought sweet sleep overtook her,  
and she dozed off, her body slack and still.

Now it occurred to the grey-eyed goddess Athena  
to make a figure of dream in a woman’s form—  
Iphthimê, great Ikários’ other daughter,  
whom Eumêlos of Phêrai took as bride.  
The goddess sent this dream to Odysseus’ house  
to quiet Penélopê and end her grieving.

830



So, passing by the strap-slit<sup>25</sup> through the door,  
the image came a-gliding down the room  
to stand at her bedside and murmur to her:

“Sleepest thou, sorrowing Penélopê?  
The gods whose life is ease no longer suffer thee  
to pine and weep, then; he returns unharmed,  
thy little one; no way hath he offended.”

840

Then pensive Penélopê made this reply,  
slumbering sweetly in the gates of dream:

“Sister, hast thou come hither? Why? Aforetime  
never wouldst come, so far away thy dwelling.  
And am I bid be done with all my grieving?  
But see what anguish hath my heart and soul!  
My lord, my lion heart, gone, long ago—  
the bravest man, and best, of the Danaans,  
famous through Hellas and the Argive midlands—  
and now my son, my dear one, gone seafaring,  
a child, untrained in hardship or in council.  
Aye, ’tis for him I weep, more than his father!  
Aye, how I tremble for him, lest some blow  
befall him at men’s hands or on the sea!  
Cruel are they and many who plot against him,  
to take his life before he can return.”

850

Now the dim phantom spoke to her once more:

“Lift up thy heart, and fear not overmuch.  
For by his side one goes whom all men else  
invoke as their defender, one so powerful—  
Pallas Athena; in thy tears she pitied thee  
and now hath sent me that I so assure thee.”

860

Then said Penélopê the wise:

“If thou art  
numinous<sup>26</sup> and hast ears for divine speech,  
O tell me, what of Odysseus, man of woe?  
Is he alive still somewhere, seeth he day light still?  
Or gone in death to the sunless underworld?”

The dim phantom said only this in answer:

870

“Of him I may not tell thee in this discourse,  
alive or dead. And empty words are evil.”

<sup>25</sup>A hole in a door through which a strap was passed. It allowed a person outside to bolt the door on the inside.

<sup>26</sup>Gifted with uncanny spiritual powers.

The wavering form withdrew along the doorbolt  
 into a draft of wind, and out of sleep  
 Penélopê awoke, in better heart  
 for that clear dream in the twilight of the night.

Meanwhile the suitors had got under way,  
 planning the death plunge for Telémakhos.  
 Between the Isles of Ithaka and Samê  
 the sea is broken by an islet, Asteris,  
 with access to both channels from a cove.  
 In ambush here that night the Akhaians lay.

880

## BOOK FIVE: SWEET NYMPH AND OPEN SEA

Dawn came up from the couch of her reclining,  
 leaving her lord Tithonos'<sup>1</sup> brilliant side  
 with fresh light in her arms for gods and men.  
 And the master of heaven and high thunder, Zeus,  
 went to his place among the gods assembled  
 hearing Athena tell Odysseus' woe.  
 For she, being vexed that he was still sojourning  
 in the sea chambers of Kalypso,<sup>2</sup> said:

"O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,  
 let no man holding scepter as a king  
 think to be mild, or kind, or virtuous;  
 let him be cruel, and practice evil ways,  
 for those Odysseus ruled cannot remember  
 the fatherhood and mercy of his reign.  
 Meanwhile he lives and grieves upon that island  
 in thralldom to the nymph; he cannot stir,  
 cannot fare homeward, for no ship is left him,  
 fitted with oars—no crewmen or companions  
 to pull him on the broad back of the sea.  
 And now murder is hatched on the high sea  
 against his son, who sought news of his father  
 in the holy lands of Pylos and Lakedaimon."

10

20

To this the summoner of cloud replied:

"My child, what odd complaints you let escape you.  
 Have you not, you yourself, arranged this matter—  
 as we all know—so that Odysseus  
 will bring these men to book, on his return?"

<sup>1</sup>The lover of Eos, goddess of the dawn. No mention is made here of the most famous version of his myth, in which Eos wins for him the gift of immortality but forgets, fatefully, to ensure that Tithonos will never grow older. See Tennyson's poem "Tithonus."

<sup>2</sup>The nymph's island, Ogygia, is located in a western region of the Mediterranean. The geography of Odysseus' wanderings west of Greece is uncertain.

And are you not the one to give Telémakhos  
a safe route for sailing? Let his enemies  
encounter no one and row home again.”

30

He turned then to his favorite son and said:

“Hermês, you have much practice on our missions,  
go make it known to the softly-braided nymph  
that we, whose will is not subject to error,  
order Odysseus home; let him depart.  
But let him have no company, gods or men,  
only a raft that he must lash together,  
and after twenty days, worn out at sea,  
he shall make land upon the garden isle,  
Skhería,<sup>3</sup> of our kinsmen, the Phaiákians.  
Let these men take him to their hearts in honor  
and berth him in a ship, and send him home,  
with gifts of garments, gold, and bronze—  
so much he had not counted on from Troy  
could he have carried home his share of plunder.  
His destiny is to see his friends again  
under his own roof, in his father’s country.”

40

No words were lost on Hermês the Wayfinder,  
who bent to tie his beautiful sandals on,  
ambrosial, golden, that carry him over water  
or over endless land in a swish of the wind,  
and took the wand with which he charms asleep—  
or when he wills, awake—the eyes of men.  
So wand in hand he paced into the air,  
shot from Pieria<sup>4</sup> down, down to sea level,  
and veered to skim the swell. A gull patrolling  
between the wave crests of the desolate sea  
will dip to catch a fish, and douse his wings;  
no higher above the whitecaps Hermês flew  
until the distant island lay ahead,  
then rising shoreward from the violet ocean  
he stepped up to the cave. Divine Kalypso,  
the mistress of the isle, was now at home.  
Upon her hearthstone a great fire blazing  
scented the farthest shores with cedar smoke  
and smoke of thyme, and singing high and low  
in her sweet voice, before her loom a-weaving,  
she passed her golden shuttle to and fro.  
A deep wood grew outside, with summer leaves  
of alder and black poplar, pungent cypress.

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70

<sup>3</sup>The land (also spelled *Scheria*) of the Phaiákians (Phaeacians), possibly located on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, opposite Ithaka, more probably Corfu, an island north-west of Ithaka off the west coast of Greece.

<sup>4</sup>An area on the slopes of Mount Olympos.

Ornate birds here rested their stretched wings—  
 horned owls, falcons, cormorants—long-tongued  
 beachcombing birds, and followers of the sea.  
 Around the smoothwalled cave a crooking vine  
 held purple clusters under ply of green;  
 and four springs, bubbling up near one another  
 shallow and clear, took channels here and there  
 through beds of violets and tender parsley.  
 Even a god who found this place  
 would gaze, and feel his heart beat with delight:  
 so Hermês did; but when he had gazed his fill  
 he entered the wide cave. Now face to face  
 the magical Kalypso recognized him,  
 as all immortal gods know one another  
 on sight—though seeming strangers, far from home.  
 but he saw nothing of the great Odysseus,  
 who sat apart, as a thousand times before,  
 and racked his own heart groaning, with eyes wet  
 scanning the bare horizon of the sea.  
 Kalypso, lovely nymph, seated her guest  
 in a bright chair all shimmering, and asked:

80

90

“O Hermês, ever with your golden wand,  
 what brings you to my island?  
 Your awesome visits in the past were few.  
 Now tell me what request you have in mind;  
 for I desire to do it, if I can,  
 and if it is a proper thing to do.  
 But wait a while, and let me serve my friend.”

She drew a table of ambrosia near him  
 and stirred a cup of ruby-colored nectar<sup>5</sup>—  
 food and drink for the luminous Wayfinder,  
 who took both at his leisure, and replied:

100

“Goddess to god, you greet me, questioning me?  
 Well, here is truth for you in courtesy.  
 Zeus made me come, and not my inclination;  
 who cares to cross that tract of desolation,  
 the bitter sea, all mortal towns behind  
 where gods have beef and honors from mankind?  
 But it is not to be thought of—and no use—  
 for any god to elude the will of Zeus.

110

He notes your friend, most ill-starred by renown  
 of all the peers who fought for Priam’s town—  
 nine years of war they had, before great Troy was down.  
 Homing, they wronged the goddess<sup>6</sup> with grey eyes,

<sup>5</sup>Ambrosia and nectar were the food and drink of the gods.

<sup>6</sup>Compare the passage in Book IV alluding to the insolence of the lesser Aías, or Ajax.

who made a black wind blow and the seas rise,  
 in which his troops were lost, and all his gear,  
 while easterlies and current washed him here.  
 Now the command is: send him back in haste.  
 His life may not in exile go to waste.  
 His destiny, his homecoming, is at hand,  
 when he shall see his dearest, and walk on his own land.”

120

That goddess most divinely made  
 shuddered before him, and her warm voice rose:

“Oh you vile gods, in jealousy supernal!  
 You hate it when we choose to lie with men—  
 immortal flesh by some dear mortal side.  
 So radiant Dawn once took to bed Orion<sup>7</sup>  
 until you easeful gods grew peevish at it,  
 and holy Artemis, Artemis throned in gold,  
 hunted him down in Delos with her arrows.  
 Then Dêmêtêr of the tasseled tresses yielded  
 to Iasion,<sup>8</sup> mingling and making love  
 in a furrow three times plowed; but Zeus found out  
 and killed him with a white-hot thunderbolt.  
 So now you grudge me, too, my mortal friend.  
 But it was I who saved him—saw him straddle  
 his own keel board, the one man left afloat  
 when Zeus rent wide his ship with chain lightning  
 and overturned him in the winedark sea.  
 Then all his troops were lost, his good companions,  
 but wind and current washed him here to me.  
 I fed him, loved him, sang that he should not die  
 nor grow old, ever, in all the days to come.  
 But now there’s no eluding Zeus’s will.  
 If this thing be ordained by him, I say  
 so be it, let the man strike out alone  
 on the vast water. Surely I cannot ‘send’ him.  
 I have no long-oared ships, no company  
 to pull him on the broad back of the sea.  
 My counsel he shall have, and nothing hidden,  
 to help him homeward without harm.”

130

140

150

To this the Wayfinder made answer briefly:

“Thus you shall send him, then. And show more grace  
 in your obedience, or be chastised by Zeus.”

<sup>7</sup>A gigantic hunter, loved by Eos.

<sup>8</sup>Probably symbolic of harvest wealth, since the offspring of his union with Dêmêtêr, goddess of the fields, was Plutus, who symbolized wealth.

The strong god glittering left her as he spoke,  
 and now her ladyship, having given heed  
 to Zeus's mandate, went to find Odysseus  
 in his stone seat to seaward—tear on tear  
 brimming his eyes. The sweet days of his life time  
 were running out in anguish over his exile, 160  
 for long ago the nymph had ceased to please.  
 Though he fought shy of her and her desire,  
 he lay with her each night, for she compelled him.  
 But when day came he sat on the rocky shore  
 and broke his own heart groaning, with eyes wet  
 scanning the bare horizon of the sea.  
 Now she stood near him in her beauty, saying:

"O forlorn man, be still.  
 Here you need grieve no more; you need not feel  
 your life consumed here; I have pondered it, 170  
 and I shall help you go.  
 Come and cut down high timber for a raft  
 or flatboat; make her broad-beamed, and decked over,  
 so you can ride her on the misty sea.  
 Stores I shall put aboard for you—bread, water,  
 and ruby-colored wine, to stay your hunger—  
 give you a seacloak and a following wind  
 to help you homeward without harm—provided  
 the gods who rule wide heaven wish it so.  
 Stronger than I they are, in mind and power." 180

For all he had endured, Odysseus shuddered.  
 But when he spoke, his words went to the mark:

"After these years, a helping hand? O goddess,  
 what guile is hidden here?  
 A raft, you say, to cross the Western Ocean,<sup>9</sup>  
 rough water, and unknown? Seaworthy ships  
 that glory in god's wind will never cross it.  
 I take no raft you grudge me out to sea.  
 Or yield me first a great oath, if I do,  
 to work no more enchantment to my harm." 190

At this the beautiful nymph Kalypso smiled  
 and answered sweetly, laying her hand upon him:

"What a dog you are! And not for nothing learned,  
 having the wit to ask this thing of me!  
 My witness then be earth and sky  
 and dripping Styx<sup>10</sup> that I swear by—

<sup>9</sup>The western Mediterranean.

<sup>10</sup>A river in Hades, the realm of the dead. To swear by Styx was the most solemn oath a deity could utter.

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the gay gods cannot swear more seriously—  
 I have no further spells to work against you.  
 But what I shall devise, and what I tell you,  
 will be the same as if your need were mine.  
 Fairness is all I think of. There are hearts  
 made of cold iron—but my heart is kind.”

200

Swiftly she turned and led him to her cave,  
 and they went in, the mortal and immortal.  
 He took the chair left empty now by Hermês,  
 where the divine Kalypso placed before him  
 victuals and drink of men; then she sat down  
 facing Odysseus, while her serving maids  
 brought nectar and ambrosia to her side.  
 Then each one's hands went out on each one's feast  
 until they had had their pleasure; and she said:

210

“Son of Laërtês, versatile Odysseus,  
 after these years with me, you still desire  
 your old home? Even so, I wish you well.  
 If you could see it all, before you go—  
 all the adversity you face at sea—  
 you would stay here, and guard this house, and be  
 immortal—though you wanted her forever,  
 that bride for whom you pine each day.  
 Can I be less desirable than she is?  
 Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals  
 compare with goddesses in grace and form?”

220

To this the strategist Odysseus answered:

“My lady goddess, here is no cause for anger.  
 My quiet Penélopê—how well I know—  
 would seem a shade before your majesty,  
 death and old age being unknown to you,  
 while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day  
 I long for home, long for the sight of home.  
 If any god has marked me out again  
 for shipwreck, my tough heart can undergo it.  
 What hardship have I not long since endured  
 at sea, in battle! Let the trial come.”

230

Now as he spoke the sun set, dusk drew on,  
 and they retired, this pair, to the inner cave  
 to revel and rest softly, side by side.

When Dawn spread out her finger tips of rose  
 Odysseus pulled his tunic and his cloak on,  
 while the sea nymph dressed in a silvery gown  
 of subtle tissue, drew about her waist  
 a golden belt, and veiled her head, and then

240

took thought for the great-hearted hero's voyage.  
 A brazen axehead first she had to give him,  
 two-bladed, and agreeable to the palm  
 with a smooth-fitting haft of olive wood;  
 next a well-polished adze; and then she led him  
 to the island's tip where bigger timber grew—  
 besides the alder and poplar, tall pine trees,  
 long dead and seasoned, that would float him high.  
 Showing him in that place her stand of timber 250  
 the loveliest of nymphs took her way home.  
 Now the man fell to chopping; when he paused  
 twenty tall trees were down. He lopped the branches,  
 split the trunks, and trimmed his puncheons true.  
 Meanwhile Kalypso brought him an auger tool  
 with which he drilled through all his planks, then drove  
 stout pins to bolt them, fitted side by side.  
 A master shipwright, building a cargo vessel,  
 lays down a broad and shallow hull; just so  
 Odysseus shaped the bottom of his craft. 260  
 He made his decking fast to close-set ribs  
 before he closed the side with longer planking,  
 then cut a mast pole, and proper yard,  
 and shaped a steering oar to hold her steady.  
 He drove long strands of willow in all the seams  
 to keep out waves, and ballasted with logs.  
 As for a sail, the lovely nymph Kalypso  
 brought him a cloth so he could make that, too.  
 Then he ran up his rigging—halyards, braces—  
 and hauled the boat on rollers to the water. 270

This was the fourth day, when he had all ready;  
 on the fifth day, she sent him out to sea.  
 But first she bathed him, gave him a scented cloak,  
 and put on board a skin of dusky wine  
 with water in a bigger skin, and stores—  
 boiled meats and other victuals—in a bag.  
 Then she conjured a warm landbreeze to blowing—  
 joy for Odysseus when he shook out sail!  
 Now the great seaman, leaning on his oar,  
 steered all the night unsleeping, and his eyes 280  
 picked out the Pleiadês, the laggard Ploughman,  
 and the Great Bear, that some have called the Wain,  
 pivoting in the sky before Orion;  
 of all the night's pure figures, she alone  
 would never bathe or dip in the Ocean stream.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>In northern latitudes, the Big Dipper (the Great Bear, or Wain) never sets but rather circles around Polaris, the North Star. For Odysseus to keep the constellation on his left would require him to sail eastward.



These stars the beautiful Kalypso bade him  
hold on his left hand as he crossed the main.  
Seventeen nights and days in the open water  
he sailed, before a dark shoreline appeared;  
Skhería then came slowly into view  
like a rough shield of bull's hide on the sea.

290

But now the god of earthquake, storming home  
over the mountains of Asia from the Sunburned land,  
sighted him far away. The god grew sullen  
and tossed his great head, muttering to himself:

"Here is a pretty cruise! While I was gone  
the gods have changed their minds about Odysseus.  
Look at him now, just offshore of that island  
that frees him from the bondage of his exile!  
Still I can give him a rough ride in, and will."

300

Brewing high thunderheads, he churned the deep  
with both hands on his trident—called up wind  
from every quarter, and sent a wall of rain  
to blot out land and sea in torrential night.  
Hurricane winds now struck from the South and East  
shifting North West in a great spume of seas,  
on which Odysseus' knees grew slack, his heart  
sickened, and he said within himself:

"Rag of man that I am, is this the end of me?  
I fear the goddess told it all too well—  
predicting great adversity at sea  
and far from home. Now all things bear her out:  
the whole rondure<sup>12</sup> of heaven hooded so  
by Zeus in woeful cloud, and the sea raging  
under such winds. I am going down, that's sure.  
How lucky those Danaans were who perished  
on Troy's wide seaboard, serving the Atreidai!<sup>13</sup>  
Would God I, too, had died there—met my end  
that time the Trojans made so many casts at me  
when I stood by Akhilleus after death.  
I should have had a soldier's burial  
and praise from the Akhaians—not this choking  
waiting for me at sea, unmarked and lonely."

310

320

A great wave drove at him with toppling crest  
spinning him round, in one tremendous blow,  
and he went plunging overboard, the oar-haft  
wrenched from his grip. A gust that came on howling  
at the same instant broke his mast in two,

<sup>12</sup> Circle or sphere.

<sup>13</sup> Sons of Atreus—Agamémnon and Meneláos.

hurling his yard and sail far out to leeward.  
 Now the big wave a long time kept him under, 330  
 helpless to surface, held by tons of water,  
 tangled, too, by the seacloak of Kalypso.  
 Long, long, until he came up spouting brine,  
 with streamlets gushing from his head and beard;  
 but still bethought him, half-drowned as he was,  
 to flounder for the boat and get a handhold  
 into the bilge—to crouch there, foiling death.  
 Across the foaming water, to and fro,  
 the boat careered like a ball of tumbleweed  
 blown on the autumn plains, but intact still. 340  
 So the winds drove this wreck over the deep,  
 East Wind and North Wind, then South Wind and West,  
 coursing each in turn to the brutal harry.

But Ino<sup>14</sup> saw him—Ino, Kadmos' daughter,  
 slim-legged, lovely, once an earthling girl,  
 now in the seas a nereid, Leukothea.  
 Touched by Odysseus' painful buffeting  
 she broke the surface, like a diving bird,  
 to rest upon the tossing raft and say:

"O forlorn man, I wonder 350  
 why the Earthshaker, Lord Poseidon, holds  
 this fearful grudge—father of all your woes.  
 He will not drown you, though, despite his rage.  
 You seem clear-headed still; do what I tell you.  
 Shed that cloak, let the gale take your craft,  
 and swim for it—swim hard to get ashore  
 upon Skhería, yonder,  
 where it is fated that you find a shelter.  
 Here: make my veil your sash; it is not mortal;  
 you cannot, now, be drowned or suffer harm. 360  
 Only, the instant you lay hold of earth,  
 discard it, cast it far, far out from shore  
 in the winedark sea again, and turn away."

After she had bestowed her veil, the nereid  
 dove like a gull to windward  
 where a dark waveside closed over her whiteness.  
 But in perplexity Odysseus  
 said to himself, his great heart laboring:

"O damned confusion! Can this be a ruse  
 to trick me from the boat for some god's pleasure? 370  
 No I'll not swim; with my own eyes I saw  
 how far the land lies that she called my shelter.

<sup>14</sup>Maddened by Hera, who was jealous of her for helping to rear the young god Dionysos, Ino leaped into the sea and was transformed into a nereid, or sea nymph.

Better to do the wise thing, as I see it.  
While this poor planking holds, I stay aboard;  
I may ride out the pounding of the storm,  
or if she cracks up, take to the water then;  
I cannot think it through a better way.”

But even while he pondered and decided,  
the god of earthquake heaved a wave against him  
high as a roof-tree and of awful gloom. 380  
A gust of wind, hitting a pile of chaff,  
will scatter all the parched stuff far and wide;  
just so, when this gigantic billow struck  
the boat's big timbers flew apart. Odysseus  
clung to a single beam, like a jockey riding,  
meanwhile stripping Kalypso's cloak away;  
then he slung round his chest the veil of Ino  
and plunged headfirst into the sea. His hands  
went out to stroke, and he gave a swimmer's kick.  
But the strong Earthshaker had him under his eye, 390  
and nodded as he said:

“Go on, go on;  
wander the high seas this way, take your blows,  
before you join that race the gods have nurtured.<sup>15</sup>  
Nor will you grumble, even then, I think,  
for want of trouble.”

Whipping his glossy team  
he rode off to his glorious home at Aigai.<sup>16</sup>  
But Zeus's daughter Athena countered him:  
she checked the course of all the winds but one,  
commanding them, “Be quiet and go to sleep.”  
Then sent a long swell running under a norther 400  
to bear the prince Odysseus, back from danger,  
to join the Phaiákians, people of the sea.

Two nights, two days, in the solid deep-sea swell  
he drifted, many times awaiting death,  
until with shining ringlets in the East  
the dawn confirmed a third day, breaking clear  
over a high and windless sea; and mounting  
a rolling wave he caught a glimpse of land.  
What a dear welcome thing life seems to children  
whose father, in the extremity, recovers 410  
after some weakening and malignant illness:  
his pangs are gone, the gods have delivered him.  
So dear and welcome to Odysseus  
the sight of land, of woodland, on that morning.

<sup>15</sup> The Phaiákians, or Phaeacians.<sup>16</sup> An Akhaian city.

It made him swim again, to get a foothold  
 on solid ground. But when he came in earshot  
 he heard the trampling roar of sea on rock,  
 where combers, rising shoreward, thudded down  
 on the sucking ebb—all sheeted with salt foam.  
 Here were no coves or harborage or shelter,  
 only steep headlands, rockfallen reefs and crags.  
 Odysseus' knees grew slack, his heart faint,  
 a heaviness came over him, and he said:

420

"A cruel turn, this. Never had I thought  
 to see this land, but Zeus has let me see it—  
 and let me, too, traverse the Western Ocean—  
 only to find no exit from these breakers.  
 Here are sharp rocks off shore, and the sea a smother  
 rushing around them; rock face rising sheer  
 from deep water; nowhere could I stand up  
 on my two feet and fight free of the welter.  
 No matter how I try it, the surf may throw me  
 against the cliffside; no good fighting there.  
 If I swim down the coast, outside the breakers,  
 I may find shelving shore and quiet water—  
 but what if another gale comes on to blow?  
 Then I go cursing out to sea once more.  
 Or then again, some shark of Amphitritè's<sup>17</sup>  
 may hunt me, sent by the genius of the deep.  
 I know how he who makes earth tremble hates me."

430

440

During this meditation a heavy surge  
 was taking him, in fact, straight on the rocks.  
 He had been flayed there, and his bones broken,  
 had not grey-eyed Athena instructed him:  
 he gripped a rock-ledge with both hands in passing  
 and held on, groaning, as the surge went by,  
 to keep clear of its breaking. Then the backwash  
 hit him, ripping him under and far out.  
 An octopus, when you drag one from his chamber,  
 comes up with suckers full of tiny stones:  
 Odysseus left the skin of his great hands  
 torn on that rock-ledge as the wave submerged him.  
 And now at last Odysseus would have perished,  
 battered inhumanly, but he had the gift  
 of self-possession from grey-eyed Athena.  
 So, when the backwash spewed him up again,  
 he swam out and along, and scanned the coast  
 for some landspit that made a breakwater.

450

<sup>17</sup>A sea nymph, consort of Poseidon and thus queen of the ocean.

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Lo and behold, the mouth of a calm river  
at length came into view, with level shores  
unbroken, free from rock, shielded from wind—  
by far the best place he had found.  
But as he felt the current flowing seaward  
he prayed in his heart:

460

“O hear me, lord of the stream:  
how sorely I depend upon your mercy!  
derelict as I am by the sea’s anger.  
Is he not sacred, even to the gods,  
the wandering man who comes, as I have come,  
in weariness before your knees, your waters?  
Here is your servant; lord, have mercy on me.”

470

Now even as he prayed the tide at ebb  
had turned, and the river god made quiet water,  
drawing him in to safety in the shallows.  
His knees buckled, his arms gave way beneath him,  
all vital force now conquered by the sea.  
Swollen from head to foot he was, and seawater  
gushed from his mouth and nostrils. There he lay,  
scarce drawing breath, unstirring, deathly spent.  
In time, as air came back into his lungs  
and warmth around his heart, he loosed the veil,  
letting it drift away on the estuary  
downstream to where a white wave took it under  
and Ino’s hands received it. Then the man  
crawled to the river bank among the reeds  
where, face down, he could kiss the soil of earth,  
in his exhaustion murmuring to himself:

480

“What more can this hulk suffer? What comes now?  
In vigil through the night here by the river  
how can I not succumb, being weak and sick,  
to the night’s damp and hoarfrost of the morning?  
The air comes cold from rivers before dawn.  
But if I climb the slope and fall asleep  
in the dark forest’s undergrowth—supposing  
cold and fatigue will go, and sweet sleep come—  
I fear I make the wild beasts easy prey.”

490

But this seemed best to him, as he thought it over.  
He made his way to a grove above the water  
on open ground, and crept under twin bushes  
grown from the same spot—olive and wild olive—  
a thicket proof against the stinging wind  
or Sun’s blaze, fine soever the needling sunlight;  
nor could a downpour wet it through, so dense  
those plants were interwoven. Here Odysseus  
tunnelled, and raked together with his hands

500

a wide bed—for a fall of leaves was there,  
 enough to save two men or maybe three  
 on a winter night, a night of bitter cold.  
 Odysseus' heart laughed when he saw his leaf-bed,  
 and down he lay, heaping more leaves above him.

A man in a distant field, no hearthfires near,  
 will hide a fresh brand in his bed of embers  
 to keep a spark alive for the next day;  
 so in the leaves Odysseus hid himself,  
 while over him Athena showered sleep  
 that his distress should end, and soon, soon.  
 In quiet sleep she sealed his cherished eyes.

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## BOOK SIX: THE PRINCESS AT THE RIVER

Far gone in weariness, in oblivion,  
 the noble and enduring man slept on;  
 but Athena in the night went down the land  
 of the Phaiákians, entering their city.  
 In days gone by, these men held Hypereia,  
 a country of wide dancing grounds, but near them  
 were overbearing Kyklopês,<sup>1</sup> whose power  
 could not be turned from pillage. So the Phaiákians  
 migrated thence under Nausíthoös  
 to settle a New World across the sea,  
 Skhería Island. That first captain walled  
 their promontory, built their homes and shrines,  
 and parcelled out the black land for the plow.  
 But he had gone down long ago to Death.  
 Alkínoös ruled, and Heaven gave him wisdom,  
 so on this night the goddess, grey-eyed Athena,  
 entered the palace of Alkínoös  
 to make sure of Odysseus' voyage home.  
 She took her way to a painted bedchamber  
 where a young girl lay fast asleep—so fine  
 in mould and feature that she seemed a goddess—  
 the daughter of Alkínoös, Nausikaa.  
 On either side, as Graces<sup>2</sup> might have slept,  
 her maids were sleeping. The bright doors were shut,  
 but like a sudden stir of wind, Athena  
 moved to the bedside of the girl, and grew

10

20

<sup>1</sup> These monstrous giants of Sicily are described in Book IX. *Hypereia* means "highlands"; their location is uncertain.

<sup>2</sup> Three goddesses who personify grace and beauty.

visible as the shipman Dymas' daughter,  
a girl the princess' age, and her dear friend.  
In this form grey-eyed Athena said to her:

"How so remiss, and yet thy mother's daughter?  
leaving thy clothes uncared for, Nausikaa,  
when soon thou must have store of marriage linen,  
and put thy minstrelsy in wedding dress!  
Beauty, in these, will make folk admire,  
and bring thy father and gentle mother joy.  
Let us go washing in the shine of morning!  
Beside thee will I drub, so wedding chests  
will brim by evening. Maidenhood must end!  
Have not the noblest born Phaiákians  
paid court to thee, whose birth none can excel?  
Go beg thy sovereign father, even at dawn,  
to have the mule cart and the mules brought round  
to take thy body-linen, gowns and mantles.  
Thou shouldst ride, for it becomes thee more,  
the washing pools are found so far from home."

30

40

On this word she departed, grey-eyed Athena,  
to where the gods have their eternal dwelling—  
as men say—in the fastness of Olympos.  
Never a tremor of wind, or a splash of rain,  
no errant snowflake comes to stain that heaven,  
so calm, so vaporless, the world of light.  
Here, where the gay gods live their days of pleasure,  
the grey-eyed one withdrew, leaving the princess.

50

And now Dawn took her own fair throne, awaking  
the girl in the sweet gown, still charmed by dream.  
Down through the rooms she went to tell her parents,  
whom she found still at home: her mother seated  
near the great hearth among her maids—and twirling  
out of her distaff yarn dyed like the sea—;  
her father at the door, bound for a council  
of princes on petition of the gentry.  
She went up close to him and softly said:

60

"My dear Papà, could you not send the mule cart  
around for me—the gig with pretty wheels?  
I must take all our things and get them washed  
at the river pools; our linen is all soiled.  
And you should wear fresh clothing, going to council  
with counselors and first men of the realm.  
Remember your five sons at home: though two  
are married, we have still three bachelor sprigs;  
they will have none but laundered clothes each time  
they go to the dancing. See what I must think of!"

70

She had no word to say of her own wedding,  
though her keen father saw her blush. Said he:

“No mules would I deny you, child, nor anything.  
Go along, now; the grooms will bring your gig  
with pretty wheels and the cargo box upon it.”

He spoke to the stableman, who soon brought round  
the cart, low-wheeled and nimble;  
harnessed the mules, and backed them in their traces.  
Meanwhile the girl fetched all her soiled apparel  
to bundle in the polished wagon box.

80

Her mother, for their luncheon, packed a hamper  
with picnic fare, and filled a skin of wine,  
and, when the princess had been handed up,  
gave her a golden bottle of olive oil  
for softening girls' bodies, after bathing.

Nausikaa took the reins and raised her whip,  
lashing the mules. What jingling! What a clatter!

But off they went in a ground-covering trot,  
with princess, maids, and laundry drawn behind.

90

By the lower river where the wagon came  
were washing pools, with water all year flowing  
in limpid spillways that no grime withstood.

The girls unhitched the mules, and sent them down  
along the eddying stream to crop sweet grass.

Then sliding out the cart's tail board, they took  
armloads of clothing to the dusky water,  
and trod them in the pits, making a race of it.

All being drubbed, all blemish rinsed away,  
they spread them, piece by piece, along the beach  
whose pebbles had been laundered by the sea;  
then took a dip themselves, and, all anointed  
with golden oil, ate lunch beside the river  
while the bright burning sun dried out their linen.  
Princess and maids delighted in that feast;

100

then, putting off their veils,  
they ran and passed a ball to a rhythmic beat,  
Nausikaa flashing first with her white arms.

So Artemis goes flying after her arrows flown  
down some tremendous valley-side—

110

Taÿgetos, Erymanthos—

chasing the mountain goats or ghosting deer,  
with nymphs of the wild places flanking her;  
and Lêto's<sup>3</sup> heart delights to see them running,  
for, taller by a head than nymphs can be,

<sup>3</sup> Mother of Artemis, goddess of the hunt. Taÿgetos and Erymanthos are mountainous places in Greece.



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the goddess shows more stately, all being beautiful.  
So one could tell the princess from the maids.

Soon it was time, she knew, for riding homeward—  
mules to be harnessed, linen folded smooth—  
but the grey-eyed goddess Athena made her tarry,  
so that Odysseus might behold her beauty  
and win her guidance to the town.

120

It happened  
when the king's daughter threw her ball off line  
and missed, and put it in the whirling stream,—  
at which they all gave such a shout, Odysseus  
awoke and sat up, saying to himself:

“Now, by my life, mankind again! But who?  
Savages, are they, strangers to courtesy?  
Or gentle folk, who know and fear the gods?  
That was a lust cry of tall young girls—  
most like the cry of nymphs, who haunt the peaks,  
and springs of brooks, and inland grassy places.  
Or am I amid people of human speech?  
Up again, man; and let me see for myself.”

130

He pushed aside the bushes, breaking off  
with his great hand a single branch of olive,  
whose leaves might shield him in his nakedness;  
so came out rustling, like a mountain lion,  
rain-drenched, wind-buffed, but in his might at ease,  
with burning eyes—who prowls among the herds  
or flocks, or after game, his hungry belly  
taking him near stout homesteads for his prey.  
Odysseus had this look, in his rough skin  
advancing on the girls with pretty braids;  
and he was driven on by hunger, too.  
Streaked with brine, and swollen, he terrified them,  
so that they fled, this way and that. Only  
Alkínoös' daughter stood her ground, being given  
a bold heart by Athena, and steady knees.

140

She faced him, waiting. And Odysseus came,  
debating inwardly what he should do:  
embrace this beauty's knees in supplication?  
or stand apart, and, using honeyed speech,  
inquire the way to town, and beg some clothing?  
In his swift reckoning, he thought it best  
to trust in words to please her—and keep away;  
he might anger the girl, touching her knees.  
So he began, and let the soft words fall:

150

“Mistress: please: are you divine, or mortal?  
If one of those who dwell in the wide heaven,

160

you are most near to Artemis, I should say—  
 great Zeus's daughter—in your grace and presence.  
 If you are one of earth's inhabitants,  
 how blest your father, and your gentle mother,  
 blest all your kin. I know what happiness  
 must send the warm tears to their eyes, each time  
 they see their wondrous child go to the dancing!  
 But one man's destiny is more than blest—  
 he who prevails, and takes you as his bride.  
 Never have I laid eyes on equal beauty  
 in man or woman. I am hushed indeed. 170  
 So fair, one time, I thought a young palm tree  
 at Delos<sup>4</sup> near the altar of Apollo—  
 I had troops under me when I was there  
 on the sea route that later brought me grief—  
 but that slim palm tree filled my heart with wonder:  
 never came shoot from earth so beautiful.  
 So now, my lady, I stand in awe so great  
 I cannot take your knees. And yet my case is desperate:  
 twenty days, yesterday, in the winedark sea, 180  
 on the ever-lunging swell, under gale winds,  
 getting away from the Island of Ogýgia.  
 And now the terror of Storm has left me stranded  
 upon this shore—with more blows yet to suffer,  
 I must believe, before the gods relent.  
 Mistress, do me a kindness!  
 After much weary toil, I come to you,  
 and you are the first soul I have seen—I know  
 no others here. Direct me to the town,  
 give me a rag that I can throw around me, 190  
 some cloth or wrapping that you brought along.  
 And may the gods accomplish your desire:  
 a home, a husband, and harmonious  
 converse with him—the best thing in the world  
 being a strong house held in serenity  
 where man and wife agree. Woe to their enemies,  
 joy to their friends! But all this they know best.”

Then she of the white arms, Nausikaa, replied:

“Stranger, there is no quirk or evil in you  
 that I can see. You know Zeus metes out fortune 200  
 to good and bad men as it pleases him.  
 Hardship he sent to you, and you must bear it.  
 But now that you have taken refuge here  
 you shall not lack for clothing, or any other  
 comfort due to a poor man in distress.

<sup>4</sup>An island in the Aegean Sea, birthplace of Apollo and sacred to him.

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The town lies this way, and the men are called  
Phaiákians, who own the land and city.  
I am daughter to the Prince Alkínoös,  
by whom the power of our people stands.”  
Turning, she called out to her maids-in-waiting:

210

“Stay with me! Does the sight of a man scare you?  
Or do you take this one for an enemy?  
Why, there’s no fool so brash, and never will be,  
as to bring war or pillage to this coast,  
for we are dear to the immortal gods,  
living here, in the sea that rolls forever,  
distant from other lands and other men.  
No: this man is a castaway, poor fellow;  
we must take care of him. Strangers and beggars  
come from Zeus: a small gift, then, is friendly.  
Give our new guest some food and drink, and take him  
into the river, out of the wind, to bathe.”

220

They stood up now, and called to one another  
to go on back. Quite soon they led Odysseus  
under the river bank, as they were bidden;  
and there laid out a tunic, and a cloak,  
and gave him olive oil in the golden flask.  
“Here,” they said, “go bathe in the flowing water.”  
But heard now from that kingly man, Odysseus:

“Maids,” he said, “keep away a little; let me  
wash the brine from my own back, and rub on  
plenty of oil. It is long since my anointing.  
I take no bath, however, where you can see me—  
naked before young girls with pretty braids.”

230

They left him, then, and went to tell the princess.  
And now Odysseus, dousing in the river,  
scrubbed the coat of brine from back and shoulders  
and rinsed the clot of sea-spume from his hair;  
got himself all rubbed down, from head to foot,  
then he put on the clothes the princess gave him.  
Athena lent a hand, making him seem  
taller, and massive too, with crisping hair  
in curls like petals of wild hyacinth,  
but all red-golden. Think of gold infused  
on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art  
Hephaistos taught him, or Athena: one  
whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished  
beauty over Odysseus’ head and shoulders.  
Then he went down to sit on the sea beach  
in his new splendor. There the girl regarded him,  
and after a time she said to the maids beside her:

240

250

“My gentlewomen, I have a thing to tell you.  
 The Olympian gods cannot be all averse  
 to this man’s coming here among our islanders.  
 Uncouth he seemed, I thought so, too, before;  
 but now he looks like one of heaven’s people.  
 I wish my husband could be fine as he  
 and glad to stay forever on Skhería!  
 But have you given refreshment to our guest?”

At this the maids, all gravely listening, hastened  
 to set out bread and wine before Odysseus,  
 and ah! how ravenously that patient man  
 took food and drink, his long fast at an end.

260

The princess Nausikaa now turned aside  
 to fold her linens; in the pretty cart  
 she stowed them, put the mule team under harness,  
 mounted the driver’s seat, and then looked down  
 to say with cheerful prompting to Odysseus:

“Up with you now, friend; back to town we go;  
 and I shall send you in before my father  
 who is wondrous wise; there in our house with him  
 you’ll meet the noblest of the Phaiákians.

270

You have good sense, I think; here’s how to do it:  
 while we go through the countryside and farmland  
 stay with my maids, behind the wagon, walking  
 briskly enough to follow where I lead.

But near the town—well, there’s a wall with towers  
 around the Isle, and beautiful ship basins  
 right and left of the causeway of approach;  
 seagoing craft are beached beside the road  
 each on its launching ways. The agora,<sup>5</sup>  
 with fieldstone benches bedded in the earth,  
 lies either side Poseidon’s shrine—for there  
 men are at work on pitch-black hulls and rigging,  
 cables and sails, and tapering of oars.

280

The archer’s craft is not for the Phaiákians,  
 but ship designing, modes of oaring cutters  
 in which they love to cross the foaming sea.  
 From these fellows I will have no salty talk,  
 no gossip later. Plenty are insolent.

290

And some seadog might say, after we passed:  
 ‘Who is this handsome stranger trailing Nausikaa?  
 Where did she find him? Will he be her husband?  
 Or is she being hospitable to some rover  
 come off his ship from lands across the sea—  
 there being no lands nearer. A god, maybe?’

<sup>5</sup>Public meeting place.

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a god from heaven, the answer to her prayer,  
 descending now—to make her his forever?  
 Better, if she's roamed and found a husband  
 somewhere else: none of our own will suit her,  
 though many come to court her, and those the best.<sup>7</sup>  
 This is the way they might make light of me.  
 And I myself should hold it shame  
 for any girl to flout her own dear parents,  
 taking up with a man, before her marriage.

300

Note well, now, what I say, friend, and your chances  
 are excellent for safe conduct from my father.  
 You'll find black poplars in a roadside park  
 around a meadow and fountain—all Athena's—  
 but Father has a garden in the place—  
 this within earshot of the city wall.

310

Go in there and sit down, giving us time  
 to pass through town and reach my father's house.  
 And when you can imagine we're at home,  
 then take the road into the city, asking  
 directions to the palace of Alkínoös.

You'll find it easily: any small boy  
 can take you there; no family has a mansion  
 half so grand as he does, being king.

As soon as you are safe inside, cross over  
 and go straight through into the mégaron<sup>6</sup>  
 to find my mother. She'll be there in firelight  
 before a column, with her maids in shadow,  
 spinning a wool dyed richly as the sea.

320

My father's great chair faces the fire, too;  
 there like a god he sits and takes his wine.  
 Go past him; cast yourself before my mother,  
 embrace her knees—and you may wake up soon  
 at home rejoicing, though your home be far.

On Mother's feeling much depends; if she  
 looks on you kindly, you shall see your friends  
 under your own roof in your father's country."

330

At this she raised her glistening whip, lashing  
 the team into a run; they left the river  
 cantering beautifully, then trotted smartly.  
 But then she reined them in, and spared the whip,  
 so that her maids could follow with Odysseus.  
 The sun was going down when they went by  
 Athena's grove. Here, then, Odysseus rested,  
 and lifted up his prayer to Zeus's daughter:

340

<sup>6</sup> The great hall of the house.

“Hear me, unwearied child of royal Zeus!  
O listen to me now—thou so aloof  
while the Earthshaker wrecked and battered me.  
May I find love and mercy among these people.”

He prayed for that, and Pallas Athena heard him—  
although in deference to her father’s brother<sup>7</sup>  
she would not show her true form to Odysseus,  
at whom Poseidon smoldered on  
until the kingly man came home to his own shore.

## BOOK SEVEN: GARDENS AND FIRELIGHT

As Lord Odysseus prayed there in the grove  
the girl rode on, behind her strapping team,  
and came late to the mansion of her father,  
where she reined in at the courtyard gate. Her brothers  
awaited her like tall gods in the court,  
circling to lead the mules away and carry  
the laundered things inside. But she withdrew  
to her own bedroom, where a fire soon shone,  
kindled by her old nurse, Eurymedousa.  
Years ago, from a raid on the continent,  
the rolling ships had brought this woman over  
to be Alkínoös’ share—fit spoil for him  
whose realm hung on his word as on a god’s.  
And she had schooled the princess, Nausikaa,  
whose fire she tended now, making her supper.

10

Odysseus, when the time had passed, arose  
and turned into the city. But Athena  
poured a sea fog around him as he went—  
her love’s expedient, that no jeering sailor  
should halt the man or challenge him for luck.  
Instead, as he set foot in the pleasant city,  
the grey-eyed goddess came to him, in figure  
a small girl child, hugging a water jug.

20

Confronted by her, Lord Odysseus asked:

“Little one, could you take me to the house  
of that Alkínoös, king among these people?  
You see, I am a poor old stranger here;  
my home is far away; here there is no one  
known to me, in countryside or city.”

<sup>7</sup>Poseidon, brother of Athena’s father, Zeus.

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The grey-eyed goddess Athena replied to him:

30

“Oh, yes, good grandfer, sir, I know, I’ll show you  
the house you mean; it is quite near my father’s.  
But come now, hush, like this, and follow me.  
You must not stare at people, or be inquisitive.  
They do not care for strangers in this neighborhood;  
a foreign man will get no welcome here.  
The only things they trust are the racing ships  
Poseidon gave, to sail the deep blue sea  
like white wings in the sky, or a flashing thought.”

Pallas Athena turned like the wind, running  
ahead of him, and he followed in her footsteps.  
And no seafaring men of Phaiákia  
perceived Odysseus passing through their town:  
the awesome one in pigtails barred their sight  
with folds of sacred mist. And yet Odysseus  
gazed out marvelling at the ships and harbors,  
public squares, and ramparts towering up  
with pointed palisades along the top.  
When they were near the mansion of the king,  
grey-eyed Athena in the child cried out:

40

“Here it is, grandfer, sir—that mansion house  
you asked to see. You’ll find our king and queen  
at supper, but you must not be dismayed;  
go in to them. A cheerful man does best  
in every enterprise—even a stranger.  
You’ll see our lady just inside the hall—  
her name is Arêtê; her grandfather  
was our good king Alkínoös’s father—  
Nausithoös by name, son of Poseidon  
and Periboia. That was a great beauty,  
the daughter of Eurymedon, commander  
of the Gigantês<sup>1</sup> in the olden days,  
who led those wild things to their doom and his.  
Poseidon then made love to Periboia,  
and she bore Nausíthoös, Phaiákia’s lord,  
whose sons in turn were Rhêxênor and Alkínoös.  
Rhêxênor had no sons; even as a bridegroom  
he fell before the silver bow of Apollo,  
his only child a daughter, Arêtê.  
When she grew up, Alkínoös married her  
and holds her dear. No lady in the world,  
no other mistress of a man’s household,  
is honored as our mistress is, and loved,  
by her own children, by Alkínoös,

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<sup>1</sup>The Giants, enormous semihuman beings, offspring of Ge, an ancient earth goddess.

and by the people. When she walks the town  
 they murmur and gaze, as though she were a goddess.  
 No grace or wisdom fails in her; indeed  
 just men in quarrels come to her for equity.  
 Supposing, then, she looks upon you kindly,  
 the chances are that you shall see your friends  
 under your own roof, in your father's country."

80

At this the grey-eyed goddess Athena left him  
 and left that comely land, going over sea  
 to Marathon, to the wide roadways of Athens  
 and her retreat in the stronghold of Erekhtheus.<sup>2</sup>  
 Odysseus, now alone before the palace,  
 meditated a long time before crossing  
 the brazen threshold of the great courtyard.  
 High rooms he saw ahead, airy and luminous  
 as though with lusters of the sun and moon,  
 bronze-paneled walls, at several distances,  
 making a vista, with an azure molding  
 of lapis lazuli.<sup>3</sup> The doors were golden  
 guardians of the great room. Shining bronze  
 plated the wide door sill; the posts and lintel  
 were silver upon silver; golden handles  
 curved on the doors, and golden, too, and silver  
 were sculptured hounds, flanking the entrance way,  
 cast by the skill and ardor of Hephaistos  
 to guard the prince Alkínoös's house—  
 undying dogs that never could grow old.  
 Through all the rooms, as far as he could see,  
 tall chairs were placed around the walls, and strewn  
 with fine embroidered stuff made by the women.  
 Here were enthroned the leaders of Phaiákia  
 drinking and dining, with abundant fare.  
 Here, too, were boys of gold on pedestals  
 holding aloft bright torches of pitch pine  
 to light the great rooms, and the night-time feasting.  
 And fifty maids-in-waiting of the household  
 sat by the round mill, grinding yellow corn,  
 or wove upon their looms, or twirled their distaffs,  
 flickering like the leaves of a poplar tree;  
 while drops of oil glistened on linen weft.  
 Skillful as were the men of Phaiákia  
 in ship handling at sea, so were these women  
 skilled at the loom, having this lovely craft  
 and artistry as talents from Athena.

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<sup>2</sup>Legendary ruler of Athens, Athena's city. Marathon (several centuries after Homer's time the site of a great Greek victory over the Persians) was a plain near Athens, cherished by Athena.

<sup>3</sup>Fine blue stone.



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To left and right, outside, he saw an orchard  
 closed by a pale—four spacious acres planted  
 with trees in bloom or weighted down for picking:  
 pear trees, pomegranates, brilliant apples,  
 luscious figs, and olives ripe and dark.

120

Fruit never failed upon these trees: winter  
 and summer time they bore, for through the year  
 the breathing Westwind ripened all in turn—  
 so one pear came to prime, and then another,  
 and so with apples, figs, and the vine's fruit  
 empurpled in the royal vineyard there.

Currants were dried at one end, on a platform  
 bare to the sun, beyond the vintage arbors  
 and vats the vintners trod; while near at hand  
 were new grapes barely formed as the green bloom fell,  
 or half-ripe clusters, faintly coloring.

130

After the vines came rows of vegetables  
 of all the kinds that flourish in every season,  
 and through the garden plots and orchard ran  
 channels from one clear fountain, while another  
 gushed through a pipe under the courtyard entrance  
 to serve the house and all who came for water.

140

These were the gifts of heaven to Alkínoös.

Odysseus, who had borne the barren sea,  
 stood in the gateway and surveyed this bounty.  
 He gazed his fill, then swiftly he went in.  
 The lords and nobles of Phaiákia  
 were tipping wine to the wakeful god, to Hermês—  
 a last libation before going to bed—  
 but down the hall Odysseus went unseen,  
 still in the cloud Athena cloaked him in,  
 until he reached Arêtê, and the king.  
 He threw his great hands round Arêtê's knees,  
 whereon the sacred mist curled back;  
 they saw him; and the diners hushed amazed  
 to see an unknown man inside the palace.  
 Under their eyes Odysseus made his plea:

150

“Arêtê, admirable Rhêxênor's daughter,  
 here is a man bruised by adversity, thrown  
 upon your mercy and the king your husband's,  
 begging indulgence of this company—  
 may the gods' blessing rest on them! May life  
 be kind to all! Let each one leave his children  
 every good thing this realm confers upon him!  
 But grant me passage to my father land.  
 My home and friends lie far. My life is pain.”

160

He moved, then, toward the fire, and sat him down  
amid the ashes. No one stirred or spoke  
until Ekhenêos broke the spell—an old man,  
eldest of the Phaiákians, an oracle,  
versed in the laws and manners of old time.  
He rose among them now and spoke out kindly:

170

“Alkínoös, this will not pass for courtesy:  
a guest abased in ashes at our hearth?  
Everyone here awaits your word; so come, then,  
lift the man up; give him a seat of honor,  
a silver-studded chair. Then tell the stewards  
we’ll have another wine bowl for libation  
to Zeus, lord of the lightning—advocate  
of honorable petitioners. And supper  
may be supplied our friend by the larder mistress.”

Alkínoös, calm in power, heard him out,  
then took the great adventurer by the hand  
and led him from the fire. Nearest his throne  
the son whom he loved best, Laódamas,  
had long held place; now the king bade him rise  
and gave his shining chair to Lord Odysseus.  
A serving maid poured water for his hands  
from a gold pitcher into a silver bowl,  
and spread a polished table at his side;  
the mistress of provisions came with bread  
and other victuals, generous with her store.  
So Lord Odysseus drank, and tasted supper.  
Seeing this done, the king in majesty  
said to his squire:

180

190

“A fresh bowl, Pontónoös;  
we make libation to the lord of lightning,  
who seconds honorable petitioners.”

Mixing the honey-hearted wine, Pontónoös  
went on his rounds and poured fresh cups for all,  
whereof when all had spilt they drank their fill.  
Alkínoös then spoke to the company:

“My lords and leaders of Phaiákia:  
hear now, all that my heart would have me say.  
Our banquet’s ended, so you may retire;  
but let our seniors gather in the morning  
to give this guest a festal day, and make  
fair offerings to the gods. In due course we  
shall put our minds upon the means at hand  
to take him safely, comfortably, well  
and happily, with speed, to his own country,

200

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distant though it may lie. And may no trouble  
 come to him here or on the way; his fate  
 he shall pay out at home, even as the Spinners<sup>4</sup>  
 spun for him on the day his mother bore him.  
 If, as may be, he is some god, come down  
 from heaven's height, the gods are working strangely:  
 until now, they have shown themselves in glory  
 only after great hekatombs—those figures  
 banqueting at our side, throned like ourselves.  
 Or if some traveller met them when alone  
 they bore no least disguise; we are their kin; Gigantês,  
 Kyklopês, rank no nearer gods than we.”

210

220

Odysseus' wits were ready, and he replied:

“Alkínoös, you may set your mind at rest.  
 Body and birth, a most unlikely god  
 am I, being all of earth and mortal nature.  
 I should say, rather, I am like those men  
 who suffer the worst trials that you know,  
 and miseries greater yet, as I might tell you—  
 hundreds; indeed the gods could send no more.  
 You will indulge me if I finish dinner—?  
 grieved though I am to say it. There's no part  
 of man more like a dog than brazen Belly,  
 crying to be remembered—and it must be—  
 when we are mortal weary and sick at heart;  
 and that is my condition. Yet my hunger  
 drives me to take this food, and think no more  
 of my afflictions. Belly must be filled.  
 Be equally impelled, my lords, tomorrow  
 to berth me in a ship and send me home!  
 Rough years I've had; now may I see once more  
 my hall, my lands, my people before I die!”

230

240

Now all who heard cried out assent to this:  
 the guest had spoken well; he must have passage.  
 Then tipping wine they drank their thirst away,  
 and one by one went homeward for the night.  
 So Lord Odysseus kept his place alone  
 with Arêtê and the king Alkínoös  
 beside him, while the maids went to and fro  
 clearing away the wine cups and the tables.  
 Presently the ivory-skinned lady  
 turned to him—for she knew his cloak and tunic  
 to be her own fine work, done with her maids—  
 and arrowy came her words upon the air:

250

<sup>4</sup>The Fates, mythological women who determined the span of a human life by spinning, measuring, and cutting the thread symbolic of it.

“Friend, I, for one, have certain questions for you.  
Who are you, and who has given you this clothing?  
Did you not say you wandered here by sea?”

The great tactician carefully replied:

“Ah, majesty, what labor it would be  
to go through the whole story! All my years  
of misadventures, given by those on high!  
But this you ask about is quickly told: 260  
in mid-ocean lies Ogýgia, the island  
haunt of Kalypso, Atlas’ guileful daughter,  
a lovely goddess and a dangerous one.  
No one, no god or man, consorts with her;  
but supernatural power brought me there  
to be her solitary guest: for Zeus  
let fly with his bright bolt and split my ship,  
rolling me over in the winedark sea.  
There all my shipmates, friends were drowned, while I  
hung on the keelboard of the wreck and drifted 270  
nine full days. Then in the dead of night  
the gods brought me ashore upon Ogýgia  
into her hands. The enchantress in her beauty  
fed and caressed me, promised me I should be  
immortal, youthful, all the days to come;  
but in my heart I never gave consent  
though seven years detained. Immortal clothing  
I had from her, and kept it wet with tears.  
Then came the eighth year on the wheel of heaven  
and word to her from Zeus, or a change of heart, 280  
so that she now commanded me to sail,  
sending me out to sea on a craft I made  
with timber and tools of hers. She gave me stores,  
victuals and wine, a cloak divinely woven,  
and made a warm land breeze come up astern.  
Seventeen days I sailed in the open water  
before I saw your country’s shore, a shadow  
upon the sea rim. Then my heart rejoiced—  
pitiable as I am! For blows aplenty  
awaited me from the god who shakes the earth. 290  
Cross gales he blew, making me lose my bearings,  
and heaved up seas beyond imagination—  
huge and foundering seas. All I could do  
was hold hard, groaning under every shock,  
until my craft broke up in the hurricane.  
I kept afloat and swam your sea, or drifted,  
taken by wind and current to this coast  
where I went in on big swells running landward.  
But cliffs and rock shoals made that place forbidding,

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so I turned back, swimming off shore, and came  
 in the end to a river, to auspicious water,  
 with smooth beach and a rise that broke the wind.  
 I lay there where I fell till strength returned.  
 Then sacred night came on, and I went inland  
 to high ground and a leaf bed in a thicket.  
 Heaven sent slumber in an endless tide  
 submerging my sad heart among the leaves.  
 That night and next day's dawn and noon I slept;  
 the sun went west; and then sweet sleep unbound me,  
 when I became aware of maids—your daughter's—  
 playing along the beach; the princess, too,  
 most beautiful. I prayed her to assist me,  
 and her good sense was perfect; one could hope  
 for no behavior like it from the young,  
 thoughtless as they most often are. But she  
 gave me good provender and good red wine,  
 a river bath, and finally this clothing.  
 There is the bitter tale. These are the facts."

300

310

But in reply Alkínoös observed:

"Friend, my child's good judgment failed in this—  
 not to have brought you in her company home.  
 Once you approached her, you became her charge."

320

To this Odysseus tactfully replied:

"Sir, as to that, you should not blame the princess.  
 She did tell me to follow with her maids,  
 but I would not. I felt abashed, and feared  
 the sight would somehow ruffle or offend you.  
 All of us on this earth are plagued by jealousy."

Alkínoös' answer was a declaration:

"Friend, I am not a man for trivial anger:  
 better a sense of measure in everything.  
 No anger here. I say that if it should please  
 our father Zeus, Athena, and Apollo—  
 seeing the man you are, seeing your thoughts  
 are my own thoughts—my daughter should be yours  
 and you my son-in-law, if you remained.  
 A home, lands, riches you should have from me  
 if you could be contented here. If not,  
 by Father Zeus, let none of our men hold you!  
 On the contrary, I can assure you now  
 of passage late tomorrow: while you sleep  
 my men will row you through the tranquil night  
 to your own land and home or where you please.

330

340

It may be, even, far beyond Euboia—  
 called most remote by seamen of our isle  
 who landed there, conveying Rhadamanthos  
 when he sought Títyos, the son of Gaia.<sup>5</sup>  
 They put about, with neither pause nor rest,  
 and entered their home port the selfsame day.  
 But this you, too, will see: what ships I have,  
 how my young oarsmen send the foam a-scudding!”

350

Now joy welled up in the patient Lord Odysseus  
 who said devoutly in the warmest tones:

“O Father Zeus, let all this be fulfilled  
 as spoken by Alkínoös! Earth of harvests  
 remember him! Return me to my homeland!”

In this manner they conversed with one another;  
 but the great lady called her maids, and sent them  
 to make a kingly bed, with purple rugs  
 piled up, and sheets outspread, and fleecy  
 coverlets, in an eastern colonnade.

360

The girls went out with torches in their hands,  
 swift at their work of bedmaking; returning  
 they whispered at the lord Odysseus’ shoulder:

“Sir, you may come; your bed has been prepared.”

How welcome the word “bed” came to his ears!  
 Now, then, Odysseus laid him down and slept  
 in luxury under the Porch of Morning,  
 while in his inner chamber Alkínoös  
 retired to rest where his dear consort lay.

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## BOOK EIGHT: THE SONGS OF THE HARPER

Under the opening fingers of the dawn  
 Alkínoös, the sacred prince, arose,  
 and then arose Odysseus, raider of cities.  
 As the king willed, they went down by the shipways  
 to the assembly ground of the Phaiákians.  
 Side by side the two men took their ease there  
 on smooth stone benches. Meanwhile Pallas Athena  
 roamed through the byways of the town, contriving  
 Odysseus’ voyage home—in voice and feature

<sup>5</sup>The lines “It may be . . . Gaia” are somewhat obscure, since Rhadamanthos is pictured in Book IV as dwelling in Elysion, and Títyos, in Book XI, is punished in Hades. The main point is clear, though: Alkínoös is boasting of the nautical range and speed of his seafaring people. Euboia is an island east of Greece. Gaia is another name for Ge, the earth deity.

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the crier of the king Alkínoös  
who stopped and passed the word to every man:

10

“Phaiákian lords and counselors, this way!  
Come to assembly: learn about the stranger,  
the new guest at the palace of Alkínoös—  
a man the sea drove, but a comely man;  
the gods’ own light is on him.”

She aroused them,  
and soon the assembly ground and seats were filled  
with curious men, a throng who peered and saw  
the master mind of war, Laërtês’ son.

Athena now poured out her grace upon him,  
head and shoulders, height and mass—a splendor  
awesome to the eyes of the Phaiákians;  
she put him in a fettle to win the day,  
mastering every trial they set to test him.  
When all the crowd sat marshalled, quieted,  
Alkínoös addressed the full assembly:

20

“Hear me, lords and captains of the Phaiákians!  
Hear what my heart would have me say!  
Our guest and new friend—nameless to me still—  
comes to my house after long wandering  
in Dawn lands, or among the Sunset races.  
Now he appeals to me for conveyance home.  
As in the past, therefore, let us provide  
passage, and quickly, for no guest of mine  
languishes here for lack of it. Look to it:  
get a black ship afloat on the noble sea,  
and pick our fastest sailer; draft a crew  
of two and fifty from our younger townsmen—  
men who have made their names at sea. Loop oars  
well to your tholepins,<sup>1</sup> lads, then leave the ship,  
come to our house, fall to, and take your supper:  
we’ll furnish out a feast for every crewman.  
These are your orders. As for my older peers  
and princes of the realm, let them foregather  
in festival for our friend in my great hall;  
and let no man refuse. Call in our minstrel,  
Demódokos, whom God made lord of song,  
heart-easing, sing upon what theme he will.”

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He turned, led the procession, and those princes  
followed, while his herald sought the minstrel.  
Young oarsmen from the assembly chose a crew  
of two and fifty, as the king commanded,

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<sup>1</sup>Pegs on the side of a boat, used as oarlocks.

and these filed off along the waterside  
to where the ship lay, poised above open water.  
They hauled the black hull down to ride the sea,  
rigging a mast and spar in the black ship,  
with oars at trail from corded rawhide, all  
seamanly; then tried the white sail, hoisting,  
and moored her off the beach. Then going ashore  
the crew went up to the great house of Alkínoös.

60

Here the enclosures, entrance ways, and rooms  
were filled with men, young men and old, for whom  
Alkínoös had put twelve sheep to sacrifice,  
eight tuskers<sup>2</sup> and a pair of shambling oxen.  
These, now, they flayed and dressed to make their banquet.

The crier soon came, leading that man of song  
whom the Muse cherished; by her gift he knew  
the good of life, and evil—  
for she who lent him sweetness made him blind.<sup>3</sup>  
Pontónoös fixed a studded chair for him  
hard by a pillar amid the banqueters,  
hanging the taut harp from a peg above him,  
and guided up his hands upon the strings;  
placed a bread basket at his side, and poured  
wine in a cup, that he might drink his fill.  
Now each man's hand went out upon the banquet.

70

In time, when hunger and thirst were turned away,  
the Muse brought to the minstrel's mind a song  
of heroes whose great fame rang under heaven:  
the clash between Odysseus and Akhilleus,  
how one time they contended<sup>4</sup> at the godfeast  
raging, and the marshal, Agamémnon,  
felt inward joy over his captains' quarrel;  
for such had been foretold him by Apollo  
at Pytho<sup>5</sup>—hallowed height—when the Akhaian  
crossed that portal of rock to ask a sign—  
in the old days when grim war lay ahead  
for Trojans and Danaans, by God's will.  
So ran the tale the minstrel sang. Odysseus  
with massive hand drew his rich mantle down  
over his brow, cloaking his face with it,  
to make the Phaiákians miss the secret tears  
that started to his eyes. How skillfully  
he dried them when the song came to a pause!

80

90

<sup>2</sup>Animals with tusks, such as boars.

<sup>3</sup>According to tradition, Homer himself was blind.

<sup>4</sup>This incident probably took place before the action of the *Iliad*.

<sup>5</sup>The shrine of Apollo at Delphi, on Mount Parnassos (Parnassus); the god uttered oracular pronouncements there.



threw back his mantle, spilt his gout of wine!  
 But soon the minstrel plucked his note once more  
 to please the Phaiákian lords, who loved the song;  
 then in his cloak Odysseus wept again.  
 His tears flowed in the mantle unperceived:  
 only Alkínoös, at his elbow, saw them,  
 and caught the low groan in the man's breathing.  
 At once he spoke to all the seafolk round him:

100

"Hear me, lords and captains of the Phaiákians.  
 Our meat is shared, our hearts are full of pleasure  
 from the clear harp tone that accords with feasting;  
 now for the field and track; we shall have trials  
 in the pentathlon.<sup>6</sup> Let our guest go home  
 and tell his friends what champions we are  
 at boxing, wrestling, broadjump and foot racing."

On this he led the way and all went after.  
 The crier unslung and pegged the shining harp  
 and, taking Demódokos's hand,  
 led him along with all the rest—Phaiákian  
 peers, gay amateurs of the great games.  
 They gained the common, where a crowd was forming,  
 and many a young athlete now came forward  
 with seaside names like Tipmast, Tiderace, Sparwood,  
 Hullman, Sternman, Beacher and Pullerman,  
 Bluewater, Shearwater, Runningwake, Boardalee,  
 Seabelt, son of Grandfleet Shipwrightson;  
 Seareach stepped up, son of the Launching Master,  
 rugged as Arês,<sup>7</sup> bane of men; his build  
 excelled all but the Prince Laódamas;  
 and Laódamas made entry with his brothers,  
 Halios and Klytóneus, sons of the king.  
 The runners, first, must have their quarter mile.  
 All lined up tense; then Go! and down the track  
 they raised the dust in a flying bunch, strung out  
 longer and longer behind Prince Klytóneus.  
 By just so far as a mule team, breaking ground,  
 will distance oxen, he left all behind  
 and came up to the crowd, an easy winner.  
 Then they made room for wrestling—grinding bouts  
 that Seareach won, pinning the strongest men;  
 then the broadjump; first place went to Seabelt;  
 Sparwood gave the discus the mightiest fling,  
 and Prince Laódamas outboxed them all.

110

120

130

Now it was he, the son of Alkínoös,  
 who said when they had run through these diversions:

<sup>6</sup>An athletic contest consisting of five events.

<sup>7</sup>God of war.

“Look here, friends, we ought to ask the stranger  
if he competes in something. He’s no cripple;  
look at his leg muscles and his forearms.  
Neck like a bollard;<sup>8</sup> strong as a bull, he seems;  
and not old, though he may have gone stale under  
the rough times he had. Nothing like the sea  
for wearing out the toughest man alive.” 140

Then Seareach took him up at once, and said:

“Laódamas, you’re right, by all the powers.  
Go up to him, yourself, and put the question.”

At this, Alkínoös’ tall son advanced  
to the center ground, and there addressed Odysseus: 150

“Friend, Excellency, come join our competition,  
if you are practiced, as you seem to be.  
While a man lives he wins no greater honor  
than footwork and the skill of hands can bring him.  
Enter our games, then; ease your heart of trouble.  
Your journey home is not far off, remember;  
the ship is launched, the crew all primed for sea.”

Odysseus, canniest of men, replied:

“Laódamas, why do you young chaps challenge me?  
I have more on my mind than track and field—  
hard days, and many, have I seen, and suffered.  
I sit here at your field meet, yes; but only  
as one who begs your king to send him home.” 160

Now Seareach put his word in, and contentiously:

“The reason being, as I see it, friend,  
you never learned a sport, and have no skill  
in any of the contests of fighting men.  
You must have been the skipper of some tramp  
that crawled from one port to the next, jam full  
of chaffering hands: a tallier of cargoes,  
itching for gold—not, by your looks, an athlete.” 170

Odysseus frowned, and eyed him coldly, saying:

“That was uncalled for, friend, you talk like a fool.  
The gods deal out no gift, this one or any—  
birth, brains, or speech—to every man alike.  
In looks a man may be a shade, a specter,  
and yet be master of speech so crowned with beauty  
that people gaze at him with pleasure. Courteous,

<sup>8</sup>A sturdy post to which a ship’s ropes were tied.

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sure of himself, he can command assemblies,  
 and when he comes to town, the crowds gather. 180  
 A handsome man, contrariwise, may lack  
 grace and good sense in everything he says.  
 You now, for instance, with your fine physique—  
 a god's, indeed—you have an empty noddle.<sup>9</sup>  
 I find my heart inside my ribs aroused  
 by your impertinence. I am no stranger  
 to contests, as you fancy. I rated well  
 when I could count on youth and my two hands.  
 Now pain has cramped me, and my years of combat 190  
 hacking through ranks in war, and the bitter sea.  
 Aye. Even so I'll give your games a trial.  
 You spoke heart-wounding words. You shall be answered."

He leapt out, cloaked as he was, and picked a discus,  
 a rounded stone, more ponderous than those  
 already used by the Phaiákian throwers,  
 and, whirling, let it fly from his great hand  
 with a low hum. The crowd went flat on the ground—  
 all those oar-pulling, seafaring Phaiákians—  
 under the rushing noise. The spinning disk 200  
 soared out, light as a bird, beyond all others.  
 Disguised now as a Phaiákian, Athena  
 staked it and called out:

"Even a blind man,  
 friend, could judge this, finding with his fingers  
 one discus, quite alone, beyond the cluster.  
 Congratulations; this event is yours;  
 not a man here can beat you or come near you."

That was a cheering hail, Odysseus thought,  
 seeing one friend there on the emulous field,  
 so, in relief, he turned among the Phaiákians 210  
 and said:

"Now come alongside that one, lads.  
 The next I'll send as far, I think, or farther.  
 Anyone else on edge for competition  
 try me now. By heaven, you angered me.  
 Racing, wrestling, boxing—I bar nothing  
 with any man except Laódamas,  
 for he's my host. Who quarrels with his host?  
 Only a madman—or no man at all—  
 would challenge his protector among strangers,  
 cutting the ground away under his feet. 220  
 Here are no others I will not engage,  
 none but I hope to know what he is made of.

<sup>9</sup>Head.

Inept at combat, am I? Not entirely.  
 Give me a smooth bow; I can handle it,  
 and I might well be first to hit my man  
 amid a swarm of enemies, though archers  
 in company around me drew together.  
 Philoktêtês<sup>10</sup> alone, at Troy, when we  
 Akhaians took the bow, used to outshoot me.  
 Of men who now eat bread upon the earth 230  
 I hold myself the best hand with a bow—  
 conceding mastery to the men of old,  
 Heraklês, or Eurýtos<sup>11</sup> of Oikhalía,  
 heroes who vied with gods in bowmanship.  
 Eurýtos came to grief, it's true; old age  
 never crept over him in his long hall;  
 Apollo took his challenge ill, and killed him.  
 What then, the spear? I'll plant it like an arrow.  
 Only in sprinting, I'm afraid, I may  
 be passed by someone. Roll of the sea waves 240  
 wearied me, and the victuals in my ship  
 ran low; my legs are flabby."

When he finished,  
 the rest were silent, but Alkínoös answered:

"Friend, we take your challenge in good part,  
 for this man angered and affronted you  
 here at our peaceful games. You'd have us note  
 the prowess that is in you, and so clearly,  
 no man of sense would ever cry it down!  
 Come, turn your mind, now, on a thing to tell  
 among your peers when you are home again, 250  
 dining in hall, beside your wife and children:  
 I mean our prowess, as you may remember it,  
 for we, too, have our skills, given by Zeus,  
 and practiced from our father's time to this—  
 not in the boxing ring nor the palestra<sup>12</sup>  
 conspicuous, but in racing, land or sea;  
 and all our days we set great store by feasting,  
 harpers, and the grace of dancing choirs,  
 changes of dress, warm baths, and downy beds.  
 O master dancers of the Phaiákians! 260  
 Perform now: let our guest on his return  
 tell his companions we excel the world  
 in dance and song, as in our ships and running.

<sup>10</sup>Philoktêtês had inherited the magical bow of the fabled hero Heraklês (Hercules); a version of his story is dramatized in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*.

<sup>11</sup>Grandson of Apollo, and Heraklês' instructor in bowmanship. He was killed in a competition with Apollo, god of archery. Eurýtos' bow descended to Odysseus.

<sup>12</sup>A public athletics ground.

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Someone go find the gittern harp in hall  
and bring it quickly to Demódokos!"

At the serene king's word, a squire ran  
to bring the polished harp out of the palace,  
and place was given to nine referees—  
peers of the realm, masters of ceremony—  
who cleared a space and smoothed a dancing floor. 270  
The squire brought down, and gave Demódokos,  
the clear-toned harp; and centering on the minstrel  
magical young dancers formed a circle  
with a light beat, and stamp of feet. Beholding,  
Odysseus marvelled at the flashing ring.

Now to his harp the blinded minstrel sang  
of Arês' dalliance with Aphroditê:  
how hidden in Hephaistos' <sup>13</sup> house they played  
at love together, and the gifts of Arês,  
dishonoring Hephaistos' bed—and how 280  
the word that wounds the heart came to the master  
from Hêlios, <sup>14</sup> who had seen the two embrace;  
and when he learned it, Lord Hephaistos went  
with baleful calculation to his forge.  
There mightily he armed his anvil block  
and hammered out a chain, whose tempered links  
could not be sprung or bent; he meant that they should hold.  
Those shackles fashioned, hot in wrath Hephaistos  
climbed to the bower and the bed of love,  
pooled all his net of chain around the bed posts 290  
and swung it from the rafters overhead—  
light as a cobweb even gods in bliss  
could not perceive, so wonderful his cunning.  
Seeing his bed now made a snare, he feigned  
a journey to the trim stronghold of Lemnos, <sup>15</sup>  
the dearest of earth's towns to him. And Arês?  
Ah, golden Arês' watch had its reward  
when he beheld the great smith leaving home.  
How promptly to the famous door he came,  
intent on pleasure with sweet Kythereia! <sup>16</sup> 300  
She, who had left her father's side but now,  
sat in her chamber when her lover entered;  
and tenderly he pressed her hand and said:

<sup>13</sup> The lame god of fire and metalworking, husband of Aphroditê.

<sup>14</sup> The sun god.

<sup>15</sup> An island in the Aegean, center of the worship of Hephaistos; it was there that he fell after Zeus, during a fit of anger, threw him out of heaven.

<sup>16</sup> Aphroditê. Also spelled *Cytherea*.

“Come and lie down, my darling, and be happy!  
Hephaistos is no longer here, but gone  
to see his grunting Sintian<sup>17</sup> friends on Lemnos.”

As she, too, thought repose would be most welcome,  
the pair went in to bed—into a shower  
of clever chains, the netting of Hephaistos.  
So trussed, they could not move apart, nor rise,  
at last they knew there could be no escape,  
they were to see the glorious cripple now—  
for Hêlios had spied for him, and told him;  
so he turned back, this side of Lemnos Isle,  
sick at heart, making his way homeward.  
Now in the doorway of the room he stood  
while deadly rage took hold of him; his voice,  
hoarse and terrible, reached all the gods:

310

“O Father Zeus, O gods in bliss forever,  
here is indecorous entertainment for you,  
Aphroditê, Zeus’s daughter,  
caught in the act, cheating me, her cripple,  
with Arês—devastating Arês.  
Cleanlimbed beauty is her joy, not these  
bandylegs I came into the world with:  
no one to blame but the two gods<sup>18</sup> who bred me!  
Come see this pair entwining here  
in my own bed! How hot it makes me burn!  
I think they may not care to lie much longer,  
pressing on one another, passionate lovers;  
they’ll have enough of bed together soon.  
And yet the chain that bagged them holds them down  
till Father sends me back my wedding gifts—  
all that I poured out for his damned pigeon,  
so lovely, and so wanton.”

320

330

All the others  
were crowding in, now, to the brazen house—  
Poseidon who embraces earth, and Hermês  
the runner, and Apollo, lord of Distance.  
The goddesses stayed home for shame; but these  
munificences ranged there in the doorway,  
and irrepressible among them all  
arose the laughter of the happy gods.  
Gazing hard at Hephaistos’ handiwork  
the gods in turn remarked among themselves:

340

“No dash in adultery now.”

<sup>17</sup>The Sintians, of Lemnos, had a reputation for crudity.

<sup>18</sup>Zeus and Hera.

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“The tortoise tags the hare—  
Hephaistos catches Arês—and Arês outran the wind.”

“The lame god’s craft has pinned him. Now shall he  
pay what is due from gods taken in cuckoldry.”

They made these improving remarks to one another,  
but Apollo leaned aside to say to Hermês:

350

“Son of Zeus, beneficent Wayfinder,  
would you accept a coverlet of chain, if only  
you lay by Aphroditê’s golden side?”

To this the Wayfinder replied, shining:

“Would I not, though, Apollo of distances!  
Wrap me in chains three times the weight of these,  
come goddesses and gods to see the fun;  
only let me lie beside the pale-golden one!”

The gods gave way again to peals of laughter,  
all but Poseidon, and he never smiled,  
but urged Hephaistos to unpinion Arês,  
saying emphatically, in a loud voice:

360

“Free him:  
you will be paid, I swear; ask what you will;  
he pays up every jot the gods decree.”

To this the Great Gamelegs replied:

“Poseidon,  
lord of the earth-surrounding sea, I should not  
swear to a scoundrel’s honor. What have I  
as surety from you, if Arês leaves me  
empty-handed, with my empty chain?”

The Earth-shaker for answer urged again:

370

“Hephaistos, let us grant he goes, and leaves  
the fine unpaid; I swear, then, I shall pay it.”

Then said the Great Gamelegs at last:

“No more:  
you offer terms I cannot well refuse.”

And down the strong god bent to set them free,  
till disencumbered of their bond, the chain,  
the lovers leapt away—he into Thrace,  
while Aphroditê, laughter’s darling, fled

to Kypros Isle and Paphos,<sup>19</sup> to her meadow  
 and altar dim with incense. There the Graces  
 bathed and anointed her with golden oil—  
 a bloom that clings upon immortal flesh alone—  
 and let her folds of mantle fall in glory.

380

So ran the song the minstrel sang.

Odysseus

listening, found sweet pleasure in the tale,  
 among the Phaiákian mariners and oarsmen.  
 And next Alkínoös called upon his sons,  
 Halios and Laódamas, to show  
 the dance no one could do as well as they—  
 handling a purple ball carved by Pólybos.  
 One made it shoot up under the shadowing clouds  
 as he leaned backward; bounding high in air  
 the other cut its flight far off the ground—  
 and neither missed a step as the ball soared.

390

The next turn was to keep it low, and shuttling  
 hard between them, while the ring of boys  
 gave them a steady stamping beat.  
 Odysseus now addressed Alkínoös:

“O majesty, model of all your folk,  
 your promise was to show me peerless dancers;  
 here is the promise kept. I am all wonder.”

400

At this Alkínoös in his might rejoicing  
 said to the seafarers of Phaiákia:

“Attend me now, Phaiákian lords and captains:  
 our guest appears a clear-eyed man and wise.  
 Come, let him feel our bounty as he should.  
 Here are twelve princes of the kingdom—lords  
 paramount, and I who make thirteen;  
 let each one bring a laundered cloak and tunic,  
 and add one bar of honorable gold.  
 Heap all our gifts together; load his arms;  
 let him go joyous to our evening feast!  
 As for Seareach—why, man to man  
 he’ll make amends, and handsomely; he blundered.”

410

Now all as one acclaimed the king’s good pleasure,  
 and each one sent a squire to bring his gifts.  
 Meanwhile Seareach found speech again, saying:

<sup>19</sup>A city in ancient Cyprus (Kypros), an island south of Turkey where Aphroditê had a cult.



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“My lord and model of us all, Alkínoös,  
as you require of me, in satisfaction,  
this broadsword of clear bronze goes to our guest.  
Its hilt is silver, and the ringed sheath  
of new-sawn ivory—a costly weapon.”

420

He turned to give the broadsword to Odysseus,  
facing him, saying blithely:

“Sir, my best  
wishes, my respects; if I offended,  
I hope the seawinds blow it out of mind.  
God send you see your lady and your homeland  
soon again, after the pain of exile.”

Odysseus, the great tactician, answered:

“My hand, friend; may the gods award you fortune.  
I hope no pressing need comes on you ever  
for this fine blade you give me in amends.”

430

He slung it, glinting silver, from his shoulder,  
as the light shone from sundown. Messengers  
were bearing gifts and treasure to the palace,  
where the king’s sons received them all, and made  
a glittering pile at their grave mother’s side;  
then, as Alkínoös took his throne of power,  
each went to his own high-backed chair in turn,  
and said Alkínoös to Arêtê:

440

“Lady, bring here a chest, the finest one;  
a clean cloak and tunic; stow these things;  
and warm a cauldron for him. Let him bathe,  
when he has seen the gifts of the Phaiákians,  
and so dine happily to a running song.  
My own wine-cup of gold intaglio<sup>20</sup>  
I’ll give him, too; through all the days to come,  
tipping his wine to Zeus or other gods  
in his great hall, he shall remember me.”

Then said Arêtê to her maids:

“The tripod:  
stand the great tripod legs about the fire.”

450

They swung the cauldron on the fire’s heart,  
poured water in, and fed the blaze beneath  
until the basin simmered, cupped in flame.

<sup>20</sup>A design cut into the surface.

The queen set out a rich chest from her chamber  
and folded in the gifts—clothing and gold  
given Odysseus by the Phaiákians;  
then she put in the royal cloak and tunic,  
briskly saying to her guest:

“Now here, sir,  
look to the lid yourself, and tie it down  
against light fingers, if there be any,  
on the black ship tonight while you are sleeping.”

460

Noble Odysseus, expert in adversity,  
battened the lid down with a lightning knot  
learned, once, long ago, from the Lady Kirkê.<sup>21</sup>  
And soon a call came from the Bathing Mistress  
who led him to a hip-bath, warm and clear—  
a happy sight, and rare in his immersions  
after he left Kalypso’s home—where, surely,  
the luxuries of a god were ever his.  
When the bath maids had washed him, rubbed him down,  
put a fresh tunic and a cloak around him,  
he left the bathing place to join the men  
at wine in hall.

470

The princess Nausikaa,  
exquisite figure, as of heaven’s shaping,  
waited beside a pillar as he passed  
and said swiftly, with wonder in her look:

“Fare well, stranger; in your land remember me  
who met and saved you. It is worth your thought.”

The man of all occasions now met this:

480

“Daughter of great Alkínoös, Nausikaa,  
may Zeus the lord of thunder, Hera’s consort,  
grant me daybreak again in my own country!  
But there and all my days until I die  
may I invoke you as I would a goddess,  
princess, to whom I owe my life.”

He left her  
and went to take his place beside the king.

Now when the roasts were cut, the winebowls full,  
a herald led the minstrel down the room  
amid the deference of the crowd, and paused  
to seat him near a pillar in the center—  
whereupon that resourceful man, Odysseus,

490

<sup>21</sup>A sorceress; Odysseus’ encounter with her is described in Book X. Also spelled *Circe*.

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carved out a quarter from his chine of pork,  
crisp with fat, and called the blind man's guide:

"Herald! here, take this to Demódokos:  
let him feast and be merry, with my compliments.  
All men owe honor to the poets—honor  
and awe, for they are dearest to the Muse  
who puts upon their lips the ways of life."

Gentle Demódokos took the proffered gift  
and inwardly rejoiced. When all were served,  
every man's hand went out upon the banquet,  
repelling hunger and thirst, until at length  
Odysseus spoke again to the blind minstrel:

500

"Demódokos, accept my utmost praise.  
The Muse, daughter of Zeus in radiance,  
or else Apollo<sup>22</sup> gave you skill to shape  
with such great style your songs of the Akhaians—  
their hard lot, how they fought and suffered war.  
You shared it, one would say, or heard it all.  
Now shift your theme, and sing that wooden horse  
Epeios built, inspired by Athena—  
the ambushade Odysseus filled with fighters  
and sent to take the inner town of Troy.  
Sing only this for me, sing me this well,  
and I shall say at once before the world  
the grace of heaven has given us a song."

510

The minstrel stirred, murmuring to the god, and soon  
clear words and notes came one by one, a vision  
of the Akhaians in their graceful ships  
drawing away from shore: the torches flung  
and shelters flaring: Argive soldiers crouched  
in the close dark around Odysseus: and  
the horse, tall on the assembly ground of Troy.  
For when the Trojans pulled it in, themselves,  
up to the citadel, they sat nearby  
with long-drawn-out and hapless argument—  
favoring, in the end, one course of three:  
either to stave the vault with brazen axes,  
or haul it to a cliff and pitch it down,  
or else to save it for the gods, a votive glory—  
the plan that could not but prevail.  
For Troy must perish, as ordained, that day  
she harbored the great horse of timber; hidden  
the flower of Akhaia lay, and bore  
slaughter and death upon the men of Troy.

520

530

<sup>22</sup>God of music and prophecy. He would naturally have an affinity with bards.

He sang, then, of the town sacked by Akhaians  
pouring down from the horse's hollow cave,  
this way and that way raping the steep city,  
and how Odysseus came like Arês to 540  
the door of Deïphobos,<sup>23</sup> with Menelâos,  
and braved the desperate fight there—  
conquering once more by Athena's power.

The splendid minstrel sang it.

And Odysseus

let the bright molten tears run down his cheeks,  
weeping the way a wife mourns for her lord  
on the lost field where he has gone down fighting  
the day of wrath that came upon his children.  
At sight of the man panting and dying there,  
she slips down to enfold him, crying out; 550  
then feels the spears, prodding her back and shoulders,  
and goes bound into slavery and grief.  
Piteous weeping wears away her cheeks:  
but no more piteous than Odysseus' tears,  
cloaked as they were, now, from the company.  
Only Alkínoös, at his elbow, knew—  
hearing the low sob in the man's breathing—  
and when he knew, he spoke:

"Hear me, lords and captains of Phaiákia!  
And let Demódokos touch his harp no more. 560  
His theme has not been pleasing to all here.  
During the feast, since our fine poet sang,  
our guest has never left off weeping. Grief  
seems fixed upon his heart. Break off the song!  
Let everyone be easy, host and guest;  
there's more decorum in a smiling banquet!  
We had prepared here, on our friend's behalf,  
safe conduct in a ship, and gifts to cheer him,  
holding that any man with a grain of wit  
will treat a decent suppliant like a brother. 570  
Now by the same rule, friend, you must not be  
secretive any longer! Come, in fairness,  
tell me the name you bore in that far country;  
how were you known to family, and neighbors?  
No man is nameless—no man, good or bad,  
but gets a name in his first infancy,  
none being born, unless a mother bears him!  
Tell me your native land, your coast and city—  
sailing directions for the ships, you know—  
for those Phaiákian ships of ours 580  
that have no steersman, and no steering oar,

<sup>23</sup>Menelâos' wife, Helen, had in Troy been given in marriage to Deïphobos.

divining the crew's wishes, as they do,  
 and knowing, as they do, the ports of call  
 about the world. Hidden in mist or cloud  
 they scud the open sea, with never a thought  
 of being in distress or going down.  
 There is, however, something I once heard  
 Nausíthoös, my father, say: Poseidon  
 holds it against us that our deep sea ships  
 are sure conveyance for all passengers. 590  
 My father said, some day one of our cutters  
 homeward bound over the cloudy sea  
 would be wrecked by the god, and a range of hills  
 thrown round our city. So, in his age, he said,  
 and let it be, or not, as the god please.  
 But come, now, put it for me clearly, tell me  
 the sea ways that you wandered, and the shores  
 you touched; the cities, and the men therein,  
 uncivilized, if such there were, and hostile,  
 and those godfearing who had kindly manners. 600  
 Tell me why you should grieve so terribly  
 over the Argives and the fall of Troy.  
 That was all gods' work, weaving ruin there  
 so it should make a song for men to come!  
 Some kin of yours, then, died at Ilion,  
 some first rate man, by marriage near to you,  
 next your own blood most dear?  
 Or some companion of congenial mind  
 and valor? True it is, a wise friend  
 can take a brother's place in our affection." 610

## BOOK NINE: NEW COASTS AND POSEIDON'S SON

Now this was the reply Odysseus made:

"Alkínoös, king and admiration of men,  
 how beautiful this is, to hear a minstrel  
 gifted as yours: a god he might be, singing!  
 There is no boon in life more sweet, I say,  
 than when a summer joy holds all the realm,  
 and banqueters sit listening to a harper  
 in a great hall, by rows of tables heaped  
 with bread and roast meat, while a steward goes  
 to dip up wine and brim your cups again. 10  
 Here is the flower of life, it seems to me!  
 But now you wish to know my cause for sorrow—  
 and thereby give me cause for more.

What shall I  
 say first? What shall I keep until the end?

The gods have tried me in a thousand ways.  
 But first my name: let that be known to you,  
 and if I pull away from pitiless death,  
 friendship will bind us, though my land lies far.

I am Laërtês' son, Odysseus.

Men hold me

formidable for guile in peace and war: 20  
 this fame has gone abroad to the sky's rim.  
 My home is on the peaked sea-mark of Ithaka  
 under Mount Neion's wind-blown robe of leaves,  
 in sight of other islands—Doulíkhion,  
 Samê, wooded Zakynthos—Ithaka  
 being most lofty in that coastal sea,  
 and northwest, while the rest lie east and south.  
 A rocky isle, but good for a boy's training;  
 I shall not see on earth a place more dear,  
 though I have been detained long by Kalypso, 30  
 loveliest among goddesses, who held me  
 in her smooth caves, to be her heart's delight,  
 as Kirkê of Aiaia, the enchantress,  
 desired me, and detained me in her hall.  
 But in my heart I never gave consent.  
 Where shall a man find sweetness to surpass  
 his own home and his parents? In far lands  
 he shall not, though he find a house of gold.

What of my sailing, then, from Troy?

What of those years

of rough adventure, weathered under Zeus? 40  
 The wind that carried west from Ilion  
 brought me to Ísmaros,<sup>1</sup> on the far shore,  
 a strongpoint on the coast of the Kikonês.  
 I stormed that place and killed the men who fought.  
 Plunder we took, and we enslaved the women,  
 to make division, equal shares to all—  
 but on the spot I told them: 'Back, and quickly!  
 Out to sea again!' My men were mutinous,  
 fools, on stores of wine. Sheep after sheep  
 they butchered by the surf, and shambling cattle, 50  
 feasting,—while fugitives went inland, running  
 to call to arms the main force of Kikonês.  
 This was an army, trained to fight on horseback  
 or, where the ground required, on foot. They came  
 with dawn over that terrain like the leaves  
 and blades of spring. So doom appeared to us,  
 dark word of Zeus for us, our evil days.

<sup>1</sup>The land of the Kikonês, in Thrace (on the northern coast of the Aegean Sea).

My men stood up and made a fight of it—  
 backed on the ships, with lances kept in play,  
 from bright morning through the blaze of noon  
 holding our beach, although so far outnumbered;  
 but when the sun passed toward unyoking time,  
 then the Akhaïans, one by one, gave way.  
 Six benches were left empty in every ship  
 that evening when we pulled away from death.  
 And this new grief we bore with us to sea:  
 our precious lives we had, but not our friends.  
 No ship made sail next day until some shipmate  
 had raised a cry, three times, for each poor ghost  
 unfleshed by the Kikonês on that field.

60

70

Now Zeus the lord of cloud roused in the north  
 a storm against the ships, and driving veils  
 of squall moved down like night on land and sea.  
 The bows went plunging at the gust; sails  
 cracked and lashed out strips in the big wind.  
 We saw death in that fury, dropped the yards,  
 unshipped the oars, and pulled for the nearest lee:  
 then two long days and nights we lay offshore  
 worn out and sick at heart, tasting our grief,  
 until a third Dawn came with ringlets shining.  
 Then we put up our masts, hauled sail, and rested,  
 letting the steersmen and the breeze take over.

80

I might have made it safely home, that time,  
 but as I came round Malea<sup>2</sup> the current  
 took me out to sea, and from the north  
 a fresh gale drove me on, past Kythera.  
 Nine days I drifted on the teeming sea  
 before dangerous high winds. Upon the tenth  
 we came to the coastline of the Lotos Eaters,  
 who live upon that flower. We landed there  
 to take on water. All ships' companies  
 mustered alongside for the mid-day meal.  
 Then I sent out two picked men and a runner  
 to learn what race of men that land sustained.  
 They fell in, soon enough, with Lotos Eaters,  
 who showed no will to do us harm, only  
 offering the sweet Lotos to our friends—  
 but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotos,  
 never cared to report, nor to return:  
 they longed to stay forever, browsing on  
 the native bloom, forgetful of their homeland.  
 I drove them, all three wailing, to the ships,

90

100

<sup>2</sup>The cape at the southernmost end of Greece; Kythera, mentioned two lines below, is a sizable island just southwest of Malea.

tied them down under their rowing benches,  
and called the rest: 'All hands aboard;  
come, clear the beach and no one taste  
the Lotos, or you lose your hope of home.'  
Filing in to their places by the rowlocks  
my oarsmen dipped their long oars in the surf,  
and we moved out again on our sea faring.

In the next land we found were *Kyklopês*,<sup>3</sup> 110  
giants, louts, without a law to bless them.  
In ignorance leaving the fruitage of the earth in mystery  
to the immortal gods, they neither plow  
nor sow by hand, nor till the ground, though grain—  
wild wheat and barley—grows untended, and  
wine-grapes, in clusters, ripen in heaven's rain.  
*Kyklopês* have no muster and no meeting,  
no consultation or old tribal ways,  
but each one dwells in his own mountain cave  
dealing out rough justice to wife and child, 120  
indifferent to what the others do.

Well, then:

across the wide bay from the mainland  
there lies a desert island, not far out,  
but still not close inshore. Wild goats in hundreds  
breed there; and no human being comes  
upon the isle to startle them—no hunter  
of all who ever tracked with hounds through forests  
or had rough going over mountain trails.  
The isle, unplanted and untilled, a wilderness, 130  
pastures goats alone. And this is why:  
good ships like ours with cheekpaint at the bows  
are far beyond the *Kyklopês*. No shipwright  
toils among them, shaping and building up  
symmetrical trim hulls to cross the sea  
and visit all the seaboard towns, as men do  
who go and come in commerce over water.  
This isle—seagoing folk would have annexed it  
and built their homesteads on it: all good land,  
fertile for every crop in season: lush  
well-watered meads along the shore, vines in profusion, 140  
prairie, clear for the plow, where grain would grow  
chin high by harvest time, and rich sub-soil.  
The island cove is landlocked, so you need  
no hawsers out astern, bow-stones or mooring:  
run in and ride there till the day your crews  
chafe to be under sail, and a fair wind blows.  
You'll find good water flowing from a cavern  
through dusky poplars into the upper bay.

<sup>3</sup>One-eyed giants, inhabitants of Sicily. Also spelled *Cyclops*.



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Here we made harbor. Some god guided us  
 that night, for we could barely see our bows  
 in the dense fog around us, and no moonlight  
 filtered through the overcast. No look-out,  
 nobody saw the island dead ahead,  
 nor even the great landward rolling billow  
 that took us in: we found ourselves in shallows,  
 keels grazing shore: so furled our sails  
 and disembarked where the low ripples broke.  
 There on the beach we lay, and slept till morning.

150

When Dawn spread out her finger tips of rose  
 we turned out marvelling, to tour the isle,  
 while Zeus's shy nymph daughters flushed wild goats  
 down from the heights—a breakfast for my men.  
 We ran to fetch our hunting bows and long-shanked  
 lances from the ships, and in three companies  
 we took our shots. Heaven gave us game a-plenty:  
 for every one of twelve ships in my squadron  
 nine goats fell to be shared; my lot was ten.  
 So there all day, until the sun went down,  
 we made our feast on meat galore, and wine—  
 wine from the ship, for our supply held out,  
 so many jars were filled at Ísmaros  
 from stores of the Kikonês that we plundered.  
 We gazed, too, at Kyklopês Land, so near,  
 we saw their smoke, heard bleating from their flocks.  
 But after sundown, in the gathering dusk,  
 we slept again above the wash of ripples.

160

170

When the young Dawn with finger tips of rose  
 came in the east, I called my men together  
 and made a speech to them:

‘Old shipmates, friends,  
 the rest of you stand by; I'll make the crossing  
 in my own ship, with my own company,  
 and find out what the mainland natives are—  
 for they may be wild savages, and lawless,  
 or hospitable and god fearing men.’

180

At this I went aboard, and gave the word  
 to cast off by the stern. My oarsmen followed,  
 filing in to their benches by the rowlocks,  
 and all in line dipped oars in the grey sea.

As we rowed on, and nearer to the mainland,  
 at one end of the bay, we saw a cavern  
 yawning above the water, screened with laurel,  
 and many rams and goats about the place

190

inside a sheepfold—made from slabs of stone  
earthfast between tall trunks of pine and rugged  
towering oak trees.

A prodigious man  
slept in this cave alone, and took his flocks  
to graze afield—remote from all companions,  
knowing none but savage ways, a brute  
so huge, he seemed no man at all of those  
who eat good wheaten bread; but he seemed rather  
a shaggy mountain reared in solitude. 200  
We beached there, and I told the crew  
to stand by and keep watch over the ship;  
as for myself I took my twelve best fighters  
and went ahead. I had a goatskin full  
of that sweet liquor that Euanthês' son,  
Maron, had given me. He kept Apollo's  
holy grove at Ísmaros; for kindness  
we showed him there, and showed his wife and child,  
he gave me seven shining golden talents 210  
perfectly formed, a solid silver winebowl,  
and then this liquor—twelve two-handled jars  
of brandy, pure and fiery. Not a slave  
in Maron's household knew this drink; only  
he, his wife and the storeroom mistress knew;  
and they would put one cupful—ruby-colored,  
honey-smooth—in twenty more of water,  
but still the sweet scent hovered like a fume  
over the winebowl. No man turned away  
when cups of this came round.

A wineskin full 220  
I brought along, and victuals in a bag,  
for in my bones I knew some towering brute  
would be upon us soon—all outward power,  
a wild man, ignorant of civility.

We climbed, then, briskly to the cave. But Kyklops  
had gone afield, to pasture his fat sheep,  
so we looked round at everything inside:  
a drying rack that sagged with cheeses, pens  
crowded with lambs and kids, each in its class:  
firstlings apart from middlings, and the 'dewdrops,' 230  
or newborn lambkins, penned apart from both.  
And vessels full of whey were brimming there—  
bowls of earthenware and pails for milking.  
My men came pressing round me, pleading:

'Why not  
take these cheeses, get them stowed, come back,  
throw open all the pens, and make a run for it?  
We'll drive the kids and lambs aboard. We say  
put out again on good salt water!'

Ah,

how sound that was! Yet I refused. I wished  
 to see the caveman, what he had to offer—  
 no pretty sight, it turned out, for my friends. 240  
 We lit a fire, burnt an offering,  
 and took some cheese to eat; then sat in silence  
 around the embers, waiting. When he came  
 he had a load of dry boughs on his shoulder  
 to stoke his fire at suppertime. He dumped it  
 with a great crash into that hollow cave,  
 and we all scattered fast to the far wall.  
 Then over the broad cavern floor he ushered  
 the ewes he meant to milk. He left his rams 250  
 and he-goats in the yard outside, and swung  
 high overhead a slab of solid rock  
 to close the cave. Two dozen four-wheeled wagons,  
 with heaving wagon teams, could not have stirred  
 the tonnage of that rock from where he wedged it  
 over the doorsill. Next he took his seat  
 and milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job  
 he made of it, giving each ewe her suckling;  
 thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey,<sup>4</sup>  
 sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets, 260  
 and poured the whey to stand in bowls  
 cooling until he drank it for his supper.  
 When all these chores were done, he poked the fire,  
 heaping on brushwood. In the glare he saw us.  
 ‘Strangers,’ he said, ‘who are you? And where from?  
 What brings you here by sea ways—a fair traffic?  
 Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives  
 like dice, and ravage other folk by sea?’

We felt a pressure on our hearts, in dread  
 of that deep rumble and that mighty man. 270  
 But all the same I spoke up in reply:  
 ‘We are from Troy, Akhaians, blown off course  
 by shifting gales on the Great South Sea;  
 homeward bound, but taking routes and ways  
 uncommon; so the will of Zeus would have it.  
 We served under Agamémnon, son of Atreus—  
 the whole world knows what city  
 he laid waste, what armies he destroyed.  
 It was our luck to come here; here we stand,  
 beholden for your help, or any gifts 280  
 you give—as custom is to honor strangers.  
 We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care

<sup>4</sup>The liquid part of separated milk, as distinguished from the lumpy curds.

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for the gods' courtesy; Zeus will avenge  
the unoffending guest.'<sup>5</sup>

He answered this  
from his brute chest, unmoved:

'You are a ninny,  
or else you come from the other end of nowhere,  
telling me, mind the gods! We Kyklopês  
care not a whistle for your thundering Zeus  
or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far.  
I would not let you go for fear of Zeus—  
you or your friends—unless I had a whim to.  
Tell me, where was it, now, you left your ship—  
around the point, or down the shore, I wonder?'

290

He thought he'd find out, but I saw through this,  
and answered with a ready lie:

'My ship?  
Poseidon Lord, who sets the earth a-tremble,  
broke it up on the rocks at your land's end.  
A wind from seaward served him, drove us there.  
We are survivors, these good men and I.'

Neither reply nor pity came from him,  
but in one stride he clutched at my companions  
and caught two in his hands like squirming puppies  
to beat their brains out, spattering the floor.  
Then he dismembered them and made his meal,  
gaping and crunching like a mountain lion—  
everything: innards, flesh, and marrow bones.  
We cried aloud, lifting our hands to Zeus,  
powerless, looking on at this, appalled;  
but Kyklops<sup>6</sup> went on filling up his belly  
with manflesh and great gulps of whey,  
then lay down like a mast among his sheep.  
My heart beat high now at the chance of action,  
and drawing the sharp sword from my hip I went  
along his flank to stab him where the midriff  
holds the liver. I had touched the spot  
when sudden fear stayed me: if I killed him  
we perished there as well, for we could never  
move his ponderous doorway slab aside.  
So we were left to groan and wait for morning.

300

310

<sup>5</sup> Zeus was the protector and guarantor of the laws of hospitality.

<sup>6</sup> Here used as a singular; his name, we learn later, is Polyphêmos.

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When the young Dawn with finger tips of rose  
 lit up the world, the Kyklops built a fire  
 and milked his handsome ewes, all in due order,  
 putting the sucklings to the mothers. Then,  
 his chores being all dispatched, he caught  
 another brace of men to make his breakfast,  
 and whisked away his great door slab  
 to let his sheep go through—but he, behind,  
 reset the stone as one would cap a quiver.  
 There was a din of whistling as the Kyklops  
 rounded his flock to higher ground, then stillness.  
 And now I pondered how to hurt him worst,  
 if but Athena granted what I prayed for.  
 Here are the means I thought would serve my turn:

320

330

a club, or staff, lay there along the fold—  
 an olive tree, felled green and left to season  
 for Kyklops' hand. And it was like a mast  
 a lugger of twenty oars, broad in the beam—  
 a deep-sea-going craft—might carry:  
 so long, so big around, it seemed. Now I  
 chopped out a six foot section of this pole  
 and set it down before my men, who scraped it;  
 and when they had it smooth, I hewed again  
 to make a stake with pointed end. I held this  
 in the fire's heart and turned it, toughening it,  
 then hid it, well back in the cavern, under  
 one of the dung piles in profusion there.  
 Now came the time to toss for it: who ventured  
 along with me? whose hand could bear to thrust  
 and grind that spike in Kyklops' eye, when mild  
 sleep had mastered him? As luck would have it,  
 the men I would have chosen won the toss—  
 four strong men, and I made five as captain.

340

350

At evening came the shepherd with his flock,  
 his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,  
 entered the cave: by some sheep-herding whim—  
 or a god's bidding—none were left outside.  
 He hefted his great boulder into place  
 and sat him down to milk the bleating ewes  
 in proper order, put the lambs to suck,  
 and swiftly ran through all his evening chores.  
 Then he caught two more men and feasted on them.  
 My moment was at hand, and I went forward  
 holding an ivy bowl of my dark drink,  
 looking up, saying:

360

‘Kyklops, try some wine.  
 Here's liquor to wash down your scraps of men.  
 Taste it, and see the kind of drink we carried

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under our planks. I meant it for an offering  
if you would help us home. But you are mad,  
unbearable, a bloody monster! After this,  
will any other traveller come to see you?’

370

He seized and drained the bowl, and it went down  
so fiery and smooth he called for more:

‘Give me another, thank you kindly. Tell me,  
how are you called? I’ll make a gift will please you.  
Even Kyklopês know the wine-grapes grow  
out of grassland and loam in heaven’s rain,  
but here’s a bit of nectar and ambrosia!’

Three bowls I brought him, and he poured them down.  
I saw the fuddle and flush come over him,  
then I sang out in cordial tones:

‘Kyklops,  
you ask my honorable name? Remember  
the gift you promised me, and I shall tell you.  
My name is Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends,  
everyone calls me Nohbdy.’

380

And he said:

‘Nohbdy’s my meat, then, after I eat his friends.  
Others come first. There’s a noble gift, now.’

Even as he spoke, he reeled and tumbled backward,  
his great head lolling to one side; and sleep  
took him like any creature. Drunk, hiccuping,  
he dribbled streams of liquor and bits of men.

390

Now, by the gods, I drove my big hand spike  
deep in the embers, charring it again,  
and cheered my men along with battle talk  
to keep their courage up: no quitting now.  
The pike of olive, green though it had been,  
reddened and glowed as if about to catch.  
I drew it from the coals and my four fellows  
gave me a hand, lugging it near the Kyklops  
as more than natural force nerved them; straight  
forward they sprinted, lifted it, and rammed it  
deep in his crater eye, and I leaned on it  
turning it as a shipwright turns a drill  
in planking, having men below to swing  
the two-handled strap that spins it in the groove.  
So with our brand we bored that great eye socket  
while blood ran out around the red hot bar.  
Eyelid and lash were seared; the pierced ball  
hissed broiling, and the roots popped.

400

In a smithy

one sees a white-hot axehead or an adze  
 plunged and wrung in a cold tub, screeching steam—  
 the way they make soft iron hale and hard—  
 just so that eyeball hissed around the spike.  
 The Kyklops bellowed and the rock roared round him,  
 and we fell back in fear. Clawing his face  
 he tugged the bloody spike out of his eye,  
 threw it away, and his wild hands went groping;  
 then he set up a howl for Kyklopês  
 who lived in caves on windy peaks nearby.  
 Some heard him; and they came by divers ways  
 to clump around outside and call:

410

‘What ails you,

Polyphêmos? Why do you cry so sore  
 in the starry night? You will not let us sleep.  
 Sure no man’s driving off your flock? No man  
 has tricked you, ruined you?’

420

Out of the cave

the mammoth Polyphêmos roared in answer:  
 ‘Nohbdy, Nohbdy’s tricked me, Nohbdy’s ruined me!’

To this rough shout they made a sage reply:  
 ‘Ah well, if nobody has played you foul  
 there in your lonely bed, we are no use in pain  
 given by great Zeus. Let it be your father,  
 Poseidon Lord, to whom you pray.’

430

So saying

they trailed away. And I was filled with laughter  
 to see how like a charm the name deceived them.  
 Now Kyklops, wheezing as the pain came on him,  
 fumbled to wrench away the great doorstone  
 and squatted in the breach with arms thrown wide  
 for any silly beast or man who bolted—  
 hoping somehow I might be such a fool.  
 But I kept thinking how to win the game:  
 death sat there huge; how could we slip away?  
 I drew on all my wits, and ran through tactics,  
 reasoning as a man will for dear life,  
 until a trick came—and it pleased me well.  
 The Kyklops’ rams were handsome, fat, with heavy  
 fleeces, a dark violet.

440

Three abreast

I tied them silently together, twining  
 cords of willow from the ogre’s bed;  
 then slung a man under each middle one

to ride there safely, shielded left and right.  
 So three sheep could convey each man. I took  
 the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,  
 and hung myself under his kinky belly,  
 pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep  
 in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.  
 So, breathing hard, we waited until morning.

450

When Dawn spread out her finger tips of rose  
 the rams began to stir, moving for pasture,  
 and peals of bleating echoed round the pens  
 where dams with udders full called for a milking.  
 Blinded, and sick with pain from his head wound,  
 the master stroked each ram, then let it pass,  
 but my men riding on the pectoral fleece  
 the giant's blind hands blundering never found.  
 Last of them all my ram, the leader, came,  
 weighted by wool and me with my meditations.  
 The Kyklops patted him, and then he said:

460

'Sweet cousin ram, why lag behind the rest  
 in the night cave? You never linger so,  
 but graze before them all, and go afar  
 to crop sweet grass, and take your stately way  
 leading along the streams, until at evening  
 you run to be the first one in the fold.  
 Why, now, so far behind? Can you be grieving  
 over your Master's eye? That carrion rogue  
 and his accurst companions burnt it out  
 when he had conquered all my wits with wine.  
 Nohbdy will not get out alive, I swear.

470

Oh, had you brain and voice to tell  
 where he may be now, dodging all my fury!  
 Bashed by this hand and bashed on this rock wall  
 his brains would strew the floor, and I should have  
 rest from the outrage Nohbdy worked upon me.'

480

He sent us into the open, then. Close by,  
 I dropped and rolled clear of the ram's belly,  
 going this way and that to untie the men.  
 With many glances back, we rounded up  
 his fat, stiff-legged sheep to take aboard,  
 and drove them down to where the good ship lay.  
 We saw, as we came near, our fellows' faces  
 shining; then we saw them turn to grief  
 tallying those who had not fled from death.  
 I hushed them, jerking head and eyebrows up,  
 and in a low voice told them: 'Load this herd;  
 move fast, and put the ship's head toward the breakers.'  
 They all pitched in at loading, then embarked

490



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and struck their oars into the sea. Far out,  
as far off shore as shouted words would carry,  
I sent a few back to the adversary:

‘O Kyklops! Would you feast on my companions?

Puny, am I, in a Caveman’s hands?

500

How do you like the beating that we gave you,  
you damned cannibal? Eater of guests  
under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!’

The blind thing in his doubled fury broke  
a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us.  
Ahead of our black prow it struck and sank  
whelmed in a spuming geyser, a giant wave  
that washed the ship stern foremost back to shore.  
I got the longest boathook out and stood  
fending us off, with furious nods to all  
to put their backs into a racing stroke—  
row, row, or perish. So the long oars bent  
kicking the foam sternward, making head  
until we drew away, and twice as far.  
Now when I cupped my hands I heard the crew  
in low voices protesting:

510

‘Godsake, Captain!

Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!’

‘That tidal wave he made on the first throw  
all but beached us.’

‘All but stove us in!’

‘Give him our bearing with your trumpeting,  
he’ll get the range and lob a boulder.’

520

‘Aye

He’ll smash our timbers and our heads together!’

I would not heed them in my glorying spirit,  
but let my anger flare and yelled:

‘Kyklops,

if ever mortal man inquire  
how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him  
Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye:  
Laërtês’ son, whose home’s on Ithaka!’

At this he gave a mighty sob and rumbled:

‘Now comes the weird<sup>7</sup> upon me, spoken of old.  
A wizard, grand and wondrous, lived here—Télemos,

530

<sup>7</sup>Inescapable destiny.

a son of Eurymos; great length of days  
 he had in wizardry among the Kyklopês,  
 and these things he foretold for time to come:  
 my great eye lost, and at Odysseus' hands.  
 Always I had in mind some giant, armed  
 in giant force, would come against me here.  
 But this, but you—small, pitiful and twiggy—  
 you put me down with wine, you blinded me.  
 Come back, Odysseus, and I'll treat you well,  
 praying the god of earthquake to befriend you—  
 his son I am, for he by his avowal  
 fathered me, and, if he will, he may  
 heal me of this black wound—he and no other  
 of all the happy gods or mortal men.'

540

Few words I shouted in reply to him:

'If I could take your life I would and take  
 your time away, and hurl you down to hell!  
 The god of earthquake could not heal you there!'

At this he stretched his hands out in his darkness  
 toward the sky of stars, and prayed Poseidon:

550

'O hear me, lord, blue girdler of the islands,  
 if I am thine indeed, and thou art father:  
 grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, never  
 see his home: Laërtês' son, I mean,  
 who kept his hall on Ithaka. Should destiny  
 intend that he shall see his roof again  
 among his family in his father land,  
 far be that day, and dark the years between.  
 Let him lose all companions, and return  
 under strange sail to bitter days at home.'

560

In these words he prayed, and the god heard him.  
 Now he laid hands upon a bigger stone  
 and wheeled around, titanic for the cast,  
 to let it fly in the black-prowed vessel's track.  
 But it fell short, just aft the steering oar,  
 and whelming seas rose giant above the stone  
 to bear us onward toward the island.

There

as we ran in we saw the squadron waiting,  
 the trim ships drawn up side by side, and all  
 our troubled friends who waited, looking seaward.  
 We beached her, grinding keel in the soft sand,  
 and waded in, ourselves, on the sandy beach.  
 Then we unloaded all the Kyklops' flock  
 to make division, share and share alike,  
 only my fighters voted that my ram,

570

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the prize of all, should go to me. I slew him  
 by the sea side and burnt his long thighbones  
 to Zeus beyond the stormcloud, Kronos'<sup>8</sup> son,  
 who rules the world. But Zeus disdained my offering;  
 destruction for my ships he had in store  
 and death for those who sailed them, my companions.  
 Now all day long until the sun went down  
 we made our feast on mutton and sweet wine,  
 till after sunset in the gathering dark  
 we went to sleep above the wash of ripples.

580

When the young Dawn with finger tips of rose  
 touched the world, I roused the men, gave orders  
 to man the ships, cast off the mooring lines;  
 and filing in to sit beside the rowlocks  
 oarsmen in line dipped oars in the grey sea.  
 So we moved out, sad in the vast offing,  
 having our precious lives, but not our friends.

590

## BOOK TEN: THE GRACE OF THE WITCH

We made our landfall on Aiolia Island,  
 domain of Aiolos<sup>1</sup> Hippotadês,  
 the wind king, dear to the gods who never die—  
 an isle adrift upon the sea, ringed round  
 with brazen ramparts on a sheer cliffside.  
 Twelve children had old Aiolos at home—  
 six daughters and six lusty sons—and he  
 gave girls to boys to be their gentle brides;  
 now those lords, in their parents' company,  
 sup every day in hall—a royal feast  
 with fumes of sacrifice and winds that pipe  
 'round hollow courts; and all the night they sleep  
 on beds of filigree beside their ladies.  
 Here we put in, lodged in the town and palace,  
 while Aiolos played host to me. He kept me  
 one full month to hear the tale of Troy,  
 the ships and the return of the Akhaians,  
 all which I told him point by point in order.  
 When in return I asked his leave to sail  
 and asked provisioning, he stinted nothing,  
 adding a bull's hide sewn from neck to tail  
 into a mighty bag, bottling storm winds;

10

20

<sup>8</sup>Equivalent of the Roman Saturn. Chief of the gods in the divine generation preceding Zeus and the Olympian dynasty; dethroned by his son Zeus.

<sup>1</sup>God of the winds, son of Hippotês. Commonly spelled *Aeolus*. A tradition locates his island off the north coast of Sicily.

for Zeus had long ago made Aiolos  
 warden of winds, to rouse or calm at will.  
 He wedged this bag under my afterdeck,  
 lashing the neck with shining silver wire  
 so not a breath go through; only the west wind  
 he lofted for me in a quartering breeze  
 to take my squadron spanking home.

No luck:

the fair wind failed us when our prudence failed.

30

Nine days and nights we sailed without event,  
 till on the tenth we raised our land. We neared it,  
 and saw men building fires along the shore;  
 but now, being weary to the bone, I fell  
 into deep slumber; I had worked the sheet  
 nine days alone, and given it to no one,  
 wishing to spill no wind on the homeward run.  
 But while I slept, the crew began to parley:  
 silver and gold, they guessed, were in that bag  
 bestowed on me by Aiolos' great heart;  
 and one would glance at his benchmate and say:  
 'It never fails. He's welcome everywhere:  
 hail to the captain when he goes ashore!  
 He brought along so many presents, plunder  
 out of Troy, that's it. How about ourselves—  
 his shipmates all the way? Nigh home we are  
 with empty hands. And who has gifts from Aiolos?  
 He has. I say we ought to crack that bag,  
 there's gold and silver, plenty, in that bag!'

40

Temptation had its way with my companions,  
 and they untied the bag.

50

Then every wind

roared into hurricane; the ships went pitching  
 west with many cries; our land was lost.  
 Roused up, despairing in that gloom, I thought:  
 'Should I go overside for a quick finish  
 or clench my teeth and stay among the living?'  
 Down in the bilge I lay, pulling my sea cloak  
 over my head, while the rough gale blew the ships  
 and rueful crews clear back to Aiolia.

We put ashore for water; then all hands  
 gathered alongside for a mid-day meal.  
 When we had taken bread and drink, I picked  
 one soldier, and one herald, to go with me  
 and called again on Aiolos. I found him  
 at meat with his young princes and his lady,  
 but there beside the pillars, in his portico,

60

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we sat down silent at the open door.  
The sight amazed them, and they all exclaimed:

‘Why back again, Odysseus?’

‘What sea fiend  
rose in your path?’

‘Did we not launch you well  
for home, or for whatever land you chose?’

70

Out of my melancholy I replied:

‘Mischief aboard and nodding at the tiller—  
a damned drowse—did for me. Make good my loss,  
dear friends! You have the power!’

Gently I pleaded,  
but they turned cold and still. Said Father Aiolos:

‘Take yourself out of this island, creeping thing—  
no law, no wisdom, lays it on me now  
to help a man the blessed gods detest—  
out! Your voyage here was cursed by heaven!’

80

He drove me from the place, groan as I would,  
and comfortless we went again to sea,  
days of it, till the men flagged at the oars—  
no breeze, no help in sight, by our own folly—  
six indistinguishable nights and days  
before we raised the Laistrygonian height  
and far stronghold of Lamos.<sup>2</sup> In that land  
the daybreak follows dusk, and so the shepherd  
homing calls to the cowherd setting out;  
and he who never slept could earn two wages,  
tending oxen, pasturing silvery flocks,  
where the low night path of the sun is near  
the sun’s path by day. Here, then, we found  
a curious bay with mountain walls of stone  
to left and right, and reaching far inland,—  
a narrow entrance opening from the sea  
where cliffs converged as though to touch and close.  
All of my squadron sheltered here, inside  
the cavern of this bay.

90

Black prow by prow  
those hulls were made fast in a limpid calm  
without a ripple, stillness all around them.

100

<sup>2</sup> Son of Poseidon and king of the Laistrygonians. Traditions place their land in southwest Italy or in Sicily. The following lines describe the almost continuous daylight of summer in the far north, but it would have been impossible for Odysseus and his men to reach such latitudes. Traditionally, the shepherd grazes his flock during the night.

My own black ship I chose to moor alone  
 on the sea side, using a rock for bollard;  
 and climbed a rocky point to get my bearings.  
 No farms, no cultivated land appeared,  
 but puffs of smoke rose in the wilderness;  
 so I sent out two picked men and a herald  
 to learn what race of men this land sustained.

My party found a track—a wagon road  
 for bringing wood down from the heights to town; 110  
 and near the settlement they met a daughter  
 of Antiphatês the Laistrygon—a stalwart  
 young girl taking her pail to Artakía,  
 the fountain where these people go for water.  
 My fellows hailed her, put their questions to her:  
 who might the king be? ruling over whom?  
 She waved her hand, showing her father's lodge,  
 so they approached it. In its gloom they saw  
 a woman like a mountain crag, the queen—  
 and loathed the sight of her. But she, for greeting, 120  
 called from the meeting ground her lord and master,  
 Antiphatês, who came to drink their blood.  
 He seized one man and tore him on the spot,  
 making a meal of him; the other two  
 leaped out of doors and ran to join the ships.  
 Behind, he raised the whole tribe howling, countless  
 Laistrygonês—and more than men they seemed,  
 gigantic when they gathered on the sky line  
 to shoot great boulders down from slings; and hell's own  
 crashing rose, and crying from the ships, 130  
 as planks and men were smashed to bits—poor gobbets<sup>3</sup>  
 the wildmen speared like fish and bore away.  
 But long before it ended in the anchorage—  
 havoc and slaughter—I had drawn my sword  
 and cut my own ship's cable. 'Men,' I shouted,  
 'man the oars and pull till your hearts break  
 if you would put this butchery behind!'  
 The oarsmen rent the sea in mortal fear  
 and my ship spurted out of range, far out  
 from that deep canyon where the rest were lost. 140  
 So we fared onward, and death fell behind,  
 and we took breath to grieve for our companions.

Our next landfall was on Aiaia,<sup>4</sup> island  
 of Kirkê, dire beauty and divine,

<sup>3</sup>Lumps of raw meat.

<sup>4</sup>Later legend placed this island, home of Kirkê (Circe), near the west coast of Italy, near Rome. Aiêtês was the king of Colchis who lost the magical Golden Fleece to Iêson (Jason) and the Argonauts; see the headnote to Euripides' *Medea*. Medea, Aiêtês' daughter, was also a sorceress; witchcraft ran in the family.

sister of baleful Aiêtês, like him  
 fathered by Hélios the light of mortals  
 on Persê, child of the Ocean stream.

We came

washed in our silent ship upon her shore,  
 and found a cove, a haven for the ship—  
 some god, invisible, conned us in. We landed,  
 to lie down in that place two days and nights,  
 worn out and sick at heart, tasting our grief.  
 But when Dawn set another day a-shining  
 I took my spear and broadsword, and I climbed  
 a rocky point above the ship, for sight  
 or sound of human labor. Gazing out  
 from that high place over a land of thicket,  
 oaks and wide watercourses, I could see  
 a smoke wisp from the woodland hall of Kirkê.  
 So I took counsel with myself: should I  
 go inland scouting out that reddish smoke?  
 No: better not, I thought, but first return  
 to waterside and ship, and give the men  
 breakfast before I sent them to explore.  
 Now as I went down quite alone, and came  
 a bowshot from the ship, some god's compassion  
 set a big buck in motion to cross my path—  
 a stag with noble antlers, pacing down  
 from pasture in the woods to the riverside,  
 as long thirst and the power of sun constrained him.  
 He started from the bush and wheeled: I hit him  
 square in the spine midway along his back  
 and the bronze point broke through it. In the dust  
 he fell and whinnied as life bled away.  
 I set one foot against him, pulling hard  
 to wrench my weapon from the wound, then left it,  
 butt-end on the ground. I plucked some withies  
 and twined a double strand into a rope—  
 enough to tie the hocks of my huge trophy;  
 then pickaback I lugged him to the ship,  
 leaning on my long spearshaft; I could not  
 haul that mighty carcass on one shoulder.  
 Beside the ship I let him drop, and spoke  
 gently and low to each man standing near:  
 'Come, friends, though hard beset, we'll not go down  
 into the House of Death before our time.  
 As long as food and drink remain aboard  
 let us rely on it, not die of hunger.'

At this those faces, cloaked in desolation  
 upon the waste sea beach, were bared;  
 their eyes turned toward me and the mighty trophy,

lighting, foreseeing pleasure, one by one.  
 So hands were washed to take what heaven sent us.  
 And all that day until the sun went down  
 we had our fill of venison and wine,  
 till after sunset in the gathering dusk  
 we slept at last above the line of breakers.  
 When the young Dawn with finger tips of rose  
 made heaven bright, I called them round and said:

‘Shipmates, companions in disastrous time,  
 O my dear friends, where Dawn lies, and the West,  
 and where the great Sun, light of men, may go  
 under the earth by night, and where he rises—  
 of these things we know nothing. Do we know  
 any least thing to serve us now? I wonder.  
 All that I saw when I went up the rock  
 was one more island in the boundless main,  
 a low landscape, covered with woods and scrub,  
 and puffs of smoke ascending in mid-forest.’

200

They were all silent, but their hearts contracted,  
 remembering Antiphatês the Laistrygon  
 and that prodigious cannibal, the Kyklops.  
 They cried out, and the salt tears wet their eyes.  
 But seeing our time for action lost in weeping,  
 I mustered those Akhaïans under arms,  
 counting them off in two platoons, myself  
 and my godlike Eurýlokhos commanding.  
 We shook lots in a soldier’s dogskin cap  
 and his came bounding out—valiant Eurýlokhos!—  
 So off he went, with twenty-two companions  
 weeping, as mine wept, too, who stayed behind.

210

220

In the wild wood they found an open glade,  
 around a smooth stone house—the hall of Kirkê—  
 and wolves and mountain lions lay there, mild  
 in her soft spell, fed on her drug of evil.  
 None would attack—oh, it was strange, I tell you—  
 but switching their long tails they faced our men  
 like hounds, who look up when their master comes  
 with tidbits for them—as he will—from table.  
 Humbly those wolves and lions with mighty paws  
 fawned on our men—who met their yellow eyes  
 and feared them.

230

In the entrance way they stayed  
 to listen there: inside her quiet house  
 they heard the goddess Kirkê.

Low she sang  
 in her beguiling voice, while on her loom  
 she wove ambrosial fabric sheer and bright,



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by that craft known to the goddesses of heaven.  
No one would speak, until Politês—most  
faithful and likable of my officers, said:

‘Dear friends, no need for stealth: here’s a young weaver  
singing a pretty song to set the air  
a-tingle on these lawns and paven courts.  
Goddess she is, or lady. Shall we greet her?’

240

So reassured, they all cried out together,  
and she came swiftly to the shining doors  
to call them in. All but Eurýlokhos—  
who feared a snare—the innocents went after her.  
On thrones she seated them, and lounging chairs,  
while she prepared a meal of cheese and barley  
and amber honey mixed with Pramnian wine,  
adding her own vile pinch, to make them lose  
desire or thought of our dear father land.  
Scarce had they drunk when she flew after them  
with her long stick and shut them in a pigsty—  
bodies, voices, heads, and bristles, all  
swinish now, though minds were still unchanged.  
So, squealing, in they went. And Kirkê tossed them  
acorns, mast, and cornel berries—fodder  
for hogs who rut and slumber on the earth.

250

Down to the ship Eurýlokhos came running.  
to cry alarm, foul magic doomed his men!  
But working with dry lips to speak a word  
he could not, being so shaken; blinding tears  
welled in his eyes; foreboding filled his heart.  
When we were frantic questioning him, at last  
we heard the tale: our friends were gone. Said he:

260

“We went up through the oak scrub where you sent us,  
Odysseus, glory of commanders,  
until we found a palace in a glade,  
a marble house on open ground, and someone  
singing before her loom a chill, sweet song—  
goddess or girl, we could not tell. They hailed her,  
and then she stepped through shining doors and said,  
“Come, come in!” Like sheep they followed her,  
but I saw cruel deceit, and stayed behind.  
Then all our fellows vanished. Not a sound,  
and nothing stirred, although I watched for hours.’

270

When I heard this I slung my silver-hilted  
broadsword on, and shouldered my long bow,  
and said, “Come, take me back the way you came.”  
But he put both his hands around my knees  
in desperate woe, and said in supplication:

280

“Not back there, O my lord! Oh, leave me here!  
 You, even you, cannot return, I know it,  
 I know you cannot bring away our shipmates;  
 better make sail with these men, quickly too,  
 and save ourselves from horror while we may.’

But I replied:

‘By heaven, Eurýlokhos,  
 rest here then; take food and wine;  
 stay in the black hull’s shelter. Let me go,  
 as I see nothing for it but to go.’

290

I turned and left him, left the shore and ship,  
 and went up through the woodland hushed and shady  
 to find the subtle witch in her long hall.  
 But Hermês met me, with his golden wand,  
 barring the way—a boy whose lip was downy  
 in the first bloom of manhood, so he seemed.  
 He took my hand and spoke as though he knew me:

‘Why take the inland path alone,  
 poor seafarer, by hill and dale  
 upon this island all unknown?  
 Your friends are locked in Kirkê’s pale;<sup>5</sup>  
 all are become like swine to see;  
 and if you go to set them free  
 you go to stay, and never more make sail  
 for your old home upon Thaki.<sup>6</sup>

300

But I can tell you what to do  
 to come unchanged from Kirkê’s power  
 and disenthral your fighting crew:  
 take with you to her bower  
 as amulet, this plant I know—  
 it will defeat her horrid show,  
 so pure and potent is the flower;  
 no mortal herb was ever so.

310

Your cup with numbing drops of night  
 and evil, stilled of all remorse,  
 she will infuse to charm your sight;  
 but this great herb with holy force  
 will keep your mind and senses clear:  
 when she turns cruel, coming near  
 with her long stick to whip you out of doors,  
 then let your cutting blade appear,

320

<sup>5</sup>An enclosed area.

<sup>6</sup>Ithaka.

Let instant death upon it shine,  
 and she will cower and yield her bed—  
 a pleasure you must not decline,  
 so may her lust and fear bestead  
 you and your friends, and break her spell;  
 but make her swear by heaven and hell  
 no witches' tricks, or else, your harness shed,  
 you'll be unmanned by her as well.'

330

He bent down glittering for the magic plant  
 and pulled it up, black root and milky flower—  
 a *molü*<sup>7</sup> in the language of the gods—  
 fatigue and pain for mortals to uproot;  
 but gods do this, and everything, with ease.

Then toward Olympos through the island trees  
 Hermês departed, and I sought out Kirkê,  
 my heart high with excitement, beating hard.  
 Before her mansion in the porch I stood  
 to call her, all being still. Quick as a cat  
 she opened her bright doors and sighed a welcome;  
 then I strode after her with heavy heart  
 down the long hall, and took the chair she gave me,  
 silver-studded, intricately carved,  
 made with a low footrest. The lady Kirkê  
 mixed me a golden cup of honeyed wine,  
 adding in mischief her unholy drug.  
 I drank, and the drink failed. But she came forward  
 aiming a stroke with her long stick, and whispered:  
 'Down in the sty and snore among the rest!'

340

350

Without a word, I drew my sharpened sword  
 and in one bound held it against her throat.  
 She cried out, then slid under to take my knees,  
 catching her breath to say, in her distress:

'What champion, of what country, can you be?  
 Where are your kinsmen and your city?  
 Are you not sluggish with my wine? Ah, wonder!  
 Never a mortal man that drank this cup  
 but when it passed his lips he had succumbed.  
 Hale must your heart be and your tempered will.  
 Odysseus then you are, O great contender,  
 of whom the glittering god with golden wand  
 spoke to me ever, and foretold  
 the black swift ship would carry you from Troy.  
 Put up your weapon in the sheath. We two

360

<sup>7</sup> Usually spelled *moly*.

shall mingle and make love upon our bed.  
So mutual trust may come of play and love.'

To this I said:

'Kirkê, am I a boy,  
that you should make me soft and doting now?  
Here in this house you turned my men to swine;  
now it is I myself you hold, enticing  
into your chamber, to your dangerous bed,  
to take my manhood when you have me stripped.  
I mount no bed of love with you upon it.  
Or swear me first a great oath, if I do,  
you'll work no more enchantment to my harm.'

370

She swore at once, outright, as I demanded,  
and after she had sworn, and bound herself,  
I entered Kirkê's flawless bed of love.

Presently in the hall her maids were busy,  
the nymphs who waited upon Kirkê: four,  
whose cradles were in fountains, under boughs,  
or in the glassy seaward-gliding streams.  
One came with richly colored rugs to throw  
on seat and chairback, over linen covers;  
a second pulled the tables out, all silver,  
and loaded them with baskets all of gold;  
a third mixed wine as tawny-mild as honey  
in a bright bowl, and set out golden cups.  
The fourth came bearing water, and lit a blaze  
under a cauldron. By and by it bubbled,  
and when the dazzling brazen vessel seethed  
she filled a bathtub to my waist, and bathed me,  
pouring a soothing blend on head and shoulders,  
warming the soreness of my joints away.  
When she had done, and smoothed me with sweet oil,  
she put a tunic and a cloak around me  
and took me to a silver-studded chair  
with footrest, all elaborately carven.  
Now came a maid to tip a golden jug  
of water into a silver finger bowl,  
and draw a polished table to my side.  
The larder mistress brought her tray of loaves  
with many savory slices, and she gave  
the best, to tempt me. But no pleasure came;  
I huddled with my mind elsewhere, oppressed.

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Kirkê regarded me, as there I sat  
disconsolate, and never touched a crust.  
Then she stood over me and chided me:

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‘Why sit at table mute, Odysseus?  
Are you mistrustful of my bread and drink?  
Can it be treachery that you fear again,  
after the gods’ great oath I swore for you?’

410

I turned to her at once, and said:

‘Kirkê,  
where is the captain who could bear to touch  
this banquet, in my place? A decent man  
would see his company before him first.  
Put heart in me to eat and drink—you may,  
by freeing my companions. I must see them.’

But Kirkê had already turned away.  
Her long staff in her hand, she left the hall  
and opened up the sty. I saw her enter,  
driving those men turned swine to stand before me.  
She stroked them, each in turn, with some new chrism;<sup>8</sup>  
and then, behold! their bristles fell away,  
the course pelt grown upon them by her drug  
melted away, and they were men again,  
younger, more handsome, taller than before.  
Their eyes upon me, each one took my hands,  
and wild regret and longing pierced them through,  
so the room rang with sobs, and even Kirkê  
pitied that transformation. Exquisite  
the goddess looked as she stood near me, saying:

420

430

‘Son of Laërtês and the gods of old,  
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,  
go to the sea beach and sea-breasting ship;  
drag it ashore, full length upon the land;  
stow gear and stores in rock-holes under cover;  
return; be quick; bring all your dear companions.’

Now, being a man, I could not help consenting.  
So I went down to the sea beach and the ship,  
where I found all my other men on board,  
weeping, in despair along the benches.  
Sometimes in farmyards when the cows return  
well fed from pasture to the barn, one sees  
the pens give way before the calves in tumult,  
breaking through to cluster about their mothers,  
bumping together, bawling. Just that way  
my crew poured round me when they saw me come—  
their faces wet with tears as if they saw  
their homeland, and the crags of Ithaka,

440

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<sup>8</sup>An oil, usually having sacred or supernatural properties.

even the very town where they were born.  
And weeping still they all cried out in greeting:

‘Prince, what joy this is, your safe return!  
Now Ithaka seems here, and we in Ithaka!  
But tell us now, what death befell our friends?’

And, speaking gently, I replied:

‘First we must get the ship high on the shingle,  
and stow our gear and stores in clefts of rock  
for cover. Then come follow me, to see  
your shipmates in the magic house of Kirkê  
eating and drinking, endlessly regaled.’

460

They turned back, as commanded, to this work;  
only one lagged, and tried to hold the others:  
Eurýlokhos it was, who blurted out:

‘Where now, poor remnants? is it devil’s work  
you long for? Will you go to Kirkê’s hall?  
Swine, wolves, and lions she will make us all,  
beasts of her courtyard, bound by her enchantment.  
Remember those the Kyklops held, remember  
shipmates who made that visit with Odysseus!  
The daring man! They died for his foolishness!’

470

When I heard this I had a mind to draw  
the blade that swung against my side and chop him,  
bowling his head upon the ground—kinsman  
or no kinsman, close to me though he was.  
But others came between, saying, to stop me,

‘Prince, we can leave him, if you say the word;  
let him stay here on guard. As for ourselves,  
show us the way to Kirkê’s magic hall.’

480

So all turned inland, leaving shore and ship,  
and Eurýlokhos—he, too, came on behind,  
fearing the rough edge of my tongue. Meanwhile  
at Kirkê’s hands the rest were gently bathed,  
anointed with sweet oil, and dressed afresh  
in tunics and new cloaks with fleecy linings.  
We found them all at supper when we came.  
But greeting their old friends once more, the crew  
could not hold back their tears; and now again  
the rooms rang with sobs. Then Kirkê, loveliest  
of all immortals, came to counsel me:

490

‘Son of Laërtês and the gods of old,  
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,

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enough of weeping fits. I know—I, too—  
 what you endured upon the inhuman sea,  
 what odds you met on land from hostile men.  
 Remain with me, and share my meat and wine;  
 restore behind your ribs those gallant hearts  
 that served you in the old days, when you sailed  
 from stony Ithaka. Now parched and spent,  
 your cruel wandering is all you think of,  
 never of joy, after so many blows.’

500

As we were men we could not help consenting.  
 So day by day we lingered, feasting long  
 on roasts and wine, until a year grew fat.  
 But when the passing months and wheeling seasons  
 brought the long summery days, the pause of summer,  
 my shipmates one day summoned me and said:

‘Captain, shake off this trance, and think of home—  
 if home indeed awaits us,

if we shall ever see  
 your own well-timbered hall on Ithaka.’

510

They made me feel a pang, and I agreed.  
 That day, and all day long, from dawn to sundown,  
 we feasted on roast meat and ruddy wine,  
 and after sunset when the dusk came on  
 my men slept in the shadowy hall, but I  
 went through the dark to Kirkê’s flawless bed  
 and took the goddess’ knees in supplication,  
 urging, as she bent to hear:

‘O Kirkê,  
 now you must keep your promise; it is time.  
 Help me make sail for home. Day after day  
 my longing quickens, and my company  
 give me no peace, but wear my heart away  
 pleading when you are not at hand to hear.’

520

The loveliest of goddesses replied:

‘Son of Laërtês and the gods of old,  
 Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,  
 you shall not stay here longer against your will;  
 but home you may not go  
 unless you take a strange way round and come  
 to the cold homes of Death and pale Perséphonê.<sup>9</sup>  
 You shall hear prophecy from the rapt shade

530

<sup>9</sup> *Death* refers to Hades, ruler of the land of the dead. *Perséphonê* was his consort.

of blind Teirêsias<sup>10</sup> of Thebes, forever  
charged with reason even among the dead;  
to him alone, of all the flitting ghosts,  
Perséphonê has given a mind undarkened.'

At this I felt a weight like stone within me,  
and, moaning, pressed my length against the bed,  
with no desire to see the daylight more.  
But when I had wept and tossed and had my fill  
of this despair, at last I answered her:

540

'Kirkê, who pilots me upon this journey?  
No man has ever sailed to the land of Death.'

That loveliest of goddesses replied:

'Son of Laërtês and the gods of old,  
Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways,  
feel no dismay because you lack a pilot;  
only set up your mast and haul your canvas  
to the fresh blowing North; sit down and steer,  
and hold that wind, even to the bourne of Ocean,  
Perséphonê's deserted strand and grove,  
dusky with poplars and the drooping willow.  
Run through the tide-rip, bring your ship to shore,  
land there, and find the crumbling homes of Death.  
Here, toward the Sorrowing Water, run the streams  
of Wailing, out of Styx, and quenchless Burning—  
torrents<sup>11</sup> that join in thunder at the Rock.  
Here then, great soldier, setting foot obey me:  
dig a well shaft a forearm square; pour out  
libations round it to the unnumbered dead:  
sweet milk and honey, then sweet wine, and last  
clear water, scattering handfulls of white barley.  
Pray now, with all your heart, to the faint dead;  
swear you will sacrifice your finest heifer,  
at home in Ithaka, and burn for them  
her tenderest parts in sacrifice; and vow  
to the lord Teirêsias, apart from all,  
a black lamb, handsomest of all your flock—  
thus to appease the nations of the dead.  
Then slash a black ewe's throat, and a black ram,  
facing the gloom of Erebos;<sup>12</sup> but turn  
your head away toward Ocean. You shall see, now

550

560

570

<sup>10</sup>A famous soothsayer who figures in many Greek myths and legends; see, for example, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

<sup>11</sup>The rivers of Hades. The Sorrowing Water is Acheron; the river of Wailing is Cocytus; the Burning river is Phlegethon.

<sup>12</sup>Part of the realm of Hades; the equivalent of primitive darkness. Also spelled *Erebus*.



souls of the buried dead in shadowy hosts,  
 and now you must call out to your companions  
 to flay those sheep the bronze knife has cut down,  
 for offerings, burnt flesh to those below,  
 to sovereign Death and pale Perséphonê.  
 Meanwhile draw sword from hip, crouch down, ward off  
 the surging phantoms from the bloody pit  
 until you know the presence of Teirêsius.  
 He will come soon, great captain; be it he  
 who gives you course and distance for your sailing  
 homeward across the cold fish-breeding sea.'

580

As the goddess ended, Dawn came stitched in gold.  
 Now Kirkê dressed me in my shirt and cloak,  
 put on a gown of subtle tissue, silvery,  
 then wound a golden belt about her waist  
 and veiled her head in linen,  
 while I went through the hall to rouse my crew.  
 I bent above each one, and gently said:

590

'Wake from your sleep: no more sweet slumber. Come,  
 we sail: the Lady Kirkê so ordains it.'

They were soon up, and ready at that word;  
 but I was not to take my men unharmed  
 from this place, even from this. Among them all  
 the youngest was Elpênor—  
 no mainstay in a fight nor very clever—  
 and this one, having climbed on Kirkê's roof  
 to taste the cool night, fell asleep with wine.  
 Waked by our morning voices, and the tramp  
 of men below, he started up, but missed  
 his footing on the long steep backward ladder  
 and fell that height headlong. The blow smashed  
 the nape cord, and his ghost fled to the dark.  
 But I was outside, walking with the rest,  
 saying:

600

'Homeward you think we must be sailing  
 to our own land; no, elsewhere is the voyage  
 Kirkê has laid upon me. We must go  
 to the cold homes of Death and pale Perséphonê  
 to hear Teirêsius tell of time to come.'

610

They felt so stricken, upon hearing this,  
 they sat down wailing loud, and tore their hair.  
 But nothing came of giving way to grief.  
 Down to the shore and ship at last we went,  
 bowed with anguish, cheeks all wet with tears,  
 to find that Kirkê had been there before us

and tied nearby a black ewe and a ram:  
 she had gone by like air.  
 For who could see the passage of a goddess  
 unless she wished his mortal eyes aware?

620

## BOOK ELEVEN: A GATHERING OF SHADES

We bore down on the ship at the sea's edge  
 and launched her on the salt immortal sea,  
 stepping our mast and spar in the black ship;  
 embarked the ram and ewe and went aboard  
 in tears, with bitter and sore dread upon us.  
 But now a breeze came up for us astern—  
 a canvas-bellying landbreeze, hale shipmate  
 sent by the singing nymph with sun-bright hair;  
 so we made fast the braces, took our thwarts,  
 and let the wind and steersman work the ship  
 with full sail spread all day above our coursing,  
 till the sun dipped, and all the ways grew dark  
 upon the fathomless unresting sea.

10

By night  
 our ship ran onward toward the Ocean's<sup>1</sup> bourne,  
 the realm and region of the Men of Winter,  
 hidden in mist and cloud. Never the flaming  
 eye of Hêlios lights on those men  
 at morning, when he climbs the sky of stars,  
 nor in descending earthward out of heaven;  
 ruinous night being rove<sup>2</sup> over those wretches.  
 We made the land, put ram and ewe ashore,  
 and took our way along the Ocean stream  
 to find the place foretold for us by Kirkê.  
 There Perimêdês and Eurýlokhos  
 pinioned the sacred beasts. With my drawn blade  
 I spaded up the votive pit, and poured  
 libations round it to the unnumbered dead:  
 sweet milk and honey, then sweet wine, and last  
 clear water; and I scattered barley down.  
 Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead,  
 vowing to slaughter my best heifer for them  
 before she calved, at home in Ithaka,  
 and burn the choice bits on the altar fire;  
 as for Teirêsias, I swore to sacrifice  
 a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock.

20

30

<sup>1</sup>The great river believed to encompass the entire (flat) world. In the present passage, Homer locates Hades in the north and not, as is more usual, beneath the surface of the earth.

<sup>2</sup>Fastened; a nautical term. Hêlios is the sun god.

Thus to assuage the nations of the dead  
 I pledged these rites, then slashed the lamb and ewe,  
 letting their black blood stream into the wellpit.  
 Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebos,  
 brides and young men, and men grown old in pain,  
 and tender girls whose hearts were new to grief;  
 many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads,  
 battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear.  
 From every side they came and sought the pit  
 with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear.  
 But presently I gave command to my officers  
 to flay those sheep the bronze cut down, and make  
 burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below—  
 to sovereign Death, to pale Perséphonê.  
 Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep  
 the surging phantoms from the bloody pit  
 till I should know the presence of Teirêsiás.

40

50

One shade came first—Elpênor, of our company,  
 who lay unburied still on the wide earth  
 as we had left him—dead in Kirkê's hall,  
 untouched, unmourned, when other cares compelled us.  
 Now when I saw him there I wept for pity  
 and called out to him:

‘How is this, Elpênor,  
 how could you journey to the western gloom  
 swifter afoot than I in the black lugger?’

60

He sighed, and answered:

‘Son of great Laërtês,  
 Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,  
 bad luck shadowed me, and no kindly power;  
 ignoble death I drank with so much wine.  
 I slept on Kirkê's roof, then could not see  
 the long steep backward ladder, coming down,  
 and fell that height. My neck bone, buckled under,  
 snapped, and my spirit found this well of dark.  
 Now hear the grace I pray for, in the name  
 of those back in the world, not here—your wife  
 and father, he who gave you bread in childhood,  
 and your own child, your only son, Telémakhos,  
 long ago left at home.

70

When you make sail  
 and put these lodgings of dim Death behind,  
 you will moor ship, I know, upon Aiaia Island;  
 there, O my lord, remember me, I pray,  
 do not abandon me unwept, unburied,

to tempt the gods' wrath,<sup>3</sup> while you sail for home;  
 but fire my corpse, and all the gear I had,  
 and build a cairn for me above the breakers—  
 an unknown sailor's mark for men to come.  
 Heap up the mound there, and implant upon it  
 the oar I pulled in life with my companions.'

80

He ceased, and I replied:

'Unhappy spirit,  
 I promise you the barrow and the burial.'

So we conversed, and grimly, at a distance,  
 with my long sword between, guarding the blood,  
 while the faint image of the lad spoke on.

Now came the soul of Antikleía, dead,  
 my mother, daughter of Autólykos,  
 dead now, though living still when I took ship  
 for holy Troy. Seeing this ghost I grieved,  
 but held her off, through pang on pang of tears,  
 till I should know the presence of Teirêsiás.  
 Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward  
 bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me:

90

'Son of Laërtês and the gods of old,  
 Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways,  
 why leave the blazing sun, O man of woe,  
 to see the cold dead and the joyless region?  
 Stand clear, put up your sword;  
 let me but taste of blood, I shall speak true.'

100

At this I stepped aside, and in the scabbard  
 let my long sword ring home to the pommel silver,  
 as he bent down to the sombre blood. Then spoke  
 the prince of those with gift of speech:

'Great captain,  
 a fair wind and the honey lights of home  
 are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;  
 the god who thunders on the land prepares it,  
 not to be shaken from your track, implacable,  
 in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded.  
 One narrow strait may take you through his blows:  
 denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.  
 When you make landfall on Thrinákia<sup>4</sup> first  
 and quit the violet sea, dark on the land

110

<sup>3</sup>The wrath of the gods would be provoked if a body on earth was left unburied and visible.

<sup>4</sup>Sicily. For the outcome of this prophetic warning about molesting the sun god's cattle, see Book XII.

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405

you'll find the grazing herds of Hêlios  
 by whom all things are seen, all speech is known.  
 Avoid those kine, hold fast to your intent,  
 and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaka.  
 But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction  
 for ship and crew. Though you survive alone,  
 bereft of all companions, lost for years,  
 under strange sail shall you come home, to find  
 your own house filled with trouble: insolent men  
 eating your livestock as they court your lady.  
 Aye, you shall make those men atone in blood!  
 But after you have dealt out death—in open  
 combat or by stealth—to all the suitors,  
 go overland on foot, and take an oar,  
 until one day you come where men have lived  
 with meat unsalted, never known the sea,  
 nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows  
 and oars that fledge light hulls for dipping flight.  
 The spot will soon be plain to you, and I  
 can tell you how: some passerby will say,  
 “What winnowing fan<sup>5</sup> is that upon your shoulder?”  
 Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf  
 and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon:  
 a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back,  
 and carry out pure hekatombs at home  
 to all wide heaven's lords, the undying gods,  
 to each in order. Then a seaborne death  
 soft as this hand of mist will come upon you  
 when you are wearied out with rich old age,  
 your country folk in blessed peace around you.  
 And all this shall be just as I foretell.'

120

130

140

When he had done, I said at once,

‘Teirêsias,
 my life runs on then as the gods have spun it.  
 But come, now, tell me this; make this thing clear:  
 I see my mother's ghost among the dead  
 sitting in silence near the blood. Not once  
 has she glanced this way toward her son, nor spoken.  
 Tell me, my lord,  
 may she in some way come to know my presence?'

150

To this he answered:

‘I shall make it clear
 in a few words and simply. Any dead man  
 whom you allow to enter where the blood is

<sup>5</sup>A tool used to separate grain from chaff.

will speak to you, and speak the truth; but those deprived will grow remote again and fade.'

When he had prophesied, Teirêsius' shade  
retired lordly to the halls of Death;  
but I stood fast until my mother stirred,  
moving to sip the black blood; then she knew me  
and called out sorrowfully to me:

160

'Child,  
how could you cross alive into this gloom  
at the world's end?—No sight for living eyes;  
great currents run between, desolate waters,  
the Ocean first, where no man goes a journey  
without ship's timber under him.

Say, now,  
is it from Troy, still wandering, after years,  
that you come here with ship and company?  
Have you not gone at all to Ithaka?  
Have you not seen your lady in your hall?'

170

She put these questions, and I answered her:

'Mother, I came here, driven to the land of death  
in want of prophecy from Teirêsius' shade;  
nor have I yet coasted Akhaia's hills  
nor touched my own land, but have had hard roving  
since first I joined Lord Agamémnon's host  
by sea for Ilion, the wild horse country,  
to fight the men of Troy.

180

But come now, tell me this, and tell me clearly,  
what was the bane that pinned you down in Death?  
Some ravaging long illness, or mild arrows  
a-flying down one day from Artemis?<sup>6</sup>  
Tell me of Father, tell me of the son  
I left behind me; have they still my place,  
my honors, or have other men assumed them?  
Do they not say that I shall come no more?  
And tell me of my wife: how runs her thought,  
still with her child, still keeping our domains,  
or bride again to the best of the Akhaians?'

190

To this my noble mother quickly answered:

'Still with her child indeed she is, poor heart,  
still in your palace hall. Forlorn her nights  
and days go by, her life used up in weeping.  
But no man takes your honored place. Telémakhos  
has care of all your garden plots and fields,

<sup>6</sup>As archer goddess, Artemis provided the gift of painless death. Among other things, she was protectress of the weak.

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and holds the public honor of a magistrate,  
 feasting and being feasted. But your father  
 is country bound and comes to town no more.  
 He owns no bedding, rugs, or fleecy mantles,  
 but lies down, winter nights, among the slaves,  
 rolled in old cloaks for cover, near the embers.  
 Or when the heat comes at the end of summer,  
 the fallen leaves, all round his vineyard plot,  
 heaped into windrows,<sup>7</sup> make his lowly bed.  
 He lies now even so, with aching heart,  
 and longs for your return, while age comes on him.  
 So I, too, pined away, so doom befell me,  
 not that the keen-eyed huntress with her shafts  
 had marked me down and shot to kill me; not  
 that illness overtook me—no true illness  
 wasting the body to undo the spirit;  
 only my loneliness for you, Odysseus,  
 for your kind heart and counsel, gentle Odysseus,  
 took my own life away.'

200

210

I bit my lip,  
 rising perplexed, with longing to embrace her,  
 and tried three times, putting my arms around her,  
 but she went sifting through my hands, impalpable  
 as shadows are, and wavering like a dream.  
 Now this embittered all the pain I bore,  
 and I cried in the darkness:

220

'O my mother,  
 will you not stay, be still, here in my arms,  
 may we not, in this place of Death, as well,  
 hold one another, touch with love, and taste  
 salt tears' relief, the twinge of welling tears?  
 Or is this all hallucination, sent  
 against me by the iron queen, Perséphonê,  
 to make me groan again?'

My noble mother  
 answered quickly:

230

'O my child—alas,  
 most sorely tried of men—great Zeus's daughter,  
 Perséphonê, knits no illusion for you.  
 All mortals meet this judgment when they die.  
 No flesh and bone are here, none bound by sinew,  
 since the bright-hearted pyre consumed them down—  
 the white bones long exanimate<sup>8</sup>—to ash;  
 dreamlike the soul flies, insubstantial.  
 You must crave sunlight soon.

<sup>7</sup>Drifted heaps, as of leaves or snow.

<sup>8</sup>Separated from the vital spirit, or "soul."

Note all things strange  
seen here, to tell your lady in after days.'

240

So went our talk; then other shadows came,  
ladies in company, sent by Perséphonê—  
consorts or daughters of illustrious men—  
crowding about the black blood.

I took thought  
how best to separate and question them,  
and saw no help for it, but drew once more  
the long bright edge of broadsword from my hip,  
that none should sip the blood in company  
but one by one, in order; so it fell  
that each declared her lineage and name.

250

Here was great loveliness of ghosts! I saw  
before them all, that princess of great ladies,  
Tyro,<sup>9</sup> Salmoneus' daughter, as she told me,  
and queen to Krêtheus, a son of Aiolos.  
She had gone daft for the river Enipeus,  
most graceful of all running streams, and ranged  
all day by Enipeus' limpid side,  
whose form the foaming girdler of the islands,  
the god who makes earth tremble, took and so  
lay down with her where he went flooding seaward,  
their bower a purple billow, arching round  
to hide them in a sea-vale, god and lady.  
Now when his pleasure was complete, the god  
spoke to her softly, holding fast her hand:

260

'Dear mortal, go in joy! At the turn of seasons,  
winter to summer, you shall bear me sons;  
no lovemaking of gods can be in vain.  
Nurse our sweet children tenderly, and rear them.  
Home with you now, and hold your tongue, and tell  
no one your lover's name—though I am yours,  
Poseidon, lord of surf that makes earth tremble.'

270

He plunged away into the deep sea swell,  
and she grew big with Pelias and Neleus,  
powerful vassals, in their time, of Zeus.  
Pelias lived on broad Iolkos seaboard  
rich in flocks, and Neleus at Pylos.  
As for the sons borne by that queen of women  
to Krêtheus, their names were Aison, Pherês,  
and Amytháon, expert charioteer.

<sup>9</sup>A queen of Thessaly, enamored of the river god Enipeus, in whose guise Poseidon made love to her. She bore him two sons: Pelias, the usurper-king of Iolkos (see headnote to Euripides' *Medea*), and Neleus (the father of Nestor, who appears earlier in the *Odyssey*).



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Next after her I saw Antiopê,  
 daughter of Ásopos. She too could boast  
 a god for lover, having lain with Zeus  
 and borne two sons to him: Amphion and  
 Zêthos, who founded Thebes, the upper city,  
 and built the ancient citadel. They sheltered  
 no life upon that plain, for all their power,  
 without a fortress wall.

280

And next I saw  
 Amphotrion's true wife, Alkmênê,<sup>10</sup> mother,  
 as all men know, of lionish Heraklê,  
 conceived when she lay close in Zeus's arms;  
 and Megarê, high-hearted Kreon's daughter,  
 wife of Amphotrion's unwearying son.

290

I saw the mother of Oidipous, Epikastê,<sup>11</sup>  
 whose great unwitting deed it was  
 to marry her own son. He took that prize  
 from a slain father; presently the gods  
 brought all to light that made the famous story.  
 But by their fearsome wills he kept his throne  
 in dearest Thebes, all through his evil days,  
 while she descended to the place of Death,  
 god of the locked and iron door. Steep down  
 from a high rafter, throttled in her noose,  
 she swung, carried away by pain, and left him  
 endless agony from a mother's Furies.

300

And I saw Khloris, that most lovely lady,  
 whom for her beauty in the olden time  
 Neleus wooed with countless gifts, and married.  
 She was the youngest daughter of Amphion,  
 son of Iasos. In those days he held  
 power at Orkhómenos, over the Minyai.  
 At Pylos then as queen she bore her children—  
 Nestor, Khromios, Periklýmenos,  
 and Pêro, too, who turned the heads of men  
 with her magnificence. A host of princes  
 from nearby lands came courting her; but Neleus  
 would hear of no one, not unless the suitor  
 could drive the steers of giant Íphiklos  
 from Phylakê—longhorns, broad in the brow,

310

<sup>10</sup> She is a "true wife" because Zeus had adopted the disguise of her husband, Amphotrion, in order to lie with her; the offspring of this union was Heraklê (Hercules).

<sup>11</sup> More commonly known as *Jocasta*. She was mother and wife of the Theban ruler Oidipous (Oedipus). The story, in which he unwittingly kills his father and marries his mother, is best known through Sophocles' drama *Oedipus the King*. Jocasta committed suicide after learning that she had been guilty of incest.

so fierce that one man only, a diviner,<sup>12</sup>  
 offered to round them up. But bitter fate  
 saw him bound hand and foot by savage herdsmen.  
 Then days and months grew full and waned, the year  
 went wheeling round, the seasons came again,  
 before at last the power of Íphiklos,  
 relenting, freed the prisoner, who foretold  
 all things to him. So Zeus's will was done.

320

And I saw Lêda,<sup>13</sup> wife of Tyndareus,  
 upon whom Tyndareus had sired twins  
 indomitable: Kastor, tamer of horses,  
 and Polydeukês, best in the boxing ring.  
 Those two live still, though life-creating earth  
 embraces them: even in the underworld  
 honored as gods by Zeus, each day in turn  
 one comes alive, the other dies again.

330

Then after Lêda to my vision came  
 the wife of Aloeus, Iphimedeia,  
 proud that she once had held the flowing sea  
 and borne him sons, thunderers for a day,  
 the world-renowned Otos and Ephialtês.  
 Never were men on such a scale  
 bred on the plowlands and the grainlands, never  
 so magnificent any, after Orion.  
 At nine years old they towered nine fathoms tall,  
 nine cubits in the shoulders, and they promised  
 furor upon Olympos, heaven broken by battle cries,  
 the day they met the gods in arms.

340

With Ossa's  
 mountain peak they meant to crown Olympos  
 and over Ossa Pelion's<sup>14</sup> forest pile  
 for footholds up the sky. As giants grown  
 they might have done it, but the bright son<sup>15</sup> of Zeus  
 by Lêto of the smooth braid shot them down  
 while they were boys unbearded; no dark curls  
 clustered yet from temples to the chin.

350

<sup>12</sup> Melampous, who was gifted with prophetic power; the giant released him in return for his services as a prophet. In some versions of the myth, Melampous performs the described feats as a service to his brother Bias, who courts and eventually marries Pêro.

<sup>13</sup> Mother, by Zeus, of Helen of Troy. By her mortal husband, Tyndareus, she is also mother of Agamêmnon's wife, Klytaimnéstra, and of the twins named Kastor and Polydeukês (better known in later myth and in astronomy as the "Gemini," Castor and Pollux). The twins are granted life after death but can never be both alive at the same time. In some versions of the myth the twins' father is Zeus.

<sup>14</sup> The mountains Ossa and Pelion are near Olympos, where Zeus and his generation of deities dwell.

<sup>15</sup> Apollo.

Then I saw Phaidra, Prokris; and Ariadnê,  
daughter of Minos,<sup>16</sup> the grim king. Theseus took her  
aboard with him from Krete for the terraced land  
of ancient Athens; but he had no joy of her.  
Artemis killed her on the Isle of Dia  
at a word from Dionysos.

Maira, then,  
and Klymênê, and that detested queen,  
Eríphylê,<sup>17</sup> who betrayed her lord for gold . . .  
but how name all the women I beheld there,  
daughters and wives of kings? The starry night  
waned long before I close.

360

Here, or aboard ship,  
amid the crew, the hour for sleep has come.  
Our sailing is the gods' affair and yours."

Then he fell silent. Down the shadowy hall  
the enchanted banqueters were still. Only  
the queen with ivory pale arms, Arêêtê, spoke,  
saying to all the silent men:

"Phaiákians,  
how does he stand, now, in your eyes, this captain,  
the look and bulk of him, the inward poise?  
He is my guest, but each one shares that honor.  
Be in no haste to send him on his way  
or scant your bounty in his need. Remember  
how rich, by heaven's will, your possessions are."

370

Then Ekhenêos, the old soldier, eldest  
of all Phaiákians, added his word:

"Friends, here was nothing but our own thought spoken,  
the mark hit square. Our duties to her majesty.  
For what is to be said and done,  
we wait upon Alkínoös' command."

380

At this the king's voice rang:

"I so command—  
as sure as it is I who, while I live,

<sup>16</sup> King of Krete (Crete), in some myths regarded as a just man who posthumously became a judge of the dead. In other myths he is a savage ruler who demanded that Athens provide victims for human sacrifice to the monstrous bull called the Minotaur. The Athenian ruler Theseus, husband of Phaidra (Phaedra), killed the Minotaur with the aid of Ariadnê, her sister. After eloping with Ariadnê, Theseus abandoned her on the island of Dia (Naxos). Ariadnê then incurred the anger of the god Dionysos, though in most versions of the myth she wedded him.

<sup>17</sup> Corrupted by Polyneices (son of Oidipous of Thebes) with the gift of a gold necklace, Eríphylê treacherously persuaded her husband, Amphiaraos, to take part in an ill-fated assault on Thebes in which he was killed.

rule the sea rovers of Phaiákia. Our friend  
 longs to put out for home, but let him be  
 content to rest here one more day, until  
 I see all gifts bestowed. And every man  
 will take thought for his launching and his voyage,  
 I most of all, for I am master here.”

390

Odysseus, the great tactician, answered:

“Alkínoös, king and admiration of men,  
 even a year’s delay, if you should urge it,  
 in loading gifts and furnishing for sea—  
 I too could wish it; better far that I  
 return with some largesse of wealth about me—  
 I shall be thought more worthy of love and courtesy  
 by every man who greets me home in Ithaka.”

The king said:

“As to that, one word, Odysseus:  
 from all we see, we take you for no swindler—  
 though the dark earth be patient of so many,  
 scattered everywhere, baiting their traps with lies  
 of old times and of places no one knows.  
 You speak with art, but your intent is honest.  
 The Argive troubles, and your own troubles,  
 you told as a poet would, a man who knows the world.  
 But now come tell me this: among the dead  
 did you meet any of your peers, companions  
 who sailed with you and met their doom at Troy?  
 Here’s a long night—an endless night—before us,  
 and no time yet for sleep, not in this hall.  
 Recall the past deeds and the strange adventures.  
 I could stay up until the sacred Dawn  
 as long as you might wish to tell your story.”

400

410

Odysseus the great tactician answered:

“Alkínoös, king and admiration of men,  
 there is a time for story telling; there is  
 also a time for sleep. But even so,  
 if, indeed, listening be still your pleasure,  
 I must not grudge my part. Other and sadder  
 tales there are to tell, of my companions,  
 of some who came through all the Trojan spears,  
 clangor and groan of war,  
 only to find a brutal death at home—  
 and a bad wife behind it.

420

After Perséphonê,  
 icy and pale, dispersed the shades of women,  
 the soul of Agamémnon, son of Atreus,

came before me, sombre in the gloom,  
 and others gathered round, all who were with him  
 when death and doom struck in Aegísthos' hall.  
 Sipping the black blood, the tall shade perceived me,  
 and cried out sharply, breaking into tears;  
 then tried to stretch his hands toward me, but could not,  
 being bereft of all the reach and power  
 he once felt in the great torque of his arms.  
 Gazing at him, and stirred, I wept for pity,  
 and spoke across to him:

430

‘O son of Atreus,  
 illustrious Lord Marshal, Agamémnon,  
 what was the doom that brought you low in death?  
 Were you at sea, aboard ship, and Poseidon  
 blew up a wicked squall to send you under,  
 or were you cattle-raiding on the mainland  
 or in a fight for some strongpoint, or women,  
 when the foe hit you to your mortal hurt?’

440

But he replied at once:

‘Son of Laërtês,  
 Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways,  
 neither did I go down with some good ship  
 in any gale Poseidon blew, nor die  
 upon the mainland, hurt by foes in battle.  
 It was Aigísthos who designed my death,  
 he and my heartless wife,<sup>18</sup> and killed me, after  
 feeding me, like an ox felled at the trough.  
 That was my miserable end—and with me  
 my fellows butchered, like so many swine  
 killed for some troop, or feast, or wedding banquet  
 in a great landholder's household. In your day  
 you have seen men, and hundreds, die in war,  
 in the bloody press, or downed in single combat,  
 but these were murders you would catch your breath at:  
 think of us fallen, all our throats cut, winebowl  
 brimming, tables laden on every side,  
 while blood ran smoking over the whole floor.  
 In my extremity I heard Kassandra,<sup>19</sup>  
 Priam's daughter, piteously crying  
 as the traitress Klytaimnéstra made to kill her  
 along with me. I heaved up from the ground  
 and got my hands around the blade, but she

450

460

<sup>18</sup> In Agamémnon's version here, his wife (as in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*) bears a greater responsibility for the murder than in the version outlined in Book IV.

<sup>19</sup> A Trojan princess and prophetess. Agamémnon brought her home from Troy as a slave. Also spelled *Cassandra*.

eluded me, that whore. Nor would she close  
 my two eyes<sup>20</sup> as my soul swam to the underworld  
 or shut my lips. There is no being more fell,  
 more bestial than a wife in such an action,  
 and what an action that one planned!  
 The murder of her husband and her lord.  
 Great god, I thought my children and my slaves  
 at least would give me welcome. But that woman,  
 plotting a thing so low, defiled herself  
 and all her sex, all women yet to come,  
 even those few who may be virtuous.'

470

He paused then, and I answered:

'Foul and dreadful.  
 That was the way that Zeus who views the wide world  
 vented his hatred on the sons of Atreus—  
 intrigues of women, even from the start.

480

Myriads  
 died by Helen's fault, and Klytaimnéstra  
 plotted against you half the world away.'

And he at once said:

'Let it be a warning  
 even to you. Indulge a woman never,  
 and never tell her all you know. Some things  
 a man may tell, some he should cover up.  
 Not that I see a risk for you, Odysseus,  
 of death at your wife's hands. She is too wise,  
 too clear-eyed, sees alternatives too well,  
 Penélopê, Ikários' daughter—  
 that young bride whom we left behind—think of it!—  
 when we sailed off to war. The baby boy  
 still cradled at her breast—now he must be  
 a grown man, and a lucky one. By heaven,  
 you'll see him yet, and he'll embrace his father  
 with old fashioned respect, and rightly.

490

My own  
 lady never let me glut my eyes  
 on my own son, but bled me to death first.  
 One thing I will advise, on second thought;  
 stow it away and ponder it.

500

Land your ship  
 in secret on your island; give no warning.  
 The day of faithful wives is gone forever.

<sup>20</sup> That is, she would not perform the customary funeral rites.

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415

But tell me, have you any word at all  
about my son's<sup>21</sup> life? Gone to Orkhómenos  
or sandy Pylos, can he be? Or waiting  
with Meneláos in the plain of Sparta?  
Death on earth has not yet taken Orestês.'

But I could only answer:

'Son of Atreus

510

why do you ask these questions of me? Neither  
news of home have I, nor news of him,  
alive or dead. And empty words are evil.'

So we exchanged our speech, in bitterness,  
weighed down by grief, and tears welled in our eyes,  
when there appeared the spirit of Akhilleus,  
son of Peleus; then Patróklos' shade,  
and then Antílokhos, and then Aias,  
first among all the Danaans in strength  
and bodily beauty, next to prince Akhilleus. 520  
Now that great runner, grandson of Aíakhos,  
recognized me and called across to me:

'Son of Laërtês and the gods of old,  
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,  
old knife, what next? What greater feat remains  
for you to put your mind on, after this?  
How did you find your way down to the dark  
where these dimwitted dead are camped forever,  
the after images of used-up men?'

I answered:

'Akhilleus, Peleus' son, strongest of all 530  
among the Akhaians, I had need of foresight  
such as Teirêsius alone could give  
to help me, homeward bound for the crags of Ithaka.  
I have not yet coasted Akhaia, not yet  
touched my land; my life is all adversity.  
But was there ever a man more blest by fortune  
than you, Akhilleus? Can there ever be?  
We ranked you with immortals in your lifetime,  
we Argives did, and here your power is royal  
among the dead men's shades. Think, then, Akhilleus: 540  
you need not be so pained by death.'

To this

he answered swiftly:

<sup>21</sup>Agamémnon asks about Orestês, who avenged his father's murder.

'Let me hear no smooth talk  
 of death from you, Odysseus, light of councils.  
 Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand  
 for some poor country man, on iron rations,  
 than lord it over all the exhausted dead.  
 Tell me, what news of the prince my son:<sup>22</sup> did he  
 come after me to make a name in battle  
 or could it be he did not? Do you know  
 if rank and honor still belong to Peleus<sup>23</sup> 550  
 in the towns of the Myrmidons? Or now, may be,  
 Hellas and Phthia<sup>24</sup> spurn him, seeing old age  
 fetters him, hand and foot. I cannot help him  
 under the sun's rays, cannot be that man  
 I was on Troy's wide seaboard, in those days  
 when I made bastion for the Argives  
 and put an army's best men in the dust.  
 Were I but whole again, could I go now  
 to my father's house, one hour would do to make  
 my passion and my hands no man could hold 560  
 hateful to any who shoulder him aside.'

Now when he paused I answered:

'Of all that—  
 of Peleus' life, that is—I know nothing;  
 but happily I can tell you the whole story  
 of Neoptólemos, as you require.  
 In my own ship I brought him out from Skyros  
 to join the Akhaians under arms.  
 And I can tell you,  
 in every council before Troy thereafter  
 your son spoke first and always to the point;  
 no one but Nestor and I could out-debate him. 570  
 And when we formed against the Trojan line  
 he never hung back in the mass, but ranged  
 far forward of his troops—no man could touch him  
 for gallantry. Aye, scores went down before him  
 in hard fights man to man. I shall not tell  
 all about each, or name them all—the long  
 roster of enemies he put out of action,  
 taking the shock of charges on the Argives.  
 But what a champion his lance ran through  
 in Eurýpulos<sup>25</sup> the son of Télephos! Keteians 580  
 in throngs around that captain also died—

<sup>22</sup> Neoptólemos, or Pyrrhus, who was brought to the Trojan War after his father's death and killed Priam, the Trojan king.

<sup>23</sup> Akhilleus' father.

<sup>24</sup> Greece and Peleus' kingdom.

<sup>25</sup> Leader of a force persuaded to join the war in support of the Trojans.



all because Priam's gifts had won his mother  
to send the lad to battle; and I thought  
Memnon alone in splendor ever outshone him.

But one fact more: while our picked Argive crew  
still rode that hollow horse Epeios built,  
and when the whole thing lay with me, to open  
the trapdoor of the ambushcade or not,  
at that point our Danaan lords and soldiers  
wiped their eyes, and their knees began to quake,  
all but Neoptólemos. I never saw  
his tanned cheek change color or his hand  
brush one tear away. Rather he prayed me,  
hand on hilt, to sortie, and he gripped  
his tough spear, bent on havoc for the Trojans.  
And when we had pierced and sacked Priam's tall city  
he loaded his choice plunder and embarked  
with no scar on him; not a spear had grazed him  
nor the sword's edge in close work—common wounds  
one gets in war. Arès in his mad fits  
knows no favorites.'

590

600

But I said no more,  
for he had gone off striding the field of asphodel,<sup>26</sup>  
the ghost of our great runner, Akhilleus Aíakidês,  
glorying in what I told him of his son.

Now other souls of mournful dead stood by,  
each with his troubled questioning, but one  
remained alone, apart: the son of Télamon,  
Aías, it was—the great shade burning still<sup>27</sup>  
because I had won favor on the beachhead  
in rivalry over Akhilleus' arms.  
The Lady Thetis, mother of Akhilleus,  
laid out for us the dead man's battle gear,  
and Trojan children, with Athena,  
named the Danaan fittest to own them. Would  
god I had not borne the palm that day!  
For earth took Aías then to hold forever,  
the handsomest and, in all feats of war,  
noblest of the Danaans after Akhilleus.  
Gently therefore I called across to him:

610

'Aías, dear son of royal Télamon,  
you would not then forget, even in death,

620

<sup>26</sup> A flower, possibly a variety of narcissus.

<sup>27</sup> After the death of Akhilleus, the "greater" Aías (Ajax) and Odysseus had been rival claimants for Akhilleus' weapons; when the arms were awarded to Odysseus, Aías killed himself.

your fury with me over those accurst  
 calamitous arms?—and so they were, a bane  
 sent by the gods upon the Argive host.  
 For when you died by your own hand we lost  
 a tower, formidable in war. All we Akhaians  
 mourn you forever, as we do Akhilleus;  
 and no one bears the blame but Zeus.  
 He fixed that doom for you because he frowned  
 on the whole expedition of our spearmen.  
 My lord, come nearer, listen to our story!  
 Conquer your indignation and your pride.’

630

But he gave no reply, and turned away,  
 following other ghosts toward Erebos.  
 Who knows if in that darkness he might still  
 have spoken, and I answered?

But my heart  
 longed, after this, to see the dead elsewhere.

And now there came before my eyes Minos,  
 the son of Zeus, enthroned, holding a golden staff,  
 dealing out justice among ghostly pleaders  
 arrayed about the broad doorways of Death.

640

And then I glimpsed Orion, the huge hunter,  
 gripping his club, studded with bronze, unbreakable,  
 with wild beasts he had overpowered in life  
 on lonely mountainsides, now brought to bay  
 on fields of asphodel.

And I saw Títyos,  
 the son of Gaia, lying  
 abandoned over nine square rods of plain.  
 Vultures, hunched above him, left and right,  
 rifling his belly, stabbed into the liver,  
 and he could never push them off.

650

This hulk  
 had once committed rape of Zeus’s mistress,  
 Lêto, in her glory, when she crossed  
 the open grass of Panopeus toward Pytho.

Then I saw Tántalos<sup>28</sup> put to the torture:  
 in a cool pond he stood, lapped round by water  
 clear to the chin, and being athirst he burned  
 to slake his dry weasand<sup>29</sup> with drink, though drink  
 he would not ever again. For when the old man

<sup>28</sup> The sin for which Tántalos (Tantalus) is being punished here is uncertain—possibly it is for revealing the gods’ secrets, possibly for his serving his son’s flesh to the gods (see the headnote to Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*).

<sup>29</sup> Throat.

put his lips down to the sheet of water  
 it vanished round his feet, gulped underground,  
 and black mud baked there in a wind from hell.  
 Boughs, too, drooped low above him, big with fruit,  
 pear trees, pomegranates, brilliant apples,  
 luscious figs, and olives ripe and dark;  
 but if he stretched his hand for one, the wind  
 under the dark sky tossed the bough beyond him.

660

Then Sísyphos<sup>30</sup> in torment I beheld  
 being roustabout to a tremendous boulder.  
 Leaning with both arms braced and legs driving,  
 he heaved it toward a height, and almost over,  
 but then a Power spun him round and sent  
 the cruel boulder bounding again to the plain.  
 Whereon the man bent down again to toil,  
 dripping sweat, and the dust rose overhead.  
 Next I saw manifest the power of Heraklês—  
 a phantom,<sup>31</sup> this, for he himself has gone  
 feasting amid the gods, reclining soft  
 with Hêbê of the ravishing pale ankles,  
 daughter of Zeus and Hêra, shod in gold.  
 But, in my vision, all the dead around him  
 cried like affrighted birds; like Night itself  
 he loomed with naked bow and nocked arrow  
 and glances terrible as continual archery.  
 My hackles rose at the gold swordbelt he wore  
 sweeping across him: gorgeous intaglio  
 of savage bears, boars, lions with wildfire eyes,  
 swordfights, battle, slaughter, and sudden death—  
 the smith who had that belt in him, I hope  
 he never made, and never will make, another.  
 The eyes of the vast figure rested on me,  
 and of a sudden he said in kindly tones:

670

680

690

‘Son of Laërtês and the gods of old,  
 Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,  
 under a cloud, you too? Destined to grinding  
 labors like my own in the sunny world?  
 Son of Kroníon Zeus or not, how many  
 days I sweated out, being bound in servitude  
 to a man far worse than I, a rough master!<sup>32</sup>  
 He made me hunt this place one time  
 to get the watchdog of the dead: no more

700

<sup>30</sup>A Corinthian ruler, noted during his lifetime for cunning treachery. More commonly spelled *Sisyphus*.

<sup>31</sup>Heraklês, or Hercules, was taken to heaven after his death. He was thereafter wedded to the goddess Hêbê.

<sup>32</sup>Eurystheus, in whose service Heraklês was forced to perform many superhumanly difficult feats, including the capture of Cerberus, the dog who guarded the realm of the dead.

perilous task, he thought, could be; but I  
brought back that beast, up from the underworld;  
Hermês and grey-eyed Athena showed the way.'

And Heraklês, down the vistas of the dead,  
faded from sight; but I stood fast, awaiting  
other great souls who perished in times past.  
I should have met, then, god-begotten Theseus  
and Peirithoös,<sup>33</sup> whom both I longed to see,  
but first came shades in thousands, rustling  
in a pandemonium of whispers, blown together,  
and the horror took me that Perséphonê  
had brought from darker hell some saurian death's head.<sup>34</sup>  
I whirled then, made for the ship, shouted to crewmen  
to get aboard and cast off the stern hawsers,  
an order soon obeyed. They took their thwarts,  
and the ship went leaping toward the stream of Ocean  
first under oars, then with a following wind.

710

## BOOK TWELVE: SEA PERILS AND DEFEAT

The ship sailed on, out of the Ocean Stream,  
riding a long swell on the open sea  
for the Island of Aiaia.

Summering Dawn  
has dancing grounds there, and the Sun his rising;<sup>1</sup>  
but still by night we beached on a sand shelf  
and waded in beyond the line of breakers  
to fall asleep, awaiting the Day Star.

When the young Dawn with finger tips of rose  
made heaven bright, I sent shipmates to bring  
Elpênor's body from the house of Kirkê.  
We others cut down timber on the foreland,  
on a high point, and built his pyre of logs,  
then stood by weeping while the flame burnt through  
corse and equipment.

10

Then we heaped his barrow,  
lifting a gravestone on the mound, and fixed  
his light but unwarped oar against the sky.  
These were our rites in memory of him. Soon, then,  
knowing us back from the Dark Land, Kirkê came  
freshly adorned for us, with handmaids bearing  
loaves, roast meats, and ruby-colored wine.

20

<sup>33</sup>A friend of Theseus.

<sup>34</sup>Reptilian specter.

<sup>1</sup>Aiaia is distinguished from the sunless land of the dead which they have just left behind.

She stood among us in immortal beauty  
jesting:

‘Hearts of oak, did you go down  
alive into the homes of Death? One visit  
finishes all men but yourselves, twice mortal!  
Come, here is meat and wine, enjoy your feasting  
for one whole day; and in the dawn tomorrow  
you shall put out to sea. Sailing directions,  
landmarks, perils, I shall sketch for you, to keep you  
from being caught by land or water  
in some black sack of trouble.’

In high humor

and ready for carousal, we agreed;  
so all that day until the sun went down  
we feasted on roast meat and good red wine,  
till after sunset, at the fall of night,  
the men dropped off to sleep by the stern hawsers.  
She took my hand then, silent in the hush,  
drew me apart, made me sit down, and lay  
beside me, softly questioning, as I told  
all I had seen, from first to last.

30

Then said the Lady Kirkê:

‘So: all those trials are over.

Listen with care

to this, now, and a god will arm your mind.  
Square in your ship’s path are Seirênês,<sup>2</sup> crying  
beauty to bewitch men coasting by;  
woe to the innocent who hears that sound!  
He will not see his lady nor his children  
in joy, crowding about him, home from sea;  
the Seirênês will sing his mind away  
on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones  
of dead men rotting in a pile beside them  
and flayed skins shrivel around the spot.

40

Steer wide;

keep well to seaward; plug your oarsmen’s ears  
with beeswax kneaded soft; none of the rest  
should hear that song.

50

But if you wish to listen,

let the men tie you in the lugger,<sup>3</sup> hand  
and foot, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,  
so you may hear those harpies’<sup>4</sup> thrilling voices;  
shout as you will, begging to be untied,

<sup>2</sup>In Grecian fable, women who could lure men to their destruction through their entrancing song. Also spelled *Sirens*.

<sup>3</sup>A small boat.

<sup>4</sup>In this passage, the word “harpies” means “temptresses.” They are not the obscene and filthy females who appear in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Book III.

your crew must only twist more line around you  
and keep their stroke up, till the singers fade.  
What then? One of two courses you may take,  
and you yourself must weigh them. I shall not  
plan the whole action for you now, but only  
tell you of both.

60

Ahead are beetling rocks  
and dark blue glancing Amphitritê,<sup>5</sup> surging,  
roars around them. Prowling Rocks,<sup>6</sup> or Drifters,  
the gods in bliss have named them—named them well.  
Not even birds can pass them by, not even  
the timorous doves that bear ambrosia  
to Father Zeus; caught by downdrafts, they die  
on rockwall smooth as ice.

Each time, the Father  
wafts a new courier to make up his crew.  
Still less can ships get searoom of these Drifters,  
whose boiling surf, under high fiery winds,  
carries tossing wreckage of ships and men.  
Only one ocean-going craft, the far-famed  
Argo,<sup>7</sup> made it, sailing from Aiêta;  
but she, too, would have crashed on the big rocks  
if Hêra had not pulled her through, for love  
of Iêson, her captain.

70

A second course<sup>8</sup>  
lies between headlands. One is a sharp mountain  
piercing the sky, with stormcloud round the peak  
dissolving never, not in the brightest summer,  
to show heaven's azure there, nor in the fall.  
No mortal man could scale it, nor so much  
as land there, not with twenty hands and feet,  
so sheer the cliffs are—as of polished stone.  
Midway that height, a cavern full of mist  
opens toward Erebos and evening. Skirting  
this in the lugger, great Odysseus,  
your master bowman, shooting from the deck,  
would come short of the cavemouth with his shaft;  
but that is the den of Skylla, where she yaps  
abominably, a newborn whelp's cry,

80

90

<sup>5</sup> Sea nymph; consort of Poseidon. She is the female personification of the ocean.

<sup>6</sup> Possibly the Planctae, islands at the north end of what is now called the Strait of Messina, which divides Sicily from the Italian mainland.

<sup>7</sup> The fabled ship, manned by great heroes and captained by Iêson (Jason), that sailed to capture the Golden Fleece.

<sup>8</sup> The following lines describe the two fabled monsters Skylla (Scylla) and Kharybdis (Charybdis), who presumably personify the dangers of the Strait of Messina. Skylla is a treacherous reef, Kharybdis a whirlpool. The proverbial phrase "between Scylla and Charybdis" has come to mean a situation in which one has to choose between equally dreadful alternatives.

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though she is huge and monstrous. God or man,  
 no one could look on her in joy. Her legs—  
 and there are twelve—are like great tentacles,  
 unjointed, and upon her serpent necks  
 are borne six heads like nightmares of ferocity,  
 with triple serried rows of fangs and deep  
 gullets of black death. Half her length, she sways  
 her heads in air, outside her horrid cleft,  
 hunting the sea around that promontory  
 for dolphins, dogfish, or what bigger game  
 thundering Amphitritê feeds in thousands.  
 And no ship's company can claim  
 to have passed her without loss and grief; she takes,  
 from every ship, one man for every gullet.

100

The opposite point seems more a tongue of land  
 you'd touch with a good bowshot, at the narrows.  
 A great wild fig, a shaggy mass of leaves,  
 grows on it, and Kharybdis lurks below  
 to swallow down the dark sea tide. Three times  
 from dawn to dusk she spews it up  
 and sucks it down again three times, a whirling  
 maelstrom; if you come upon her then  
 the god who makes earth tremble could not save you.  
 No, hug the cliff of Skylla, take your ship  
 through on a racing stroke. Better to mourn  
 six men than lose them all, and the ship, too.'

110

So her advice ran; but I faced her, saying:

120

'Only instruct me, goddess, if you will,  
 how, if possible, can I pass Kharybdis,  
 or fight off Skylla when she raids my crew?'

Swiftly that loveliest goddess answered me:

'Must you have battle in your heart forever?  
 The bloody toil of combat? Old contender,  
 will you not yield to the immortal gods?  
 That nightmare cannot die, being eternal  
 evil itself—horror, and pain, and chaos;  
 there is no fighting her, no power can fight her,  
 all that avails is flight.

130

Lose headway there  
 along that rockface while you break out arms,  
 and she'll swoop over you, I fear, once more,  
 taking one man again for every gullet.  
 No, no, put all your backs into it, row on;  
 invoke Blind Force, that bore this scourge of men,  
 to keep her from a second strike against you.

Then you will coast Thrinákia,<sup>9</sup> the island  
 where Hêlios' cattle graze, fine herds, and flocks  
 of goodly sheep. The herds and flocks are seven,  
 with fifty beasts in each.

140

No lambs are dropped,  
 or calves, and these fat cattle never die.  
 Immortal, too, their cowherds are—their shepherds—  
 Phaëthousa and Lampetía, sweetly braided  
 nymphs that divine Neaira bore  
 to the overlord of high noon, Hêlios.  
 These nymphs their gentle mother bred and placed  
 upon Thrinákia, the distant land,  
 in care of flocks and cattle for their father.

Now give those kine a wide berth, keep your thoughts  
 intent upon your course for home,  
 and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaka.  
 But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction  
 for ship and crew.

150

Rough years then lie between  
 you and your homecoming, alone and old,  
 the one survivor, all companions lost.'

As Kirkê spoke, Dawn mounted her golden throne,  
 and on the first rays Kirkê left me, taking  
 her way like a great goddess up the island.  
 I made straight for the ship, roused up the men  
 to get aboard and cast off at the stern.  
 They scrambled to their places by the rowlocks  
 and all in line dipped oars in the grey sea.  
 But soon an off-shore breeze blew to our liking—  
 a canvas-bellying breeze, a lusty shipmate  
 sent by the singing nymph with sunbright hair.  
 So we made fast the braces, and we rested,  
 letting the wind and steersman work the ship.  
 The crew being now silent before me, I  
 addressed them, sore at heart:

160

'Dear friends,  
 more than one man, or two, should know those things  
 Kirkê foresaw for us and shared with me,  
 so let me tell her forecast: then we die  
 with our eyes open, if we are going to die,  
 or know what death we baffle if we can. Seirênês  
 weaving a haunting song over the sea  
 we are to shun, she said, and their green shore

170

<sup>9</sup>Sicily.



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all sweet with clover; yet she urged that I  
 alone should listen to their song. Therefore  
 you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,  
 erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,  
 and if I shout and beg to be untied,  
 take more turns of the rope to muffle me.'

180

I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast,<sup>10</sup>  
 while our good ship made time, bound outward down  
 the wind for the strange island of Seirênês.  
 Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm  
 came over all the sea, as though some power  
 lulled the swell.

The crew were on their feet  
 briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,  
 each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades  
 and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved  
 a massive cake of beeswax into bits  
 and rolled them in my hands until they softened—  
 no long task, for a burning heat came down  
 from Hêlios, lord of high noon. Going forward  
 I carried wax along the line, and laid it  
 thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb  
 amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,  
 and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,  
 as we came smartly within hailing distance,  
 the two Seirênês, noting our fast ship  
 off their point, made ready, and they sang:

190

200

*This way, oh turn your bows,  
 Akhaia's glory,  
 As all the world allows—  
 Moor and be merry.*

*Sweet coupled airs we sing.  
 No lonely seafarer  
 Holds clear of entering  
 Our green mirror.*

210

*Pleased by each purling note  
 Like honey twining  
 From her throat and my throat,  
 Who lies a-pining?*

<sup>10</sup> Odysseus shrewdly failed to mention the inevitable devouring of some of his men by Skylla.

*Sea rovers here take joy  
 Voyaging onward,  
 As from our song of Troy  
 Greybeard and rower-boy  
 Goeth more learned.*

220

*All feats on that great field  
 In the long warfare,  
 Dark days the bright gods willed,  
 Wounds you bore there,*

*Argos' old soldiery  
 On Troy beach teeming,  
 Charmed out of time we see.  
 No life on earth can be  
 Hid from our dreaming.*

The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water  
 made me crave to listen, and I tried to say  
 'Untie me!' to the crew, jerking my brows;  
 but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimêdês  
 got to his feet, he and Eurýlokhos,  
 and passed more line about, to hold me still.  
 So all rowed on, until the Seirênês  
 dropped under the sea rim, and their singing  
 dwindled away.

230

My faithful company  
 rested on their oars now, peeling off  
 the wax that I had laid thick on their ears;  
 then set me free.

240

But scarcely had that island  
 faded in blue air than I saw smoke  
 and white water, with sound of waves in tumult—  
 a sound the men heard, and it terrified them.  
 Oars flew from their hands; the blades went knocking  
 wild alongside till the ship lost way,  
 with no oarblades to drive her through the water.

Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern,  
 trying to put heart into them, standing over  
 every oarsman, saying gently,

'Friends,  
 have we never been in danger before this?  
 More fearsome, is it now, than when the Kyklops  
 penned us in his cave? What power he had!  
 Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits  
 to find a way out for us?

250

Now I say  
by hook or crook this peril too shall be  
something that we remember.

Heads up, lads!  
We must obey the orders as I give them.  
Get the oarshafts in your hands, and lay back  
hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.  
Zeus help us pull away before we founder.  
You at the tiller, listen, and take in  
all that I say—the rudders are your duty;  
keep her out of the combers and the smoke;  
steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we  
fetch up in the smother, and you drown us.’

260

That was all, and it brought them round to action.  
But as I sent them on toward Skylla, I  
told them nothing, as they could do nothing.  
They would have dropped their oars again, in panic,  
to roll for cover under the decking. Kirkê’s  
bidding against arms had slipped my mind,  
so I tied on my cuirass and took up  
two heavy spears, then made my way along  
to the foredeck—thinking to see her first from there,  
the monster of the grey rock, harboring  
torment for my friends. I strained my eyes  
upon that cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere  
could I catch sight of her.

270

And all this time,  
in travail, sobbing, gaining on the current,  
we rowed into the strait—Skylla to port  
and on our starboard beam Kharybdis, dire  
gorge of the salt sea tide. By heaven! when she  
vomited, all the sea was like a cauldron  
seething over intense fire, when the mixture  
suddenly heaves and rises.

280

The shot spume  
soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain.

But when she swallowed the sea water down  
we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard  
the rock bellowing all around, and dark  
sand raged on the bottom far below.  
My men all blanched against the gloom, our eyes  
were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear  
of being devoured.

290

Then Skylla made her strike,  
whisking six of my best men from the ship.  
I happened to glance aft at ship and oarsmen  
and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling

high overhead. Voices came down to me  
in anguish, calling my name for the last time.

A man surfcasting on a point of rock  
for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod  
to drop the sinker and the bait far out,  
will hook a fish and rip it from the surface  
to dangle wriggling through the air:

300

so these

were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.

She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den,  
in the dire grapple, reaching still for me—  
and deathly pity ran me through  
at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered,  
questing the passes of the strange sea.

We rowed on.

310

The Rocks were now behind; Kharybdis, too,  
and Skylla dropped astern.

Then we were coasting

the noble island of the god, where grazed  
those cattle with wide brows, and bounteous flocks  
of Hêlios, lord of noon, who rides high heaven.

From the black ship, far still at sea, I heard  
the lowing of the cattle winding home  
and sheep bleating; and heard, too, in my heart  
the words of blind Teirêsius of Thebes  
and Kirkê of Aiaia: both forbade me  
the island of the world's delight, the Sun.

320

So I spoke out in gloom to my companions:

‘Shipmates, grieving and weary though you are,  
listen: I had forewarning from Teirêsius  
and Kirkê, too; both told me I must shun  
this island of the Sun, the world's delight.  
Nothing but fatal trouble shall we find here.  
Pull away, then, and put the land astern.’

That strained them to the breaking point, and, cursing,  
Eurýlokhos cried out in bitterness:

330

‘Are you flesh and blood, Odysseus, to endure  
more than a man can? Do you never tire?  
God, look at you, iron is what you're made of.  
Here we all are, half dead with weariness,  
falling asleep over the oars, and you  
say “No landing”—no firm island earth  
where we could make a quiet supper. No:  
pull out to sea, you say, with night upon us—

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429

just as before, but wandering now, and lost.  
Sudden storms can rise at night and swamp  
ships without a trace.

340

Where is your shelter  
if some stiff gale blows up from south or west—  
the winds that break up shipping every time  
when seamen flout the lord gods' will? I say  
do as the hour demands and go ashore  
before black night comes down.

We'll make our supper  
alongside, and at dawn put out to sea.'

Now when the rest said 'Aye' to this, I saw  
the power of destiny devising ill.  
Sharply I answered, without hesitation:

350

'Eurýlokhos, they are with you to a man.  
I am alone, outmatched.

Let this whole company  
swear me a great oath: Any herd of cattle  
or flock of sheep here found shall go unharmed;  
no one shall slaughter out of wantonness  
ram or heifer; all shall be content  
with what the goddess Kirkê put aboard.'

They fell at once to swearing as I ordered,  
and when the round of oaths had ceased, we found  
a halfmoon bay to beach and moor the ship in,  
with a fresh spring nearby. All hands ashore  
went about skillfully getting up a meal.

360

Then, after thirst and hunger, those besiegers,  
were turned away, they mourned for their companions  
plucked from the ship by Skylla and devoured,  
and sleep came soft upon them as they mourned.

In the small hours of the third watch, when stars  
that shone out in the first dusk of evening  
had gone down to their setting, a giant wind  
blew from heaven, and clouds driven by Zeus  
shrouded land and sea in a night of storm;  
so, just as Dawn with finger tips of rose  
touched the windy world, we dragged our ship  
to cover in a grotto, a sea cave  
where nymphs had chairs of rock and sanded floors.  
I mustered all the crew and said:

370

'Old shipmates,  
our stores are in the ship's hold, food and drink;  
the cattle here are not for our provision,  
or we pay dearly for it.

Fierce the god is  
 who cherishes these heifers and these sheep:  
 Hêlios; and no man avoids his eye.'

380

To this my fighters nodded. Yes. But now  
 we had a month of onshore gales, blowing  
 day in, day out—south winds, or south by east.  
 As long as bread and good red wine remained  
 to keep the men up, and appease their craving,  
 they would not touch the cattle. But in the end,  
 when all the barley in the ship was gone,  
 hunger drove them to scour the wild shore  
 with angling hooks, for fishes and sea fowl,  
 whatever fell into their hands; and lean days  
 wore their bellies thin.

390

The storms continued.  
 So one day I withdrew to the interior  
 to pray the gods in solitude, for hope  
 that one might show me some way of salvation.  
 Slipping away, I struck across the island  
 to a sheltered spot, out of the driving gale.  
 I washed my hands there, and made supplication  
 to the gods who own Olympos, all the gods—  
 but they, for answer, only closed my eyes  
 under slow drops of sleep.

400

Now on the shore Eurýlokhos  
 made his insidious plea:

'Comrades,' he said,  
 'You've gone through everything; listen to what I say.  
 All deaths are hateful to us, mortal wretches,  
 but famine is the most pitiful, the worst  
 end that a man can come to.

Will you fight it?  
 Come, we'll cut out the noblest of these cattle  
 for sacrifice to the gods who own the sky;  
 and once at home, in the old country of Ithaka,  
 if ever that day comes—  
 we'll build a costly temple and adorn it  
 with every beauty for the Lord of Noon.  
 But if he flares up over his heifers lost,  
 wishing our ship destroyed, and if the gods  
 make cause with him, why, then I say: Better  
 open your lungs to a big sea once for all  
 than waste to skin and bones on a lonely island!'

410

Thus Eurýlokhos; and they murmured 'Aye!'  
 trooping away at once to round up heifers.  
 Now, that day tranquil cattle with broad brows

420

were grazing near, and soon the men drew up  
 around their chosen beasts in ceremony.  
 They plucked the leaves that shone on a tall oak—  
 having no barley meal—to strew the victims,  
 performed the prayers and ritual, knifed the kine  
 and flayed each carcass, cutting thighbones free  
 to wrap in double folds of fat. These offerings,  
 with strips of meat, were laid upon the fire.  
 Then, as they had no wine, they made libation  
 with clear spring water, broiling the entrails first;  
 and when the bones were burnt and tripes shared,  
 they spitted the carved meat.

430

Just then my slumber  
 left me in a rush, my eyes opened,  
 and I went down the seaward path. No sooner  
 had I caught sight of our black hull, than savory  
 odors of burnt fat eddied around me;  
 grief took hold of me, and I cried aloud:

‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,  
 you made me sleep away this day of mischief!  
 O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour!  
 Here they sat, and a great work they contrived.’

440

Lampetía<sup>11</sup> in her long gown meanwhile  
 had borne swift word to the Overlord of Noon:

‘They have killed your kine.’

And the Lord Hêlios  
 burst into angry speech amid the immortals:

‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,  
 punish Odysseus’ men! So overweening,  
 now they have killed my peaceful kine, my joy  
 at morning when I climbed the sky of stars,  
 and evening, when I bore westward from heaven.  
 Restitution or penalty they shall pay—  
 and pay in full—or I go down forever  
 to light the dead men in the underworld.’

450

Then Zeus who drives the stormcloud made reply:

‘Peace, Hêlios: shine on among the gods,  
 shine over mortals in the fields of grain.  
 Let me throw down one white-hot bolt, and make  
 splinters of their ship in the winedark sea.’

<sup>11</sup>One of the nymphs who tended her father Hêlios’ cattle.

—Kalypso later told me of this exchange,  
 as she declared that Hermês had told her.  
 Well, when I reached the sea cave and the ship,  
 I faced each man, and had it out; but where  
 could any remedy be found? There was none.  
 The silken beeves of Hêlios were dead.  
 The gods, moreover, made queer signs appear:  
 cowhides began to crawl, and beef, both raw  
 and roasted, lowed like kine upon the spits.

460

Now six full days my gallant crew could feast  
 upon the prime beef they had marked for slaughter  
 from Hêlios' herd; and Zeus, the son of Kronos,  
 added one fine morning.

470

All the gales  
 had ceased, blown out, and with an offshore breeze  
 we launched again, stepping the mast and sail,  
 to make for the open sea. Astern of us  
 the island coastline faded, and no land  
 showed anywhere, but only sea and heaven,  
 when Zeus Kroníon piled a thunderhead  
 above the ship, while gloom spread on the ocean.  
 We held our course, but briefly. Then the squall  
 struck whining from the west, with gale force, breaking  
 both forestays, and the mast came toppling aft  
 along the ship's length, so the running rigging  
 showered into the bilge.

480

On the after deck  
 the mast had hit the steersman a slant blow  
 bashing the skull in, knocking him overside,  
 as the brave soul fled the body, like a diver.  
 With crack on crack of thunder, Zeus let fly  
 a bolt against the ship, a direct hit,  
 so that she bucked, in reeking fumes of sulphur,  
 and all the men were flung into the sea.  
 They came up 'round the wreck, bobbing a while  
 like petrels<sup>12</sup> on the waves.

490

No more seafaring  
 homeward for these, no sweet day of return;  
 the god had turned his face from them.

I clambered

fore and aft my hulk until a comber  
 split her, keel from ribs, and the big timber  
 floated free; the mast, too, broke away.  
 A backstay floated dangling from it, stout  
 rawhide rope, and I used this for lashing  
 mast and keel together. These I straddled,  
 riding the frightful storm.

500

<sup>12</sup> Seabirds.



Nor had I yet  
 seen the worst of it: for now the west wind  
 dropped, and a southeast gale came on—one more  
 twist of the knife—taking me north again,  
 straight for Kharybdis. All that night I drifted,  
 and in the sunrise, sure enough, I lay  
 off Skylla mountain and Kharybdis deep.  
 There, as the whirlpool drank the tide, a billow  
 tossed me, and I sprang for the great fig tree,  
 catching on like a bat under a bough. 510  
 Nowhere had I to stand, no way of climbing,  
 the root and bole being far below, and far  
 above my head the branches and their leaves,  
 massed, overshadowing Kharybdis pool.  
 But I clung grimly, thinking my mast and keel  
 would come back to the surface when she spouted.  
 And ah! how long, with what desire, I waited!  
 till, at the twilight hour, when one who hears  
 and judges pleas in the marketplace all day  
 between contentious men, goes home to supper, 520  
 the long poles at last reared from the sea.

Now I let go with hands and feet, plunging  
 straight into the foam beside the timbers,  
 pulled astride, and rowed hard with my hands  
 to pass by Skylla. Never could I have passed her  
 had not the Father of gods and men, this time,  
 kept me from her eyes. Once through the strait,  
 nine days I drifted in the open sea  
 before I made shore, buoyed up by the gods,  
 upon Ogýgia Isle. The dangerous nymph 530  
 Kalypso lives and sings there, in her beauty,  
 and she received me, loved me.

But why tell  
 the same tale that I told last night in hall  
 to you and to your lady? Those adventures  
 made a long evening, and I do not hold  
 with tiresome repetition of a story.”

## BOOK THIRTEEN: ONE MORE STRANGE ISLAND

He ended it, and no one stirred or sighed  
 in the shadowy hall, spellbound as they all were,  
 until Alkínoös answered:

“When you came  
 here to my strong home, Odysseus, under  
 my tall roof, headwinds were left behind you.

Clear sailing shall you have now, homeward now,  
however painful all the past.

My lords,  
ever my company, sharing the wine of Council,  
the songs of the blind harper, hear me further:  
garments are folded for our guest and friend  
in the smooth chest, and gold  
in various shaping of adornment lies  
with other gifts, and many, brought by our peers;  
let each man add his tripod and deep-bellied  
cauldron: we'll make levy upon the realm  
to pay us for the loss each bears in this."

10

Alkínoös had voiced their own hearts' wish.  
All gave assent, then home they went to rest;  
but young Dawn's finger tips of rose, touching  
the world, roused them to make haste to the ship,  
each with his gift of noble bronze. Alkínoös,  
their ardent king, stepping aboard himself,  
directed the stowing under the cross planks,  
not to cramp the long pull of the oarsmen.  
Going then to the great hall, lords and crew  
prepared for feasting.

20

As the gods' anointed,  
Alkínoös made offering on their behalf—an ox  
to Zeus beyond the stormcloud, Kronos' son,  
who rules the world. They burnt the great thighbones  
and feasted at their ease on fresh roast meat,  
as in their midst the godlike harper sang—  
Demódokos, honored by all that realm.

30

Only Odysseus  
time and again turned craning toward the sun,  
impatient for day's end, for the open sea.  
Just as a farmer's hunger grows, behind  
the bolted plow and share, all day afield,  
drawn by his team of winedark oxen: sundown  
is benison for him, sending him homeward  
stiff in the knees from weariness, to dine;  
just so, the light on the sea rim gladdened Odysseus,  
and as it dipped he stood among the Phaiákians,  
turned to Alkínoös, and said:

40

"O king and admiration of your people,  
give me fare well, and stain the ground with wine;  
my blessings on you all! This hour brings  
fulfillment to the longing of my heart:  
a ship for home, and gifts the gods of heaven  
make so precious and so bountiful.

After this voyage  
god grant I find my own wife in my hall  
with everyone I love best, safe and sound!

50

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435

And may you, settled in your land, give joy  
to wives and children; may the gods reward you  
every way, and your realm be free of woe."

Then all the voices rang out, "Be it so!"  
and "Well spoken!" and "Let our friend make sail!"

Whereon Alkínoös gave command to his crier:

"Fill the winebowl, Pontónoös: mix and serve:  
go the whole round, so may this company  
invoke our Father Zeus, and bless our friend,  
seaborne tonight and bound for his own country."

60

Pontónoös mixed the honey-hearted wine  
and went from chair to chair, filling the cups;  
then each man where he sat poured out his offering  
to the gods in bliss who own the sweep of heaven.  
With gentle bearing Odysseus rose, and placed  
his double goblet in Arêtê's hands,  
saying:

"Great Queen, farewell;  
be blest through all your days till age comes on you,  
and death, last end for mortals, after age.  
Now I must go my way. Live in felicity,  
and make this palace lovely for your children,  
your countrymen, and your king, Alkínoös."

70

Royal Odysseus turned and crossed the door sill,  
a herald at his right hand, sent by Alkínoös  
to lead him to the sea beach and the ship.  
Arêtê, too, sent maids in waiting after him,  
one with a laundered great cloak and a tunic,  
a second balancing the crammed sea chest,  
a third one bearing loaves and good red wine.  
As soon as they arrived alongside, crewmen  
took these things for stowage under the planks,  
their victualling and drink; then spread a rug  
and linen cover on the after deck,  
where Lord Odysseus might sleep in peace.  
Now he himself embarked, lay down, lay still,  
while oarsmen took their places at the rowlocks  
all in order. They untied their hawser,  
passing it through a drilled stone ring; then bent  
forward at the oars and caught the sea  
as one man, stroking.

80

Slumber, soft and deep  
like the still sleep of death, weighed on his eyes  
as the ship hove seaward.

90

How a four horse team

whipped into a run on a straightaway  
 consumes the road, surging and surging over it!  
 So ran that craft and showed her heels to the swell,  
 her bow wave riding after, and her wake  
 on the purple night-sea foaming.

Hour by hour  
 she held her pace; not even a falcon wheeling  
 downwind, swiftest bird, could stay abreast of her  
 in that most arrowy flight through open water,  
 with her great passenger—godlike in counsel,  
 he that in twenty years had borne such blows  
 in his deep heart, breaking through ranks in war  
 and waves on the bitter sea.

100

This night at last  
 he slept serene, his long-tried mind at rest.

When on the East the sheer bright star arose  
 that tells of coming Dawn, the ship made landfall  
 and came up islandward in the dim of night.

Phorkys, the old sea baron, has a cove  
 here in the realm of Ithaka; two points  
 of high rock, breaking sharply, hunch around it,  
 making a haven from the plunging surf  
 that gales at sea roll shoreward. Deep inside,  
 at mooring range, good ships can ride unmoored.  
 There, on the inmost shore, an olive tree  
 throws wide its boughs over the bay; nearby  
 a cave of dusky light is hidden

110

for those immortal girls, the Naiadês.<sup>1</sup>

Within are winebowls hollowed in the rock  
 and amphorai; bees bring their honey here;  
 and there are looms of stone, great looms, whereon  
 the weaving nymphs make tissues, richly dyed  
 as the deep sea is; and clear springs in the cavern  
 flow forever. Of two entrances,  
 one on the north allows descent of mortals,  
 but beings out of light alone, the undying,  
 can pass by the south slit; no men come there.

120

This cove the sailors knew. Here they drew in,  
 and the ship ran half her keel's length up the shore,  
 she had such way on her from those great oarsmen.  
 Then from their benches forward on dry ground  
 they disembarked. They hoisted up Odysseus  
 unruffled on his bed, under his cover,  
 handing him overside still fast asleep,

130

<sup>1</sup>Sea nymphs.

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to lay him on the sand; and they unloaded  
 all those gifts the princes of Phaiákia  
 gave him, when by Athena's heart and will  
 he won his passage home. They bore this treasure  
 off the beach, and piled it close around  
 the roots of the olive tree, that no one passing  
 should steal Odysseus' gear before he woke.  
 That done, they pulled away on the homeward track.

140

But now the god that shakes the islands, brooding  
 over old threats of his against Odysseus,  
 approached Lord Zeus to learn his will. Said he:

"Father of gods, will the bright immortals ever  
 pay me respect again, if mortals do not?—  
 Phaiákians, too, my own blood kin?

I thought  
 Odysseus should in time regain his homeland;  
 I had no mind to rob him of that day—  
 no, no; you promised it, being so inclined;  
 only I thought he should be made to suffer  
 all the way.

150

But now these islanders  
 have shipped him homeward, sleeping soft, and put him  
 On Ithaka, with gifts untold  
 of bronze and gold, and fine cloth to his shoulder.  
 Never from Troy had he borne off such booty  
 if he had got home safe with all his share."

Then Zeus who drives the stormcloud answered, sighing:

"God of horizons, making earth's underbeam  
 tremble, why do you grumble so?  
 The immortal gods show you no less esteem,  
 and the rough consequence would make them slow  
 to let barbs fly at their eldest and most noble.  
 But if some mortal captain, overcome  
 by his own pride of strength, cuts or defies you,  
 are you not always free to take reprisal?  
 Act as your wrath requires and as you will."

160

Now said Poseidon, god of earthquake:

"Aye,  
 god of the stormy sky, I should have taken  
 vengeance, as you say, and on my own;  
 but I respect, and would avoid, your anger.  
 The sleek Phaiákian cutter, even now,  
 has carried out her mission and glides home  
 over the misty sea. Let me impale her,

170

end her voyage, and end all ocean-crossing  
with passengers, then heave a mass of mountain  
in a ring around the city."

Now Zeus who drives the stormcloud said benignly:

"Here is how I should do it, little brother: 180  
when all who watch upon the wall have caught  
sight of the ship, let her be turned to stone—  
an island like a ship, just off the bay.  
Mortals may gape at that for generations!  
But throw no mountain round the sea port city."

When he heard this, Poseidon, god of earthquake,  
departed for Skheria, where the Phaiákians  
are born and dwell. Their ocean-going ship  
he saw already near, heading for harbor;  
so up behind her swam the island-shaker 190  
and struck her into stone, rooted in stone, at one  
blow of his palm,

then took to the open sea.  
Those famous ship handlers, the Phaiákians,  
gazed at each other, murmuring in wonder;  
you could have heard one say:

"Now who in thunder  
has anchored, moored that ship in the seaway,  
when everyone could see her making harbor?"

The god had wrought a charm beyond their thought.  
But soon Alkínoös made them hush, and told them:

"This present doom upon the ship—on me— 200  
my father prophesied in the olden time.  
If we gave safe conveyance to all passengers  
we should incur Poseidon's wrath, he said,  
whereby one day a fair ship, manned by Phaiákians,  
would come to grief at the god's hands; and great  
mountains would hide our city from the sea.  
So my old father forecast.

Use your eyes:  
these things are even now being brought to pass.  
Let all here abide by my decree:

We make 210  
an end henceforth of taking, in our ships,  
castaways who may land upon Skheria;  
and twelve choice bulls we dedicate at once  
to Lord Poseidon, praying him of his mercy  
not to heave up a mountain round our city."

In fearful awe they led the bulls to sacrifice

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and stood about the altar stone, those captains,  
peers of Phaiákia, led by their king in prayer  
to Lord Poseidon.

Meanwhile, on his island,  
his father's shore, that kingly man, Odysseus,  
awoke, but could not tell what land it was  
after so many years away; moreover,  
Pallas Athena, Zeus's daughter, poured  
a grey mist all around him, hiding him  
from common sight—for she had things to tell him  
and wished no one to know him, wife or townsmen,  
before the suitors paid up for their crimes.

220

The landscape then looked strange, unearthly strange  
to the Lord Odysseus: paths by hill and shore,  
glimpses of harbors, cliffs, and summer trees.  
He stood up, rubbed his eyes, gazed at his homeland,  
and swore, slapping his thighs with both his palms,  
then cried aloud:

230

“What am I in for now?  
Whose country have I come to this time? Rough  
savages and outlaws, are they, or  
godfearing people, friendly to castaways?  
Where shall I take these things? Where take myself,  
with no guide, no directions? These should be  
still in Phaiákian hands, and I uncumbered,  
free to find some other openhearted  
prince who might be kind and give me passage.  
I have no notion where to store this treasure;  
first-comer's trove it is, if I leave it here.  
My lords and captains of Phaiákia  
were not those decent men they seemed, not honorable,  
landing me in this unknown country—no,  
by god, they swore to take me home to Ithaka  
and did not! Zeus attend to their reward,  
Zeus, patron of petitioners, who holds  
all other mortals under his eye; he takes  
payment from betrayers!

240

I'll be busy.  
I can look through my gear. I shouldn't wonder  
if they pulled out with part of it on board.”

250

He made a tally of his shining pile—  
tripods, cauldrons, cloaks, and gold—and found  
he lacked nothing at all.

And then he wept,  
despairing, for his own land, trudging down  
beside the endless wash of the wide, wide sea,

weary and desolate as the sea. But soon  
 Athena came to him from the nearby air,  
 putting a young man's figure on—a shepherd, 260  
 like a king's son, all delicately made.  
 She wore a cloak, in two folds off her shoulders,  
 and sandals bound upon her shining feet.  
 A hunting lance lay in her hands.

At sight of her  
 Odysseus took heart, and he went forward  
 to greet the lad, speaking out fair and clear:

"Friend, you are the first man I've laid eyes on  
 here in this cove. Greetings. Do not feel  
 alarmed or hostile, coming across me; only  
 receive me into safety with my stores. 270  
 Touching your knees I ask it, as I might  
 ask grace of a god.

O sir, advise me,  
 what is this land and realm, who are the people?  
 Is it an island all distinct, or part  
 of the fertile mainland, sloping to the sea?"

To this grey-eyed Athena answered:

"Stranger,  
 you must come from the other end of nowhere,  
 else you are a great booby, having to ask  
 what place this is. It is no nameless country.  
 Why, everyone has heard of it, the nations 280  
 over on the dawn side, toward the sun,  
 and westerners in cloudy lands of evening.  
 No one would use this ground for training horses,  
 it is too broken, has no breadth of meadow;  
 but there is nothing meager about the soil,  
 the yield of grain is wondrous, and wine, too,  
 with drenching rains and dewfall.

There's good pasture  
 for oxen and for goats, all kinds of timber,  
 and water all year long in the cattle ponds.  
 For these blessings, friend, the name of Ithaka 290  
 has made its way even as far as Troy—  
 and they say Troy lies far beyond Akhaia."

Now Lord Odysseus, the long-enduring,  
 laughed in his heart, hearing his land described  
 by Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus who rules  
 the veering stormwind; and he answered her  
 with ready speech—not that he told the truth,  
 but, just as she did, held back what he knew,  
 weighing within himself at every step  
 what he made up to serve his turn.



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Said he:

300

“Far away in Krete I learned of Ithaka—  
 in that broad island over the great ocean.  
 And here I am now, come myself to Ithaka!  
 Here is my fortune with me. I left my sons  
 an equal part, when I shipped out. I killed  
 Orsílokhos, the courier, son of Idómeneus.<sup>2</sup>  
 This man could beat the best cross country runners  
 in Krete, but he desired to take away  
 my Trojan plunder, all I had fought and bled for,  
 cutting through ranks in war and the cruel sea.  
 Confiscation is what he planned; he knew  
 I had not cared to win his father’s favor  
 as a staff officer in the field at Troy,  
 but led my own command.

310

I acted: I  
 hit him with a spearcast from a roadside  
 as he came down from the open country. Murky  
 night shrouded all heaven and the stars.  
 I made that ambush with one man at arms.  
 We were unseen. I took his life in secret,  
 finished him off with my sharp sword. That night  
 I found asylum on a ship off shore  
 skippered by gentlemen of Phoinikia;<sup>3</sup> I gave  
 all they could wish, out of my store of plunder,  
 for passage, and for landing me at Pylos  
 or Elis Town, where the Epeioi are in power.  
 Contrary winds carried them willy-nilly  
 past that coast; they had no wish to cheat me,  
 but we were blown off course.

320

Here, then, by night  
 we came, and made this haven by hard rowing.  
 All famished, but too tired to think of food,  
 each man dropped in his tracks after the landing,  
 and I slept hard, being wearied out. Before  
 I woke today, they put my things ashore  
 on the sand here beside me where I lay,  
 then reembarked for Sidon, that great city.  
 Now they are far at sea, while I am left  
 forsaken here.”

330

At this the grey-eyed goddess  
 Athena smiled, and gave him a caress,  
 her looks being changed now, so she seemed a woman,  
 tall and beautiful and no doubt skilled  
 at weaving splendid things. She answered briskly:

340

<sup>2</sup> The king of Krete (Crete).

<sup>3</sup> Phoenicia; an area of the Syrian coast noted for commerce. Sidon was one of its principal cities.

“Whoever gets around you must be sharp  
and guileful as a snake; even a god  
might bow to you in ways of dissimulation.  
You! You chameleon!  
Bottomless bag of tricks! Here in your own country  
would you not give your stratagems a rest  
or stop spellbinding for an instant?  
You play a part as if it were your own tough skin.

No more of this, though. Two of a kind, we are,  
contrivers, both. Of all men now alive  
you are the best in plots and story telling.  
My own fame is for wisdom among the gods—  
deceptions, too.

350

Would even you have guessed  
that I am Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus,  
I that am always with you in times of trial,  
a shield to you in battle, I who made  
the Phaiákians befriend you, to a man?  
Now I am here again to counsel with you—  
but first to put away those gifts the Phaiákians  
gave you at departure—I planned it so.  
Then I can tell you of the gall and wormwood  
it is your lot to drink in your own hall.  
Patience, iron patience, you must show;  
so give it out to neither man nor woman  
that you are back from wandering. Be silent  
under all injuries, even blows from men.”

360

His mind ranging far, Odysseus answered:

“Can mortal man be sure of you on sight,  
even a sage, O mistress of disguises?  
Once you were fond of me—I am sure of that—  
years ago, when we Akhaians made  
war, in our generation, upon Troy.  
But after we had sacked the shrines of Priam  
and put to sea, God scattered the Akhaians;  
I never saw you after that, never  
knew you aboard with me, to act as shield  
in grievous times—not till you gave me comfort  
in the rich hinterland of the Phaiákians  
and were yourself my guide into that city.

370

380

Hear me now in your father’s name, for I  
cannot believe that I have come to Ithaka.  
It is some other land. You made that speech  
only to mock me, and to take me in.  
Have I come back in truth to my home island?”

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To this the grey-eyed goddess Athena answered:

“Always the same detachment! That is why  
I cannot fail you, in your evil fortune,  
coolheaded, quick, well-spoken as you are!  
Would not another wandering man, in joy,  
make haste home to his wife and children? Not  
you, not yet. Before you hear their story  
you will have proof about your wife.

390

I tell you,  
she still sits where you left her, and her days  
and nights go by forlorn, in lonely weeping.  
For my part, never had I despaired; I felt  
sure of your coming home, though all your men  
should perish; but I never cared to fight  
Poseidon, Father’s brother, in his baleful  
rage with you for taking his son’s eye.

400

Now I shall make you see the shape of Ithaka.  
Here is the cove the sea lord Phorkys owns,  
there is the olive spreading out her leaves  
over the inner bay, and there the cavern  
dusky and lovely, hallowed by the feet  
of those immortal girls, the Naiadês—  
the same wide cave under whose vault you came  
to honor them with hekatombs—and there  
Mount Neion, with his forest on his back!”

She had dispelled the mist, so all the island  
stood out clearly. Then indeed Odysseus’  
heart stirred with joy. He kissed the earth,  
and lifting up his hands prayed to the nymphs:

410

“O slim shy Naiadês, young maids of Zeus,  
I had not thought to see you ever again!

O listen smiling  
to my gentle prayers, and we’ll make offering  
plentiful as in the old time, granted I  
live, granted my son grows tall, by favor  
of great Athena, Zeus’s daughter,  
who gives the winning fighter his reward!”

420

The grey-eyed goddess said directly:

“Courage;  
and let the future trouble you no more.  
We go to make a cache now, in the cave,  
to keep your treasure hid. Then we’ll consider  
how best the present action may unfold.”

The goddess turned and entered the dim cave,  
 exploring it for crannies, while Odysseus  
 carried up all the gold, the fire-hard bronze,  
 and well-made clothing the Phaiákians gave him.  
 Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus the storm king,  
 placed them, and shut the cave mouth with a stone,  
 and under the old grey olive tree those two  
 sat down to work the suitors death and woe.  
 Grey-eyed Athena was the first to speak, saying:

430

“Son of Laërtês and the gods of old,  
 Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways,  
 put your mind on a way to reach and strike  
 a crowd of brazen upstarts.

Three long years  
 they have played master in your house: three years  
 trying to win your lovely lady, making  
 gifts as though betrothed. And she? Forever  
 grieving for you, missing your return,  
 she has allowed them all to hope, and sent  
 messengers with promises to each—  
 though her true thoughts are fixed elsewhere.”

440

At this

the man of ranging mind, Odysseus, cried:

“So hard beset! An end like Agamémnon’s  
 might very likely have been mine, a bad end,  
 bleeding to death in my own hall. You forestalled it,  
 goddess, by telling me how the land lies.  
 Weave me a way to pay them back! And you, too,  
 take your place with me, breathe valor in me  
 the way you did that night when we Akhaïans  
 unbound the bright veil from the brow of Troy!  
 O grey-eyed one, fire my heart and brace me!  
 I’ll take on fighting men three hundred strong  
 if you fight at my back, immortal lady!”

450

The grey-eyed goddess Athena answered him:

“No fear but I shall be there; you’ll go forward  
 under my arm when the crux comes at last.  
 And I foresee your vast floor stained with blood,  
 spattered with brains of this or that tall suitor  
 who fed upon your cattle.

460

Now, for a while,  
 I shall transform you; not a soul will know you,  
 the clear skin of your arms and legs shriveled,  
 your chestnut hair all gone, your body dressed  
 in sacking that a man would gag to see,  
 and the two eyes, that were so brilliant, dirtied—

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contemptible, you shall seem to your enemies,  
as to the wife and son you left behind.

470

But join the swineherd first—the overseer  
of all your swine, a good soul now as ever,  
devoted to Penélopê and your son.  
He will be found near Raven’s Rock and the well  
of Arethousa,<sup>4</sup> where the swine are pastured,  
rooting for acorns to their hearts’ content,  
drinking the dark still water. Boarflesh grows  
pink and fat on that fresh diet. There  
stay with him, and question him, while I  
am off to the great beauty’s land of Sparta,  
to call your son Telémakhos home again—  
for you should know, he went to the wide land  
of Lakedaimon, Meneláos’ country,  
to learn if there were news of you abroad.”

480

Odysseus answered:

“Why not tell him, knowing  
my whole history, as you do? Must he  
traverse the barren sea, he too, and live  
in pain, while others feed on what is his?”

At this the grey-eyed goddess Athena said:

“No need for anguish on that lad’s account.  
I sent him off myself, to make his name  
in foreign parts—no hardship in the bargain,  
taking his ease in Meneláos’ mansion,  
lapped in gold.

490

The young bucks here, I know,  
lie in wait for him in a cutter, bent  
on murdering him before he reaches home.  
I rather doubt they will. Cold earth instead  
will take in her embrace a man or two  
of those who fed so long on what is his.”

Speaking no more, she touched him with her wand,  
shriveled the clear skin of his arms and legs,  
made all his hair fall out, cast over him  
the wrinkled hide of an old man, and bleared  
both his eyes, that were so bright. Then she  
clapped an old tunic, a foul cloak, upon him,  
tattered, filthy, stained by greasy smoke,  
and over that a mangy big buck skin.

500

<sup>4</sup>The fountain identified with the water nymph Arethousa (Arethusa) is more often located in Sicily.

A staff she gave him, and a leaky knapsack  
with no strap but a loop of string.

Now then,  
their colloquy at an end, they went their ways—  
Athena toward illustrious Lakedaimon  
Far over sea, to join Odysseus' son.

510

## BOOK FOURTEEN: HOSPITALITY IN THE FOREST

He went up from the cove through wooded ground,  
taking a stony trail into the high hills, where  
the swineherd lived, according to Athena.  
Of all Odysseus' field hands in the old days  
this forester cared most for the estate;  
and now Odysseus found him  
in a remote clearing, sitting inside the gate  
of a stockade he built to keep the swine  
while his great lord was gone.

Working alone,  
far from Penélopê and old Laërtès,  
he had put up a fieldstone hut and timbered it  
with wild pear wood. Dark hearts of oak he split  
and trimmed for a high palisade around it,  
and built twelve sties adjoining in this yard  
to hold the livestock. Fifty sows with farrows  
were penned in each, bedded upon the earth,  
while the boars lay outside—fewer by far,  
as those well-fatted were for the suitors' table,  
fine pork, sent by the swineherd every day.  
Three hundred sixty now lay there at night,  
guarded by dogs—four dogs like wolves, one each  
for the four lads the swineherd reared and kept  
as under-herdsmen.

10

When Odysseus came,  
the good servant sat shaping to his feet  
oxhide for sandals, cutting the well-cured leather.  
Three of his young men were afield, pasturing  
herds in other woods; one he had sent  
with a fat boar for tribute into town,  
the boy to serve while the suitors got their fill.

20

The watch dogs, when they caught sight of Odysseus,  
faced him, a snarling troop, and pelted out  
viciously after him. Like a tricky beggar  
he sat down plump, and dropped his stick. No use.  
They would have rolled him in the dust and torn him

30

there by his own steading<sup>1</sup> if the swineherd  
 had not sprung up and flung his leather down,  
 making a beeline for the open. Shouting,  
 throwing stone after stone,  
 he made them scatter; then turned to his lord  
 and said:

“You might have got a ripping, man!  
 Two shakes more and a pretty mess for me  
 you could have called it, if you had the breath.  
 As though I had not trouble enough already,  
 given me by the gods, my master gone,  
 true king that he was. I hang on here,  
 still mourning for him, raising pigs of his  
 to feed foreigners, and who knows where the man is,  
 in some far country among strangers! Aye—  
 if he is living still, if he still sees the light of day.

40

Come to the cabin. You’re a wanderer too.  
 You must eat something, drink some wine, and tell me  
 where you are from and the hard times you’ve seen.”

50

The forester now led him to his hut  
 and made a couch for him, with tips of fir  
 piled for a mattress under a wild goat skin,  
 shaggy and thick, his own bed covering.

Odysseus,

in pleasure at this courtesy, gently said:  
 “May Zeus and all the gods give you your heart’s desire  
 for taking me in so kindly, friend.”

Eumaios—

O my swineherd!<sup>2</sup>—answered him:

“Tush, friend,

rudeness to a stranger is not decency,  
 poor though he may be, poorer than you.

60

All wanderers

and beggars come from Zeus. What we can give  
 is slight but well-meant—all we dare. You know  
 that is the way of slaves,<sup>3</sup> who live in dread  
 of masters—new ones like our own.

<sup>1</sup> Farmhouse or farm.

<sup>2</sup> This kind of direct address by the poet, expressing affection, is used in the *Odyssey* only for Eumaios.

<sup>3</sup> Though owned by masters as in modern forms of slavery, and often obtained by forced capture, “slaves” in the aristocratic Homeric times were often more like trusted and responsible servants than like maltreated property. Eumaios and Telémakhos’ old nurse Eurýkleia, described elsewhere in the *Odyssey*, are representative examples.

I told you  
 the gods, long ago, hindered our lord's return.  
 He had a fondness for me, would have pensioned me  
 with acres of my own, a house, a wife  
 that other men admired and courted; all  
 gifts good-hearted kings bestow for service,  
 for a life work the bounty of god has prospered—  
 for it does prosper here, this work I do.  
 Had he grown old in his own house, my master  
 would have rewarded me. But the man's gone.  
 God curse the race of Helen and cut it down,  
 that wrung the strength out of the knees of many!  
 And he went, too—for the honor of Agamémnon  
 he took ship overseas for the wild horse country  
 of Troy, to fight the Trojans.”

70

This being told,  
 he tucked his long shirt up inside his belt  
 and strode into the pens for two young porkers.  
 He slaughtered them and singed them at the fire,  
 flayed and quartered them, and skewered the meat  
 to broil it all; then gave it to Odysseus  
 hot on the spits. He shook out barley meal,  
 took a winebowl of ivy wood and filled it,  
 and sat down facing him, with a gesture, saying:

80

“There is your dinner, friend, the pork of slaves.  
 Our fat shoats are all eaten by the suitors,  
 cold-hearted men, who never spare a thought  
 for how they stand in the sight of Zeus. The gods  
 living in bliss are fond of no wrongdoing,  
 but honor discipline and right behavior.  
 Even the outcasts of the earth, who bring  
 piracy from the sea, and bear off plunder  
 given by Zeus in shiploads—even those men  
 deep in their hearts tremble for heaven's eye.  
 But the suitors, now, have heard some word, some oracle  
 of my lord's death, being so unconcerned  
 to pay court properly or to go about their business.  
 All they want is to prey on his estate,  
 proud dogs; they stop at nothing. Not a day  
 goes by, and not a night comes under Zeus,  
 but they make butchery of our beeves and swine—  
 not one or two beasts at a time, either.  
 As for swilling down wine, they drink us dry.  
 Only a great domain like his could stand it—  
 greater than any on the dusky mainland  
 or here in Ithaka. Not twenty heroes  
 in the whole world were as rich as he. I know:  
 I could count it all up; twelve herds in Elis,

90

100

110



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as many flocks, as many herds of swine,  
 and twelve wide-ranging herds of goats, as well,  
 attended by his own men or by others—  
 out at the end of the island, eleven herds  
 are scattered now, with good men looking after them,  
 and every herdsman, every day, picks out  
 a prize ram to hand over to those fellows.  
 I too as overseer, keeper of swine,  
 must go through all my boars and send the best.”

120

While he ran on, Odysseus with zeal  
 applied himself to the meat and wine, but inwardly  
 his thought shaped woe and ruin for the suitors.  
 When he had eaten all that he desired  
 and the cup he drank from had been filled again  
 with wine—a welcome sight—,  
 he spoke, and the words came light upon the air:

“Who is this lord who once acquired you,  
 so rich, so powerful, as you describe him?  
 You think he died for Agamémnon’s honor.  
 Tell me his name: I may have met someone  
 of that description in my time. Who knows?  
 Perhaps only the immortal gods could say  
 if I should claim to have seen him: I have roamed  
 about the world so long.”

130

The swineherd answered

as one who held a place of trust:

“Well, man,  
 his lady and his son will put no stock  
 in any news of him brought by a rover.  
 Wandering men tell lies for a night’s lodging,  
 for fresh clothing; truth doesn’t interest them.  
 Every time some traveller comes ashore  
 he has to tell my mistress his pretty tale,  
 and she receives him kindly, questions him,  
 remembering her prince, while the tears run  
 down her cheeks—and that is as it should be  
 when a woman’s husband has been lost abroad.  
 I suppose you, too, can work your story up  
 at a moment’s notice, given a shirt or cloak.  
 No: long ago wild dogs and carrion  
 birds, most like, laid bare his ribs on land  
 where life had left him. Or it may be, quick fishes  
 picked him clean in the deep sea, and his bones  
 lie mounded over in sand upon some shore.  
 One way or another, far from home he died,  
 a bitter loss, and pain, for everyone,  
 certainly for me. Never again shall I

140

150

have for my lot a master mild as he was  
 anywhere—not even with my parents  
 at home, where I was born and bred. I miss them  
 less than I do him—though a longing comes  
 to set my eyes on them in the old country.  
 No, it is the lost man I ache to think of—  
 Odysseus. And I speak the name respectfully,  
 even if he is not here. He loved me, cared for me.  
 I call him dear my lord, far though he be.”

160

Now royal Odysseus, who had borne the long war,  
 spoke again:

“Friend, as you are so dead sure  
 he will not come—and so mistrustful, too—  
 let me not merely talk, as others talk,  
 but swear to it: your lord is now at hand.  
 And I expect a gift for this good news  
 when he enters his own hall. Till then I would not  
 take a rag, no matter what my need.  
 I hate as I hate Hell’s own gate that weakness  
 that makes a poor man into a flatterer.  
 Zeus be my witness, and the table garnished  
 for true friends, and Odysseus’ own hearth—  
 by heaven, all I say will come to pass!  
 He will return, and he will be avenged  
 on any who dishonor his wife and son.”

170

180

Eumaios—O my swineherd!—answered him:

“I take you at your word, then: you shall have  
 no good news gift from me. Nor will Odysseus  
 enter his hall. But peace! drink up your wine.  
 Let us talk now of other things. No more  
 imaginings. It makes me heavy-hearted  
 when someone brings my master back to mind—  
 my own true master.

No, by heaven,  
 let us have no oaths! But if Odysseus  
 can come again god send he may! My wish  
 is that of Penélopê and old Laërtês  
 and Prince Telémakhos.

190

Ah, he’s another  
 to be distressed about—Odysseus’ child,  
 Telémakhos! By the gods’ grace he grew  
 like a tough sapling, and I thought he’d be  
 no less a man than his great father—strong  
 and admirably made; but then someone,  
 god or man, upset him, made him rash,  
 so that he sailed away to sandy Pylos  
 to hear news of his father. Now the suitors

200

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lie in ambush on his homeward track,  
ready to cut away the last shoot of Arkêsios'<sup>4</sup>  
line, the royal stock of Ithaka.

No good  
dwelling on it. Either he'll be caught  
or else Kroníon's<sup>5</sup> hand will take him through.

Tell me, now, of your own trials and troubles.  
And tell me truly first, for I should know,  
who are you, where do you hail from, where's your home  
and family? What kind of ship was yours,  
and what course brought you here? Who are your sailors?  
I don't suppose you walked here on the sea."

210

To this the master of improvisation answered:

"I'll tell you all that, clearly as I may.  
If we could sit here long enough, with meat  
and good sweet wine, warm here, in peace and quiet  
within doors, while the work of the world goes on—  
I might take all this year to tell my story  
and never end the tale of misadventures  
that wore my heart out, by the gods' will.

220

My native land is the wide seaboard of Krete  
where I grew up. I had a wealthy father,  
and many other sons were born to him  
of his true lady. My mother was a slave,  
his concubine; but Kastor Hylákidês,  
my father, treated me as a true born son.  
High honor came to him in that part of Krete  
for wealth and ease, and sons born for renown,  
before the death-bearing Kêrês<sup>6</sup> drew him down  
to the underworld. His avid sons thereafter  
dividing up the property by lot  
gave me a wretched portion, a poor house.  
But my ability won me a wife  
of rich family. Fool I was never called,  
nor turn-tail in a fight.

230

My strength's all gone,  
but from the husk you may divine the ear  
that stood tall in the old days. Misery owns me  
now, but then great Arês and Athena  
gave me valor and man-breaking power,  
whenever I made choice of men-at-arms  
to set a trap with me for my enemies.

240

<sup>4</sup>Odysseus' paternal grandfather.

<sup>5</sup>Zeus, son of Kronos.

<sup>6</sup>That is, the forces of death.

Never, as I am a man, did I fear Death  
 ahead, but went in foremost in the charge,  
 putting a spear through any man whose legs  
 were not as fast as mine. That was my element,  
 war and battle. Farming I never cared for,  
 nor life at home, nor fathering fair children.  
 I reveled in long ships with oars; I loved  
 polished lances, arrows in the skirmish,  
 the shapes of doom that others shake to see. 250  
 Carnage suited me; heaven put those things  
 in me somehow. Each to his own pleasure!  
 Before we young Akhaians shipped for Troy  
 I led men on nine cruises in corsairs  
 to raid strange coasts, and had great luck, taking  
 rich spoils on the spot, and even more  
 in the division. So my house grew prosperous,  
 my standing therefore high among the Kretans.  
 Then came the day when Zeus who views the wide world  
 drew men's eyes upon that way accurst 260  
 that wrung the manhood from the knees of many!  
 Everyone pressed me, pressed King Idómeneus  
 to take command of ships for Ilion.  
 No way out; the country rang with talk of it.  
 So we Akhaians had nine years of war.  
 In the tenth year we sacked the inner city,  
 Priam's town, and sailed for home; but heaven  
 dispersed the Akhaians. Evil days for me  
 were stored up in the hidden mind of Zeus.  
 One month, no more, I stayed at home in joy 270  
 with children, wife, and treasure. Lust for action  
 drove me to go to sea then, in command  
 of ships and gallant seamen bound for Egypt.  
 Nine ships I fitted out; my men signed on  
 and came to feast with me, as good shipmates,  
 for six full days. Many a beast I slaughtered  
 in the gods' honor, for my friends to eat.  
 Embarking on the seventh, we hauled sail  
 and filled away from Krete on a fresh north wind  
 effortlessly, as boats will glide down stream. 280  
 All rigging whole and all hands well, we rested,  
 letting the wind and steersmen work the ships,  
 for five days; on the fifth we made the delta.<sup>7</sup>  
 I brought my squadron in to the river bank  
 with one turn of the sweeps. There, heaven knows,  
 I told the men to wait and guard the ships  
 while I sent out patrols to rising ground.

<sup>7</sup> The estuary of the Nile River. Though the entire present account by Odysseus of his past life is meant to deceive, many of his invented stories correspond to what in fact did happen to him.

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But reckless greed carried them all away  
to plunder the rich bottomlands; they bore off  
wives and children, killed what men they found.

290

When this news reached the city, all who heard it  
came at dawn. On foot they came, and horsemen,  
filling the river plain with dazzle of bronze;  
and Zeus lord of lightning  
threw my men into blind panic: no one dared  
stand against that host closing around us.  
Their scything weapons left our dead in piles,  
but some they took alive, into forced labor.  
And I—ah, how I wish that I had died  
in Egypt, on that field! So many blows  
awaited me!—Well, Zeus himself inspired me;  
I wrenched my dogskin helmet off my head,  
dropped my spear, dodged out of my long shield,  
ran for the king's chariot and swung on  
to embrace and kiss his knees. He pulled me up,  
took pity on me, placed me on the footboards,  
and drove home with me crouching there in tears.  
Aye—for the troops, in battle fury still,  
made one pass at me after another, pricking me  
with spears, hoping to kill me. But he saved me,  
for fear of the great wrath of Zeus that comes  
when men who ask asylum are given death.

300

310

Seven years, then, my sojourn lasted there,  
and I amassed a fortune, going about  
among the openhanded Egyptians.  
But when the eighth came round, a certain  
Phoinikian adventurer came too,  
a plausible rat, who had already done  
plenty of devilry in the world.

This fellow

took me in completely with his schemes,  
and led me with him to Phoinikia,  
where he had land and houses. One full year  
I stayed there with him, to the month and day,  
and when fair weather came around again  
he took me in a deepsea ship for Libya,  
pretending I could help in the cargo trade;  
he meant, in fact, to trade me off, and get  
a high price for me. I could guess the game  
but had to follow him aboard. One day  
on course due west, off central Krete, the ship  
caught a fresh norther, and we ran southward  
before the wind while Zeus piled ruin ahead.  
When Krete was out of sight astern, no land

320

330

anywhere to be seen, but sky and ocean,  
 Kroníon put a dark cloud in the zenith  
 over the ship, and gloom spread on the sea.  
 With crack on crack of thunder, he let fly  
 a bolt against the ship, a direct hit,  
 so that she bucked, in sacred fumes of sulphur,  
 and all the men were flung into the water. 340  
 They came up round the wreck, bobbing a while  
 like petrels on the waves. No homecoming  
 for these, from whom the god had turned his face!  
 Stunned in the smother as I was, yet Zeus  
 put into my hands the great mast of the ship—  
 a way to keep from drowning. So I twined  
 my arms and legs around it in the gale  
 and stayed afloat nine days. On the tenth night,  
 a big surf cast me up in Thesprotia.<sup>8</sup>  
 Pheidon the king there gave me refuge, nobly, 350  
 with no talk of reward. His son discovered me  
 exhausted and half dead with cold, and gave me  
 a hand to bear me up till he reached home  
 where he could clothe me in a shirt and cloak.  
 In that king's house I heard news of Odysseus,  
 who lately was a guest there, passing by  
 on his way home, the king said; and he showed me  
 the treasure that Odysseus had brought:  
 bronze, gold, and iron wrought with heavy labor—  
 in that great room I saw enough to last 360  
 Odysseus' heirs for ten long generations.  
 The man himself had gone up to Dodona<sup>9</sup>  
 to ask the spelling leaves of the old oak  
 the will of God: how to return, that is,  
 to the rich realm of Ithaka, after so long  
 an absence—openly, or on the quiet.  
 And, tipping wine out, Pheidon swore to me  
 the ship was launched, the seamen standing by  
 to take Odysseus to his land at last.  
 But he had passage first for me: Thesprotians 370  
 were sailing, as luck had it, for Doulíkhion,<sup>10</sup>  
 the grain-growing island; there, he said,  
 they were to bring me to the king, Akastos.  
 Instead, that company saw fit to plot  
 foul play against me; in my wretched life  
 there was to be more suffering.

<sup>8</sup> In Epirus, on the northwest shore of Greece, somewhat north of Ithaka along the mainland coast.

<sup>9</sup> Site of the oldest oracle of Zeus, where the god's utterances were interpreted from the rustling of oak leaves.

<sup>10</sup> An island near Ithaka.

At sea, then,  
 when land lay far astern, they sprang their trap.  
 They'd make a slave of me that day, stripping  
 cloak and tunic off me, throwing around me  
 the dirty rags you see before you now. 380  
 At evening, off the fields of Ithaka,  
 they bound me, lashed me down under the decking  
 with stout ship's rope, while they all went ashore  
 in haste to make their supper on the beach.  
 The gods helped me to pry the lashing loose  
 until it fell away. I wound my rags  
 in a bundle round my head and eased myself  
 down the smooth lading plank into the water,  
 up to the chin, then swam an easy breast stroke  
 out and around, putting that crew behind, 390  
 and went ashore in underbrush, a thicket,  
 where I lay still, making myself small.  
 They raised a bitter yelling, and passed by  
 several times. When further groping seemed  
 useless to them, back to the ship they went  
 and out to sea again. The gods were with me,  
 keeping me hid; and with me when they brought me  
 here to the door of one who knows the world.  
 My destiny is yet to live awhile."

The swineherd bowed and said:

"Ah well, poor drifter, 400  
 you've made me sad for you, going back over it,  
 all your hard life and wandering. That tale  
 about Odysseus, though, you might have spared me;  
 you will not make me believe that.  
 Why must you lie, being the man you are,  
 and all for nothing?

I can see so well  
 what happened to my master, sailing home!  
 Surely the gods turned on him, to refuse him  
 death in the field, or in his friends' arms  
 after he wound up the great war at Troy. 410  
 They would have made a tomb for him, the Akhaians,  
 and paid all honor to his son thereafter. No,  
 stormwinds made off with him. No glory came to him.

I moved here to the mountain with my swine.  
 Never, now, do I go down to town  
 unless I am sent for by Penélopê  
 when news of some sort comes. But those who sit  
 around her go on asking the old questions—  
 a few who miss their master still,  
 and those who eat his house up, and go free. 420

For my part, I have had no heart for inquiry  
 since one year an Aitolian<sup>11</sup> made a fool of me.  
 Exiled from land to land after some killing,  
 he turned up at my door; I took him in.  
 My master he had seen in Krete, he said,  
 lodged with Idómeneus, while the long ships,  
 leaky from gales, were laid up for repairs.  
 But they were all to sail, he said, that summer,  
 or the first days of fall—hulls laden deep  
 with treasure, manned by crews of heroes.

This time

430

you are the derelict the Powers bring.  
 Well, give up trying to win me with false news  
 or flattery. If I receive and shelter you,  
 it is not for your tales but for your trouble,  
 and with an eye to Zeus, who guards a guest.”

Then said that sly and guileful man, Odysseus:

“A black suspicious heart beats in you surely;  
 the man you are, not even an oath could change you.  
 Come then, we’ll make a compact; let the gods  
 witness it from Olympos, where they dwell.  
 Upon your lord’s homecoming, if he comes  
 here to this very hut, and soon—  
 then give me a new outfit, shirt and cloak,  
 and ship me to Doulíkhion—I thought it  
 a pleasant island. But if Odysseus  
 fails to appear as I predict, then Swish!  
 let the slaves pitch me down from some high rock,  
 so the next poor man who comes will watch his tongue.”

440

The forester gave a snort and answered:

“Friend,

if I agreed to that, a great name  
 I should acquire in the world for goodness—  
 at one stroke and forever: your kind host  
 who gave you shelter and the hand of friendship,  
 only to take your life next day!  
 How confidently, after that, should I  
 address my prayers to Zeus, the son of Kronos!

450

It is time now for supper. My young herdsmen  
 should be arriving soon to set about it.  
 We’ll make a quiet feast here at our hearth.”

At this point in their talk the swine had come  
 up to the clearing, and the drovers followed  
 to pen them for the night—the porkers squealing

460

<sup>11</sup>Aitolia (or Aetolia) was part of the western Greek mainland, east of Ithaka.



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to high heaven, milling around the yard.  
The swineherd then gave orders to his men:

“Bring in our best pig for a stranger’s dinner.  
A feast will do our hearts good, too; we know  
grief and pain, hard scrabbling with our swine,  
while the outsiders live on our labor.”

Bronze

axe in hand, he turned to split up kindling,  
while they drove in a tall boar, prime and fat,  
planting him square before the fire. The gods,  
as ever, had their due in the swineherd’s thought,  
for he it was who tossed the forehead bristles  
as a first offering on the flames, calling  
upon the immortal gods to let Odysseus  
reach his home once more.

470

Then he stood up  
and brained the boar with split oak from the woodpile.  
Life ebbed from the beast; they slaughtered him,  
singed the carcass, and cut out the joints.  
Eumaios, taking flesh from every quarter,  
put lean strips on the fat of sacrifice,  
floured each one with barley meal, and cast it  
into the blaze. The rest they sliced and skewered,  
roasted with care, then took it off the fire  
and heaped it up on platters. Now their chief,  
who knew best the amenities, rose to serve,  
dividing all that meat in seven portions—  
one to be set aside, with proper prayers,  
for the wood nymphs and Hermês, Maia’s son;  
the others for the company. Odysseus  
he honored with long slices from the chine—  
warming the master’s heart. Odysseus looked at him  
and said:

480

“May you be dear to Zeus  
as you are dear to me for this, Eumaios,  
favoring with choice cuts a man like me.”

And—O my swineherd!—you replied, Eumaios:

“Bless you, stranger, fall to and enjoy it  
for what it is. Zeus grants us this or that,  
or else refrains from granting, as he will;  
all things are in his power.”

He cut and burnt  
a morsel for the gods who are young forever,  
tipped out some wine, then put it in the hands  
of Odysseus, the old soldier, raider of cities,

500

who sat at ease now with his meat before him.  
 As for the loaves, Mesaúlios dealt them out,  
 a yard boy, bought by the swineherd on his own,  
 unaided by his mistress or Laërtês,  
 from Taphians,<sup>12</sup> while Odysseus was away.  
 Now all hands reached for that array of supper,  
 until, when hunger and thirst were turned away  
 Mesaúlios removed the bread and, heavy  
 with food and drink, they settled back to rest.

510

Now night had come on, rough, with no moon,  
 but a nightlong downpour setting in, the rainwind  
 blowing hard from the west. Odysseus  
 began to talk, to test the swineherd, trying  
 to put it in his head to take his cloak off  
 and lend it, or else urge the others to.  
 He knew the man's compassion.

“Listen,” he said,  
 “Eumaios, and you others, here's a wishful  
 tale that I shall tell. The wine's behind it,  
 vaporizing wine, that makes a serious man  
 break down and sing, kick up his heels and clown,  
 or tell some story that were best untold.  
 But now I'm launched, I can't stop now.

520

Would god I felt  
 the hot blood in me that I had at Troy!  
 Laying an ambush near the walls one time,  
 Odysseus and Menelâos were commanders  
 and I ranked third. I went at their request.  
 We worked in toward the bluffs and battlements  
 and, circling the town, got into canebrakes,<sup>13</sup>  
 thick and high, a marsh where we took cover,  
 hunched under arms.

530

The northwind dropped, and night  
 came black and wintry. A fine sleet descending  
 whitened the cane like hoarfrost, and clear ice  
 grew dense upon our shields. The other men,  
 all wrapt in blanket cloaks as well as tunics,  
 rested well, in shields up to their shoulders,  
 but I had left my cloak with friends in camp,  
 foolhardy as I was. No chance of freezing hard,  
 I thought, so I wore kilts and a shield only.  
 But in the small hours of the third watch, when stars  
 that rise at evening go down to their setting,  
 I nudged Odysseus, who lay close beside me;  
 he was alert then, listening, and I said:

540

<sup>12</sup> Inhabitants of western Greece. That Eumaios the slave himself acquired a servant is another sign that in Homeric times slavery was not always degrading serfdom.

<sup>13</sup> Thick growths of cane.

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‘Son of Laërtês and the gods of old,  
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,  
I cannot hold on long among the living.  
The cold is making a corpse of me. Some god  
inveigled me to come without a cloak.  
No help for it now; too late.’

550

Next thing I knew  
he had a scheme all ready in his mind—  
and what a man he was for schemes and battles!  
Speaking under his breath to me, he murmured:  
‘Quiet; none of the rest should hear you.’

Then,  
propping his head on his forearm, he said:  
‘Listen, lads, I had an ominous dream,  
the point being how far forward from our ships  
and lines we’ve come. Someone should volunteer  
to tell the corps commander, Agamémnon;  
he may reinforce us from the base.’

560

At this,  
Thoas jumped up, the young son of Andraimon,  
put down his crimson cloak and headed off,  
running shoreward.

Wrapped in that man’s cloak  
how gratefully I lay in the bitter dark  
until the dawn came stitched in gold! I wish  
I had that sap and fiber in me now!”

Then—O my swineherd!—you replied, Eumaios:

“That was a fine story, and well told,  
not a word out of place, not a pointless word.  
No, you’ll not sleep cold for lack of cover,  
or any other comfort one should give  
to a needy guest. However, in the morning,  
you must go flapping in the same old clothes.  
Shirts and cloaks are few here; every man  
has one change only. When our prince arrives,  
the son of Odysseus, he will make you gifts—  
cloak, tunic, everything—and grant you passage  
wherever you care to go.”

570

On this he rose  
and placed the bed of balsam near the fire,  
strewing sheepskins on top, and skins of goats.  
Odysseus lay down. His host threw over him  
a heavy blanket cloak, his own reserve  
against the winter wind when it came wild.

580

So there Odysseus dropped off to sleep,  
 while herdsmen slept nearby. But not the swineherd:  
 not in the hut could he lie down in peace,  
 but now equipped himself for the night outside;  
 and this rejoiced Odysseus' heart, to see him  
 care for the herd so, while his lord was gone.  
 He hung a sharp sword from his shoulder, gathered  
 a great cloak round him, close, to break the wind,  
 and pulled a shaggy goatskin on his head.  
 Then, to keep at a distance dogs or men,  
 he took a sharpened lance, and went to rest  
 under a hollow rock where swine were sleeping  
 out of the wind and rain.

590

## BOOK FIFTEEN: HOW THEY CAME TO ITHAKA

South into Lakedaïmon<sup>1</sup>  
 into the land where greens are wide for dancing  
 Athena went, to put in mind of home  
 her great-hearted hero's honored son,  
 rousing him to return.

And there she found him  
 with Nestor's lad in the late night at rest  
 under the portico of Meneláos,  
 the famous king. Stilled by the power of slumber  
 the son of Nestor lay, but honeyed sleep  
 had not yet taken in her arms Telémakhos.  
 All through the starlit night, with open eyes,  
 he pondered what he had heard about his father,  
 until at his bedside grey-eyed Athena  
 towered and said:

10

"The brave thing now, Telémakhos,  
 would be to end this journey far from home.  
 All that you own you left behind  
 with men so lost to honor in your house  
 they may devour it all, shared out among them.  
 How will your journey save you then?

Go quickly  
 to the lord of the great war cry, Meneláos;  
 press him to send you back. You may yet find  
 the queen your mother in her rooms alone.  
 It seems her father and her kinsmen say  
 Eurýmakhos is the man for her to marry.  
 He has outdone the suitors, all the rest,  
 in gifts to her, and made her pledges double.

20

<sup>1</sup> The story of Telémakhos, broken off after Book IV, is here resumed.

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Check him, or he will have your lands and chattels  
in spite of you.

You know a woman's pride  
at bringing riches to the man she marries.  
As to her girlhood husband, her first children,  
he is forgotten, being dead—and they  
no longer worry her.<sup>2</sup>

30

So act alone.

Go back; entrust your riches to the servant  
worthiest in your eyes, until the gods  
make known what beauty you yourself shall marry.

This too I have to tell you: now take heed:  
the suitors' ringleaders are hot for murder,  
waiting in the channel between Ithaka  
and Samê's rocky side; they mean to kill you  
before you can set foot ashore. I doubt  
they'll bring it off. Dark earth instead  
may take to her cold bed a few brave suitors  
who preyed upon your cattle.

40

Bear well out  
in your good ship, to eastward of the islands,  
and sail again by night. Someone immortal  
who cares for you will make a fair wind blow.  
Touch at the first beach, go ashore, and send  
your ship and crew around to port by sea,  
while you go inland to the forester,  
your old friend, loyal keeper of the swine.  
Remain that night with him; send him to town  
to tell your watchful mother Penélopê  
that you are back from Pylos safe and sound."

50

With this Athena left him for Olympos.  
He swung his foot across and gave a kick  
and said to the son of Nestor:

"Open your eyes,  
Peisístratos. Get our team into harness.  
We have a long day's journey."

Nestor's son  
turned over and answered him:

"It is still night,  
and no moon. Can we drive now? We can not,  
itch as we may for the road home. Dawn is near.  
Allow the captain of spearmen, Meneláos,

60

<sup>2</sup> These last three lines are a comment on widows in general, not on Penélopê in particular. Athena assumes this cynical view in order to hasten Telémakhos' return.

time to pack our car with gifts and time  
to speak a gracious word, sending us off.  
A guest remembers all his days  
that host who makes provision for him kindly.”

The Dawn soon took her throne of gold, and Lord  
Meneláos, clarion in battle,  
rose from where he lay beside the beauty  
of Helen with her shining hair. He strode  
into the hall nearby.

70

Hearing him come,  
Odysseus’ son pulled on his snowy tunic  
over the skin, gathered his long cape  
about his breadth of shoulder like a captain,  
the heir of King Odysseus. At the door  
he stood and said:

“Lord Marshal, Meneláos,  
send me home now to my own dear country:  
longing has come upon me to go home.”

The lord of the great war cry said at once:

80

“If you are longing to go home, Telémakhos,  
I would not keep you for the world, not I.  
I’d think myself or any other host  
as ill-mannered for over-friendliness  
as for hostility.

Measure is best in everything  
To send a guest packing, or cling to him  
when he’s in haste—one sin equals the other.  
‘Good entertaining ends with no detaining.’  
Only let me load your car with gifts  
and fine ones, you shall see.

I’ll bid the women  
set out breakfast from the larder stores;  
honor and appetite—we’ll attend to both  
before a long day’s journey overland.  
Or would you care to try the Argive midlands  
and Hellas, in my company? I’ll harness  
my own team, and take you through the towns.  
Guests like ourselves no lord will turn away;  
each one will make one gift, at least,  
to carry home with us: tripod or cauldron  
wrought in bronze, mule team, or golden cup.”

90

100

Clearheaded Telémakhos replied:

“Lord Marshal  
Meneláos, royal son of Atreus,  
I must return to my own hearth. I left  
no one behind as guardian of my property.

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463

This going abroad for news of a great father—  
 heaven forbid it be my own undoing,  
 or any precious thing be lost at home.”

At this the tall king, clarion in battle,  
 called to his lady and her waiting women  
 to give them breakfast from the larder stores. 110  
 Eteóneus, the son of Boethoös, came  
 straight from bed, from where he lodged nearby,  
 and Meneláos ordered a fire lit  
 for broiling mutton. The king’s man obeyed.  
 Then down to the cedar chamber Meneláos  
 walked with Helen and Prince Megapénthês.  
 Amid the gold he had in that place lying  
 the son of Atreus picked a wine cup, wrought  
 with handles left and right, and told his son  
 to take a silver winebowl.

Helen lingered 120  
 near the deep coffers filled with gowns, her own  
 handiwork.

Tall goddess among women,  
 she lifted out one robe of state so royal,  
 adorned and brilliant with embroidery,  
 deep in the chest it shimmered like a star.  
 Now all three turned back to the door to greet  
 Telémakhos. And red-haired Meneláos  
 cried out to him:

“O prince Telémakhos,  
 may Hêra’s Lord of Thunder see you home  
 and bring you to the welcome you desire! 130  
 Here are your gifts—perfect and precious things  
 I wish to make your own, out of my treasure.”

And gently the great captain, son of Atreus,  
 handed him the goblet. Megapénthês  
 carried the winebowl glinting silvery  
 to set before him, and the Lady Helen  
 drew near, so that he saw her cheek’s pure line.  
 She held the gown and murmured:

“I, too,  
 bring you a gift, dear child, and here it is; 140  
 remember Helen’s hands by this; keep it  
 for your own bride, your joyful wedding day;  
 let your dear mother guard it in her chamber.  
 My blessing: may you come soon to your island,  
 home to your timbered hall.”

So she bestowed it,  
 and happily he took it. These fine things

Peisístratos packed well in the wicker carrier,  
 admiring every one. Then Meneláos  
 led the two guests in to take their seats  
 on thrones and easy chairs in the great hall. 150  
 Now came a maid to tip a golden jug  
 of water over a silver finger bowl,  
 and draw the polished tables up beside them;  
 the larder mistress brought her tray of loaves,  
 with many savories to lavish on them;  
 viands were served by Eteóneus, and wine  
 by Meneláos' son. Then every hand  
 reached out upon good meat and drink to take them,  
 driving away hunger and thirst. At last,  
 Telémakhos and Nestor's son led out 160  
 their team to harness, mounted their bright car,  
 and drove down under the echoing entrance way,  
 while red-haired Meneláos, Atreus' son,  
 walked alongside with a golden cup—  
 wine for the wayfarers to spill at parting.  
 Then by the tugging team he stood, and spoke  
 over the horses' heads:

"Farewell, my lads.  
 Homage to Nestor, the benevolent king;  
 in my time he was fatherly to me,  
 when the flower of Akhaia warred on Troy." 170

Telémakhos made this reply:

"No fear  
 but we shall bear at least as far as Nestor  
 your messages, great king. How I could wish  
 to bring them home to Ithaka! If only  
 Odysseus were there, if he could hear me tell  
 of all the courtesy I have had from you,  
 returning with your finery and your treasure."

Even as he spoke, a beat of wings went skyward  
 off to the right—a mountain eagle, grappling 180  
 a white goose in his talons, heavy prey  
 hooked from a farmyard. Women and men-at-arms  
 made hubbub, running up, as he flew over,  
 but then he wheeled hard right before the horses—  
 a sight that made the whole crowd cheer, with hearts  
 lifting in joy. Peisístratos called out:

"Read us the sign, O Meneláos, Lord  
 Marshal of armies! Was the god revealing  
 something thus to you, or to ourselves?"

At this the old friend of the god of battle 190



groped in his mind for the right thing to say,  
but regal Helen put in quickly:

“Listen:

I can tell you—tell what the omen means,  
as light is given me, and as I see it  
point by point fulfilled. The beaked eagle  
flew from the wild mountain of his fathers  
to take for prey the tame house bird. Just so,  
Odysseus, back from his hard trials and wandering,  
will soon come down in fury on his house.  
He may be there today, and a black hour  
he brings upon the suitors.”

200

Telémakhos

gazed and said:

“May Zeus, the lord of Hêra,  
make it so! In far-off Ithaka, all my life,  
I shall invoke you as a goddess, lady.”

He let the whip fall, and the restive mares  
broke forward at a canter through the town  
into the open country.

All that day  
they kept their harness shaking, side by side,  
until at sundown when the roads grew dim  
they made a halt at Pherai. There Dióklês  
son of Ortilokhos whom Alpheios fathered,  
welcomed the young men, and they slept the night.  
Up when the young Dawn’s finger tips of rose  
opened in the east, they hitched the team  
once more to the painted car  
and steered out westward through the echoing gate,  
whipping their fresh horses into a run.  
Approaching Pylos Height at the day’s end,  
Telémakhos appealed to the son of Nestor:

210

“Could you, I wonder, do a thing I’ll tell you,  
supposing you agree?  
We take ourselves to be true friends—in age  
alike, and bound by ties between our fathers,  
and now by partnership in this adventure.  
Prince, do not take me roundabout,  
but leave me at the ship, else the old king  
your father will detain me overnight  
for love of guests, when I should be at sea.”

220

The son of Nestor nodded, thinking swiftly  
how best he could oblige his friend.  
Here was his choice: to pull the team hard over

230

along the beach till he could rein them in  
beside the ship. Unloading Meneláos'  
royal keepsakes into the stern sheets,  
he sang out:

“Now for action! Get aboard,  
and call your men, before I break the news  
at home in hall to father. Who knows better  
the old man's heart than I? If you delay,  
he will not let you go, but he'll descend on you  
in person and imperious; no turning  
back with empty hands for him, believe me,  
once his blood is up.”

240

He shook the reins  
to the lovely mares with long manes in the wind,  
guiding them full tilt toward his father's hall.  
Telémakhos called in the crew, and told them:

“Get everything shipshape aboard this craft;  
we pull out now, and put sea miles behind us.”

The listening men obeyed him, climbing in  
to settle on their benches by the rowlocks,  
while he stood watchful by the stern. He poured out  
offerings there, and prayers to Athena.

250

Now a strange man came up to him, an easterner  
fresh from spilling blood in distant Argos,  
a hunted man. Gifted in prophecy,  
he had as forebear that Melampous,<sup>3</sup> wizard  
who lived of old in Pylos, mother city  
of western flocks.

Melampous, a rich lord,  
had owned a house unmatched among the Pylians,  
until the day came when king Neleus, noblest  
in that age, drove him from his native land.  
And Neleus for a year's term sequestered  
Melampous' fields and flocks, while he lay bound  
hand and foot in the keep of Phylakos.  
Beauty of Neleus' daughter put him there  
and sombre folly the inbreaking Fury  
thrust upon him. But he gave the slip  
to death, and drove the bellowing herd of Iphiklos  
from Phylakê to Pylos, there to claim  
the bride that ordeal won him from the king.  
He led her to his brother's house, and went on  
eastward into another land, the bluegrass

260

270

<sup>3</sup>For the stories of Melampous and Amphiaraos, see Book XI and the notes to it.

plain of Argos. Destiny held for him  
 rule over many Argives. Here he married,  
 built a great manor house, fathered Antíphatês  
 and Mantios, commanders both, of whom  
 Antíphatês begot Oikleîs  
 and Oikleîs the firebrand Amphiaraios.  
 This champion the lord of stormcloud, Zeus,  
 and strong Apollo loved; nor had he ever  
 to cross the doorsill into dim old age. 280  
 A woman, bought by trinkets, gave him over  
 to be cut down in the assault on Thebes.  
 His sons were Alkmáon and Amphilokhos.  
 In the meantime Lord Mantios begot  
 Polypheidês, the prophet, and  
 Kleitos—famous name! For Dawn<sup>4</sup> in silks  
 of gold carried off Kleitos for his beauty  
 to live among the gods. But Polypheidês,  
 high-hearted and exalted by Apollo 290  
 above all men for prophecy, withdrew  
 to Hyperesia<sup>5</sup> when his father angered him.  
 He lived on there, foretelling to the world  
 the shape of things to come.

His son it was,  
 Theoklýmenos, who came upon Telémakhos  
 as he poured out the red wine in the sand  
 near his trim ship, with prayer to Athena;  
 and he called out, approaching:

“Friend, well met  
 here at libation before going to sea.  
 I pray you by the wine you spend, and by 300  
 your god, your own life, and your company;  
 enlighten me, and let the truth be known.  
 Who are you? Of what city and what parents?”

Telémakhos turned to him and replied:

“Stranger, as truly as may be, I’ll tell you.  
 I am from Ithaka, where I was born;  
 my father is, or he once was, Odysseus.  
 But he’s a long time gone, and dead, may be;  
 and that is what I took ship with my friends  
 to find out—for he left long years ago.” 310

Said Theoklýmenos in reply:

“I too  
 have had to leave my home. I killed a cousin.

<sup>4</sup>Eos, goddess of the dawn.

<sup>5</sup>A town on the Corinthian bay; part of Agamémnon’s kingdom.

In the wide grazing lands of Argos live  
 many kinsmen of his and friends in power,  
 great among the Akhaians. These I fled.  
 Death and vengeance at my back, as Fate  
 has turned now, I came wandering overland.  
 Give me a plank aboard your ship, I beg,  
 or they will kill me. They are on my track.”

320

Telémakhos made answer:

“No two ways  
 about it. Will I pry you from our gunnel<sup>6</sup>  
 when you are desperate to get to sea?  
 Come aboard; share what we have, and welcome.”

He took the bronze-shod lance from the man’s hand  
 and laid it down full-length on deck; then swung  
 his own weight after it aboard the cutter,  
 taking position aft, making a place  
 for Theoklýmenos near him. The stern lines  
 were slacked off, and Telémakhos commanded:

330

“Rig the mast; make sail!” Nimble they ran  
 to push the fir pole high and step it firm  
 amidships in the box, make fast the forestays,  
 and hoist aloft the white sail on its halyards.  
 A following wind came down from grey-eyed Athena,  
 blowing brisk through heaven, and so steady  
 the cutter lapped up miles of salt blue sea,  
 passing Krounoi<sup>7</sup> abeam and Khalkis estuary  
 at sundown when the sea ways all grew dark.  
 Then, by Athena’s wind borne on, the ship  
 rounded Pheai by night and coasted Elis,  
 the green domain of the Epeioi; thence  
 he put her head north toward the running pack  
 of islets, wondering if by sailing wide  
 he sheered off Death, or would be caught.

340

That night

Odysseus and the swineherd supped again  
 with herdsmen in their mountain hut. At ease  
 when appetite and thirst were turned away,  
 Odysseus, while he talked, observed the swineherd  
 to see if he were hospitable still—  
 if yet again the man would make him stay  
 under his roof, or send him off to town.

350

<sup>6</sup> Gunwale; the top edge of the ship’s side.

<sup>7</sup> The following lines describe the ship’s northwest course along the southwest coast of Greece.

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“Listen,” he said, “Eumaios; listen, lads.  
 At daybreak I must go and try my luck  
 around the port. I burden you too long.  
 Direct me, put me on the road with someone.  
 Nothing else for it but to play the beggar  
 in populous parts. I’ll get a cup or loaf,  
 maybe, from some householder. If I go  
 as far as the great hall of King Odysseus  
 I might tell Queen Penélopê my news.  
 Or I can drift inside among the suitors  
 to see what alms they give, rich as they are.  
 If they have whims, I’m deft in ways of service—  
 that I can say, and you may know for sure.  
 By grace of Hermês the Wayfinder, patron  
 of mortal tasks, the god who honors toil,  
 no man can do a chore better than I can.  
 Set me to build a fire, or chop wood,  
 cook or carve, mix wine and serve—or anything  
 inferior men attend to for the gentry.”

360

370

Now you were furious at this, Eumaios,  
 and answered—O my swineherd!—

“Friend, friend,  
 how could this fantasy take hold of you?  
 You dally with your life, and nothing less,  
 if you feel drawn to mingle in that company—  
 reckless, violent, and famous for it  
 out to the rim of heaven. Slaves  
 they have, but not like you. No—theirs are boys  
 in fresh cloaks and tunics, with pomade  
 ever on their sleek heads, and pretty faces.  
 These are their minions, while their tables gleam  
 and groan under big roasts, with loaves and wine.  
 Stay with us here. No one is burdened by you,  
 neither myself nor any of my hands.  
 Wait here until Odysseus’ son returns.  
 You shall have clothing from him, cloak and tunic,  
 and passage where your heart desires to go.”

380

The noble and enduring man replied:

“May you be dear to Zeus for this, Eumaios,  
 even as you are to me. Respite from pain  
 you give me—and from homelessness. In life  
 there’s nothing worse than knocking about the world,  
 no bitterness we vagabonds are spared  
 when the curst belly rages! Well, you master it  
 and me, making me wait for the king’s son.  
 But now, come, tell me:

390

470

*The Ancient World*

what of Odysseus' mother, and his father  
 whom he took leave of on the sill of age?  
 Are they under the sun's rays, living still,  
 or gone down long ago to lodge with Death?"

400

To this the rugged herdsman answered:

"Aye,  
 that I can tell you; it is briefly told.  
 Laërtês lives, but daily in his hall  
 prays for the end of life and soul's delivery,  
 heartbroken as he is for a son long gone  
 and for his lady. Sorrow, when she died,  
 aged and enfeebled him like a green tree stricken;  
 but pining for her son, her brilliant son,  
 wore out her life.

410

Would god no death so sad  
 might come to benefactors dear as she!  
 I loved always to ask and hear about her  
 while she lived, although she lived in sorrow.  
 For she had brought me up with her own daughter,  
 Princess Ktimenê, her youngest child.  
 We were alike in age and nursed as equals  
 nearly, till in the flower of our years  
 they gave her, married her, to a Samian prince,  
 taking his many gifts. For my own portion  
 her mother gave new clothing, cloak and sandals,  
 and sent me to the woodland. Well she loved me.  
 Ah, how I miss that family! It is true  
 the blissful gods prosper my work; I have  
 meat and drink to spare for those I prize;  
 but so removed I am, I have no speech  
 with my sweet mistress, now that evil days  
 and overbearing men darken her house.  
 Tenants all hanker for good talk and gossip  
 around their lady, and a snack in hall,  
 a cup or two before they take the road  
 to their home acres, each one bearing home  
 some gift to cheer his heart."

420

430

The great tactician  
 answered:

"You were still a child, I see,  
 when exiled somehow from your parents' land.  
 Tell me, had it been sacked in war, the city  
 of spacious ways in which they made their home,  
 your father and your gentle mother? Or  
 were you kidnapped alone, brought here by sea  
 huddled with sheep in some foul pirate squadron,  
 to this landowner's hall? He paid your ransom?"

440

The master of the woodland answered:

“Friend,

now that you show an interest in that matter,  
attend me quietly, be at your ease,  
and drink your wine. These autumn nights are long,  
ample for story-telling and for sleep.

You need not go to bed before the hour;  
sleeping from dusk to dawn’s a dull affair.  
Let any other here who wishes, though,  
retire to rest. At daybreak let him breakfast  
and take the king’s own swine into the wilderness.

450

Here’s a tight roof; we’ll drink on, you and I,  
and ease our hearts of hardships we remember,  
sharing old times. In later days a man  
can find a charm in old adversity,  
exile and pain. As to your question, now:

A certain island, Syriê by name—  
you may have heard the name—lies off Ortýgia<sup>8</sup>  
due west, and holds the sunsets of the year.  
Not very populous, but good for grazing  
sheep and kine; rich too in wine and grain.  
No dearth is ever known there, no disease  
wars on the folk, of ills that plague mankind;  
but when the townsmen reach old age, Apollo  
with his longbow of silver comes, and Artemis,  
showering arrows of mild death.

460

Two towns  
divide the farmlands of that whole domain,  
and both were ruled by Ktêsios, my father,  
Orménos’ heir, and a great godlike man.

Now one day some of those renowned seafaring  
men, sea-dogs, Phoinikians, came ashore  
with bags of gauds for trading. Father had  
in our household a woman of Phoinikia,  
a handsome one, and highly skilled. Well, she  
gave in to the seductions of those rovers.  
One of them found her washing near the mooring  
and lay with her, making such love to her  
as women in their frailty are confused by,  
even the best of them.

470

In due course, then,  
he asked her who she was and where she hailed from:  
and nodding toward my father’s roof, she said:

480

<sup>8</sup>Though there were actual places bearing the names of Syriê and Ortýgia, in the present context they refer vaguely to unidentifiable localities, probably in northwestern Greece, and possibly invented by the poet.

'I am of Sidon town, smithy of bronze  
for all the East. Arubas Pasha's daughter.  
Taphian pirates caught me in a byway  
and sold me into slavery overseas  
in this man's home. He could afford my ransom.'

The sailor who had lain with her replied:

'Why not ship out with us on the run homeward,  
and see your father's high-roofed hall again,  
your father and your mother? Still in Sidon  
and still rich, they are said to be.'

490

She answered:

'It could be done, that, if you sailors take  
oath I'll be given passage home unharmed.'

Well, soon she had them swearing it all pat  
as she desired, repeating every syllable,  
whereupon she warned them:

'Not a word  
about our meeting here! Never call out to me  
when any of you see me in the lane  
or at the well. Some visitor might bear  
tales to the old man. If he guessed the truth,  
I'd be chained up, your lives would be in peril.  
No: keep it secret. Hurry with your peddling,  
and when your hold is filled with livestock, send  
a message to me at the manor hall.  
Gold I'll bring, whatever comes to hand,  
and something else, too, as my passage fee—  
the master's child, my charge: a boy so high,  
bright for his age; he runs with me on errands.  
I'd take him with me happily; his price  
would be I know not what in sale abroad.'

500

510

Her bargain made, she went back to the manor.  
But they were on the island all that year,  
getting by trade a cargo of our cattle;  
until, the ship at length being laden full,  
ready for sea, they sent a messenger  
to the Phoinikian woman. Shrewd he was,  
this fellow who came round my father's hall,  
showing a golden chain all strung with amber,  
a necklace. Maids in waiting and my mother  
passed it from hand to hand, admiring it,  
engaging they would buy it. But that dodger,  
as soon as he had caught the woman's eye  
and nodded, slipped away to join the ship.

520



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473

She took my hand and led me through the court  
 into the portico. There by luck she found  
 winecups and tables still in place—for Father's  
 attendant counselors had dined just now  
 before they went to the assembly. Quickly  
 she hid three goblets in her bellying dress  
 to carry with her, while I tagged along  
 in my bewilderment. The sun went down  
 and all the lanes grew dark as we descended,  
 skirting the harbor in our haste to where  
 those traders of Phoinikia held their ship.  
 All went aboard at once and put to sea,  
 taking the two of us. A favoring wind  
 blew from the power of heaven. We sailed on  
 six nights and days without event. Then Zeus  
 the son of Kronos added one more noon—and sudden  
 arrows from Artemis pierced the woman's heart.  
 Stone-dead she dropped  
 into the sloshing bilge the way a tern  
 plummets; and the sailors heaved her over  
 as tender pickings for the seals and fish.  
 Now I was left in dread, alone, while wind  
 and current bore them on to Ithaka.  
 Laërtês purchased me. That was the way  
 I first laid eyes upon this land."

530

540

Odysseus,

the kingly man, replied:

"You rouse my pity,  
 telling what you endured when you were young.  
 But surely Zeus put good alongside ill:  
 torn from your own far home, you had the luck  
 to come into a kind man's service, generous  
 with food and drink. And a good life you lead,  
 unlike my own, all spent in barren roaming  
 from one country to the next, till now."

550

So the two men talked on, into the night,  
 leaving few hours for sleep before the Dawn  
 stepped up to her bright chair.

The ship now drifting  
 under the island lee, Telémakhos'  
 companions took in sail and mast, unshipped  
 the oars and rowed ashore. They moored her stern  
 by the stout hawser lines, tossed out the bow stones,  
 and waded in beyond the wash of ripples  
 to mix their wine and cook their morning meal.  
 When they had turned back hunger and thirst, Telémakhos  
 arose to give the order of the day.

560

“Pull for the town,” he said, “and berth our ship,  
while I go inland across country. Later,  
this evening, after looking at my farms,  
I’ll join you in the city. When day comes  
I hope to celebrate our crossing, feasting  
everyone on good red meat and wine.”

570

His noble passenger, Theoklýmenos,  
now asked:

“What as to me, my dear young fellow,  
where shall I go? Will I find lodging here  
with some one of the lords of stony Ithaka?  
Or go straight to your mother’s hall and yours?”

Telémakhos turned round to him and said:

“I should myself invite you to our hall  
if things were otherwise; there’d be no lack  
of entertainment for you. As it stands,  
no place could be more wretched for a guest  
while I’m away. Mother will never see you;  
she almost never shows herself at home  
to the suitors there, but stays in her high chamber  
weaving upon her loom. No, let me name  
another man for you to go to visit:  
Eurýmakhos,<sup>9</sup> the honored son of Pólybos.  
In Ithaka they are dazzled by him now—  
the strongest of their princes, bent on making  
mother and all Odysseus’ wealth his own.  
Zeus on Olympos only knows  
if some dark hour for them will intervene.”

580

590

The words were barely spoken, when a hawk,  
Apollo’s courier, flew up on the right,  
clutching a dove and plucking her—so feathers  
floated down to the ground between Telémakhos  
and the moored cutter. Theoklýmenos  
called him apart and gripped his hand, whispering:

600

“A god spoke in this bird-sign on the right.  
I knew it when I saw the hawk fly over us.  
There is no kinglier house than yours, Telémakhos,  
here in the realm of Ithaka. Your family  
will be in power forever.”

<sup>9</sup>*Eurýmakhos*. Since he is one of Penélopê’s principal suitors, it is odd that Eurýmakhos should be recommended by Telémakhos as a host for his passenger. Indeed, Telémakhos soon changes his mind and asks the trusted crewman Peiraios to house Theoklýmenos. Possibly Telémakhos, with something of his father’s wariness, hesitates until he has some evidence of Theoklýmenos’ goodwill.

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475

The young prince,  
clear in spirit, answered:

“Be it so,  
friend, as you say. And may you know as well  
the friendship of my house, and many gifts  
from me, so everyone may call you fortunate.”

He called a trusted crewman named Peiraíos,  
and said to him:

610

“Peiraíos, son of Klýtios,  
can I rely on you again as ever, most  
of all the friends who sailed with me to Pylos?  
Take this man home with you, take care of him,  
treat him with honor, till I come.”

To this  
Peiraíos the good spearman answered:

“Aye,  
stay in the wild country while you will,  
I shall be looking after him, Telémakhos.  
He will not lack good lodging.”

Down to the ship  
he turned, and boarded her, and called the others  
to cast off the stern lines and come aboard.  
So men climbed in to sit beside the rowlocks.  
Telémakhos now tied his sandals on  
and lifted his tough spear from the ship’s deck;  
hawsers were taken in, and they shoved off  
to reach the town by way of the open sea  
as he commanded them—royal Odysseus’  
own dear son, Telémakhos.

620

On foot  
and swiftly he went up toward the stockade  
where swine were penned in hundreds, and at night  
the guardian of the swine, the forester,  
slept under arms on duty for his masters.

630

## BOOK SIXTEEN: FATHER AND SON

But there were two men in the mountain hut—  
Odysseus and the swineherd. At first light  
blowing their fire up, they cooked their breakfast  
and sent their lads out, driving herds to root  
in the tall timber.

When Telémakhos came,  
the wolvish troop of watchdogs only fawned on him  
as he advanced. Odysseus heard them go  
and heard the light crunch of a man's footfall—  
at which he turned quickly to say:

“Eumaios,  
here is one of your crew come back, or maybe  
another friend: the dogs are out there snuffling  
belly down; not one has even growled.  
I can hear footsteps—”

But before he finished  
his tall son stood at the door.

The swineherd  
rose in surprise, letting a bowl and jug  
tumble from his fingers. Going forward,  
he kissed the young man's head, his shining eyes  
and both hands, while his own tears brimmed and fell.  
Think of a man whose dear and only son,  
born to him in exile, reared with labor,  
has lived ten years abroad and now returns:  
how would that man embrace his son! Just so  
the herdsman clapped his arms around Telémakhos  
and covered him with kisses—for he knew  
the lad had got away from death. He said:

“Light of my days, Telémakhos,  
you made it back! When you took ship for Pylos  
I never thought to see you here again.  
Come in, dear child, and let me feast my eyes;  
here you are, home from the distant places!  
How rarely, anyway, you visit us,  
your own men, and your own woods and pastures!  
Always in the town, a man would think  
you loved the suitors' company, those dogs!”

Telémakhos with his clear candor said:

“I am with you, Uncle. See now, I have come  
because I wanted to see you first, to hear from you  
if Mother stayed at home—or is she married  
off to someone, and Odysseus' bed  
left empty for some gloomy spider's weaving?”

Gently the forester replied to this:

“At home indeed your mother is, poor lady,  
still in the women's hall. Her nights and days  
are wearied out with grieving.”

Stepping back  
 he took the bronze-shod lance, and the young prince  
 entered the cabin over the worn door stone.  
 Odysseus moved aside, yielding his couch,  
 but from across the room Telémakhos checked him:

“Friend, sit down; we’ll find another chair  
 in our own hut. Here is the man to make one!”

50

The swineherd, when the quiet man sank down,  
 built a new pile of evergreens and fleeces—  
 a couch for the dear son of great Odysseus—  
 then gave them trenchers of good meat, left over  
 from the roast pork of yesterday, and heaped up  
 willow baskets full of bread, and mixed  
 an ivy bowl of honey-hearted wine.  
 Then he in turn sat down, facing Odysseus,  
 their hands went out upon the meat and drink  
 as they fell to, ridding themselves of hunger,  
 until Telémakhos paused and said:

60

“Oh, Uncle,  
 what’s your friend’s home port? How did he come?  
 Who were the sailors brought him here to Ithaka?  
 I doubt if he came walking on the sea.”

And you replied, Eumaios—O my swineherd—

“Son, the truth about him is soon told.  
 His home land, and a broad land, too, is Krete,  
 but he has knocked about the world, he says,  
 for years, as the Powers wove his life. Just now  
 he broke away from a shipload of Thesprotians  
 to reach my hut. I place him in your hands.  
 Act as you will. He wishes your protection.”

70

The young man said:

“Eumaios, my protection!  
 The notion cuts me to the heart. How can I  
 receive your friend at home? I am not old enough  
 or trained in arms. Could I defend myself  
 if someone picked a fight with me?

Besides,  
 mother is in a quandary, whether to stay with me  
 as mistress of our household, honoring  
 her lord’s bed, and opinion in the town,  
 or take the best Akhaian who comes her way—  
 the one who offers most.

80

I’ll undertake,  
 at all events, to clothe your friend for winter,

now he is with you. Tunic and cloak of wool,  
 a good broadsword, and sandals—these are his.  
 I can arrange to send him where he likes  
 or you may keep him in your cabin here.  
 I shall have bread and wine sent up; you need not  
 feel any pinch on his behalf.

Impossible  
 to let him stay in hall, among the suitors. 90  
 They are drunk, drunk on impudence, they might  
 injure my guest—and how could I bear that?  
 How could a single man take on those odds?  
 Not even a hero could.

The suitors are too strong.”

At this the noble and enduring man, Odysseus,  
 addressed his son:

“Kind prince, it may be fitting  
 for me to speak a word. All that you say  
 gives me an inward wound as I sit listening.  
 I mean this wanton game they play, these fellows,  
 riding roughshod over you in your own house, 100  
 admirable as you are. But tell me,  
 are you resigned to being bled? The townsmen,  
 stirred up against you, are they, by some oracle?  
 Your brothers—can you say your brothers fail you?  
 A man should feel his kin, at least, behind him  
 in any clash, when a real fight is coming.  
 If my heart were as young as yours, if I were  
 son to Odysseus, or the man himself,  
 I’d rather have my head cut from my shoulders 110  
 by some slashing adversary, if I  
 brought no hurt upon that crew! Suppose  
 I went down, being alone, before the lot,  
 better, I say, to die at home in battle  
 than see these insupportable things, day after  
 day the stranger cuffed, the women slaves  
 dragged here and there, shame in the lovely rooms,  
 the wine drunk up in rivers, sheer waste  
 of pointless feasting, never at an end!”

Telémakhos replied:

“Friend, I’ll explain to you.  
 There is no rancor in the town against me, 120  
 no fault of brothers, whom a man should feel  
 behind him when a fight is in the making;  
 no, no—in our family the First Born  
 of Heaven, Zeus, made single sons the rule.  
 Arkeísios had but one, Laërtês; he  
 in turn fathered only one, Odysseus,

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who left me in his hall alone, too young  
 to be of any use to him.  
 And so you see why enemies fill our house  
 in these days: all the princes of the islands,  
 Doulíkhion, Samê, wooded Zakýnthos,  
 Ithaka, too—lords of our island rock—  
 eating our house up as they court my mother.  
 She cannot put an end to it; she dare not  
 bar the marriage that she hates; and they  
 devour all my substance and my cattle,  
 and who knows when they'll slaughter me as well?  
 It rests upon the gods' great knees.

130

Uncle,  
 go down at once and tell the Lady Penélopê  
 that I am back from Pylos, safe and sound.  
 I stay here meanwhile. You will give your message  
 and then return. Let none of the Akhaians  
 hear it; they have a mind to do me harm."

140

To this, Eumaios, you replied:

"I know.  
 But make this clear, now—should I not likewise  
 call on Laértês with your news? Hard hit  
 by sorrow though he was, mourning Odysseus,  
 he used to keep an eye upon his farm.  
 He had what meals he pleased, with his own folk.  
 But now no more, not since you sailed for Pylos;  
 he has not taken food or drink, I hear,  
 sitting all day, blind to the work of harvest,  
 groaning, while the skin shrinks on his bones."

150

Telémakhos answered:

"One more misery,  
 but we had better leave it so.  
 If men choose, and have their choice, in everything,  
 we'd have my father home.

Turn back  
 when you have done your errand, as you must,  
 not to be caught alone in the countryside.  
 But wait—you may tell Mother  
 to send our old housekeeper on the quiet  
 and quickly; she can tell the news to Grandfather."

160

The swineherd, roused, reached out to get his sandals,  
 tied them on, and took the road.

Who else  
 beheld this but Athena? From the air  
 she walked, taking the form of a tall woman,

handsome and clever at her craft, and stood  
beyond the gate in plain sight of Odysseus,  
unseen, though, by Telémakhos, unguessed,  
for not to everyone will gods appear.

170

Odysseus noticed her; so did the dogs,  
who cowered whimpering away from her. She only  
nodded, signing to him with her brows,  
a sign he recognized. Crossing the yard,  
he passed out through the gate in the stockade  
to face the goddess. There she said to him:

“Son of Laërtês and the gods of old,  
Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways,  
dissemble to your son no longer now.  
The time has come: tell him how you together  
will bring doom on the suitors in the town.  
I shall not be far distant then, for I  
myself desire battle.”

180

Saying no more,  
she tipped her golden wand upon the man,  
making his cloak pure white, and the knit tunic  
fresh around him. Lithe and young she made him,  
ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard  
no longer grey upon his chin. And she  
withdrew when she had done.

Then Lord Odysseus  
reappeared—and his son was thunderstruck.  
Fear in his eyes, he looked down and away  
as though it were a god, and whispered:

190

“Stranger,  
you are no longer what you were just now!  
Your cloak is new; even your skin! You are  
one of the gods who rule the sweep of heaven!  
Be kind to us, we’ll make you fair oblation  
and gifts of hammered gold. Have mercy on us!”

The noble and enduring man replied:

“No god. Why take me for a god? No, no.  
I am that father whom your boyhood lacked  
and suffered pain for lack of. I am he.”

200

Held back too long, the tears ran down his cheeks  
as he embraced his son.

Only Telémakhos,  
uncomprehending, wild  
with incredulity, cried out:



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“You cannot  
 be my father Odysseus! Meddling spirits  
 conceived this trick to twist the knife in me!  
 No man of woman born could work these wonders  
 by his own craft, unless a god came into it  
 with ease to turn him young or old at will.  
 I swear you were in rags and old,  
 and here you stand like one of the immortals!”

210

Odysseus brought his ranging mind to bear  
 and said:

“This is not princely, to be swept  
 away by wonder at your father’s presence.  
 No other Odysseus will ever come,  
 for he and I are one, the same; his bitter  
 fortune and his wanderings are mine.  
 Twenty years gone, and I am back again  
 on my own island.

220

As for my change of skin,  
 that is a charm Athena, Hope of Soldiers,  
 uses as she will; she has the knack  
 to make me seem a beggar man sometimes  
 and sometimes young, with finer clothes about me.  
 It is no hard thing for the gods of heaven  
 to glorify a man or bring him low.”

When he had spoken, down he sat.

Then, throwing  
 his arms around this marvel of a father  
 Telémakhos began to weep. Salt tears  
 rose from the wells of longing in both men,  
 and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering  
 as those of the great taloned hawk,  
 whose nestlings farmers take before they fly.  
 So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears,  
 and might have gone on weeping so till sundown,  
 had not Telémakhos said:

230

“Dear father! Tell me  
 what kind of vessel put you here ashore  
 on Ithaka? Your sailors, who were they?  
 I doubt you made it, walking on the sea!”

Then said Odysseus, who had borne the barren sea:

240

“Only plain truth shall I tell you, child.  
 Great seafarers, the Phaiákians, gave me passage  
 as they give other wanderers. By night  
 over the open ocean, while I slept,

they brought me in their cutter, set me down  
 on Ithaka, with gifts of bronze and gold  
 and stores of woven things. By the gods' will  
 these lie all hidden in a cave. I came  
 to this wild place, directed by Athena,  
 so that we might lay plans to kill our enemies.  
 Count up the suitors for me, let me know  
 what men at arms are there, how many men.  
 I must put all my mind to it, to see  
 if we two by ourselves can take them on  
 or if we should look round for help."

250

Télémakhos

replied:

"O Father, all my life your fame  
 as a fighting man has echoed in my ears—  
 your skills with weapons and the tricks of war—  
 but what you speak of is a staggering thing,  
 beyond imagining, for me. How can two men  
 do battle with a houseful in their prime?  
 For I must tell you this is no affair  
 of ten or even twice ten men, but scores,  
 throngs of them. You shall see, here and now.  
 The number from Doulíkhion alone  
 is fifty-two, picked men, with armorers,  
 a half dozen; twenty-four came from Samê,  
 twenty from Zakýnthos; our own island  
 accounts for twelve, high-ranked, and their retainers,  
 Medôn the crier, and the Master Harper  
 besides a pair of handymen at feasts.  
 If we go in against all these  
 I fear we pay in salt blood for your vengeance.  
 You must think hard if you would conjure up  
 the fighting strength to take us through."

260

270

Odysseus

who had endured the long war and the sea  
 answered:

"I'll tell you now.  
 Suppose Athena's arm is over us, and Zeus  
 her father's, must I rack my brains for more?"

Clearheaded Télémakhos looked hard and said:

280

"Those two are great defenders, no one doubts it,  
 but throned in the serene clouds overhead;  
 other affairs of men and gods they have  
 to rule over."

And the hero answered:

“Before long they will stand to right and left of us  
in combat, in the shouting, when the test comes—  
our nerve against the suitors’ in my hall.  
Here is your part: at break of day tomorrow  
home with you, go mingle with our princes.  
The swineherd later on will take me down  
the port-side trail—a beggar, by my looks,  
hangdog and old. If they make fun of me  
in my own courtyard, let your ribs cage up  
your springing heart, no matter what I suffer,  
no matter if they pull me by the heels  
or practice shots at me, to drive me out.  
Look on, hold down your anger. You may even  
plead with them, by heaven! in gentle terms  
to quit their horseplay—not that they will heed you,  
rash as they are, facing their day of wrath.  
Now fix the next step in your mind.

290

300

Athena,  
counseling me, will give me word, and I  
shall signal to you, nodding: at that point  
round up all armor, lances, gear of war  
left in our hall, and stow the lot away  
back in the vaulted store room. When the suitors  
miss those arms and question you, be soft  
in what you say: answer:

‘I thought I’d move them  
out of the smoke. They seemed no longer those  
bright arms Odysseus left us years ago  
when he went off to Troy. Here where the fire’s  
hot breath came, they had grown black and drear.  
One better reason, too, I had from Zeus:  
suppose a brawl starts up when you are drunk,  
you might be crazed and bloody one another,  
and that would stain your feast, your courtship. Tempered  
iron can magnetize a man.’

310

Say that.  
But put aside two broadswords and two spears  
for our own use, two oxhide shields nearby  
when we go into action. Pallas Athena  
and Zeus All Provident will see you through,  
bemusing our young friends.

320

Now one thing more.  
If son of mine you are and blood of mine,  
let no one hear Odysseus is about.  
Neither Laërtēs, nor the swineherd here,  
nor any slave, nor even Penélopê.  
But you and I alone must learn how far

the women are corrupted; we should know  
how to locate good men among our hands,  
the loyal and respectful, and the shirkers  
who take you lightly, as alone and young.”

330

His admirable son replied:

“Ah, Father,  
even when danger comes I think you’ll find  
courage in me. I am not scatterbrained.  
But as to checking on the field hands now,  
I see no gain for us in that. Reflect,  
you make a long toil, that way, if you care  
to look men in the eye at every farm,  
while these gay devils in our hall at ease  
eat up our flocks and herds, leaving us nothing.

340

As for the maids I say, Yes: make distinction  
between good girls and those who shame your house;  
all that I shy away from is a scrutiny  
of cottagers just now. The time for that  
comes later—if in truth you have a sign  
from Zeus the Stormking.”

So their talk ran on,  
while down the coast, and round toward Ithaka,  
hove the good ship that had gone out to Pylos  
bearing Télémakhos and his companions.  
Into the wide bay waters, on to the dark land,  
they drove her, hauled her up, took out the oars  
and the canvas for light-hearted squires to carry  
homeward—as they carried, too, the gifts  
of Meneláos round to Klýtios’<sup>1</sup> house.  
But first they sped a runner to Penélopê.  
They knew that quiet lady must be told  
the prince her son had come ashore, and sent  
his good ship round to port; not one soft tear  
should their sweet queen let fall.

350

Both messengers,  
crewman and swineherd—reached the outer gate  
in the same instant, bearing the same news,  
and went in side by side to the king’s hall.  
He of the ship burst out among the maids:  
“Your son’s ashore this morning, O my Queen!”

360

<sup>1</sup>Father of the trusty Peiraios; see the end of Book XV.

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485

But the swineherd calmly stood near Penélopê  
 whispering what her son had bade him tell  
 and what he had enjoined on her. No more.  
 When he had done, he left the place and turned  
 back to his stading in the hills.

By now,  
 sullen confusion weighed upon the suitors.  
 Out of the house, out of the court they went,  
 beyond the wall and gate, to sit in council.  
 Eurýmakhos, the son of Pólybos,  
 opened discussion:

370

“Friends, face up to it;  
 that young pup, Telémakhos, has done it;  
 he made the round trip, though we said he could not.  
 Well—now to get the best craft we can find  
 afloat, with oarsmen who can drench her bows,  
 and tell those on the island to come home.”

He was yet speaking when Amphinómos,  
 craning seaward, spotted the picket ship  
 already in the roadstead under oars  
 with canvas brailed up; and this fresh arrival  
 made him chuckle. Then he told his friends:

380

“Too late for messages. Look, here they come  
 along the bay. Some god has brought them news,  
 or else they saw the cutter pass—and could not  
 overtake her.”

On their feet at once,  
 the suitors took the road to the sea beach,  
 where, meeting the black ship, they hauled her in.  
 Oars and gear they left for their light-hearted  
 squires to carry, and all in company  
 made off for the assembly ground. All others,  
 young and old alike, they barred from sitting.  
 Eupeithês’ son, Antínóös, made the speech:

390

“How the gods let our man escape a boarding,  
 that is the wonder.

We had lookouts posted  
 up on the heights all day in the sea wind,  
 and every hour a fresh pair of eyes;  
 at night we never slept ashore  
 but after sundown cruised the open water  
 to the southeast, patrolling until Dawn.  
 We were prepared to cut him off and catch him,  
 squelch him for good and all. The power of heaven  
 steered him the long way home.

400

Well, let this company plan his destruction,  
 and leave him no way out, this time. I see  
 our business here unfinished while he lives.  
 He knows, now, and he's no fool. Besides,  
 his people are all tired of playing up to us.  
 I say, act now, before he brings the whole  
 body of Akhaians to assembly—  
 and he would leave no word unsaid, in righteous  
 anger speaking out before them all  
 of how we plotted murder, and then missed him.  
 Will they commend us for that pretty work?  
 Take action now, or we are in for trouble;  
 we might be exiled, driven off our lands.  
 Let the first blow be ours.

410

If we move first, and get our hands on him  
 far from the city's eye, on path or field,  
 then stores and livestock will be ours to share;  
 the house we may confer upon his mother—  
 and on the man who marries her. Decide  
 otherwise you may—but if, my friends,  
 you want that boy to live and have his patrimony,  
 then we should eat no more of his good mutton,  
 come to this place no more.

420

Let each from his own hall  
 court her with dower gifts. And let her marry  
 the destined one, the one who offers most.”

430

He ended, and no sound was heard among them,  
 sitting all hushed, until at last the son  
 of Nísos Aretíadês arose—  
 Amphínomos.

He led the group of suitors  
 who came from grainlands on Doulíkhion,  
 and he had lightness in his talk that pleased  
 Penélopê, for he meant no ill.  
 Now, in concern for them, he spoke:

“O Friends

I should not like to kill Telémakhos.  
 It is a shivery thing to kill a prince  
 of royal blood.

440

We should consult the gods.  
 If Zeus hands down a ruling for that act,  
 then I shall say, ‘Come one, come all,’ and go  
 cut him down with my own hand—  
 but I say Halt, if gods are contrary.”

Now this proposal won them, and it carried.  
 Breaking their session up, away they went  
 to take their smooth chairs in Odysseus' house.

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Meanwhile Penélopê the Wise,  
decided, for her part, to make appearance  
before the valiant young men.

450

She knew now  
they plotted her child's death in her own hall,  
for once more Medôn, who had heard them, told her.  
Into the hall that lovely lady came,  
with maids attending, and approached the suitors,  
till near a pillar of the well-wrought roof  
she paused, her shining veil across her cheeks,  
and spoke directly to Antínoös:

"Infatuate,  
steeped in evil! Yet in Ithaka they say  
you were the best one of your generation  
in mind and speech. Not so, you never were.  
Madman, why do you keep forever knitting  
death for Telémakhos? Have you no piety  
toward men dependent on another's mercy?  
Before Lord Zeus, no sanction can be found  
for one such man to plot against another!  
Or are you not aware that your own father  
fled to us when the realm was up in arms  
against him? He had joined the Taphian pirates  
in ravaging Thesprotian folk, our friends.  
Our people would have raided *him*, then—breached  
his heart, butchered his herds to feast upon—  
only Odysseus took him in, and held  
the furious townsmen off. It is Odysseus'  
house you now consume, his wife you court,  
his son you kill, or try to kill. And me  
you ravage now, and grieve. I call upon you  
to make an end of it!—and your friends too!"

460

470

The son of Pólybos it was, Eurýmakhos,  
who answered her with ready speech:

"My lady

480

Penélopê, wise daughter of Ikários,  
you must shake off these ugly thoughts. I say  
that man does not exist, nor will, who dares  
lay hands upon your son Telémakhos,  
while I live, walk the earth, and use my eyes.  
The man's life blood, I swear,  
will spurt and run out black around my lancehead!  
For it is true of me, too, that Odysseus,  
raiders of cities, took me on his knees  
and fed me often—tidbits and red wine.  
Should not Telémakhos, therefore, be dear to me  
above the rest of men? I tell the lad  
he must not tremble for his life, at least

490

488

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alone in the suitors' company. Heaven  
deals death no man avoids."

Blasphemous lies  
in earnest tones he told—the one who planned  
the lad's destruction!

Silently the lady  
made her way to her glowing upper chamber,  
there to weep for her dear lord, Odysseus,  
until grey-eyed Athena  
cast sweet sleep upon her eyes.

500

At fall of dusk  
Odysseus and his son heard the approach  
of the good forester. They had been standing  
over the fire with a spitted pig,  
a yearling. And Athena coming near  
with one rap of her wand made of Odysseus  
an old old man again, with rags about him—  
for if the swineherd knew his lord were there  
he could not hold the news; Penélopê  
would hear it from him.

Now Telémakhos  
greeted him first:

510

"Eumaios, back again!  
What was the talk in town? Are the tall suitors  
home again, by this time, from their ambush,  
or are they still on watch for my return?"

And you replied, Eumaios—O my swineherd:

"There was no time to ask or talk of that;  
I hurried through the town. Even while I spoke  
my message, I felt driven to return.  
A runner from your friends turned up, a crier,  
who gave the news first to your mother. Ah!  
One thing I do know; with my own two eyes  
I saw it. As I climbed above the town  
to where the sky is cut by Hermês' ridge,  
I saw a ship bound in for our own bay  
with many oarsmen in it, laden down  
with sea provisioning and two-edged spears,  
and I surmised those were the men.

520

Who knows?"

Telémakhos, now strong with magic, smiled  
across at his own father—but avoided  
the swineherd's eye.

So when the pig was done,  
the spit no longer to be turned, the table  
garnished, everyone sat down to feast

530



on all the savory flesh he craved. And when  
they had put off desire for meat and drink,  
they turned to bed and took the gift of sleep.

## BOOK SEVENTEEN: THE BEGGAR AT THE MANOR

When the young Dawn came bright into the East  
spreading her finger tips of rose, Telémakhos  
the king's son, tied on his rawhide sandals  
and took the lance that bore his handgrip. Burning  
to be away, and on the path to town,  
he told the swineherd:

“Uncle, the truth is  
I must go down myself into the city.  
Mother must see me there, with her own eyes,  
or she will weep and feel forsaken still,  
and will not set her mind at rest. Your job  
will be to lead this poor man down to beg. 10  
Some householder may want to dole him out  
a loaf and pint. I have my own troubles.  
Am I to care for every last man who comes?  
And if he takes it badly—well, so much  
the worse for him. Plain truth is what I favor.”

At once Odysseus the great tactician  
spoke up briskly:

“Neither would I myself  
care to be kept here, lad. A beggar man  
fares better in the town. Let it be said 20  
I am not yet so old I must lay up  
indoors and mumble, ‘Aye, Aye’ to a master.<sup>1</sup>  
Go on, then. As you say, my friend can lead me  
as soon as I have had a bit of fire  
and when the sun grows warmer. These old rags  
could be my death, outside on a frosty morning,  
and the town is distant, so they say.”

Telémakhos  
with no more words went out, and through the fence,  
and down hill, going fast on the steep footing,  
nursing woe for the suitors in his heart. 30

<sup>1</sup>Odysseus means that he is not yet so old that he must remain in one place, subject to a single master.

Before the manor hall, he leaned his lance  
against a great porch pillar and stepped in  
across the door stone.

Old Eurýkleia

saw him first, for that day she was covering  
handsome chairs nearby with clean fleeces.  
She ran to him at once, tears in her eyes;  
and other maidservants of the old soldier  
Odysseus gathered round to greet their prince,  
kissing his head and shoulders.

Quickly, then,

Penélopê the Wise, tall in her beauty  
as Artemis or pale-gold Aphroditê,  
appeared from her high chamber and came down  
to throw her arms around her son. In tears  
she kissed his head, kissed both his shining eyes,  
then cried out, and her words flew:

40

“Back with me!

Telémakhos, more sweet to me than sunlight!  
I thought I should not see you again, ever,  
after you took the ship that night to Pylos—  
against my will, with not a word! you went  
for news of your dear father. Tell me now  
of everything you saw!”

50

But he made answer:

“Mother, not now. You make me weep. My heart  
already aches—I came near death at sea.  
You must bathe, first of all, and change your dress,  
and take your maids to the highest room to pray.  
Pray, and burn offerings to the gods of heaven,  
that Zeus may put his hand to our revenge.

I am off now to bring home from the square  
a guest, a passenger I had. I sent him  
yesterday with all my crew to town.  
Peiraios was to care for him, I said,  
and keep him well, with honor, till I came.”

60

She caught back the swift words upon her tongue.  
Then softly she withdrew  
to bathe and dress her body in fresh linen,  
and make her offerings to the gods of heaven,  
praying Almighty Zeus  
to put his hand to their revenge.

Telémakhos

had left the hall, taken his lance, and gone  
with two quick hounds at heel into the town,

70

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491

Athena's grace in his long stride  
 making the people gaze as he came near.  
 And suitors gathered, primed with friendly words,  
 despite the deadly plotting in their hearts—  
 but these, and all their crowd, he kept away from.  
 Next he saw sitting some way off, apart,  
 Mentor, with Antiphos and Halithersês,  
 friends of his father's house in years gone by.  
 Near these men he sat down, and told his tale  
 under their questioning.

His crewman, young Peiraïos,  
 guided through town, meanwhile, into the Square,  
 the Argive exile, Theoklýmenos.  
 Telémakhos lost no time in moving toward him;  
 but first Peiraïos had his say:

80

Telémakhos,  
 you must send maids to me, at once, and let me  
 turn over to you those gifts from Meneláos!"

The prince had pondered it, and said:

"Peiraïos,  
 none of us knows how this affair will end.  
 Say one day our fine suitors, without warning,  
 draw upon me, kill me in our hall,  
 and parcel out my patrimony—I wish  
 you, and no one of them, to have those things.  
 But if my hour comes, if I can bring down  
 bloody death on all that crew,  
 you will rejoice to send my gifts to me—  
 and so will I rejoice!"

90

Then he departed,  
 leading his guest, the lonely stranger, home.

Over chair-backs in hall they dropped their mantles  
 and passed in to the polished tubs, where maids  
 poured out warm baths for them, anointed them,  
 and pulled fresh tunics, fleecy cloaks around them.  
 Soon they were seated at their ease in hall.  
 A maid came by to tip a golden jug  
 over their fingers into a silver bowl  
 and draw a gleaming table up beside them.  
 The larder mistress brought her tray of loaves  
 and savories, dispensing each.

100

In silence  
 across the hall, beside a pillar, propped  
 in a long chair, Telémakhos' mother  
 spun a fine wool yarn.

The young men's hands  
 went out upon the good things placed before them,  
 and only when their hunger and thirst were gone  
 did she look up and say:

110

“Telémakhos,  
 what am I to do now? Return alone  
 and lie again on my forsaken bed—  
 sodden how often with my weeping  
 since that day when Odysseus put to sea  
 to join the Atreidai<sup>2</sup> before Troy?

Could you not  
 tell me, before the suitors fill our house,  
 what news you have of his return?”

He answered:

120

“Now that you ask a second time, dear Mother,  
 here is the truth.

We went ashore at Pylos  
 to Nestor, lord and guardian of the West,  
 who gave me welcome in his towering hall.  
 So kind he was, he might have been my father  
 and I his long-lost son—so truly kind,  
 taking me in with his own honored sons.  
 But as to Odysseus' bitter fate,  
 living or dead, he had no news at all  
 from anyone on earth, he said. He sent me  
 overland in a strong chariot  
 to Atreus' son, the captain, Meneláos.  
 And I saw Helen there, for whom the Argives  
 fought, and the Trojans fought, as the gods willed.  
 Then Meneláos of the great war cry  
 asked me my errand in that ancient land  
 of Lakedaimon. So I told our story,  
 and in reply he burst out:<sup>3</sup>

130

‘Intolerable!  
 That feeble men, unfit as those men are,  
 should think to lie in that great captain's bed,  
 fawns in the lion's lair! As if a doe  
 put down her litter of sucklings there, while she  
 sniffed at the glen or grazed a grassy hollow.  
 Ha! Then the lord returns to his own bed  
 and deals out wretched doom on both alike.

140

So will Odysseus deal out doom on these.  
 O Father Zeus, Athena, and Apollo!  
 I pray he comes as once he was, in Lesbos,

<sup>2</sup>Sons of Atreus—Agamémnon and Meneláos.

<sup>3</sup>The following quotation of Meneláos' words summarizes his narrative in Book IV.

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when he stood up to wrestle Philomeleidês—  
 champion and Island King—  
 and smashed him down. How the Akhaians cheered!  
 If that Odysseus could meet the suitors,  
 they'd have a quick reply, a stunning dowry!  
 Now for your questions, let me come to the point.  
 I would not misreport it for you; let me  
 tell you what the Ancient of the Sea,  
 that infallible seer, told me.

150

On an island  
 your father lies and grieves. The Ancient saw him  
 held by a nymph, Kalypso, in her hall;  
 no means of sailing home remained to him,  
 no ship with oars, and no ship's company  
 to pull him on the broad back of the sea.'

160

I had this from the lord marshal, Menelâos,  
 and when my errand in that place was done  
 I left for home. A fair breeze from the gods  
 brought me swiftly back to our dear island."

The boy's tale made her heart stir in her breast,  
 but this was not all. Mother and son now heard  
 Theoklýmenos, the diviner, say:

"He does not see it clear—

O gentle lady,  
 wife of Odysseus Laërtiadês,  
 listen to me, I can reveal this thing.  
 Zeus be my witness, and the table set  
 for strangers and the hearth to which I've come—  
 the lord Odysseus, I tell you  
 is present now, already, on this island!  
 Quartered somewhere, or going about, he knows  
 what evil is afoot. He has it in him  
 to bring a black hour on the suitors. Yesterday,  
 still at the ship, I saw this in a portent.  
 I read the sign aloud, I told Telémakhos!"

170

180

The prudent queen, for her part, said:

"Stranger,  
 if only this came true—  
 our love would go to you, with many gifts;  
 aye, every man who passed would call you happy!"

So ran the talk between these three.

Meanwhile,  
 swaggering before Odysseus' hall,  
 the suitors were competing at the discus throw  
 and javelin, on the level measured field.

But when the dinner hour drew on, and beasts  
 were being driven from the fields to slaughter—  
 as beasts were, every day—Medôn spoke out:  
 Medôn, the crier, whom the suitors liked;  
 he took his meat beside them.

190

“Men,” he said,  
 “each one has had his work-out and his pleasure,  
 come in to Hall now; time to make our feast.  
 Are discus throws more admirable than a roast  
 when the proper hour comes?”

At this reminder  
 they all broke up their games, and trailed away  
 into the gracious, timbered hall. There, first,  
 they dropped their cloaks on chairs; then came their ritual:  
 putting great rams and fat goats to the knife—  
 pigs and a cow, too.

200

So they made their feast.

During these hours, Odysseus and the swineherd  
 were on their way out of the hills to town.  
 The forester had got them started, saying:

“Friend, you have hopes, I know, of your adventure  
 into the heart of town today. My lord  
 wishes it so, not I. No, I should rather  
 you stood by here as guardian of our stading.  
 But I owe reverence to my prince, and fear  
 he’ll make my ears burn later if I fail.  
 A master’s tongue has a rough edge. Off we go.  
 Part of the day is past; nightfall will be  
 early, and colder, too.”

210

Odysseus,  
 who had it all timed in his head, replied:

“I know, as well as you do. Let’s move on.  
 You lead the way—the whole way. Have you got  
 a staff, a lopped stick, you could let me use  
 to put my weight on when I slip? This path  
 is hard going, they said.”

220

Over his shoulders  
 he slung his patched-up knapsack, an old bundle  
 tied with twine. Eumaios found a stick for him,  
 the kind he wanted, and the two set out,  
 leaving the boys and dogs to guard the place.  
 In this way good Eumaios led his lord  
 down to the city.

And it seemed to him  
 he led an old outcast, a beggar man,  
 leaning most painfully upon a stick,  
 his poor cloak, all in tatters, looped about him.

230

Down by the stony trail they made their way  
 as far as Clearwater, not far from town—  
 a spring house where the people filled their jars.  
 Ithakos, Nêritos, and Polýktor<sup>4</sup> built it,  
 and round it on the humid ground a grove,  
 a circular wood of poplars grew. Ice cold  
 in runnels from a high rock ran the spring,  
 and over it there stood an altar stone  
 to the cool nymphs, where all men going by  
 laid offerings.

Well, here the son of Dólios  
 crossed their path—Melánthios.<sup>5</sup>

240

He was driving  
 a string of choice goats for the evening meal,  
 with two goatherds beside him; and no sooner  
 had he laid eyes upon the wayfarers  
 than he began to growl and taunt them both  
 so grossly that Odysseus' heart grew hot:

"Here comes one scurvy type leading another!  
 God pairs them off together, every time.  
 Swineherd, where are you taking your new pig,  
 that stinking beggar there, lick of pots?  
 How many doorposts has he rubbed his back on  
 whining for garbage, where a noble guest  
 would rate a cauldron or a sword?

250

Hand him  
 over to me, I'll make a farmhand of him,  
 a stall scraper, a fodder carrier! Whey  
 for drink will put good muscle on his shank!  
 No chance: he learned his dodges long ago—  
 no honest sweat. He'd rather tramp the country  
 begging, to keep his hoggish belly full.  
 Well, I can tell you this for sure:  
 in King Odysseus' hall, if he goes there,  
 footstools will fly around his head—good shots  
 from strong hands. Back and side, his ribs will catch it  
 on the way out!"

260

<sup>4</sup> These three were the founding fathers of the island; Ithakos' name represents the island itself, Nêritos' name an important mountain on the island.

<sup>5</sup> Dólios was a trusty steward of Odysseus' father, Laërtês. As we learn later, Melánthios' sister Melántho, maid to Penélopê, is a mistress of the suitor Eurýmakhos, a fact that probably accounts for the intimacy of her goatherd brother with the suitors.

And like a drunken fool  
 he kicked at Odysseus' hip as he passed by.  
 Not even jogged off stride, or off the trail,  
 the Lord Odysseus walked along, debating  
 inwardly whether to whirl and beat  
 the life out of this fellow with his stick,  
 or toss him, brain him on the stony ground.  
 Then he controlled himself, and bore it quietly.  
 Not so the swineherd.

270

Seeing the man before him,  
 he raised his arms and cried:

"Nymphs of the spring,  
 daughters of Zeus, if ever Odysseus  
 burnt you a thighbone in rich fat—a ram's  
 or kid's thighbone, hear me, grant my prayer:  
 let our true lord come back, let heaven bring him  
 to rid the earth of these fine courtly ways  
 Melánthios picks up around the town—  
 all wine and wind! Bad shepherds ruin flocks!"

280

Melánthios the goatherd answered:

"Bless me!  
 The dog can snap: how he goes on! Some day  
 I'll take him in a slave ship overseas  
 and trade him for a herd!"

Old Silverbow  
 Apollo, if he shot clean through Telémakhos<sup>6</sup>  
 in hall today, what luck! Or let the suitors  
 cut him down!

Odysseus died at sea;  
 no coming home for him."

He flung this out  
 and left the two behind to come on slowly,  
 while he went hurrying to the king's hall.  
 There he slipped in, and sat among the suitors,  
 beside the one he doted on—Eurýmakhos.  
 Then working servants helped him to his meat  
 and the mistress of the larder gave him bread.

290

Reaching the gate, Odysseus and the forester  
 halted and stood outside, for harp notes came  
 around them rippling on the air  
 as Phêmios picked out a song. Odysseus  
 caught his companion's arm and said:

<sup>6</sup> That is, if Telémakhos should drop dead.



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“My friend,  
 here is the beautiful place—who could mistake it?  
 Here is Odysseus’ hall: no hall like this!  
 See how one chamber grows out of another;  
 see how the court is tight with wall and coping;  
 no man at arms could break this gateway down!  
 Your banqueting young lords are here in force,  
 I gather, from the fumes of mutton roasting  
 and strum of harping—harping, which the gods  
 appoint sweet friend of feasts!”

300

And—O my swineherd!  
 you replied:

“That was quick recognition;  
 but you are no numbskull—in this or anything.  
 Now we must plan this action. Will you take  
 leave of me here, and go ahead alone  
 to make your entrance now among the suitors?  
 Or do you choose to wait?—Let me go forward  
 and go in first.

310

Do not delay too long;  
 someone might find you skulking here outside  
 and take a club to you, or heave a lance.  
 Bear this in mind, I say.”

The patient hero  
 Odysseus answered:

“Just what I was thinking.  
 You go in first, and leave me here a little.  
 But as for blows and missiles,  
 I am no tyro<sup>7</sup> at these things. I learned  
 to keep my head in hardship—years of war  
 and years at sea. Let this new trial come.  
 The cruel belly, can you hide its ache?  
 How many bitter days it brings! Long ships  
 with good stout planks athwart—would fighters rig them  
 to ride the barren sea, except for hunger?  
 Seawolves—woe to their enemies!”

320

While he spoke  
 an old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears  
 and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argos,  
 trained as a puppy by Odysseus,  
 but never taken on a hunt before  
 his master sailed for Troy. The young men, afterward,

330

<sup>7</sup>Inexperienced beginner.

hunted wild goats with him, and hare, and deer,  
 but he had grown old in his master's absence.  
 Treated as rubbish now, he lay at last  
 upon a mass of dung before the gates—  
 manure of mules and cows, piled there until  
 fieldhands could spread it on the king's estate.  
 Abandoned there, and half destroyed with flies,  
 old Argos lay.

340

But when he knew he heard  
 Odysseus' voice nearby, he did his best  
 to wag his tail, nose down, with flattened ears,  
 having no strength to move nearer his master.  
 And the man looked away,  
 wiping a salt tear from his cheek; but he  
 hid this from Eumaios. Then he said:

"I marvel that they leave this hound to lie  
 here on the dung pile;  
 he would have been a fine dog, from the look of him,  
 though I can't say as to his power and speed  
 when he was young. You find the same good build  
 in house dogs, table dogs landowners keep  
 all for style."

350

And you replied, Eumaios:

"A hunter owned him—but the man is dead  
 in some far place. If this old hound could show  
 the form he had when Lord Odysseus left him,  
 going to Troy, you'd see him swift and strong.  
 He never shrank from any savage thing  
 he'd brought to bay in the deep woods; on the scent  
 no other dog kept up with him. Now misery  
 has him in leash. His owner died abroad,  
 and here the women slaves will take no care of him.  
 You know how servants are: without a master  
 they have no will to labor, or excel.  
 For Zeus who views the wide world takes away  
 half the manhood of a man, that day  
 he goes into captivity and slavery."

360

Eumaios crossed the court and went straight forward  
 into the mégaron<sup>8</sup> among the suitors;  
 but death and darkness in that instant closed  
 the eyes of Argos, who had seen his master,  
 Odysseus, after twenty years.

370

<sup>8</sup> The great hall of the house.

Long before anyone else  
 Telémakhos caught sight of the grey woodsman  
 coming from the door, and called him over  
 with a quick jerk of his head. Eumaios'  
 narrowed eyes made out an empty bench  
 beside the one the carver used—that servant  
 who had no respite, carving for the suitors.  
 This bench he took possession of, and placed it  
 across the table from Telémakhos  
 for his own use. Then the two men were served  
 cuts from a roast and bread from a bread basket.

380

At no long interval, Odysseus came  
 through his own doorway as a mendicant,  
 humped like a bundle of rags over his stick.  
 He settled on the inner ash wood sill,  
 leaning against the door jamb—cypress timber  
 the skilled carpenter planed years ago  
 and set up with a plumbline.

390

Now Telémakhos  
 took an entire loaf and a double handful  
 of roast meat; then he said to the forester:  
 “Give these to the stranger there. But tell him  
 to go among the suitors, on his own;  
 he may beg all he wants. This hanging back  
 is no asset to a hungry man.”

The swineherd rose at once, crossed to the door,  
 and halted by Odysseus.

“Friend,” he said,  
 “Telémakhos is pleased to give you these,  
 but he commands you to approach the suitors;  
 you may ask all you want from them. He adds,  
 your shyness is no asset to a beggar.”

400

The great tactician, lifting up his eyes,  
 cried:

“Zeus aloft! A blessing on Telémakhos!  
 Let all things come to pass as he desires!”

Palms held out, in the beggar’s gesture, he  
 received the bread and meat and put it down  
 before him on his knapsack—lowly table!—  
 then he fell to, devouring it. Meanwhile  
 the harper in the great room sang a song.  
 Not till the man was fed did the sweet harper

410

500

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end his singing—whereupon the company  
made the walls ring again with talk.

Unseen,  
Athena took her place beside Odysseus  
whispering in his ear:

“Yes, try the suitors.  
You may collect a few more loaves, and learn  
who are the decent lads, and who are vicious—  
although not one can be excused from death!”

So he appealed to them, one after another,  
going from left to right, with open palm,  
as though his life time had been spent in beggary.  
And they gave bread, for pity—wondering, though,  
at the strange man. Who could this beggar be,  
where did he come from? each would ask his neighbor;  
till in their midst the goatherd, Melánthios,  
raised his voice:

420

“Hear just a word from me,  
my lords who court our illustrious queen!  
This man,  
this foreigner, I saw him on the road;  
the swineherd here was leading him this way;  
who, what, or whence he claims to be, I could not  
say for sure.”

430

At this, Antínoös  
turned on the swineherd brutally, saying:

“You famous  
breeder of pigs, why bring this fellow here?  
Are we not plagued enough with beggars,  
foragers and such rats?

You find the company  
too slow at eating up your lord’s estate—  
is that it? So you call this scarecrow in?”

The forester replied:

“Antínoös,  
well born you are, but that was not well said.  
Who would call in a foreigner?—unless  
an artisan with skill to serve the realm,  
a healer, or a prophet, or a builder,  
or one whose harp and song might give us joy.  
All these are sought for on the endless earth,  
but when have beggars come by invitation?

440

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501

Who puts a field mouse in his granary? My lord,  
you are a hard man, and you always were,  
more so than others of this company—hard  
on all Odysseus' people and on me.  
But this I can forget  
as long as Penélopê lives on, the wise and tender  
mistress of this hall; as long  
as Prince Telémakhos—"

450

But he broke off  
at a look from Telémakhos, who said:

"Be still.  
Spare me a long-drawn answer to this gentleman.  
With his unpleasantness, he will forever make  
strife where he can—and goad the others on."

He turned and spoke out clearly to Antínoös:

"What fatherly concern you show me! Frighten  
this unknown fellow, would you, from my hall  
with words that promise blows—may God forbid it!  
Give him a loaf. Am I a niggard? No,  
I call on you to give. And spare your qualms  
as to my mother's loss, or anyone's—  
not that in truth you have such care at heart:  
your heart is all in feeding, not in giving."

460

Antínoös replied:

"What high and mighty  
talk, Telémakhos! No holding you!  
If every suitor gave what I may give him,  
he could be kept for months—kept out of sight!"

470

He reached under the table for the footstool  
his shining feet had rested on—and this  
he held up so that all could see his gift.

But all the rest gave alms,  
enough to fill the beggar's pack with bread  
and roast meat.

So it looked as though Odysseus  
had had his taste of what these men were like  
and could return scot free to his own doorway—  
but halting now before Antínoös  
he made a little speech to him. Said he:

480

"Give a mite, friend. I would not say, myself,  
you are the worst man of the young Akhaians.  
The noblest, rather; kingly, by your look;

therefore you'll give more bread than others do.  
 Let me speak well of you as I pass on  
 over the boundless earth!

I, too, you know,  
 had fortune once, lived well, stood well with men,  
 and gave alms, often, to poor wanderers  
 like this one that you see—aye, to all sorts,  
 no matter in what dire want. I owned  
 servants—many, god knows—and all the rest  
 that goes with being prosperous, as they say.  
 But Zeus the son of Kronos brought me down.

490

No telling  
 why he would have it, but he made me go  
 to Egypt with a company of rovers—  
 a long sail to the south—for my undoing.  
 Up the broad Nile and in to the river bank  
 I brought my dipping squadron. There, indeed,  
 I told the men to stand guard at the ships;  
 I sent patrols out—out to rising ground;  
 but reckless greed carried my crews away  
 to plunder the Egyptian farms; they bore off  
 wives and children, killed what men they found.  
 The news ran on the wind to the city, a night cry,  
 and sunrise brought both infantry and horsemen,  
 filling the river plain with dazzle of bronze;  
 then Zeus lord of lightning  
 threw my men into a blind panic; no one dared  
 stand against that host closing around us.  
 Their scything weapons left our dead in piles,  
 but some they took alive, into forced labor,  
 myself among them. And they gave me, then,  
 to one Dmêtor, a traveller, son of Iasos,  
 who ruled at Kypros.<sup>9</sup> He conveyed me there.  
 From that place, working northward, miserably—”

500

510

But here Antúnoös broke in, shouting:

“God!

What evil wind blew in this pest?

Get over,  
 stand in the passage! Nudge my table, will you?  
 Egyptian whips are sweet  
 to what you'll come to here, you nosing rat,  
 making your pitch to everyone!  
 These men have bread to throw away on you  
 because it is not theirs. Who cares? Who spares  
 another's food, when he has more than plenty?”

520

<sup>9</sup> Cyprus, a large island off the Syrian coast.

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503

With guile Odysseus drew away, then said:

“A pity that you have more looks than heart.  
You’d grudge a pinch of salt from your own larder  
to your own handy man. You sit here, fat  
on others’ meat, and cannot bring yourself  
to rummage out a crust of bread for me!”

530

Then anger made Antínoös’ heart beat hard,  
and, glowering under his brows, he answered:

“Now!

You think you’ll shuffle off and get away  
after that impudence? Oh, no you don’t!”

The stool he let fly hit the man’s right shoulder  
on the packed muscle under the shoulder blade—  
like solid rock, for all the effect one saw.  
Odysseus only shook his head, containing  
thoughts of bloody work, as he walked on,  
then sat, and dropped his loaded bag again  
upon the door sill. Facing the whole crowd  
he said, and eyed them all:

540

“One word only,  
my lords, and suitors of the famous queen.  
One thing I have to say.  
There is no pain, no burden for the heart  
when blows come to a man, and he defending  
his own cattle—his own cows and lambs.  
Here it was otherwise. Antínoös  
hit me for being driven on by hunger—  
how many bitter seas men cross for hunger!  
If beggars interest the gods, if there are Furies  
pent in the dark to avenge a poor man’s wrong, then may  
Antínoös meet his death before his wedding day!”

550

Then said Eupeithês’ son, Antínoös:

“Enough.

Eat and be quiet where you are, or shamble elsewhere,  
unless you want these lads to stop your mouth  
pulling you by the heels, or hands and feet,  
over the whole floor, till your back is peeled!”

560

But now the rest were mortified, and someone  
spoke from the crowd of young bucks to rebuke him:

“A poor show, that—hitting this famished tramp—  
bad business, if he happened to be a god.  
You know they go in foreign guise, the gods do,  
looking like strangers, turning up

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in towns and settlements to keep an eye  
on manners, good or bad.”

But at this notion  
Antínoös only shrugged.

Telémakhos,  
after the blow his father bore, sat still  
without a tear, though his heart felt the blow.  
Slowly he shook his head from side to side,  
containing murderous thoughts.

570

Penélopê  
on the higher level of her room had heard  
the blow, and knew who gave it. Now she murmured:  
“Would god you could be hit yourself, Antínoös—  
hit by Apollo’s bowshot!”

And Eurýnomê  
her housekeeper, put in:

“He and no other?  
If all we pray for came to pass, not one  
would live till dawn!”

Her gentle mistress said:

580

“Oh, Nan,<sup>10</sup> they are a bad lot; they intend  
ruin for all of us; but Antínoös  
appears a blacker-hearted hound than any.  
Here is a poor man come, a wanderer,  
driven by want to beg his bread, and everyone  
in hall gave bits, to cram his bag—only  
Antínoös threw a stool, and banged his shoulder!”

So she described it, sitting in her chamber  
among her maids—while her true lord was eating.  
Then she called in the forester and said:

590

“Go to that man on my behalf, Eumaios,  
and send him here, so I can greet and question him.  
Abroad in the great world, he may have heard  
rumors about Odysseus—may have known him!”

Then you replied—O swineherd!

“Ah, my queen,  
if these Akhaian sprigs would hush their babble  
the man could tell you tales to charm your heart.  
Three days and nights I kept him in my hut;  
he came straight off a ship, you know, to me.

<sup>10</sup>Affectionate diminutive for an old woman.



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There was no end to what he made me hear  
 of his hard roving; and I listened, eyes  
 upon him, as a man drinks in a tale  
 a minstrel sings—a minstrel taught by heaven  
 to touch the hearts of men. At such a song  
 the listener becomes rapt and still. Just so  
 I found myself enchanted by this man.  
 He claims an old tie with Odysseus, too—  
 in his home country, the Minoan<sup>11</sup> land  
 of Krete. From Krete he came, a rolling stone  
 washed by the gales of life this way and that  
 to our own beach.

600

610

If he can be believed  
 he has news of Odysseus near at hand  
 alive, in the rich country of Thesprotia,  
 bringing a mass of treasure home.”

Then wise Penélopê said again:

“Go call him, let him come here, let him tell  
 that tale again for my own ears.

Our friends  
 can drink their cups outside or stay in hall,  
 being so carefree. And why not? Their stores  
 lie intact in their homes, both food and drink,  
 with only servants left to take a little.  
 But these men spend their days around our house  
 killing our beeves, our fat goats and our sheep,  
 carousing, drinking up our good dark wine;  
 sparing nothing, squandering everything.  
 No champion like Odysseus takes our part.  
 Ah, if he comes again, no falcon ever  
 struck more suddenly than he will, with his son,  
 to avenge this outrage!”

620

The great hall below  
 at this point rang with a tremendous sneeze<sup>12</sup>—  
 “kchaou!” from Telémakhos—like an acclamation.  
 And laughter seized Penélopê.

630

Then quickly,  
 lucidly she went on:

“Go call the stranger  
 straight to me. Did you hear that, Eumaios?  
 My son’s thundering sneeze at what I said!  
 May death come of a sudden so; may death  
 relieve us, clean as that, of all the suitors!

<sup>11</sup> Minos, to whom the adjective *Minoan* refers, had been king of Krete (Crete).

<sup>12</sup> A sneeze was regarded as a sign of good luck.

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Let me add one thing—do not overlook it—  
if I can see this man has told the truth,  
I promise him a warm new cloak and tunic.”

640

With all this in his head, the forester  
went down the hall, and halted near the beggar,  
saying aloud:

“Good father, you are called  
by the wise mother of Telémakhos,  
Penélopê. The queen, despite her troubles,  
is moved by a desire to hear your tales  
about her lord—and if she finds them true,  
she’ll see you clothed in what you need, a cloak  
and a fresh tunic.

You may have your belly  
full each day you go about this realm  
begging. For all may give, and all they wish.”

650

Now said Odysseus, the old soldier:

“Friend,  
I wish this instant I could tell my facts  
to the wise daughter of Ikários, Penélopê—  
and I have much to tell about her husband;  
we went through much together.

But just now  
this hard crowd worries me. They are, you said  
infamous to the very rim of heaven  
for violent acts: and here, just now, this fellow  
gave me a bruise. What had I done to him?  
But who would lift a hand for me? Telémakhos?  
Anyone else?

660

No; bid the queen be patient,  
Let her remain till sundown in her room,  
and then—if she will seat me near the fire—  
inquire tonight about her lord’s return.  
My rags are sorry cover; you know that;  
I showed my sad condition first to you.”

The woodsman heard him out, and then returned;  
but the queen met him on her threshold, crying:  
“Have you not brought him? Why? What is he thinking?  
Has he some fear of overstepping? Shy  
about these inner rooms? A hangdog beggar?”

670

To this you answered, friend Eumaios:

“No:  
he reasons as another might, and well,

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not to tempt any swordplay from these drunkards.  
 Be patient, wait—he says—till darkness falls.  
 And, O my queen, for you too that is better:  
 better to be alone with him, and question him,  
 and hear him out.”

680

Penélopê replied:

“He is no fool; he sees how it could be.  
 Never were mortal men like these  
 for bullying and brainless arrogance!”

Thus she accepted what had been proposed,  
 so he went back into the crowd. He joined  
 Télémakhos, and said at once in whispers—  
 his head bent, so that no one else might hear:

“Dear prince, I must go home to keep good watch  
 on hut and swine, and look to my own affairs.  
 Everything here is in your hands. Consider  
 your own safety before the rest; take care  
 not to get hurt. Many are dangerous here.  
 May Zeus destroy them first, before we suffer!”

690

Télémakhos said:

“Your wish is mine, Uncle.  
 Go when your meal is finished. Then come back  
 at dawn, and bring good victims for a slaughter.  
 Everything here is in my hands indeed—  
 and in the disposition of the gods.”

Taking his seat on the smooth bench again,  
 Eumaios ate and drank his fill, then rose  
 to climb the mountain trail back to his swine,  
 leaving the mégaron and court behind him  
 crowded with banqueters.

700

These had their joy  
 of dance and song, as day waned into evening.

## BOOK EIGHTEEN: BLOWS AND A QUEEN'S BEAUTY

Now a true scavenger came in—a public tramp  
 who begged around the town of Ithaka,  
 a by-word for his insatiable swag-belly,  
 feeding and drinking, dawn to dark. No pith  
 was in him, and no nerve, huge as he looked.  
 Arnaïos, as his gentle mother called him,

he had been nicknamed “Iros”<sup>1</sup> by the young  
for being ready to take messages.

This fellow  
thought he would rout Odysseus from his doorway,  
growling at him:

“Clear out, grandfather,  
or else be hauled out by the ankle bone.  
See them all giving me the wink? That means,  
‘Go on and drag him out!’ I hate to do it.  
Up with you! Or would you like a fist fight?”

10

Odysseus only frowned and looked him over,  
taking account of everything, then said:

“Master, I am no trouble to you here.  
I offer no remarks. I grudge you nothing.  
Take all you get, and welcome. Here is room  
for two on this doorslab—or do you own it?  
You are a tramp, I think, like me. Patience:  
a windfall from the gods will come. But drop  
that talk of using fists; it could annoy me.  
Old as I am, I might just crack a rib  
or split a lip for you. My life would go  
even more peacefully, after tomorrow,  
looking for no more visits here from you.”

20

Iros the tramp grew red and hooted:

“Ho,  
listen to him! The swine can talk your arm off,  
like an old oven woman! With two punches  
I’d knock him snoring, if I had a mind to—  
and not a tooth left in his head, the same  
as an old sow caught in the corn! Belt up!  
And let this company see the way I do it  
when we square off. Can you fight a fresher man?”

30

Under the lofty doorway, on the door sill  
of wide smooth ash, they held this rough exchange.  
And the tall full-blooded suitor, Antinoös,  
overhearing, broke into happy laughter.  
Then he said to the others:

40

“Oh, my friends,  
no luck like this ever turned up before!  
What a farce heaven has brought this house!  
The stranger  
and Iros have had words, they brag of boxing!  
Into the ring they go, and no more talk!”

<sup>1</sup>A pun on Iris, goddess of the rainbow and a messenger of the gods.

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509

All the young men got on their feet now, laughing,  
to crowd around the ragged pair. Antínoös  
called out:

“Gentlemen, quiet! One more thing:  
here are goat stomachs ready on the fire  
to stuff with blood and fat, good supper pudding.  
The man who wins this gallant bout  
may step up here and take the one he likes.  
And let him feast with us from this day on:  
no other beggar will be admitted here  
when we are at our wine.”

50

This pleased them all.  
But now that wily man, Odysseus, muttered:

“An old man, an old hulk, has no business  
fighting a young man, but my belly nags me;  
nothing will do but I must take a beating.  
Well, then, let every man here swear an oath  
not to step in for Iros. No one throw  
a punch for luck. I could be whipped that way.”

60

So much the suitors were content to swear,  
but after they reeled off their oaths, Telémakhos  
put in a word to clinch it, saying:

“Friend,  
if you will stand and fight, as pride requires,  
don’t worry about a foul blow from behind.  
Whoever hits you will take on the crowd.  
You have my word as host; you have the word  
of these two kings, Antínoös and Eurýmakhos—  
a pair of thinking men.”

70

All shouted, “Aye!”  
So now Odysseus made his shirt a belt  
and roped his rags around his loins, baring  
his hurdler’s thighs and boxer’s breadth of shoulder,  
the dense rib-sheath and upper arms. Athena  
stood nearby to give him bulk and power,  
while the young suitors watched with narrowed eyes—  
and comments went around:

“By god, old Iros now retiros.”

“Aye,  
he asked for it, he’ll get it—bloody, too.”

80

“The build this fellow had, under his rags!”

Panic made Iros’ heart jump, but the yard-boys  
hustled and got him belted by main force,

though all his blubber quivered now with dread.  
Antínoös' angry voice rang in his ears:

"You sack of guts, you might as well be dead,  
might as well never have seen the light of day,  
if this man makes you tremble! Chicken-heart,  
afraid of an old wreck, far gone in misery!  
Well, here is what I say—and what I'll do.

90

If this ragpicker can outfight you, whip you,  
I'll ship you out to that king in Epeíros,  
Ékhetos<sup>2</sup>—he skins everyone alive.

Let him just cut your nose off and your ears  
and pull your privy parts out by the roots  
to feed raw to his hunting dogs!"

#### Poor Iros

felt a new fit of shaking take his knees.  
But the yard-boys pushed him out. Now both contenders  
put their hands up. Royal Odysseus  
pondered if he should hit him with all he had  
and drop the man dead on the spot, or only  
spar, with force enough to knock him down.  
Better that way, he thought—a gentle blow,  
else he might give himself away.

100

The two  
were at close quarters now, and Iros lunged  
hitting the shoulder. Then Odysseus hooked him  
under the ear and shattered his jaw bone,  
so bright red blood came bubbling from his mouth,  
as down he pitched into the dust, bleating,  
kicking against the ground, his teeth stove in.  
The suitors whooped and swung their arms, half dead  
with pangs of laughter.

110

Then, by the ankle bone,  
Odysseus hauled the fallen one outside,  
crossing the courtyard to the gate, and piled him  
against the wall. In his right hand he stuck  
his begging staff, and said:

"Here, take your post.  
Sit here to keep the dogs and pigs away.  
You can give up your habit of command  
over poor waifs and beggarmen—you swab.  
Another time you may not know what hit you."

120

When he had slung his rucksack by the string  
over his shoulder, like a wad of rags,  
he sat down on the broad door sill again,

<sup>2</sup> Probably a nonhistorical tyrannical ruler whose name was a byword for cruelty. Epeíros (Epirus), in the preceding line, is the Grecian mainland north of Ithaka.

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as laughing suitors came to flock inside;  
and each young buck in passing gave him greeting,  
saying, maybe,

“Zeus fill your pouch for this!  
May the gods grant your heart’s desire!”

“Well done  
to put that walking famine out of business.”

“We’ll ship him out to that king in Epeiros,  
Ékhetos—he skins everyone alive.”

130

Odysseus found grim cheer in their good wishes—  
his work had started well.

Now from the fire  
his fat blood pudding came, deposited  
before him by Antinoös—then, to boot,  
two brown loaves from the basket, and some wine  
in a fine cup of gold. These gifts Amphínomos  
gave him. Then he said:

“Here’s luck, grandfather;  
a new day; may the worst be over now.”

Odysseus answered, and his mind ranged far:

“Amphínomos, your head is clear, I’d say;  
so was your father’s—or at least I’ve heard  
good things of Nisos the Doulíkhion,  
whose son you are, they tell me—an easy man.  
And you seem gently bred.

140

In view of that,  
I have a word to say to you, so listen.

Of mortal creatures, all that breathe and move,  
earth bears none frailer than mankind. What man  
believes in woe to come, so long as valor  
and tough knees are supplied him by the gods?  
But when the gods in bliss bring miseries on,  
then willy-nilly, blindly, he endures.  
Our minds are as the days are, dark or bright,  
blown over by the father of gods and men.

150

So I, too, in my time thought to be happy;  
but far and rash I ventured, counting on  
my own right arm, my father, and my kin;  
behold me now.

No man should flout the law,  
but keep in peace what gifts the gods may give.

I see you young blades living dangerously,  
a household eaten up, a wife dishonored—

160

and yet the master will return, I tell you,  
to his own place, and soon; for he is near.  
So may some power take you out of this,  
homeward, and softly, not to face that man  
the hour he sets foot on his native ground.  
Between him and the suitors I foretell  
no quittance,<sup>3</sup> no way out, unless by blood,  
once he shall stand beneath his own roof-beam.”

Gravely, when he had done, he made libation  
and took a sip of honey-hearted wine,  
giving the cup, then, back into the hands  
of the young nobleman. Amphínomos, for his part,  
shaking his head, with chill and burdened breast,  
turned in the great hall.

170

Now his heart foreknew  
the wrath to come, but he could not take flight,  
being by Athena bound there.

Death would have him  
broken by a spear thrown by Telémakhos.  
So he sat down where he had sat before.

And now heart-prompting from the grey-eyed goddess  
came to the quiet queen, Penélopê:  
a wish to show herself before the suitors;  
for thus by fanning their desire again  
Athena meant to set her beauty high  
before her husband's eyes, before her son.  
Knowing no reason, laughing confusedly,  
she said:

180

“Eurýnomê, I have a craving  
I never had at all—I would be seen  
among those ruffians, hateful as they are.  
I might well say a word, then, to my son,  
for his own good—tell him to shun that crowd;  
for all their gay talk, they are bent on evil.”

190

Mistress Eurýnomê replied:

“Well said, child,  
now is the time. Go down, and make it clear,  
hold nothing back from him.

But you must bathe  
and put a shine upon your cheeks—not this way,  
streaked under your eyes and stained with tears.  
You make it worse, being forever sad,  
and now your boy's a bearded man! Remember  
you prayed the gods to let you see him so.”

<sup>3</sup> Repayment.



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Penélopê replied:

“Eurýnomê,  
it is a kind thought, but I will not hear it—  
to bathe and sleek with perfumed oil. No, no,  
the gods forever took my sheen away  
when my lord sailed for Troy in the decked ships.  
Only tell my Autonoë to come,  
and Hippodameía; they should be attending me  
in hall, if I appear there. I could not  
enter alone into that crowd of men.”

200

At this the good old woman left the chamber  
to tell the maids her bidding. But now too  
the grey-eyed goddess had her own designs.  
Upon the quiet daughter of Ikários  
she let clear drops of slumber fall, until  
the queen lay back asleep, her limbs unstrung,  
in her long chair. And while she slept the goddess  
endowed her with immortal grace to hold  
the eyes of the Akhaians. With ambrosia  
she bathed her cheeks and throat and smoothed her brow—  
ambrosia, used by flower-crowned Kythereia<sup>4</sup>  
when she would join the rose-lipped Graces dancing.  
Grandeur she gave her, too, in height and form,  
and made her whiter than carved ivory.  
Touching her so, the perfect one was gone.  
Now came the maids, bare-armed and lovely, voices  
breaking into the room. The queen awoke  
and as she rubbed her cheek she sighed:

210

220

“Ah, soft  
that drowse I lay embraced in, pain forgot!  
If only Artemis the Pure would give me  
death as mild, and soon! No heart-ache more,  
no wearing out my lifetime with desire  
and sorrow, mindful of my lord, good man  
in all ways that he was, best of the Akhaians!”

230

She rose and left her glowing upper room,  
and down the stairs, with her two maids in train,  
this beautiful lady went before the suitors.  
Then by a pillar of the solid roof  
she paused, her shining veil across her cheek,  
the two girls close to her and still;  
and in that instant weakness took those men  
in the knee joints, their hearts grew faint with lust;  
not one but swore to god to lie beside her.

240

<sup>4</sup> Aphroditê, goddess of love.

But speaking for her dear son's ears alone  
she said:

“Telémakhos, what has come over you?  
Lightminded you were not, in all your boyhood.  
Now you are full grown, come of age; a man  
from foreign parts might take you for the son  
of royalty, to go by your good looks;  
and have you no more thoughtfulness or manners?  
How could it happen in our hall that you  
permit the stranger to be so abused?  
Here, in our house, a guest, can any man  
suffer indignity, come by such injury?  
What can this be for you but public shame?”

250

Telémakhos looked in her eyes and answered,  
with his clear head and his discretion:

“Mother,  
I cannot take it ill that you are angry.  
I know the meaning of these actions now,  
both good and bad. I had been young and blind.  
How can I always keep to what is fair  
while these sit here to put fear in me?—princes  
from near and far whose interest is my ruin;  
are any on my side?

260

But you should know  
the suitors did not have their way, matching  
the stranger here and Iros—for the stranger  
beat him to the ground.

O Father Zeus!

Athena and Apollo! could I see  
the suitors whipped like that! Courtyard and hall  
strewn with our friends, too weak-kneed to get up,  
chapfallen to their collarbones, the way  
old Iros rolls his head there by the gate  
as though he were pig-drunk! No energy  
to stagger on his homeward path; no fight  
left in his numb legs!”

270

Thus Penélopê  
reproached her son, and he replied. Now, interrupting,  
Eurýmakhos called out to her:

“Penélopê,  
deep-minded queen, daughter of Ikários,  
if all Akhaians in the land of Argos  
only saw you now! What hundreds more  
would join your suitors here to feast tomorrow!  
Beauty like yours no woman had before,  
or majesty, or mastery.”

280

She answered:

“Eurýmakhos, my qualities—I know—  
my face, my figure, all were lost or blighted  
when the Akhaians crossed the sea to Troy,  
Odysseus my lord among the rest.  
If he returned, if he were here to care for me,  
I might be happily renowned!  
But grief instead heaven sent me—years of pain.  
Can I forget?—the day he left this island,  
enfolding my right hand and wrist in his,  
he said:

290

‘My lady, the Akhaian troops  
will not easily make it home again  
full strength, unhurt, from Troy. They say the Trojans  
are fighters too; good lances and good bowmen,  
horsemen, charioteers—and those can be  
decisive when a battle hangs in doubt.  
So whether God will send me back, or whether  
I’ll be a captive there, I cannot tell.  
Here, then, you must attend to everything.  
My parents in our house will be a care for you  
as they are now, or more, while I am gone.  
Wait for the beard to darken our boy’s cheek;  
then marry whom you will, and move away.’

300

The years he spoke of are now past; the night  
comes when a bitter marriage overtakes me,  
desolate as I am, deprived by Zeus  
of all the sweets of life.

How galling, too,  
to see newfangled manners in my suitors!  
Others who go to court a gentlewoman,  
daughter of a rich house, if they are rivals,  
bring their own beeves and sheep along; her friends  
ought to be feasted, gifts are due to her;  
would any dare to live at her expense?”

310

Odysseus’ heart laughed when he heard all this—  
her sweet tones charming gifts out of the suitors  
with talk of marriage, though she intended none.  
Eupeithês’ son, Antinoös, now addressed her:

“Ikários’ daughter, O deep-minded queen!  
If someone cares to make you gifts, accept them!  
It is no courtesy to turn gifts away.  
But we go neither to our homes nor elsewhere  
until of all Akhaians here you take  
the best man for your lord.”

320

Pleased at this answer,  
 every man sent a squire to fetch a gift—  
 Antínoös, a wide resplendent robe,  
 embroidered fine, and fastened with twelve brooches,  
 pins pressed into sheathing tubes of gold;  
 Eurýmakhos, a necklace, wrought in gold,  
 with sunray pieces of clear glinting amber. 330  
 Eurýdamas's men came back with pendants,  
 ear-drops in triple clusters of warm lights;  
 and from the hoard of Lord Polýktor's son,  
 Peisándros, came a band for her white throat,  
 jewelled adornment. Other wondrous things  
 were brought as gifts from the Akhaian princes.  
 Penélopê then mounted the stair again,  
 her maids behind, with treasure in their arms.

And now the suitors gave themselves to dancing,  
 to harp and haunting song, as night drew on; 340  
 black night indeed came on them at their pleasure.  
 But three torch fires were placed in the long hall  
 to give them light. On hand were stores of fuel,  
 dry seasoned chips of resinous wood, split up  
 by the bronze hatchet blade—these were mixed in  
 among the flames to keep them flaring bright;  
 each housemaid of Odysseus took her turn.

Now he himself, the shrewd and kingly man,  
 approached and told them:

“Housemaids of Odysseus,  
 your master so long absent in the world, 350  
 go to the women's chambers, to your queen.  
 Attend her, make the distaff whirl, divert her,  
 stay in her room, comb wool for her.

I stand here  
 ready to tend these flares and offer light  
 to everyone. They cannot tire me out,  
 even if they wish to drink till Dawn.  
 I am a patient man.”

But the women giggled,  
 glancing back and forth—laughed in his face;  
 and one smooth girl, Melántho, spoke to him  
 most impudently. She was Dólios' daughter, 360  
 taken as ward in childhood by Penélopê  
 who gave her playthings to her heart's content  
 and raised her as her own. Yet the girl felt  
 nothing for her mistress, no compunction,  
 but slept and made love with Eurýmakhos.  
 Her bold voice rang now in Odysseus' ears:

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“You must be crazy, punch drunk, you old goat.  
 Instead of going out to find a smithy  
 to sleep warm in—or a tavern bench—you stay  
 putting your oar in, amid all our men.  
 Numbskull, not to be scared! The wine you drank  
 has clogged your brain, or are you always this way,  
 boasting like a fool? Or have you lost  
 your mind because you beat that tramp, that Iros?  
 Look out, or someone better may get up  
 and give you a good knocking about the ears  
 to send you out all bloody.”

370

But Odysseus  
 glared at her under his brows and said:

“One minute:

let me tell Telémakhos how you talk  
 in hall, you slut; he’ll cut your arms and legs off!”

380

This hard shot took the women’s breath away  
 and drove them quaking to their rooms, as though  
 knives were behind: they felt he spoke the truth.  
 So there he stood and kept the firelight high  
 and looked the suitors over, while his mind  
 roamed far ahead to what must be accomplished.

They, for their part, could not now be still  
 or drop their mockery—for Athena wished  
 Odysseus mortified still more.

Eurýmakhos,  
 the son of Pôlybos, took up the baiting,  
 angling for a laugh among his friends.

390

“Suitors of our distinguished queen,” he said,  
 “hear what my heart would have me say.

This man

comes with a certain aura of divinity  
 into Odysseus’ hall. He shines.

He shines  
 around the noggin, like a flashing light,  
 having no hair at all to dim his lustre.”

Then turning to Odysseus, raider of cities,  
 he went on:

“Friend, you have a mind to work,  
 do you? Could I hire you to clear stones  
 from wasteland for me—you’ll be paid enough—  
 collecting boundary walls and planting trees?  
 I’d give you a bread ration every day,  
 a cloak to wrap in, sandals for your feet.

400

Oh no: you learned your dodges long ago—  
no honest sweat. You'd rather tramp the country  
begging, to keep your hoggish belly full."

The master of many crafts replied:

"Eurýmakhos,  
we two might try our hands against each other  
in early summer when the days are long, 410  
in meadow grass, with one good scythe for me  
and one as good for you: we'd cut our way  
down a deep hayfield, fasting to late evening.  
Or we could try our hands behind a plow,  
driving the best of oxen—fat, well-fed,  
well-matched for age and pulling power, and say  
four strips apiece of loam the share could break:  
you'd see then if I cleft you a straight furrow.  
Competition in arms? If Zeus Kroníon  
roused up a scuffle now, give me a shield, 420  
two spears, a dogskin cap with plates of bronze  
to fit my temples, and you'd see me go  
where the first rank of fighters lock in battle.  
There would be no more jeers about my belly.  
You thick-skinned menace to all courtesies!  
You think you are a great man and a champion,  
but up against few men, poor stuff, at that.  
Just let Odysseus return, those doors  
wide open as they are, you'd find too narrow  
to suit you on your sudden journey out." 430

Now fury mounted in Eurýmakhos,  
who scowled and shot back:

"Bundle of rags and lice!  
By god, I'll make you suffer for your gall,  
your insolent gabble before all our men."

He had his foot-stool out: but now Odysseus  
took to his haunches by Amphinomos' knees,  
fearing Eurýmakhos' missile, as it flew.  
It clipped a wine steward on the serving hand,  
so that his pitcher dropped with a loud clang  
while he fell backward, cursing, in the dust. 440  
In the shadowy hall a low sound rose—of suitors  
murmuring to one another.

"Ai!" they said,  
"This vagabond would have done well to perish  
somewhere else, and make us no such rumpus.  
Here we are, quarreling over tramps; good meat  
and wine forgotten; good sense gone by the board."

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519

Telémakhos, his young heart high, put in:

“Bright souls, alight with wine, you can no longer  
hide the cups you’ve taken.<sup>5</sup> Aye, some god  
is goading you. Why not go home to bed?—  
I mean when you are moved to. No one jumps  
at my command.”

450

Struck by his blithe manner,  
the young men’s teeth grew fixed in their under lips,  
but now the son of Nísos, Lord Amphínomos  
of Aretíadês, addressed them all:

“O friends, no ruffling replies are called for;  
that was fair counsel.

Hands off the stranger, now,  
and hands off any other servant here  
in the great house of King Odysseus. Come,  
let my own herald wet our cups once more,  
we’ll make an offering, and then to bed.  
The stranger can be left behind in hall;  
Telémakhos may care for him; he came  
to Telémakhos’ door, not ours.”

460

This won them over.  
The soldier Moulíos, Doulíkhion herald,  
comrade in arms of Lord Amphínomos,  
mixed the wine and served them all. They tipped out  
drops for the blissful gods, and drank the rest,  
and when they had drunk their thirst away  
they trailed off homeward drowsily to bed.

470

## BOOK NINETEEN: RECOGNITIONS AND A DREAM

Now by Athena’s side in the quiet hall  
studying the ground for slaughter, Lord Odysseus  
turned to Telémakhos.

“The arms,” he said.  
“Harness and weapons must be out of sight  
in the inner room. And if the suitors miss them,  
be mild; just say ‘I had a mind to move them  
out of the smoke. They seemed no longer

<sup>5</sup> That is, they cannot hide the fact that they have drunk so much.

the bright arms that Odysseus left at home  
 when he went off to Troy. Here where the fire's  
 hot breath came, they had grown black and drear.  
 One better reason struck me, too:  
 suppose a brawl starts up when you've been drinking—  
 you might in madness let each other's blood,  
 and that would stain your feast, your courtship.

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Iron

itself can draw men's hands.'"

Then he fell silent,  
 and Telémakhos obeyed his father's word.  
 He called Eurýkleia, the nurse, and told her:

"Nurse, go shut the women in their quarters  
 while I shift Father's armor back  
 to the inner rooms—these beautiful arms unburnished,  
 caked with black soot in his years abroad.  
 I was a child then. Well, I am not now.  
 I want them shielded from the draught and smoke."

20

And the old woman answered:

"It is time, child,  
 you took an interest in such things. I wish  
 you'd put your mind on all your house and chattels.<sup>1</sup>  
 But who will go along to hold a light?<sup>2</sup>  
 You said no maids, no torch-bearers."

Telémakhos

looked at her and replied:

"Our friend here.  
 A man who shares my meat can bear a hand,  
 no matter how far he is from home."

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He spoke so soldierly  
 her own speech halted on her tongue. Straight back  
 she went to lock the doors of the women's hall.  
 And now the two men sprang to work—father  
 and princely son, loaded with round helms  
 and studded bucklers, lifting the long spears,  
 while in their path Pallas Athena  
 held up a golden lamp of purest light.  
 Telémakhos at last burst out:

<sup>1</sup> Possessions other than house and lands.

<sup>2</sup> Maids would normally have been the torchbearers.



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521

“Oh, Father,  
here is a marvel! All around I see  
the walls and roof beams, pedestals and pillars,  
lighted as though by white fire blazing near.  
One of the gods of heaven is in this place!”

40

Then said Odysseus, the great tactician,  
“Be still: keep still about it: just remember it.  
The gods who rule Olympos make this light.  
You may go off to bed now. Here I stay  
to test your mother and her maids again.  
Out of her long grief she will question me.”

Telémakhos went across the hall and out  
under the light of torches—crossed the court  
to the tower chamber where he had always slept.  
Here now again he lay, waiting for dawn,  
while in the great hall by Athena’s side  
Odysseus waited with his mind on slaughter.

50

Presently Penélopê from her chamber  
stepped in her thoughtful beauty.

So might Artemis  
or golden Aphroditê have descended;  
and maids drew to the hearth her own smooth chair  
inlaid with silver whorls and ivory. The artisan  
Ikmálios had made it, long before,  
with a footrest in a single piece, and soft  
upon the seat a heavy fleece was thrown.  
Here by the fire the queen sat down. Her maids,  
leaving their quarters, came with white arms bare  
to clear the wine cups and the bread, and move  
the trestle boards where men had lingered drinking.  
Fiery ashes out of the pine-chip flares  
they tossed, and piled on fuel for light and heat.  
And now a second time Melántho’s voice  
rang brazen in Odysseus’ ears:

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“Ah, stranger,  
are you still here, so creepy, late at night  
hanging about, looking the women over?  
You old goat, go outside, cuddle your supper;  
get out, or a torch may kindle you behind!”

At this Odysseus glared under his brows  
and said:

“Little devil, why pitch into me again?  
Because I go unwashed and wear these rags,

and make the rounds? But so I must, being needy;  
that is the way a vagabond must live.

80

And do not overlook this: in my time  
I too had luck, lived well, stood well with men,  
and gave alms, often, to poor wanderers  
like him you see before you—aye, to all sorts,  
no matter in what dire want. I owned  
servants—many, I say—and all the rest  
that goes with what men call prosperity.  
But Zeus the son of Kronos brought me down.  
Mistress, mend your ways, or you may lose  
all this vivacity of yours. What if her ladyship  
were stirred to anger? What if Odysseus came?—  
and I can tell you, there is hope of that—  
or if the man is done for, still his son  
lives to be reckoned with, by Apollo's will.  
None of you can go wantoning on the sly  
and fool him now. He is too old for that.”

90

Penélopê, being near enough to hear him,  
spoke out sharply to her maid:

“Oh, shameless,  
through and through! And do you think me blind,  
blind to your conquest?<sup>3</sup> It will cost your life.  
You knew I waited—for you heard me say it—  
waited to see this man in hall and question him  
about my lord; I am so hard beset.”

100

She turned away and said to the housekeeper:

“Eurýnomê, a bench, a spread of sheepskin,  
to put my guest at ease. Now he shall talk  
and listen, and be questioned.”

Willing hands  
brought a smooth bench, and dropped a fleece upon it.  
Here the adventurer and king sat down;  
then carefully Penélopê began:

110

“Friend, let me ask you first of all:  
who are you, where do you come from, of what nation  
and parents were you born?”

And he replied:

“My lady, never a man in the wide world  
should have a fault to find with you. Your name

<sup>3</sup>The reference is to Melántho's sexual dalliance with Eurýmakhos. The following words are probably less a threat than a warning that Melántho will have brought on her own punishment.

has gone out under heaven like the sweet  
 honor of some god-fearing king, who rules  
 in equity over the strong: his black lands bear  
 both wheat and barley, fruit trees laden bright,  
 new lambs at lambing time—and the deep sea  
 gives great hauls of fish by his good strategy,  
 so that his folk fare well.

120

O my dear lady,  
 this being so, let it suffice to ask me  
 of other matters—not my blood, my homeland.  
 Do not enforce me to recall my pain.  
 My heart is sore; but I must not be found  
 sitting in tears here, in another's house:  
 it is not well forever to be grieving.  
 One of the maids might say—or you might think—  
 I had got maudlin over cups of wine.”

130

And Penélopê replied:

“Stranger, my looks,  
 my face, my carriage, were soon lost or faded  
 when the Akhaians crossed the sea to Troy,  
 Odysseus my lord among the rest.  
 If he returned, if he were here to care for me,  
 I might be happily renowned!  
 But grief instead heaven sent me—years of pain.  
 Sons of the noblest families on the islands,  
 Doulíkhion, Samê, wooded Zakýnthos,  
 with native Ithakans, are here to court me,  
 against my wish; and they consume this house.  
 Can I give proper heed to guest or suppliant  
 or herald on the realm's affairs?

140

How could I?  
 wasted with longing for Odysseus, while here  
 they press for marriage.

Ruses served my turn  
 to draw the time out—first a close-grained web  
 I had the happy thought to set up weaving  
 on my big loom in hall. I said, that day:  
 ‘Young men—my suitors, now my lord is dead,  
 let me finish my weaving before I marry,  
 or else my thread will have been spun in vain.  
 It is a shroud I weave for Lord Laërtês  
 when cold Death comes to lay him on his bier.  
 The country wives would hold me in dishonor  
 if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.’  
 I reached their hearts that way, and they agreed.  
 So every day I wove on the great loom,  
 but every night by torchlight I unwove it;  
 and so for three years I deceived the Akhaians.

150

But when the seasons brought a fourth year on,  
 as long months waned, and the long days were spent,  
 through impudent folly in the slinking maids  
 they caught me—clamored up to me at night;  
 I had no choice then but to finish it.  
 And now, as matters stand at last,  
 I have no strength left to evade a marriage,  
 cannot find any further way; my parents  
 urge it upon me, and my son  
 will not stand by while they eat up his property.  
 He comprehends it, being a man full grown,  
 able to oversee the kind of house  
 Zeus would endow with honor.

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Gales had caught him off Cape Malea,  
 driven him southward on the coast of Krete,  
 when he was bound for Troy. At Ámnisos,  
 hard by the holy cave of Eileithuía,<sup>6</sup>  
 he lay to, and dropped anchor, in that open  
 and rough roadstead riding out the blow.  
 Meanwhile he came ashore, came inland, asking  
 after Idómeneus: dear friends he said they were;  
 but now ten mornings had already passed,  
 ten or eleven, since my brother sailed.  
 So I played host and took Odysseus home,  
 saw him well lodged and fed, for we had plenty;  
 then I made requisitions—barley, wine,  
 and beeves for sacrifice—to give his company  
 abundant fare along with him.

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Twelve days  
 they stayed with us, the Akhaians, while that wind  
 out of the north shut everyone inside—  
 even on land you could not keep your feet,  
 such fury was abroad. On the thirteenth,  
 when the gale dropped, they put to sea.”

Now all these lies he made appear so truthful  
 she wept as she sat listening. The skin  
 of her pale face grew moist the way pure snow  
 softens and glistens on the mountains, thawed  
 by Southwind after powdering from the West,  
 and, as the snow melts, mountain streams run full:  
 so her white cheeks were wetted by these tears  
 shed for her lord—and he close by her side.  
 Imagine how his heart ached for his lady,  
 his wife in tears; and yet he never blinked;  
 his eyes might have been made of horn or iron  
 for all that she could see. He had this trick—  
 wept, if he willed to, inwardly.

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Well, then,  
 as soon as her relieving tears were shed  
 she spoke once more:

“I think that I shall say, friend,  
 give me some proof, if it is really true  
 that you were host in that place to my husband  
 with his brave men, as you declare. Come, tell me  
 the quality of his clothing, how he looked,  
 and some particular of his company.”

<sup>6</sup> Ámnisos is an anchorage off Krete. Eileithuía was a goddess, daughter of Hêra, who controlled maternal labor and childbirth.

Odysseus answered, and his mind ranged far:

“Lady, so long a time now lies between,  
it is hard to speak of it. Here is the twentieth year  
since that man left the island of my father.  
But I shall tell what memory calls to mind.  
A purple cloak, and fleecy, he had on—  
a double thick one. Then, he wore a brooch  
made of pure gold with twin tubes for the prongs,  
and on the face a work of art: a hunting dog  
pinning a spotted fawn in agony  
between his forepaws—wonderful to see  
how being gold, and nothing more, he bit  
the golden deer convulsed, with wild hooves flying.  
Odysseus’ shirt I noticed, too—a fine  
closefitting tunic like dry onion skin,  
so soft it was, and shiny.

Women there,  
many of them, would cast their eyes on it.  
But I might add, for your consideration,  
whether he brought these things from home, or whether  
a shipmate gave them to him, coming aboard,  
I have no notion: some regardful host  
in another port perhaps it was. Affection  
followed him—there were few Akhaians like him.  
And I too made him gifts: a good bronze blade,  
a cloak with lining and a broidered shirt,  
and sent him off in his trim ship with honor.  
A herald, somewhat older than himself,  
he kept beside him; I’ll describe this man:  
round-shouldered, dusky, woolly-headed;  
Eurýbatês, his name was—and Odysseus  
gave him preferment over the officers.  
He had a shrewd head, like the captain’s own.”

Now hearing these details—minutely true—  
she felt more strangely moved, and tears flowed  
until she had tasted her salt grief again.  
Then she found words to answer:

“Before this  
you won my sympathy, but now indeed  
you shall be our respected guest and friend.  
With my own hands I put that cloak and tunic  
upon him—took them folded from their place—  
and the bright brooch for ornament.

Gone now,  
I will not meet the man again  
returning to his own home fields. Unkind  
the fate that sent him young in the long ship  
to see that misery at Ilion, unspeakable!”

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527

And the master improviser answered:

“Honorable

wife of Odysseus Laërtiadês,

you need not stain your beauty with these tears,

nor wear yourself out grieving for your husband.

Not that I can blame you. Any wife

grieves for the man she married in her girlhood,

lay with in love, bore children to—though he

290

may be no prince like this Odysseus,

whom they compare even to the gods. But listen:

weep no more, and listen:

I have a thing to tell you, something true.

I heard but lately of your lord’s return,

heard that he is alive, not far away,

among Thesprôtians in their green land

amassing fortune to bring home. His company

went down in shipwreck in the winedark sea

off the coast of Thrinákia. Zeus and Hêlios

300

held it against him that his men had killed

the kine of Hêlios. The crew drowned for this.

He rode the ship’s keel. Big seas cast him up

on the island of Phaiákians, godlike men

who took him to their hearts. They honored him

with many gifts and a safe passage home,

or so they wished. Long since he should have been here,

but he thought better to restore his fortune

playing the vagabond about the world;

and no adventurer could beat Odysseus

310

at living by his wits—no man alive.

I had this from King Phaidôn of Thesprôtia;

and, tipping wine out, Phaidôn swore to me

the ship was launched, the seamen standing by

to bring Odysseus to his land at last,

but I got out to sea ahead of him

by the king’s order—as it chanced a freighter

left port for the grain bins of Doulíkhion.

Phaidôn, however, showed me Odysseus’ treasure.

Ten generations of his heirs or more

320

could live on what lay piled in that great room.

The man himself had gone up to Dodona

to ask the spelling leaves of the old oak

what Zeus would have him do—how to return to Ithaka

after so many years—by stealth or openly.

You see, then, he is alive and well, and headed

homeward now, no more to be abroad

far from his island, his dear wife and son.

Here is my sworn word for it. Witness this,

god of the zenith, noblest of the gods,

330

and Lord Odysseus’ hearthfire, now before me:

I swear these things shall turn out as I say.  
Between this present dark and one day's ebb,  
after the wane, before the crescent moon,<sup>7</sup>  
Odysseus will come."

Penélopê,  
the attentive queen, replied to him:

"Ah, stranger,  
if what you say could ever happen!  
You would soon know our love! Our bounty, too:  
men would turn after you to call you blessed.  
But my heart tells me what must be.  
Odysseus will not come to me; no ship  
will be prepared for you. We have no master  
quick to receive and furnish out a guest  
as Lord Odysseus was.

340

Or did I dream him?

Maids, maids: come wash him, make a bed for him,  
bedstead and colored rugs and coverlets  
to let him lie warm into the gold of Dawn.  
In morning light you'll bathe him and anoint him  
so that he'll take his place beside Telémakhos  
feasting in hall. If there be one man there  
to bully or annoy him, that man wins  
no further triumph here, burn though he may.  
How will you understand me, friend, how find in me,  
more than in common women, any courage  
or gentleness, if you are kept in rags  
and filthy at our feast? Men's lives are short.  
The hard man and his cruelties will be  
cursed behind his back, and mocked in death.  
But one whose heart and ways are kind—of him  
strangers will bear report to the wide world,  
and distant men will praise him."

350

360

Warily

Odysseus answered:

"Honorable lady,  
wife of Odysseus Laërtiadês,  
a weight of rugs and cover? Not for me.  
I've had none since the day I saw the mountains  
of Krete, white with snow, low on the sea line  
fading behind me as the long oars drove me north.

<sup>7</sup>Between now and the time of the new moon. As it happens, the day specified will be the morrow.



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Let me lie down tonight as I've lain often,  
 many a night unsleeping, many a time  
 afield on hard ground waiting for pure Dawn.  
 No: and I have no longing for a footbath  
 either; none of these maids will touch my feet,  
 unless there is an old one, old and wise,  
 one who has lived through suffering as I have:  
 I would not mind letting my feet be touched  
 by that old servant."

370

And Penélopê said:

"Dear guest, no foreign man so sympathetic  
 ever came to my house, no guest more likeable,  
 so wry and humble are the things you say.  
 I have an old maidservant ripe with years,  
 one who in her time nursed my lord. She took him  
 into her arms the hour his mother bore him.  
 Let her, then, wash your feet, though she is frail.  
 Come here, stand by me, faithful Eurýkleia,  
 and bathe—bathe your master, I almost said,  
 for they are of an age, and now Odysseus'  
 feet and hands would be enseamed like his.  
 Men grow old soon in hardship."

380

Hearing this,  
 the old nurse hid her face between her hands  
 and wept hot tears, and murmured:

"Oh, my child!

390

I can do nothing for you! How Zeus hated you,  
 no other man so much! No use, great heart,  
 O faithful heart, the rich thighbones you burnt  
 to Zeus who plays in lightning—and no man  
 ever gave more to Zeus—with all your prayers  
 for a green age, a tall son reared to manhood.  
 There is no day of homecoming for you.  
 Stranger, some women in some far off place  
 perhaps have mocked my lord when he'd be home  
 as now these strumpets<sup>8</sup> mock you here. No wonder  
 you would keep clear of all their whorishness  
 and have no bath. But here am I. The queen  
 Penélopê, Ikários' daughter, bids me;  
 so let me bathe your feet to serve my lady—  
 to serve you, too.

400

My heart within me stirs,  
 mindful of something. Listen to what I say:  
 strangers have come here, many through the years,

<sup>8</sup>Whores.

but no one ever came, I swear, who seemed  
so like Odysseus—body, voice and limbs—  
as you do.”

Ready for this, Odysseus answered:

410

“Old woman, that is what they say. All who have seen  
the two of us remark how like we are,  
as you yourself have said, and rightly, too.”

Then he kept still, while the old nurse filled up  
her basin glittering in firelight; she poured  
cold water in, then hot.

But Lord Odysseus  
whirled suddenly from the fire to face the dark.  
The scar: he had forgotten that. She must not  
handle his scarred thigh, or the game was up.  
But when she bared her lord’s leg, bending near,  
she knew the groove at once.

420

An old wound  
a boar’s white tusk inflicted, on Parnassos<sup>9</sup>  
years ago. He had gone hunting there  
in company with his uncles and Autólykos,  
his mother’s father—a great thief and swindler  
by Hermês’<sup>10</sup> favor, for Autólykos pleased him  
with burnt offerings of sheep and kids. The god  
acted as his accomplice. Well, Autólykos  
on a trip to Ithaka  
arrived just after his daughter’s boy was born.  
In fact, he had no sooner finished supper  
than Nurse Eurýkleia put the baby down  
in his own lap and said:

430

“It is for you, now,  
to choose a name for him, your child’s dear baby;  
the answer to her prayers.”

Autólykos replied:

“My son-in-law, my daughter, call the boy  
by the name I tell you. Well you know, my hand  
has been against the world of men and women;  
odium and distrust I’ve won. Odysseus  
should be his given name.<sup>11</sup> When he grows up,  
when he comes visiting his mother’s home

440

<sup>9</sup> The famous mountain near Delphi. Also spelled *Parnassus*.

<sup>10</sup> Noted for cleverness, Hermês was the patron god of thieves, though he is not usually presented in that role by Homer.

<sup>11</sup> *Odysseus* means something like “wrathful.”

under Parnassos, where my treasures are,  
I'll make him gifts and send him back rejoicing."

Odysseus in due course went for the gifts,  
and old Autólykos and his sons embraced him  
with welcoming sweet words; and Amphithéa,  
his mother's mother, held him tight and kissed him,  
kissed his head and his fine eyes.

The father  
called on his noble sons to make a feast,  
and going about it briskly they led in  
an ox of five years, whom they killed and flayed  
and cut in bits for roasting on the skewers  
with skilled hands, with care; then shared it out.  
So all the day until the sun went down  
they feasted to their hearts' content. At evening,  
after the sun was down and dusk had come,  
they turned to bed and took the gift of sleep.

450

When the young Dawn spread in the eastern sky  
her finger tips of rose, the men and dogs  
went hunting, taking Odysseus. They climbed  
Parnassos' rugged flank mantled in forest,  
entering amid high windy folds at noon  
when Hêlios beat upon the valley floor  
and on the winding Ocean whence he came.  
With hounds questing ahead, in open order,  
the sons of Autólykos went down a glen,  
Odysseus in the lead, behind the dogs,  
pointing his long-shadowing spear.

460

Before them  
a great boar lay hid in undergrowth,  
in a green thicket proof against the wind  
or sun's blaze, fine soever the needling sunlight,  
impervious too to any rain, so dense  
that cover was, heaped up with fallen leaves.  
Patter of hounds' feet, men's feet, woke the boar  
as they came up—and from his woody ambush  
with razor back bristling and raging eyes  
he trotted and stood at bay. Odysseus,  
being on top of him, had the first shot,  
lunging to stick him; but the boar  
had already charged under the long spear.  
He hooked aslant with one white tusk and ripped out  
flesh above the knee, but missed the bone.  
Odysseus' second thrust went home by luck,  
his bright spear passing through the shoulder joint;  
and the beast fell, moaning as life pulsed away.  
Autólykos' tall sons took up the wounded,

470

480

working skillfully over the Prince Odysseus  
to bind his gash, and with a rune<sup>12</sup> they stanchéd  
the dark flow of blood. Then downhill swiftly  
they all repaired to the father's house, and there  
tended him well—so well they soon could send him,  
with Grandfather Autólykos' magnificent gifts,

490

rejoicing, over sea to Ithaka.  
His father and the Lady Antikleía  
welcomed him, and wanted all the news  
of how he got his wound; so he spun out  
his tale, recalling how the boar's white tusk  
caught him when he was hunting on Parnassos.

This was the scar the old nurse recognized;  
she traced it under her spread hands, then let go,  
and into the basin fell the lower leg  
making the bronze clang, sloshing the water out.  
Then joy and anguish seized her heart; her eyes  
filled up with tears; her throat closed, and she whispered,  
with hand held out to touch his chin:

500

“Oh yes!

*You are Odysseus!* Ah, dear child! I could not  
see you until now—not till I knew  
my master's very body with my hands!”

Her eyes turned to Penélopê with desire  
to make her lord, her husband, known—in vain,  
because Athena had bemused the queen,  
so that she took no notice, paid no heed.  
At the same time Odysseus' right hand  
gripped the old throat; his left hand pulled her near,  
and in her ear he said:

510

“Will you destroy me,  
nurse, who gave me milk at your own breast?  
Now with a hard lifetime behind I've come  
in the twentieth year home to my father's island.  
You found me out, as the chance was given you.  
Be quiet; keep it from the others, else  
I warn you, and I mean it, too,  
if by my hand god brings the suitors down  
I'll kill you, nurse or not, when the time comes—  
when the time comes to kill the other women.”

520

Eurýkleia kept her wits and answered him:

“Oh, what mad words are these you let escape you!  
Child, you know my blood, my bones are yours;

<sup>12</sup> Magic spell or charm.

no one could whip this out of me. I'll be  
 a woman turned to stone, iron I'll be.  
 And let me tell you too—mind now—if god  
 cuts down the arrogant suitors by your hand,  
 I can report to you on all the maids,  
 those who dishonor you, and the innocent.”

530

But in response the great tactician said:

“Nurse, no need to tell me tales of these.  
 I will have seen them, each one, for myself.  
 Trust in the gods, be quiet, hold your peace.”

Silent, the old nurse went to fetch more water,  
 her basin being all spilt.

When she had washed  
 and rubbed his feet with golden oil, he turned,  
 dragging his bench again to the fire side  
 for warmth, and hid the scar under his rags.  
 Penélopê broke the silence, saying:

540

“Friend,  
 allow me one brief question more. You know,  
 the time for bed, sweet rest, is coming soon,  
 if only that warm luxury of slumber  
 would come to enfold us, in our trouble. But for me  
 my fate at night is anguish and no rest.  
 By day being busy, seeing to my work,  
 I find relief sometimes from loss and sorrow;  
 but when night comes and all the world's abed  
 I lie in mine alone, my heart thudding,  
 while bitter thoughts and fears crowd on my grief.  
 Think, how Pandáreos'<sup>13</sup> daughter, pale forever,  
 sings as the nightingale in the new leaves  
 through those long quiet hours of night,  
 on some thick-flowering orchard bough in spring;  
 how she rills out and tilts her note, high now, now low,  
 mourning for Itylos whom she killed in madness—  
 her child, and her lord Zêthos' only child.  
 My forlorn thought flows variable as her song,  
 wondering: shall I stay beside my son  
 and guard my own things here, my maids, my hall,  
 to honor my lord's bed and the common talk?  
 Or had I best join fortunes with a suitor,  
 the noblest one, most lavish in his gifts?  
 Is it now time for that?

550

560

<sup>13</sup> In this version of the nightingale myth, Aedon (daughter of Pandáreos and wife of Zêthos) was metamorphosed into a nightingale, through the compassion of Zeus, after she had killed her only son, Itylos, by mistake. She had intended to kill the eldest son of Niobe, her sister-in-law, who had aroused her jealousy by having so many children.

My son being still a callow boy forbade  
marriage, or absence from my lord's domain;  
but now the child is grown, grown up, a man,  
he, too, begins to pray for my departure,  
aghast at all the suitors gorge on.

570

Listen:

interpret me this dream: From a water's edge  
twenty fat geese have come to feed on grain  
beside my house. And I delight to see them.  
But now a mountain eagle with great wings  
and crooked beak storms in to break their necks  
and strew their bodies here. Away he soars  
into the bright sky; and I cry aloud—  
all this in dream—I wail and round me gather  
softly braided Akhaian women mourning  
because the eagle killed my geese.

580

Then down  
out of the sky he drops to a cornice beam  
with mortal voice telling me not to weep.  
'Be glad,' says he, 'renowned Ikários' daughter:  
here is no dream but something real as day,  
something about to happen. All those geese  
were suitors, and the bird was I. See now,  
I am no eagle but your lord come back  
to bring inglorious death upon them all!'  
As he said this, my honeyed slumber left me.  
Peering through half-shut eyes, I saw the geese  
in hall, still feeding at the self-same trough."

590

The master of subtle ways and straight replied:

"My dear, how can you choose to read the dream  
differently? Has not Odysseus himself  
shown you what is to come? Death to the suitors,  
sure death, too. Not one escapes his doom."

Penélopê shook her head and answered:

"Friend,

many and many a dream is mere confusion,  
a cobweb of no consequence at all.  
Two gates for ghostly dreams there are: one gateway  
of honest horn, and one of ivory.  
Issuing by the ivory gate are dreams  
of glimmering illusion, fantasies,  
but those that come through solid polished horn  
may be borne out, if mortals only know them.  
I doubt it came by horn, my fearful dream—  
too good to be true, that, for my son and me.  
But one thing more I wish to tell you: listen  
carefully. It is a black day, this that comes.

600

610

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535

Odysseus' house and I are to be parted.  
 I shall decree a contest for the day.  
 We have twelve axe heads. In his time, my lord  
 could line them up, all twelve, at intervals  
 like a ship's ribbing; then he'd back away  
 a long way off and whip an arrow through.  
 Now I'll impose this trial on the suitors.  
 The one who easily handles and strings the bow  
 and shoots through all twelve axes I shall marry,  
 whoever he may be—then look my last  
 on this my first love's beautiful brimming house.  
 But I'll remember, though I dream it only."

620

Odysseus said:

"Dear honorable lady,  
 wife of Odysseus Laërtiadês,  
 let there be no postponement of the trial.  
 Odysseus, who knows the shifts of combat,  
 will be here: aye, he'll be here long before  
 one of these lads can stretch or string that bow  
 or shoot to thread the iron!"

Grave and wise,

630

Penélopê replied:

"If you were willing  
 to sit with me and comfort me, my friend,  
 no tide of sleep would ever close my eyes.  
 But mortals cannot go forever sleepless.  
 This the undying gods decree for all  
 who live and die on earth, kind furrowed earth.  
 Upstairs I go, then, to my single bed,  
 my sighing bed, wet with so many tears  
 after my Lord Odysseus took ship  
 to see that misery at Ilion, unspeakable.  
 Let me rest there, you here. You can stretch out  
 on the bare floor, or else command a bed."

640

So she went up to her chamber softly lit,  
 accompanied by her maids. Once there, she wept  
 for Odysseus, her husband, till Athena  
 cast sweet sleep upon her eyes.

## BOOK TWENTY: SIGNS AND A VISION

Outside in the entry way he made his bed—  
 raw oxhide spread on level ground, and heaped up  
 fleeces, left from sheep the Akhaians killed.

And when he had lain down, Eurýnomê  
flung out a robe to cover him. Unsleeping  
the Lord Odysseus lay, and roved in thought  
to the undoing of his enemies.

Now came a covey of women  
laughing as they slipped out, arm in arm,  
as many a night before, to the suitors' beds;  
and anger took him like a wave to leap  
into their midst and kill them, every one—  
or should he let them all go hot to bed  
one final night? His heart cried out within him  
the way a brach<sup>1</sup> with whelps between her legs  
would howl and bristle at a stranger—so  
the hackles of his heart rose at that laughter.  
Knocking his breast he muttered to himself:

10

“Down; be steady. You’ve seen worse, that time  
the Kyklops like a rockslide ate your men  
while you looked on. Nobody, only guile,  
got you out of that cave alive.”

20

His rage  
held hard in leash, submitted to his mind,  
while he himself rocked, rolling from side to side,  
as a cook turns a sausage, big with blood  
and fat, at a scorching blaze, without a pause,  
to broil it quick: so he rolled left and right,  
casting about to see how he, alone,  
against the false outrageous crowd of suitors  
could press the fight.

And out of the night sky  
Athena came to him; out of the nearby dark  
in body like a woman; came and stood  
over his head to chide him:

30

“Why so wakeful,  
most forlorn of men? Here is your home,  
there lies your lady; and your son is here,  
as fine as one could wish a son to be.”

Odysseus looked up and answered:

“Aye,  
goddess, that much is true; but still  
I have some cause to fret in this affair.  
I am one man; how can I whip those dogs?  
They are always here in force. Neither  
is that the end of it, there’s more to come.

40

<sup>1</sup>Female dog; bitch.



If by the will of Zeus and by your will  
I killed them all, where could I go for safety?  
Tell me that!”

And the grey-eyed goddess said:

“Your touching faith! Another man would trust  
some villainous mortal, with no brains—and what  
am I? Your goddess-guardian to the end  
in all your trials. Let it be plain as day:  
if fifty bands of men surrounded us  
and every sword sang for your blood,  
you could make off still with their cows and sheep.  
Now you, too, go to sleep. This all night vigil  
wearies the flesh. You’ll come out soon enough  
on the other side of trouble.”

50

Raining soft  
sleep on his eyes, the beautiful one was gone  
back to Olympos. Now at peace, the man  
slumbered and lay still, but not his lady.  
Wakeful again with all her cares, reclining  
in the soft bed, she wept and cried aloud  
until she had had her fill of tears, then spoke  
in prayer first to Artemis:

60

“O gracious  
divine lady Artemis, daughter of Zeus,  
if you could only make an end now quickly,  
let the arrow fly, stop my heart,  
or if some wind could take me by the hair  
up into running cloud, to plunge in tides of Ocean,  
as hurricane winds took Pandáreos’ daughters<sup>2</sup>  
when they were left at home alone. The gods  
had sapped their parents’ lives. But Aphroditê  
fed those children honey, cheese, and wine,  
and Hêra gave them looks and wit, and Artemis,  
pure Artemis, gave lovely height, and wise  
Athena made them practised in her arts—  
till Aphroditê in glory walked on Olympos,  
begging for each a happy wedding day  
from Zeus, the lightning’s joyous king, who knows  
all fate of mortals, fair and foul—  
but even at that hour the cyclone winds  
had ravished them away  
to serve the loathsome Furies.

70

80

<sup>2</sup> Pandáreos stole a statue from a temple of Zeus; after the death of Pandáreos, his three daughters (Aedon and two of her sisters), though pitied by the greatest of the goddesses, were carried away by the Furies, the avengers of the father’s wickedness. This story differs from the one in Book XIX, in which Aedon was changed into a nightingale.

Let me be  
 blown out by the Olympians! Shot by Artemis,  
 I still might go and see amid the shades  
 Odysseus in the rot of underworld.  
 No coward's eye should light by my consenting!  
 Evil may be endured when our days pass  
 in mourning, heavy-hearted, hard beset,  
 if only sleep reign over nighttime, blanketing  
 the world's good and evil from our eyes.  
 But not for me: dreams too my demon sends me.  
 Tonight the image of my lord came by  
 as I remember him with troops. O strange  
 exultation! I thought him real, and not a dream."

90

Now as the Dawn appeared all stitched in gold,  
 the queen's cry reached Odysseus at his waking,  
 so that he wondered, half asleep: it seemed  
 she knew him, and stood near him! Then he woke  
 and picked his bedding up to stow away  
 on a chair in the mégaron. The oxhide pad  
 he took outdoors. There, spreading wide his arms,  
 he prayed:

100

"O Father Zeus, if over land and water,  
 after adversity, you willed to bring me home,  
 let someone in the waking house give me good augury,  
 and a sign be shown, too, in the outer world."

He prayed thus, and the mind of Zeus in heaven  
 heard him. He thundered out of bright Olympos  
 down from above the cloudlands, in reply—  
 a rousing peal for Odysseus. Then a token  
 came to him from a woman grinding flour  
 in the court nearby. His own handmills were there,  
 and twelve maids had the job of grinding out  
 whole grain and barley meal, the pith of men.  
 Now all the rest, their bushels ground, were sleeping;  
 one only, frail and slow, kept at it still.  
 She stopped, stayed her hand, and her lord heard  
 the omen from her lips:

110

"Ah, Father Zeus  
 almighty over gods and men!  
 A great bang of thunder that was, surely,  
 out of the starry sky, and not a cloud in sight.  
 It is your nod to someone. Hear me, then,  
 make what I say come true:  
 let this day be the last the suitors feed  
 so dainty in Odysseus' hall!  
 They've made me work my heart out till I drop,  
 grinding barley. May they feast no more!"

120

The servant's prayer, after the cloudless thunder  
 of Zeus, Odysseus heard with lifting heart,  
 sure in his bones that vengeance was at hand.  
 Then other servants, wakening, came down  
 to build and light a fresh fire at the hearth.  
 Telémakhos, clear-eyed as a god, awoke,  
 put on his shirt and belted on his sword,  
 bound rawhide sandals under his smooth feet,  
 and took his bronze-shod lance. He came and stood  
 on the broad sill of the doorway, calling Eurýkleia:

130

"Nurse, dear Nurse, how did you treat our guest?  
 Had he a supper and a good bed? Has he lain  
 uncared for still? My mother is like that,  
 perverse for all her cleverness:  
 she'd entertain some riff-raff, and turn out  
 a solid man."

140

The old nurse answered him:

"I would not be so quick to accuse her, child.  
 He sat and drank here while he had a mind to;  
 food he no longer hungered for, he said—  
 for she did ask him. When he thought of sleeping,  
 she ordered them to make a bed. Poor soul!  
 Poor gentleman! So humble and so miserable,  
 he would accept no bed with rugs to lie on,  
 but slept on sheepskins and a raw oxhide  
 in the entry way. We covered him ourselves."

150

Telémakhos left the hall, hefting his lance,  
 with two swift flickering hounds for company,  
 to face the island Akhaians in the square;  
 and gently born Eurýkleia, the daughter  
 of Ops Peisenóridês, called to the maids:

"Bestir yourselves! you have your brooms, go sprinkle  
 the rooms and sweep them, robe the chairs in red,  
 sponge off the tables till they shine.  
 Wash out the winebowls and two-handled cups.  
 You others go fetch water from the spring;  
 no loitering; come straight back. Our company  
 will be here soon; morning is sure to bring them;  
 everyone has a holiday today."<sup>3</sup>

160

The women ran to obey her—twenty girls  
 off to the spring with jars for dusky water,  
 the rest at work inside. Then tall woodcutters  
 entered to split up logs for the hearth fire,

<sup>3</sup> The day is a special festival.

the water carriers returned; and on their heels  
arrived the swineherd, driving three fat pigs,  
chosen among his pens. In the wide court  
he let them feed, and said to Odysseus kindly:

170

“Friend, are they more respectful of you now,  
or still insulting you?”

Replied Odysseus:

“The young men, yes. And may the gods requite  
those insolent puppies for the game they play  
in a home not their own. They have no decency.”

During this talk, Melánthios the goatherd  
came in, driving goats for the suitors’ feast,  
with his two herdsmen. Under the portico  
they tied the animals, and Melánthios  
looked at Odysseus with a sneer. Said he:

180

“Stranger,

I see you mean to stay and turn our stomachs  
begging in this hall. Clear out, why don’t you?  
Or will you have to taste a bloody beating  
before you see the point? Your begging ways  
nauseate everyone. There are feasts elsewhere.”

Odysseus answered not a word, but grimly  
shook his head over his murderous heart.  
A third man came up now: Philoítios  
the cattle foreman, with an ox behind him  
and fat goats for the suitors. Ferryman  
had brought these from the mainland, as they bring  
travellers, too—whoever comes along.  
Philoítios tied the beasts under the portico  
and joined the swineherd.

190

“Who is this,” he said,  
“Who is the new arrival at the manor?  
Akhaian? or what else does he claim to be?  
Where are his family and fields of home?  
Down on his luck, all right: carries himself like a captain.  
How the immortal gods can change and drag us down  
once they begin to spin dark days for us!—  
Kings and commanders, too.”

200

Then he stepped over  
and took Odysseus by the right hand, saying:

“Welcome, Sir. May good luck lie ahead  
at the next turn. Hard times you’re having, surely.

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541

O Zeus! no god is more berserk in heaven  
 if gentle folk, whom you yourself begot,<sup>4</sup>  
 you plunge in grief and hardship without mercy!  
 Sir, I began to sweat when I first saw you,  
 and tears came to my eyes, remembering  
 Odysseus: rags like these he may be wearing  
 somewhere on his wanderings now—  
 I mean, if he's alive still under the sun.  
 But if he's dead and in the house of Death,  
 I mourn Odysseus. He entrusted cows to me  
 in Kephallênia,<sup>5</sup> when I was knee high,  
 and now his herds are numberless, no man else  
 ever had cattle multiply like grain.  
 But new men tell me I must bring my beeves  
 to feed them, who care nothing for our prince,  
 fear nothing from the watchful gods. They crave  
 partition of our lost king's land and wealth.  
 My own feelings keep going round and round  
 upon this tether: can I desert the boy  
 by moving, herds and all, to another country,  
 a new life among strangers? Yet it's worse  
 to stay here, in my old post, herding cattle  
 for upstarts.

210

220

I'd have gone long since,  
 gone, taken service with another king; this shame  
 is no more to be borne; but I keep thinking  
 my own lord, poor devil, still might come  
 and make a rout of suitors in his hall."

230

Odysseus, with his mind on action, answered:

"Herdsman, I make you out to be no coward  
 and no fool: I can see that for myself.  
 So let me tell you this. I swear by Zeus  
 all highest, by the table set for friends,  
 and by your king's hearthstone to which I've come,  
 Odysseus will return. You'll be on hand  
 to see, if you care to see it,  
 how those who lord it here will be cut down."

240

The cowman said:

"Would god it all came true!  
 You'd see the fight that's in me!"

Then Eumaios  
 echoed him, and invoked the gods, and prayed  
 that his great-minded master should return.

<sup>4</sup>To say that Zeus was their father was a way of describing great leaders.

<sup>5</sup>A large island near Ithaka; modern Cephalonia.

While these three talked, the suitors in the field  
had come together plotting—what but death  
for Telémakhos?—when from the left an eagle  
crossed high with a rockdove in his claws.

Amphínomos got up. Said he, cutting them short:

250

“Friends, no luck lies in that plan for us,  
no luck,<sup>6</sup> knifing the lad. Let’s think of feasting.”

A grateful thought, they felt, and walking on  
entered the great hall of the hero Odysseus,  
where they all dropped their cloaks on chairs or couches  
and made a ritual slaughter, knifing sheep,  
fat goats and pigs, knifing the grass-fed steer.  
Then tripe was broiled and eaten. Mixing bowls  
were filled with wine. The swineherd passed out cups,  
Philoítios, chief cowherd, dealt the loaves  
into the panniers, Melánthios poured wine,  
and all their hands went out upon the feast.

260

Telémakhos placed his father to advantage  
just at the door sill of the pillared hall,  
setting a stool there and a sawed-off table,  
gave him a share of tripe, poured out his wine  
in a golden cup, and said:

“Stay here, sit down  
to drink with our young friends. I stand between you  
and any cutting word or cuffing hand  
from any suitor. Here is no public house  
but the old home of Odysseus, my inheritance.  
Hold your tongues then, gentlemen, and your blows,  
and let no wrangling start, no scuffle either.”

270

The others, disconcerted, bit their lips  
at the ring in the young man’s voice. Antínoös,  
Eupeithês’ son, turned round to them and said:

“It goes against the grain, my lords, but still  
I say we take this hectoring by Telémakhos.  
You know Zeus balked at it, or else  
we might have shut his mouth a long time past,  
the silvery speaker.”

280

But Telémakhos  
paid no heed to what Antínoös said.

<sup>6</sup> The bird’s appearance on the left is an ill omen.

Now public heralds wound through Ithaka  
 leading a file of beasts for sacrifice, and islanders  
 gathered under the shade trees of Apollo,  
 in the precinct of the Archer—while in hall  
 the suitors roasted mutton and fat beef  
 on skewers, pulling off the fragrant cuts;  
 and those who did the roasting served Odysseus  
 a portion equal to their own, for so  
 Telémakhos commanded.

290

But Athena  
 had no desire now to let the suitors  
 restrain themselves from wounding words and acts.  
 Laërtês' son again must be offended.  
 There was a scapegrace<sup>7</sup> fellow in the crowd  
 named Ktésippos, a Samian, rich beyond  
 all measure, arrogant with riches, early  
 and late a bidder for Odysseus' queen.  
 Now this one called attention to himself:

"Hear me, my lords, I have a thing to say.  
 Our friend has had his fair share from the start  
 and that's polite; it would be most improper  
 if we were cold to guests of Telémakhos—  
 no matter what tramp turns up. Well then, look here,  
 let me throw in my own small contribution.  
 He must have prizes to confer, himself,  
 on some brave bathman or another slave  
 here in Odysseus' house."

300

His hand went backward  
 and, fishing out a cow's foot from the basket,  
 he let it fly.

Odysseus rolled his head  
 to one side softly, ducking the blow, and smiled  
 a crooked smile with teeth clenched. On the wall  
 the cow's foot struck and fell. Telémakhos  
 blazed up:

310

"Ktésippos, lucky for you, by heaven,  
 not to have hit him! He took care of himself,  
 else you'd have had my lance-head in your belly;  
 no marriage, but a grave instead on Ithaka  
 for your father's pains.

You others, let me see  
 no more contemptible conduct in my house!  
 I've been awake to it for a long time—by now  
 I know what is honorable and what is not.

320

<sup>7</sup>Unprincipled.

Before, I was a child. I can endure it  
 while sheep are slaughtered, wine drunk up, and bread—  
 can one man check the greed of a hundred men?—  
 but I will suffer no more viciousness.  
 Granted you mean at last to cut me down:  
 I welcome that—better to die than have  
 humiliation always before my eyes,  
 the stranger buffeted, and the serving women  
 dragged about, abused in a noble house.”

330

They quieted, grew still, under his lashing,  
 and after a long silence, Ageláos,  
 Damástor’s son, spoke to them all:

“Friends, friends,  
 I hope no one will answer like a fishwife.  
 What has been said is true. Hands off this stranger,  
 he is no target, neither is any servant  
 here in the hall of King Odysseus.  
 Let me say a word, though, to Telémakhos  
 and to his mother, if it please them both:  
 as long as hope remained in you to see  
 Odysseus, that great gifted man, again,  
 you could not be reproached for obstinacy,  
 tying the suitors down here; better so,  
 if still your father fared the great sea homeward.  
 How plain it is, though, now, he’ll come no more!  
 Go sit then by your mother, reason with her,  
 tell her to take the best man, highest bidder,  
 and you can have and hold your patrimony,  
 feed on it, drink it all, while she  
 adorns another’s house.”

340

Keeping his head,  
 Telémakhos replied:

350

“By Zeus Almighty,  
 Ageláos, and by my father’s sufferings,  
 far from Ithaka, whether he’s dead or lost,  
 I make no impediment to Mother’s marriage.  
 ‘Take whom you wish,’ I say, ‘I’ll add my dowry.’  
 But can I pack her off against her will  
 from her own home? Heaven forbid!”

At this,  
 Pallas Athena touched off in the suitors  
 a fit of laughter, uncontrollable.<sup>8</sup>  
 She drove them into nightmare, till they wheezed

360

<sup>8</sup>The laughter is a sign that the suitors are out of their right minds.



and neighed as though with jaws no longer theirs,  
while blood defiled their meat,<sup>9</sup> and blurring tears  
flooded their eyes, heart-sore with woe to come.  
Then said the visionary, Theoklýmenos:

“O lost sad men, what terror is this you suffer?  
Night shrouds you to the knees, your heads, your faces;  
dry retch of death runs round like fire in sticks;  
your cheeks are streaming; these fair walls and pedestals  
are dripping crimson blood. And thick with shades  
is the entry way, the courtyard thick with shades  
passing athirst toward Érebos, into the dark,  
the sun is quenched in heaven, foul mist hems us in . . .”

370

The young men greeted this with shouts of laughter,  
and Eurýmakhos, the son of Pólybos, crowed:

“The mind of our new guest has gone astray.  
Hustle him out of doors, lads, into the sunlight;  
he finds it dark as night inside!”

The man of vision looked at him and said:

“When I need help, I’ll ask for it, Eurýmakhos.  
I have my eyes and ears, a pair of legs,  
and a straight mind, still with me. These will do  
to take me out. Damnation and black night  
I see arriving for yourselves: no shelter,  
no defence for any in this crowd—  
fools and vipers in the king’s own hall.”

380

With this he left that handsome room and went  
home to Peiraíos, who received him kindly.  
The suitors made wide eyes at one another  
and set to work provoking Telémakhos  
with jokes about his friends. One said, for instance:

390

“Telémakhos, no man is a luckier host  
when it comes to what the cat dragged in. What burning  
eyes your beggar had for bread and wine!  
But not for labor, not for a single heave—  
he’d be a deadweight on a field. Then comes  
this other, with his mumbo-jumbo. Boy,  
for your own good, I tell you, toss them both  
into a slave ship for the Sikels.<sup>10</sup> That would pay you.”

Telémakhos ignored the suitors’ talk.  
He kept his eyes in silence on his father,

400

<sup>9</sup>That is, in the eyes of Odysseus, Telémakhos, and Theoklýmenos.

<sup>10</sup>Sicilians.

awaiting the first blow. Meanwhile  
 the daughter of Ikários, Penélopê,  
 had placed her chair to look across and down  
 on father and son at bay; she heard the crowd,  
 and how they laughed as they resumed their dinner,  
 a fragrant feast, for many beasts were slain—  
 but as for supper, men supped never colder  
 than these, on what the goddess and the warrior  
 were even then preparing for the suitors,  
 whose treachery had filled that house with pain.

410

## BOOK TWENTY-ONE: THE TEST OF THE BOW

Upon Penélopê, most worn in love and thought,  
 Athena cast a glance like a grey sea  
 lifting her. Now to bring the tough bow out and bring  
 the iron blades. Now try those dogs at archery  
 to usher bloody slaughter in.

So moving stairward  
 the queen took up a fine doorhook of bronze,  
 ivory-hafted, smooth in her clenched hand,  
 and led her maids down to a distant room,  
 a storeroom where the master's treasure lay:  
 bronze, bar gold, black iron forged and wrought.  
 In this place hung the double-torsion bow  
 and arrows in a quiver, a great sheaf—  
 quills of groaning.

10

In the old time in Lakedaimon<sup>1</sup>  
 her lord had got these arms from Íphitos,  
 Eurýtos'<sup>2</sup> son. The two met in Messenia<sup>3</sup>  
 at Ortílokhos' table, on the day  
 Odysseus claimed a debt owed by that realm—  
 sheep stolen by Messenians out of Ithaka  
 in their long ships, three hundred head, and herdsmen.  
 Seniors of Ithaka and his father sent him  
 on that far embassy when he was young.  
 But Íphitos had come there tracking strays,  
 twelve shy mares, with mule colts yet unweaned.  
 And a fatal chase they led him over prairies  
 into the hands of Heraklês. That massive  
 son of toil and mortal son of Zeus

20

<sup>1</sup>The region of Sparta, in southern Greece.

<sup>2</sup>A famous archer.

<sup>3</sup>A region down the coast from Ithaka, in southwestern Greece.

murdered his guest at wine<sup>4</sup> in his own house—  
 inhuman, shameless in the sight of heaven—  
 to keep the mares and colts in his own grange.  
 Now Íphitos, when he knew Odysseus, gave him  
 the master bowman's arm; for old Eurýtos  
 had left it on his deathbed to his son.  
 In fellowship Odysseus gave a lance  
 and a sharp sword. But Heraklês killed Íphitos  
 before one friend could play host to the other.  
 And Lord Odysseus would not take the bow  
 in the black ships to the great war at Troy.  
 As a keepsake he put it by:  
 it served him well at home in Ithaka.

30

Now the queen reached the storeroom door and halted.  
 Here was an oaken sill, cut long ago  
 and sanded clean and bedded true. Foursquare  
 the doorjambs and the shining doors were set  
 by the careful builder. Penélopê untied the strap  
 around the curving handle, pushed her hook  
 into the slit, aimed at the bolts inside  
 and shot them back. Then came a rasping sound  
 as those bright doors the key had sprung gave way—  
 a bellow like a bull's vaunt in a meadow—  
 followed by her light footfall entering  
 over the plank floor. Herb-scented robes  
 lay there in chests, but the lady's milkwhite arms  
 went up to lift the bow down from a peg  
 in its own polished bowcase.

40

50

Now Penélopê  
 sank down, holding the weapon on her knees,  
 and drew her husband's great bow out, and sobbed  
 and bit her lip and let the salt tears flow.  
 Then back she went to face the crowded hall  
 tremendous bow in hand, and on her shoulder hung  
 the quiver spiked with coughing death. Behind her  
 maids bore a basket full of axeheads, bronze  
 and iron implements for the master's game.  
 Thus in her beauty she approached the suitors,  
 and near a pillar of the solid roof  
 she paused, her shining veil across her cheeks,  
 her maids on either hand and still,  
 then spoke to the banqueters:

60

<sup>4</sup>Íphitos' pursuit of his lost mares brought him to Tiryns, the city of the great hero-adventurer Heraklês, who, according to certain versions of the story, had something to do with the mares' disappearance. By some accounts, Heraklês killed Íphitos by throwing him down from the city walls.

“My lords, hear me:  
 suitors indeed, you commandeered this house  
 to feast and drink in, day and night, my husband  
 being long gone, long out of mind. You found  
 no justification for yourselves—none  
 except your lust to marry me. Stand up, then:  
 we now declare a contest for that prize.  
 Here is my lord Odysseus’ hunting bow.  
 Bend and string it if you can. Who sends an arrow  
 through iron axe-helve sockets,<sup>5</sup> twelve in line?  
 I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home,  
 my rich and beautiful bridal house, forever  
 to be remembered, though I dream it only.”

70

Then to Eumaios:

“Carry the bow forward.  
 Carry the blades.”

80

Tears came to the swineherd’s eyes  
 as he reached out for the big bow. He laid it  
 down at the suitors’ feet. Across the room  
 the cowherd sobbed, knowing the master’s weapon.  
 Antínoös growled, with a glance at both:

“Clods.

They go to pieces over nothing.

You two, there,  
 why are you sniveling? To upset the woman  
 even more? Has she not pain enough  
 over her lost husband? *Sit down.*  
 Get on with dinner quietly, or cry about it  
 outside, if you must. Leave us the bow.  
 A clean-cut game, it looks to me.  
 Nobody bends that bowstave easily  
 in this company. Is there a man here  
 made like Odysseus? I remember him  
 from childhood: I can see him even now.”

90

That was the way he played it, hoping inwardly  
 to span the great horn bow with corded gut  
 and drill the iron with his shot—he, Antínoös,  
 destined to be the first of all to savor  
 blood from a biting arrow at his throat,  
 a shaft drawn by the fingers of Odysseus  
 whom he had mocked and plundered, leading on

100

<sup>5</sup> The details of the feat to be performed have been much discussed and are not entirely clear; in any case, the archer had to send an arrow through twelve openings—notches, holes, or other apertures—in the handles or blades of the axes.

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549

the rest, his boon companions. Now they heard  
a gay snort of laughter from Telémakhos,  
who said then brilliantly:

“A queer thing, that!  
Has Zeus almighty made me a half-wit?  
For all her spirit, Mother has given in,  
promised to go off with someone—and  
is that amusing? What am I cackling for?  
Step up, my lords, contend now for your prize.  
There is no woman like her in Akhaia,  
not in old Argos, Pylos, or Mykênê,  
neither in Ithaka nor on the mainland,  
and you all know it without praise of mine.  
Come on, no hanging back, no more delay  
in getting the bow bent. Who’s the winner?  
I myself should like to try that bow.  
Suppose I bend it and bring off the shot,  
my heart will be less heavy, seeing the queen my mother  
go for the last time from this house and hall,  
if I who stay can do my father’s feat.”

110

120

He moved out quickly, dropping his crimson cloak,  
and lifted sword and sword belt from his shoulders.  
His preparation was to dig a trench,  
heaping the earth in a long ridge beside it  
to hold the blades half-bedded. A taut cord  
aligned the socket rings. And no one there  
but looked on wondering at his workmanship,  
for the boy had never seen it done.

He took his stand then  
on the broad door sill to attempt the bow.  
Three times he put his back into it and sprang it,  
three times he had to slack off. Still he meant  
to string that bow and pull for the needle shot.  
A fourth try, and he had it all but strung—  
when a stiffening in Odysseus made him check.  
Abruptly then he stopped and turned and said:

130

“Blast and damn it, must I be a milksop  
all my life? Half-grown, all thumbs,  
no strength or knack at arms, to defend myself  
if someone picks a fight with me.

140

Take over,  
O my elders and betters, try the bow,  
run off the contest.”

And he stood the weapon  
upright against the massy-timbered door  
with one arrow across the horn aslant,

550

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then went back to his chair. Antínoös  
gave the word:

“Now one man at a time  
rise and go forward. Round the room in order;  
left to right from where they dip the wine.”

As this seemed fair enough, up stood Leódês 150  
the son of Oinops. This man used to find  
vision for them in the smoke of sacrifice.  
He kept his chair well back, retired by the winebowl,  
for he alone could not abide their manners  
but sat in shame for all the rest. Now it was he  
who had first to confront the bow,  
standing up on the broad door sill. He failed.  
The bow unbending made his thin hands yield,  
no muscle in them. He gave up and said:

“Friends, I cannot. Let the next man handle it. 160  
Here is a bow to break the heart and spirit  
of many strong men. Aye. And death is less  
bitter than to live on and never have  
the beauty that we came here laying siege to  
so many days. Resolute, are you still,  
to win Odysseus’ lady Penélopê?  
Pit yourselves against the bow, and look  
among Akhaians for another’s daughter.  
Gifts will be enough to court and take her.  
Let the best offer win.”

With this Leódês 170  
thrust the bow away from him, and left it  
upright against the massy-timbered door,  
with one arrow aslant across the horn.  
As he went down to his chair he heard Antínoös’  
voice rising:

“What is that you say?  
It makes me burn. You cannot string the weapon,  
so ‘Here is a bow to break the heart and spirit  
of many strong men.’ Crushing thought!  
You were not born—you never had it in you—  
to pull that bow or let an arrow fly. 180  
But here are men who can and will.”

He called out to the goatherd, Melánthios:

“Kindle a fire there, be quick about it,  
draw up a big bench with a sheepskin on it,  
and bring a cake of lard out of the stores.  
Contenders from now on will heat and grease the bow.  
We’ll try it limber, and bring off the shot.”

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Melánthios darted out to light a blaze,  
 drew up a bench, threw a big sheepskin over it,  
 and brought a cake of lard. So one by one  
 the young men warmed and greased the bow for bending,  
 but not a man could string it. They were whipped.  
 Antínoös held off; so did Eurýmakhos,  
 suitors in chief, by far the ablest there.

190

Two men had meanwhile left the hall:  
 swineherd and cowherd, in companionship,  
 one downcast as the other. But Odysseus  
 followed them outdoors, outside the court,  
 and coming up said gently:

“You, herdsman  
 and you, too, swineherd, I could say a thing to you,  
 or should I keep it dark?

200

No, no; speak,  
 my heart tells me. Would you be men enough  
 to stand by Odysseus if he came back?  
 Suppose he dropped out of a clear sky, as I did?  
 Suppose some god should bring him?  
 Would you bear arms for him, or for the suitors?”

The cowherd said:

“Ah, let the master come!  
 Father Zeus, grant our old wish! Some courier  
 guide him back! Then judge what stuff is in me  
 and how I manage arms!”

Likewise Eumaios  
 fell to praying all heaven for his return,  
 so that Odysseus, sure at least of these,  
 told them:

210

“I am at home, for I am he.  
 I bore adversities, but in the twentieth year  
 I am ashore in my own land. I find  
 the two of you, alone among my people,  
 longed for my coming. Prayers I never heard  
 except your own that I might come again.  
 So now what is in store for you I’ll tell you:  
 If Zeus brings down the suitors by my hand  
 I promise marriages to both, and cattle,  
 and houses built near mine. And you shall be  
 brothers-in-arms of my Telémakhos.  
 Here, let me show you something else, a sign  
 that I am he, that you can trust me, look:  
 this old scar from the tusk wound that I got  
 boar hunting on Parnassos—  
 Autólykos’ sons and I.”

220

Shifting his rags  
 he bared the long gash. Both men looked, and knew,  
 and threw their arms around the old soldier, weeping, 230  
 kissing his head and shoulders. He as well  
 took each man's head and hands to kiss, then said—  
 to cut it short, else they might weep till dark—

“Break off, no more of this.  
 Anyone at the door could see and tell them.  
 Drift back in, but separately at intervals  
 after me.

Now listen to your orders:  
 when the time comes, those gentlemen, to a man,  
 will be dead against giving me bow or quiver.  
 Defy them. Eumaios, bring the bow 240  
 and put it in my hands there at the door.  
 Tell the women to lock their own door tight.  
 Tell them if someone hears the shock of arms  
 or groans of men, in hall or court, not one  
 must show her face, but keep still at her weaving.  
 Philoítios, run to the outer gate and lock it.  
 Throw the cross bar and lash it.”

He turned back  
 into the courtyard and the beautiful house  
 and took the stool he had before. They followed  
 one by one, the two hands loyal to him. 250

Eurýmakhos had now picked up the bow.  
 He turned it round, and turned it round  
 before the licking flame to warm it up,  
 but could not, even so, put stress upon it  
 to jam the loop over the tip  
 though his heart groaned to bursting.

Then he said grimly:

“Curse this day.  
 What gloom I feel, not for myself alone,  
 and not only because we lose that bride.  
 Women are not lacking in Akhaia,  
 in other towns, or on Ithaka. No, the worst 260  
 is humiliation—to be shown up for children  
 measured against Odysseus—we who cannot  
 even hitch the string over his bow.  
 What shame to be repeated of us, after us!”

Antínoös said:

“Come to yourself. You know  
 that is not the way this business ends.



Today the islanders held holiday, a holy day,<sup>6</sup>  
no day to sweat over a bowstring.

Keep your head.

Postpone the bow. I say we leave the axes  
planted where they are. No one will take them.

270

No one comes to Odysseus' hall tonight.

Break out good wine and brim our cups again,  
we'll keep the crooked bow safe overnight,  
order the fattest goats Melánthios has  
brought down tomorrow noon, and offer thighbones burning  
to Apollo, god of archers,  
while we try out the bow and make the shot."

As this appealed to everyone, heralds came  
pouring fresh water for their hands, and boys  
filled up the winebowls. Joints of meat went round,  
fresh cuts for all, while each man made his offering,  
tilting the red wine to the gods, and drank his fill.  
Then spoke Odysseus, all craft and gall:

280

"My lords, contenders for the queen, permit me:  
a passion in me moves me to speak out.  
I put it to Eurýmakhos above all  
and to that brilliant prince, Antínoös. Just now  
how wise his counsel was, to leave the trial  
and turn your thoughts to the immortal gods! Apollo  
will give power tomorrow to whom he wills.  
But let me try my hand at the smooth bow!  
Let me test my fingers and my pull  
to see if any of the oldtime kick is there,  
or if thin fare and roving took it out of me."

290

Now irritation beyond reason swept them all,  
since they were nagged by fear that he could string it.  
Antínoös answered, coldly and at length:

"You bleary vagabond, no rag of sense is left you.  
Are you not coddled here enough, at table  
taking meat with gentlemen, your betters,  
denied nothing, and listening to our talk?  
When have we let a tramp hear all our talk?  
The sweet goad of wine has made you rave!  
Here is the evil wine can do  
to those who swig it down. Even the centaur  
Eurýtion,<sup>7</sup> in Peiríthoös' hall

300

<sup>6</sup> With ironic appropriateness, a feast day of Apollo, god of archery; Antínoös makes this an excuse for putting off the present challenge.

<sup>7</sup> The centaurs were an uncivilized tribe (often represented in myth as having horses' trunks and legs and human torsos and heads), inhabitants of Thessaly, in northeastern Greece. They were invited to the wedding of Peiríthoös, king of the Lapithai, a neighboring people, and at the wedding tried to carry off the bride; the present version tells the story in the singular, of Eurýtion. In the ensuing battle the centaurs were defeated.

among the Lapíthai, came to a bloody end  
 because of wine; wine ruined him: it crazed him,  
 drove him wild for rape in that great house.  
 The princes cornered him in fury, leaping on him  
 to drag him out and crop his ears and nose.  
 Drink had destroyed his mind, and so he ended  
 in that mutilation—fool that he was.  
 Centaurs and men made war for this,  
 but the drunkard first brought hurt upon himself.

310

The tale applies to you: I promise you  
 great trouble if you touch that bow. You'll come by  
 no indulgence in our house; kicked down  
 into a ship's bilge, out to sea you go,  
 and nothing saves you. Drink, but hold your tongue.  
 Make no contention here with younger men."

320

At this the watchful queen Penélopê  
 interposed:

"Antínoös, discourtesy  
 to a guest of Telémakhos—whatever guest—  
 that is not handsome. What are you afraid of?  
 Suppose this exile put his back into it  
 and drew the great bow of Odysseus—  
 could he then take me home to be his bride?  
 You know he does not imagine that! No one  
 need let that prospect weigh upon his dinner!  
 How very, very improbable it seems."

330

It was Eurýmakhos who answered her:

"Penélopê, O daughter of Ikários,  
 most subtle queen, we are not given to fantasy.  
 No, but our ears burn at what men might say  
 and women, too. We hear some jackal whispering:  
 'How far inferior to the great husband  
 her suitors are! Can't even budge his bow!  
 Think of it; and a beggar, out of nowhere,  
 strung it quick and made the needle shot!'  
 That kind of disrepute we would not care for."

340

Penélopê replied, steadfast and wary:

"Eurýmakhos, you have no good repute  
 in this realm, nor the faintest hope of it—  
 men who abused a prince's house for years,  
 consumed his wine and cattle. Shame enough.  
 Why hang your heads over a trifle now?  
 The stranger is a big man, well-compacted,  
 and claims to be of noble blood.

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Ai!

350

Give him the bow, and let us have it out!  
What I can promise him I will:  
if by the kindness of Apollo he prevails  
he shall be clothed well and equipped.  
A fine shirt and a cloak I promise him;  
a lance for keeping dogs at bay, or men;  
a broadsword; sandals to protect his feet;  
escort, and freedom to go where he will."

Telémakhos now faced her and said sharply:

"Mother, as to the bow and who may handle it  
or not handle it, no man here  
has more authority than I do—not one lord  
of our own stony Ithaka nor the islands lying  
east toward Elis: no one stops me if I choose  
to give these weapons outright to my guest.  
Return to your own hall. Tend your spindle.  
Tend your loom. Direct your maids at work.  
This question of the bow will be for men to settle,  
most of all for me. I am master here."

360

She gazed in wonder, turned, and so withdrew,  
her son's clearheaded bravery in her heart.  
But when she had mounted to her rooms again  
with all her women, then she fell to weeping  
for Odysseus, her husband. Grey-eyed Athena  
presently cast a sweet sleep on her eyes.

370

The swineherd had the horned bow in his hands  
moving toward Odysseus, when the crowd  
in the banquet hall broke into an ugly din,  
shouts rising from the flushed young men:

"Ho! Where  
do you think you are taking that, you smutty slave?"

380

"What is this dithering?"

"We'll toss you back alone  
among the pigs, for your own dogs to eat,  
if bright Apollo nods and the gods are kind!"

He faltered, all at once put down the bow, and stood  
in panic, buffeted by waves of cries,  
hearing Telémakhos from another quarter  
shout:

"Go on, take him the bow!

Do you obey this pack?  
You will be stoned back to your hills! Young as I am

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my power is over you! I wish to God  
 I had as much the upper hand of these!  
 There would be suitors pitched like dead rats  
 through our gate, for the evil plotted here!"

390

Telémakhos' frenzy struck someone as funny,  
 and soon the whole room roared with laughter at him,  
 so that all tension passed. Eumaios picked up  
 bow and quiver, making for the door,  
 and there he placed them in Odysseus' hands.  
 Calling Eurýkleia to his side he said:

"Telémakhos  
 trusts you to take care of the women's doorway.  
 Lock it tight. If anyone inside  
 should hear the shock of arms or groans of men  
 in hall or court, not one must show her face,  
 but go on with her weaving."

400

The old woman  
 nodded and kept still. She disappeared  
 into the women's hall, bolting the door behind her.  
 Philoítios left the house now at one bound,  
 catlike, running to bolt the courtyard gate.  
 A coil of deck-rope of papyrus fiber  
 lay in the gateway; this he used for lashing,  
 and ran back to the same stool as before,  
 fastening his eyes upon Odysseus.

410

And Odysseus took his time,  
 turning the bow, tapping it, every inch,  
 for borings that termites might have made  
 while the master of the weapon was abroad.  
 The suitors were now watching him, and some  
 jested among themselves:

"A bow lover!"

"Dealer in old bows!"

"Maybe he has one like it  
 at home!"

"Or has an itch to make one for himself."

"See how he handles it, the sly old buzzard!"

420

And one disdainful suitor added this:

"May his fortune grow an inch for every inch he bends it!"

But the man skilled in all ways of contending,  
 satisfied by the great bow's look and heft,

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like a musician, like a harper, when  
 with quiet hand upon his instrument  
 he draws between his thumb and forefinger  
 a sweet new string upon a peg: so effortlessly  
 Odysseus in one motion strung the bow.  
 Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it,  
 so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang  
 a swallow's note.

430

In the hushed hall it smote the suitors  
 and all their faces changed. Then Zeus thundered  
 overhead, one loud crack for a sign.  
 And Odysseus laughed within him that the son  
 of crooked-minded Kronos had flung that omen down.  
 He picked one ready arrow from his table  
 where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still  
 in the quiver for the young men's turn to come.  
 He nocked it, let it rest across the handgrip,  
 and drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow,  
 aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

440

Now flashed  
 arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle  
 through every socket ring, and grazed not one,  
 to thud with heavy brazen head beyond.

Then quietly

Odysseus said:

"Telémakhos, the stranger  
 you welcomed in your hall has not disgraced you.  
 I did not miss, neither did I take all day  
 stringing the bow. My hand and eye are sound,  
 not so contemptible as the young men say.  
 The hour has come to cook their lordships' mutton—  
 supper by daylight. Other amusements later,  
 with song and harping that adorn a feast."

450

He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince  
 Telémakhos, true son of King Odysseus,  
 belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear,  
 and with a clink and glitter of keen bronze  
 stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.

## BOOK TWENTY-TWO: DEATH IN THE GREAT HALL

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest fighter of the islands  
 leapt and stood on the broad door sill, his own bow in his hand.  
 He poured out at his feet a rain of arrows from the quiver  
 and spoke to the crowd:

“So much for that. Your clean-cut game is over.  
Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before,  
if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo.”

He drew to his fist the cruel head of an arrow for Antínoös  
just as the young man leaned to lift his beautiful drinking cup,  
embossed, two-handled, golden: the cup was in his fingers:  
the wine was even at his lips: and did he dream of death? 10  
How could he? In that revelry amid his throng of friends  
who would imagine a single foe—though a strong foe indeed—  
could dare to bring death’s pain on him and darkness on his eyes?  
Odysseus’ arrow hit him under the chin  
and punched up to the feathers through his throat.

Backward and down he went, letting the winecup fall  
from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted  
crimson runnels, a river of mortal red,  
and one last kick upset his table  
knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood. 20  
Now as they craned to see their champion where he lay  
the suitors jostled in uproar down the hall,  
everyone on his feet. Wildly they turned and scanned  
the walls in the long room for arms; but not a shield,  
not a good ashen spear was there for a man to take and throw.  
All they could do was yell in outrage at Odysseus:

“Foul! to shoot at a man! That was your last shot!”

“Your own throat will be slit for this!”

“Our finest lad is down!

You killed the best on Ithaka.”

“Buzzards will tear your eyes out!”

For they imagined as they wished—that it was a wild shot, 30  
an unintended killing—fools, not to comprehend  
they were already in the grip of death.  
But glaring under his brows Odysseus answered:

“You yellow dogs, you thought I’d never make it  
home from the land of Troy. You took my house to plunder,  
twisted my maids to serve your beds. You dared  
bid for my wife while I was still alive.  
Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide heaven,  
contempt for what men say of you hereafter.  
Your last hour has come. You die in blood.” 40

As they all took this in, sickly green fear  
pulled at their entrails, and their eyes flickered  
looking for some hatch or hideaway from death.  
Eurýmakhos alone could speak. He said:

“If you are Odysseus of Ithaka come back,  
 all that you say these men have done is true.  
 Rash actions, many here, more in the countryside.  
 But here he lies, the man who caused them all.  
 Antinoös was the ringleader, he whipped us on  
 to do these things. He cared less for a marriage  
 than for the power Kronion has denied him  
 as king of Ithaka. For that  
 he tried to trap your son and would have killed him.  
 He is dead now and has his portion. Spare  
 your own people. As for ourselves, we’ll make  
 restitution of wine and meat consumed,  
 and add, each one, a tithe of twenty oxen  
 with gifts of bronze and gold to warm your heart.  
 Meanwhile we cannot blame you for your anger.”

50

Odysseus glowered under his black brows  
 and said:

60

“Not for the whole treasure of your fathers,  
 all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold  
 put up by others, would I hold my hand.  
 There will be killing till the score is paid.  
 You forced yourselves upon this house. Fight your way out,  
 or run for it, if you think you’ll escape death.  
 I doubt one man of you skins by.”

They felt their knees fail, and their hearts—but heard  
 Eurymakhos for the last time rallying them.

“Friends,” he said, “the man is implacable.  
 Now that he’s got his hands on bow and quiver  
 he’ll shoot from the big door stone there  
 until he kills us to the last man.

70

Fight, I say,  
 let’s remember the joy of it. Swords out!  
 Hold up your tables to deflect his arrows.  
 After me, everyone: rush him where he stands.  
 If we can budge him from the door, if we can pass  
 into the town, we’ll call out men to chase him.  
 This fellow with his bow will shoot no more.”

He drew his own sword as he spoke, a broadsword of fine bronze,  
 honed like a razor on either edge. Then crying hoarse and loud  
 he hurled himself at Odysseus. But the kingly man let fly  
 an arrow at that instant, and the quivering feathered butt  
 sprang to the nipple of his breast as the barb stuck in his liver.  
 The bright broadsword clanged down. He lurched and fell aside,  
 pitching across his table. His cup, his bread and meat,  
 were spilt and scattered far and wide, and his head slammed on the  
 ground.

80

Revulsion, anguish in his heart, with both feet kicking out,  
he downed his chair, while the shrouding wave of mist closed on his  
eyes.

Amphínomos now came running at Odysseus, 90  
broadsword naked in his hand. He thought to make  
the great soldier give way at the door.  
But with a spear throw from behind Telémakhos hit him  
between the shoulders, and the lancehead drove  
clear through his chest. He left his feet and fell  
forward, thudding, forehead against the ground.  
Telémakhos swerved around him, leaving the long dark spear  
planted in Amphínomos. If he paused to yank it out  
someone might jump him from behind or cut him down with a  
sword

at the moment he bent over. So he ran—ran from the tables 100  
to his father's side and halted, panting, saying:

"Father let me bring you a shield and spear,  
a pair of spears, a helmet.  
I can arm on the run myself; I'll give  
outfits to Eumaios and this cowherd.  
Better to have equipment."

Said Odysseus:

"Run then, while I hold them off with arrows  
as long as the arrows last. When all are gone  
if I'm alone they can dislodge me."

Quick

upon his father's word Telémakhos 110  
ran to the room where spears and armor lay.  
He caught up four light shields, four pairs of spears,  
four helms of war high-plumed with flowing manes,  
and ran back, loaded down, to his father's side.  
He was the first to pull a helmet on  
and slide his bare arm in a buckler strap.  
The servants armed themselves, and all three took their stand  
beside the master of battle.

While he had arrows  
he aimed and shot, and every shot brought down 120  
one of his huddling enemies.  
But when all barbs had flown from the bowman's fist,  
he leaned his bow in the bright entry way  
beside the door, and armed: a four-ply shield  
hard on his shoulder, and a crested helm,  
horsetailed, nodding stormy upon his head,  
then took his tough and bronze-shod spears.

The suitors  
who held their feet, no longer under bowshot,



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could see a window high in a recess of the wall,  
 a vent, lighting the passage to the storeroom.  
 This passage had one entry, with a door,  
 at the edge of the great hall's threshold, just outside.<sup>1</sup>

130

Odysseus told the swineherd to stand over  
 and guard this door and passage. As he did so,  
 a suitor named Ageláos asked the others:

"Who will get a leg up on that window  
 and run to alarm the town? One sharp attack  
 and this fellow will never shoot again."

His answer

came from the goatherd, Melánthios:

"No chance, my lord.

The exit into the courtyard is too near them,  
 too narrow. One good man could hold that portal  
 against a crowd. No: let me scale the wall  
 and bring you arms out of the storage chamber.  
 Odysseus and his son put them indoors,  
 I'm sure of it; not outside."

140

The goatish goatherd  
 clambered up the wall, toes in the chinks,  
 and slipped through to the storeroom. Twelve light shields,  
 twelve spears he took, and twelve thick-crested helmets,  
 and handed all down quickly to the suitors.  
 Odysseus, when he saw his adversaries  
 girded and capped and long spears in their hands  
 shaken at him, felt his knees go slack,  
 his heart sink, for the fight was turning grim.  
 He spoke rapidly to his son:

150

"Telémakhos, one of the serving women  
 is tipping the scales against us in this fight,  
 or maybe Melánthios."

But sharp and clear

Telémakhos said:

"It is my own fault, Father,  
 mine alone. The storeroom door—I left it  
 wide open. They were more alert than I.  
 Eumaios, go and lock that door  
 and bring back word if a woman is doing this  
 or Melánthios, Dólios' son. More likely he."

160

<sup>1</sup> The window in the *mégaron*, or great hall, connects with an external corridor that runs to the rear of the house, past the women's chambers, to the storeroom; the only exit from the corridor to the outdoor courtyard is close to where Odysseus and his three allies have posted themselves. It is therefore, as Melánthios soon points out, not a safe escape route.

Even as they conferred, Melánthios  
entered the storeroom for a second load,  
and the swineherd at the passage entry saw him.  
He cried out to his lord:

“Son of Laërtês,  
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,  
there he goes, the monkey, as we thought,  
there he goes into the storeroom.

Let me hear your will:  
put a spear through him—I hope I am the stronger—  
or drag him here to pay for his foul tricks  
against your house?”

170

Odysseus said:

“Telémakhos and I  
will keep these gentlemen in hall, for all their urge to leave.  
You two go throw him into the storeroom, wrench his arms  
and legs behind him, lash his hands and feet  
to a plank, and hoist him up to the roof beams.  
Let him live on there suffering at his leisure.”

The two men heard him with appreciation  
and ducked into the passage. Melánthios,  
rummaging in the chamber, could not hear them  
as they came up; nor could he see them freeze  
like posts on either side the door.

180

He turned back with a handsome crested helmet  
in one hand, in the other an old shield  
coated with dust—a shield Laërtês bore  
soldiering in his youth. It had lain there for years,  
and the seams on strap and grip had rotted away.  
As Melánthios came out the two men sprang,  
jerked him backward by the hair, and threw him.  
Hands and feet they tied with a cutting cord  
behind him, so his bones ground in their sockets,  
just as Laërtês’ royal son commanded.

190

Then with a whip of rope they hoisted him  
in agony up a pillar to the beams,  
and—O my swineherd—you were the one to say:

“Watch through the night up there, Melánthios.  
An airy bed is what you need.  
You’ll be awake to see the primrose Dawn  
when she goes glowing from the streams of Ocean  
to mount her golden throne.

No oversleeping  
the hour for driving goats to feed the suitors.”

200

They stooped for helm and shield and left him there  
contorted, in his brutal sling,

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and shut the doors, and went to join Odysseus,  
 whose mind moved through the combat now to come.  
 Breathing deep, and snorting hard, they stood  
 four at the entry, facing two score men.  
 But now into the gracious doorway stepped  
 Zeus's daughter Athena. She wore the guise of Mentor,  
 and Odysseus appealed to her in joy:

210

"O Mentor, join me in this fight! Remember  
 how all my life I've been devoted to you,  
 friend of my youth!"

For he guessed it was Athena,  
 Hope of Soldiers. Cries came from the suitors,  
 and Ageláos, Damástor's son, called out:

"Mentor, don't let Odysseus lead you astray  
 to fight against us on his side.  
 Think twice: we are resolved—and we will do it—  
 after we kill them, father and son,  
 you too will have your throat slit for your pains  
 if you make trouble for us here. It means your life.  
 Your life—and cutting throats will not be all.  
 Whatever wealth you have, at home, or elsewhere,  
 we'll mingle with Odysseus' wealth. Your sons  
 will be turned out, your wife and daughters  
 banished from the town of Ithaka."

220

Athena's anger grew like a storm wind as he spoke  
 until she flashed out at Odysseus:

"Ah, what a falling off!

Where is your valor, where is the iron hand  
 that fought at Troy for Helen, pearl of kings,  
 no respite and nine years of war? How many foes  
 your hand brought down in bloody play of spears!  
 What stratagem but yours took Priam's town?  
 How is it now that on your own door sill,  
 before the harriers<sup>2</sup> of your wife, you curse your luck  
 not to be stronger?

230

Come here, cousin, stand by me,  
 and you'll see action! In the enemies' teeth  
 learn how Mentor, son of Álkimos,  
 repays fair dealing!"

For all her fighting words  
 she gave no overpowering aid—not yet;  
 father and son must prove their mettle still.  
 Into the smoky air under the roof

240

<sup>2</sup>Predatory dogs or hawks.

the goddess merely darted to perch on a blackened beam—  
no figure to be seen now but a swallow.

Command of the suitors had fallen to Ageláos.  
With him were Eurýnomos, Amphímedon,  
Demoptólemos, Peisándros, Pólybos,  
the best of the lot who stood to fight for their lives  
after the streaking arrows downed the rest.  
Ageláos rallied them with his plan of battle:

250

“Friends, our killer has come to the end of his rope,  
and much good Mentor did him, that blowhard, dropping in.  
Look, only four are left to fight, in the light there at the door.  
No scattering of shots, men, no throwing away good spears;  
we six will aim a volley at Odysseus alone,  
and may Zeus grant us the glory of a hit.  
If he goes down, the others are no problem.”

At his command, then, “Ho!” they all let fly  
as one man. But Athena spoiled their shots.  
One hit the doorpost of the hall, another  
stuck in the door’s thick timbering, still others  
rang on the stone wall, shivering hafts<sup>3</sup> of ash.  
Seeing his men unscathed, royal Odysseus  
gave the word for action.

260

“Now I say, friends,  
the time is overdue to let them have it.  
Battlespoil they want from our dead bodies  
to add to all they plundered here before.”

Taking aim over the steadied lanceheads  
they all let fly together. Odysseus killed  
Demoptólemos; Telémakhos  
killed Eurýades; the swineherd, Élatos;  
and Peisándros went down before the cowherd.  
As these lay dying, biting the central floor,  
their friends gave way and broke for the inner wall.  
The four attackers followed up with a rush  
to take spears from the fallen men.

270

Re-forming,  
the suitors threw again with all their strength,  
but Athena turned their shots, or all but two.  
One hit a doorpost in the hall, another  
stuck in the door’s thick timbering, still others  
rang on the stone wall, shivering hafts of ash.  
Amphímedon’s point bloodied Telémakhos’  
wrist, a superficial wound, and Ktésippos’  
long spear passing over Eumaios’ shield

280

<sup>3</sup> Shafts.

grazed his shoulder, hurtled on and fell.  
 No matter: with Odysseus the great soldier  
 the wounded threw again. And Odysseus raider of cities  
 struck Eurýdamas down. Telémakhos  
 hit Amphímedon, and the swineherd's shot  
 killed Pólybos. But Ktésippos, who had last evening thrown  
 a cow's hoof at Odysseus, got the cowherd's heavy cast  
 full in the chest—and dying heard him say:

290

“You arrogant joking bastard!  
 Clown, will you, like a fool, and parade your wit?  
 Leave jesting to the gods who do it better.  
 This will repay your cow's-foot courtesy  
 to a great wanderer come home.”

The master  
 of the black herds had answered Ktésippos.  
 Odysseus, lunging at close quarters, put a spear  
 through Ageláos, Damástor's son. Telémakhos  
 hit Leókritos from behind and pierced him,  
 kidney to diaphragm. Speared off his feet,  
 he fell face downward on the ground.

300

At this moment that unmanning thunder cloud,  
 the aegis,<sup>4</sup> Athena's shield,  
 took form aloft in the great hall.

And the suitors mad with fear  
 at her great sign stampeded like stung cattle by a river  
 when the dread shimmering gadfly strikes in summer,  
 in the flowering season, in the long-drawn days.  
 After them the attackers wheeled, as terrible as falcons  
 from eyries in the mountains veering over and diving down  
 with talons wide unsheathed on flights of birds,  
 who cower down the sky in chutes and bursts along the valley—  
 but the pouncing falcons grip their prey, no frantic wing avails,  
 and farmers love to watch those beakèd hunters.  
 So these now fell upon the suitors in that hall,  
 turning, turning to strike and strike again,  
 while torn men moaned at death, and blood ran smoking  
 over the whole floor.

310

Now there was one  
 who turned and threw himself at Odysseus' knees—  
 Leódès, begging for his life:

320

“Mercy,  
 mercy on a suppliant, Odysseus!  
 Never by word or act of mine, I swear,  
 was any woman troubled here. I told the rest  
 to put an end to it. They would not listen,

<sup>4</sup>The shield of Zeus, lent by him to Athena.

566

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would not keep their hands from brutishness,  
and now they are all dying like dogs for it.  
I had no part in what they did: my part  
was visionary—reading the smoke of sacrifice.  
Scruples go unrewarded if I die.”

330

The shrewd fighter frowned over him and said:

“You were diviner to this crowd? How often  
you must have prayed my sweet day of return  
would never come, or not for years!—and prayed  
to have my dear wife, and beget children on her.  
No plea like yours could save you  
from this hard bed of death. Death it shall be!”

He picked up Ageláos’ broadsword  
from where it lay, flung by the slain man,  
and gave Leódês’ neck a lopping blow  
so that his head went down to mouth in dust.

340

One more who had avoided furious death  
was the son of Terpis, Phêmios, the minstrel,  
singer by compulsion to the suitors.  
He stood now with his harp, holy and clear,  
in the wall’s recess, under the window, wondering  
if he should flee that way to the courtyard altar,  
sanctuary of Zeus, the Enclosure God.  
Thighbones in hundreds had been offered there  
by Laërtês and Odysseus. No, he thought;  
the more direct way would be best—to go  
humbly to his lord. But first to save  
his murmuring instrument he laid it down  
carefully between the winebowl and a chair,  
then he betook himself to Lord Odysseus,  
clung hard to his knees, and said:

350

“Mercy,  
mercy on a suppliant, Odysseus!  
My gift is song for men and for the gods undying.  
My death will be remorse for you hereafter.  
No one taught me: deep in my mind a god  
shaped all the various ways of life in song.  
And I am fit to make verse in your company  
as in the god’s. Put aside lust for blood.  
Your own dear son Telémakhos can tell you,  
never by my own will or for love  
did I feast here or sing amid the suitors.  
They were too strong, too many; they compelled me.”

360

Telémakhos in the elation of battle  
heard him. He at once called to his father:

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“Wait: that one is innocent: don’t hurt him.  
And we should let our herald live—Medôn;  
he cared for me from boyhood. Where is *he*?  
Has he been killed already by Philoítios  
or by the swineherd? Else he got an arrow  
in that first gale of bowshots down the room.”

370

Now this came to the ears of prudent Medôn  
under the chair where he had gone to earth,  
pulling a new-flayed bull’s hide over him.  
Quiet he lay while blinding death passed by.  
Now heaving out from under  
he scrambled for Telémakhos’ knees and said:

380

“Here I am, dear prince; but rest your spear!  
Tell your great father not to see in me  
a suitor for the sword’s edge—one of those  
who laughed at you and ruined his property!”

The lord of all the tricks of war surveyed  
this fugitive and smiled. He said:

“Courage: my son has dug you out and saved you.  
Take it to heart, and pass the word along:  
fair dealing brings more profit in the end.  
Now leave this room. Go and sit down outdoors  
where there’s no carnage, in the court,  
you and the poet with his many voices,  
while I attend to certain chores inside.”

390

At this the two men stirred and picked their way  
to the door and out, and sat down at the altar,  
looking around with wincing eyes  
as though the sword’s edge hovered still.  
And Odysseus looked around him, narrow-eyed,  
for any others who had lain hidden  
while death’s black fury passed.

400

In blood and dust  
he saw that crowd all fallen, many and many slain.

Think of a catch that fishermen haul in to a halfmoon bay  
in a fine-meshed net from the white-caps of the sea:  
how all are poured out on the sand, in throes for the salt sea,  
twitching their cold lives away in Hêlios’ fiery air:  
so lay the suitors heaped on one another.

Odysseus at length said to his son:

“Go tell old Nurse I’ll have a word with her.  
What’s to be done now weighs on my mind.”

410

Telémakhos knocked at the women’s door and called:

“Eurýkleia, come out here! Move, old woman.  
You kept your eye on all our servant girls.  
Jump, my father is here and wants to see you.”

His call brought no reply, only the doors  
were opened, and she came. Telémakhos  
led her forward. In the shadowy hall  
full of dead men she found his father  
spattered and caked with blood like a mountain lion  
when he has gorged upon an ox, his kill—  
with hot blood glistening over his whole chest,  
smeared on his jaws, baleful and terrifying—  
even so encrimsoned was Odysseus  
up to his thighs and armpits. As she gazed  
from all the corpses to the bloody man  
she raised her head to cry over his triumph,  
but felt his grip upon her, checking her.  
Said the great soldier then:

420

“Rejoice  
inwardly. No crowing aloud, old woman.  
To glory over slain men is no piety.  
Destiny and the gods’ will vanquished these,  
and their own hardness. They respected no one,  
good or bad, who came their way.  
For this, and folly, a bad end befell them.  
Your part is now to tell me of the women,  
those who dishonored me, and the innocent.”

430

His own old nurse Eurýkleia said:

“I will, then.  
Child, you know you’ll have the truth from me.  
Fifty all told they are, your female slaves,  
trained by your lady and myself in service,  
wool carding and the rest of it, and taught  
to be submissive. Twelve went bad,  
flouting me, flouting Penélopê, too.  
Telémakhos being barely grown, his mother  
would never let him rule the serving women—  
but you must let me go to her lighted rooms  
and tell her. Some god sent her a drift of sleep.”

440

But in reply the great tactician said:

“Not yet. Do not awake her. Tell those women  
who were the suitors’ harlots to come here.”

450

She went back on this mission through his hall.  
Then he called Telémakhos to his side  
and the two herdsmen. Sharply Odysseus said:



“These dead must be disposed of first of all.  
 Direct the women. Tables and chairs will be  
 scrubbed with sponges, rinsed and rinsed again.  
 When our great room is fresh and put in order,  
 take them outside, these women,  
 between the roundhouse<sup>5</sup> and the palisade,  
 and hack them with your swordblades till you cut  
 the life out of them, and every thought of sweet  
 Aphroditê under the rutting suitors,  
 when they lay down in secret.”

460

As he spoke  
 here came the women in a bunch, all wailing,  
 soft tears on their cheeks. They fell to work  
 to lug the corpses out into the courtyard  
 under the gateway, propping one  
 against another as Odysseus ordered,  
 for he himself stood over them. In fear  
 these women bore the cold weight of the dead.  
 The next thing was to scrub off chairs and tables  
 and rinse them down. Telémakhos and the herdsman  
 scraped the packed earth floor with hoes, but made  
 the women carry out all blood and mire.  
 When the great room was cleaned up once again,  
 at swordpoint they forced them out, between  
 the roundhouse and the palisade, pell-mell  
 to huddle in that dead end without exit.  
 Telémakhos, who knew his mind,<sup>6</sup> said curtly:

470

“I would not give the clean death of a beast  
 to trulls<sup>7</sup> who made a mockery of my mother  
 and of me too—you sluts, who lay with suitors.”

480

He tied one end of a hawser to a pillar  
 and passed the other about the roundhouse top,  
 taking the slack up, so that no one's toes  
 could touch the ground. They would be hung like doves  
 or larks in springes<sup>8</sup> triggered in a thicket,  
 where the birds think to rest—a cruel nesting.  
 So now in turn each woman thrust her head  
 into a noose and swung, yanked high in air,  
 to perish there most piteously.  
 Their feet danced for a little, but not long.

490

<sup>5</sup>A building, with a cone-shaped roof, near the wall surrounding the courtyard; probably a place for storing implements.

<sup>6</sup>Telémakhos departs from Odysseus' instructions; he gives the offending women a dishonorable death by hanging rather than death by the knife or sword, as in the ritual sacrifice of an innocent animal.

<sup>7</sup>Harlots.

<sup>8</sup>Nooses, attached to tied branches, used to trap birds and other small animals.

570

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From storeroom to the court they brought Melánthios,  
 chopped with swords to cut his nose and ears off,  
 pulled off his genitals to feed the dogs  
 and raging hacked his hands and feet away.

As their own hands and feet called for a washing,  
 they went indoors to Odysseus again.  
 Their work was done. He told Eurýkleia:

“Bring me

brimstone<sup>9</sup> and a brazier—medicinal  
 fumes to purify my hall. Then tell  
 Penélopê to come, and bring her maids.  
 All servants round the house must be called in.”

500

His own old nurse Eurýkleia replied:

“Aye, surely that is well said, child. But let me  
 find you a good clean shirt and cloak and dress you.  
 You must not wrap your shoulders’ breadth again  
 in rags in your own hall. That would be shameful.”

Odysseus answered:

“Let me have the fire.

The first thing is to purify this place.”

510

With no more chat Eurýkleia obeyed  
 and fetched out fire and brimstone. Cleansing fumes  
 he sent through court and hall and storage chamber.  
 Then the old woman hurried off again  
 to the women’s quarters to announce her news,  
 and all the servants came now, bearing torches  
 in twilight, crowding to embrace Odysseus,  
 taking his hands to kiss, his head and shoulders,  
 while he stood there, nodding to every one,  
 and overcome by longing and by tears.

520

## BOOK TWENTY-THREE: THE TRUNK OF THE OLIVE TREE

The old nurse went upstairs exulting,  
 with knees toiling, and patter of slapping feet,  
 to tell the mistress of her lord’s return,  
 and cried out by the lady’s pillow:

<sup>9</sup> Sulfur.

“Wake,  
wake up, dear child! Penélopê, come down,  
see with your own eyes what all these years you longed for!  
Odysseus is here! Oh, in the end, he came!  
And he has killed your suitors, killed them all  
who made his house a bordel<sup>1</sup> and ate his cattle  
and raised their hands against his son!”

Penélopê said:

10

“Dear nurse . . . the gods have touched you.  
They can put chaos into the clearest head  
or bring a lunatic down to earth. Good sense  
you always had. They’ve touched you. What is this  
mockery you wake me up to tell me,  
breaking in on my sweet spell of sleep?  
I had not dozed away so tranquilly  
since my lord went to war, on that ill wind  
to Iliion.

Oh, leave me! Back down stairs!  
If any other of my women came in babbling  
things like these to startle me, I’d see her  
flogged out of the house! Your old age spares you that.”

20

Eurýkleia said:

“Would I play such a trick on you, dear child?  
It is true, true, as I tell you, he has come!  
That stranger they were baiting was Odysseus.  
Telémakhos knew it days ago—  
cool head, never to give his father away,  
till he paid off those swollen dogs!”

The lady in her heart’s joy now sprang up  
with sudden dazzling tears, and hugged the old one,  
crying out:

30

“But try to make it clear!  
If he came home in secret, as you say,  
could he engage them singlehanded? How?  
They were all down there, still in the same crowd.”

To this Eurýkleia said:

“I did not see it,  
I knew nothing; only I heard the groans  
of men dying. We sat still in the inner rooms  
holding our breath, and marvelling, shut in,  
until Telémakhos came to the door and called me—  
your own dear son, sent this time by his father!

40

<sup>1</sup> Bordello; brothel.

So I went out, and found Odysseus  
erect, with dead men littering the floor  
this way and that. If you had only seen him!  
It would have made your heart glow hot!—a lion  
splashed with mire and blood.

But now the cold  
corpses are all gathered at the gate,  
and he has cleansed his hall with fire and brimstone,  
a great blaze. Then he sent me here to you.  
Come with me: you may both embark this time  
for happiness together, after pain,  
after long years. Here is your prayer, your passion,  
granted: your own lord lives, he is at home,  
he found you safe, he found his son. The suitors  
abused his house, but he has brought them down.”

50

The attentive lady said:

“Do not lose yourself  
in this rejoicing: wait: you know  
how splendid that return would be for us,  
how dear to me, dear to his son and mine;  
but no, it is not possible, your notion  
must be wrong.

60

Some god has killed the suitors,  
a god, sick of their arrogance and brutal  
malice—for they honored no one living,  
good or bad, who ever came their way.  
Blind young fools, they’ve tasted death for it.  
But the true person of Odysseus?  
He lost his home, he died far from Akhaia.”

The old nurse sighed:

“How queer, the way you talk!  
Here he is, large as life, by his own fire,  
and you deny he ever will get home!  
Child, you always were mistrustful!  
But there is one sure mark that I can tell you:  
that scar left by the boar’s tusk long ago.  
I recognized it when I bathed his feet  
and would have told you, but he stopped my mouth,  
forbade me, in his craftiness.

70

Come down,  
I stake my life on it, he’s here!  
Let me die in agony if I lie!”

Penélopê said:

“Nurse dear, though you have your wits about you,  
still it is hard not to be taken in

80

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by the immortals. Let us join my son, though,  
and see the dead and that strange one who killed them.”

She turned then to descend the stair, her heart  
in tumult. Had she better keep her distance  
and question him, her husband? Should she run  
up to him, take his hands, kiss him now?  
Crossing the door sill she sat down at once  
in firelight, against the nearest wall,  
across the room from the lord Odysseus.

There

leaning against a pillar, sat the man  
and never lifted up his eyes, but only waited  
for what his wife would say when she had seen him.  
And she, for a long time, sat deathly still  
in wonderment—for sometimes as she gazed  
she found him—yes, clearly—like her husband,  
but sometimes blood and rags were all she saw.  
Telémakhos’ voice came to her ears:

90

“Mother,

cruel mother, do you feel nothing,  
drawing yourself apart this way from Father?  
Will you not sit with him and talk and question him?  
What other woman could remain so cold?  
Who shuns her lord, and he come back to her  
from wars and wandering, after twenty years?  
Your heart is hard as flint and never changes!”

100

Penélopê answered:

“I am stunned, child.  
I cannot speak to him. I cannot question him.  
I cannot keep my eyes upon his face.  
If really he is Odysseus, truly home,  
beyond all doubt we two shall know each other  
better than you or anyone. There are  
secret signs we know, we two.”

110

A smile

came now to the lips of the patient hero, Odysseus,  
who turned to Telémakhos and said:

“Peace: let your mother test me at her leisure.  
Before long she will see and know me best.  
These tatters, dirt—all that I’m caked with now—  
make her look hard at me and doubt me still.  
As to this massacre, we must see the end.  
Whoever kills one citizen, you know,  
and has no force of armed men at his back,  
had better take himself abroad by night

120

and leave his kin. Well, we cut down the flower of Ithaka,  
the mainstay of the town. Consider that.”

Telémakhos replied respectfully:

“Dear Father,  
enough that you yourself study the danger,  
foresighted in combat as you are,  
they say you have no rival.

We three stand  
ready to follow you and fight. I say  
for what our strength avails, we have the courage.”

And the great tactician, Odysseus, answered:

“Good.

130

Here is our best maneuver, as I see it:  
bathe, you three, and put fresh clothing on,  
order the women to adorn themselves,  
and let our admirable harper choose a tune  
for dancing, some lighthearted air, and strum it.  
Anyone going by, or any neighbor,  
will think it is a wedding feast he hears.  
These deaths must not be cried about the town  
till we can slip away to our own woods. We’ll see  
what weapon, then, Zeus puts into our hands.”

140

They listened attentively, and did his bidding,  
bathed and dressed afresh; and all the maids  
adorned themselves. Then Phênios the harper  
took his polished shell and plucked the strings,  
moving the company to desire  
for singing, for the sway and beat of dancing,  
until they made the manor hall resound  
with gaiety of men and grace of women.  
Anyone passing on the road would say:

“Married at last, I see—the queen so many courted.  
Sly, cattish wife! She would not keep—not she!—  
the lord’s estate until he came.”

150

So travellers’  
thoughts might run—but no one guessed the truth.

Greathearted Odysseus, home at last,  
was being bathed now by Eurýnomê  
and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again  
in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena  
lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him  
taller, and massive, too, with crisping hair  
in curls like petals of wild hyacinth

160

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but all red-golden. Think of gold infused  
on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art  
Hephaistos taught him, or Athena: one  
whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished  
beauty over Odysseus' head and shoulders.  
He sat then in the same chair by the pillar,  
facing his silent wife, and said:

“Strange woman,  
the immortals of Olympos made you hard,  
harder than any. Who else in the world  
would keep aloof as you do from her husband  
if he returned to her from years of trouble,  
cast on his own land in the twentieth year?

170

Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.  
Her heart is iron in her breast.”

Penélopê  
spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

“Strange man,  
if man you are . . . This is no pride on my part  
nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely.  
I know so well how you—how he—appeared  
boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same . . .

Make up his bed for him, Eurýkleia.  
Place it outside the bedchamber my lord  
built with his own hands. Pile the big bed  
with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen.”

180

With this she tried him to the breaking point,  
and he turned on her in a flash raging:

“Woman, by heaven you've stung me now!  
Who dared to move my bed?  
No builder had the skill for that—unless  
a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal  
in his best days could budge it with a crowbar.  
There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign,  
built into that bed—my handiwork  
and no one else's!

190

An old trunk of olive  
grew like a pillar on the building plot,  
and I laid out our bedroom round that tree,  
lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof,  
gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors.  
Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,  
hewed and shaped that stump from the roots up  
into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve

200

as model for the rest. I planed them all,<sup>2</sup>  
inlaid them all with silver, gold and ivory,  
and stretched a bed between—a pliant web  
of oxhide thongs dyed crimson.

There's our sign!  
I know no more. Could someone else's hand  
have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?"

Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees  
grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.  
With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,  
throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him,  
murmuring:

210

"Do not rage at me, Odysseus!  
No one ever matched your caution! Think  
what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us  
life together in our prime and flowering years,  
kept us from crossing into age together.  
Forgive me, don't be angry. I could not  
welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself  
long ago against the frauds of men,  
impostors who might come—and all those many  
whose underhanded ways bring evil on!  
Helen of Argos, daughter of Zeus and Leda,  
would she have joined the stranger,<sup>3</sup> lain with him,  
if she had known her destiny? known the Akhaians  
in arms would bring her back to her own country?  
Surely a goddess moved her to adultery,  
her blood unchilled by war and evil coming,  
the years, the desolation; ours, too.  
But here and now, what sign could be so clear  
as this of our own bed?  
No other man has ever laid eyes on it—  
only my own slave, Aktoris, that my father  
sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.  
You make my stiff heart know that I am yours."

220

230

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache  
of longing mounted, and he wept at last,  
his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,  
longed for

as the sunwarmed earth is longed for by a swimmer  
spent in rough water where his ship went down  
under Poseidon's blows, gale winds and tons of sea.  
Few men can keep alive through a big surf

240

<sup>2</sup>That is, planed all the bedposts, of which one was the shaped tree trunk.

<sup>3</sup>Paris, the Trojan guest of Menelâos and Helen, with whom she ran away.



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to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches  
 in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind:  
 and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,  
 her white arms round him pressed as though forever.

The rose Dawn might have found them weeping still  
 had not grey-eyed Athena slowed the night  
 when night was most profound, and held the Dawn  
 under the Ocean of the East. That glossy team,  
 Firebright and Daybright, the Dawn's horses  
 that draw her heavenward for men—Athena  
 stayed their harnessing.

250

Then said Odysseus:

"My dear, we have not won through to the end.  
 One trial—I do not know how long—is left for me  
 to see fulfilled. Teirêsias' ghost forewarned me<sup>4</sup>  
 the night I stood upon the shore of Death, asking  
 about my friends' homecoming and my own.  
 But now the hour grows late, it is bed time,  
 rest will be sweet for us; let us lie down."

To this Penélopê replied:

"That bed,  
 that rest is yours whenever desire moves you,  
 now the kind powers have brought you home at last.  
 But as your thought has dwelt upon it, tell me:  
 what is the trial you face? I must know soon;  
 what does it matter if I learn tonight?"

260

The teller of many stories said:

"My strange one,  
 must you again, and even now,  
 urge me to talk? Here is a plodding tale;  
 no charm in it, no relish in the telling.  
 Teirêsias told me I must take an oar  
 and trudge the mainland, going from town to town,  
 until I discover men who have never known  
 the salt blue sea, nor flavor of salt meat—  
 strangers to painted prows, to watercraft  
 and oars like wings, dipping across the water.  
 The moment of revelation he foretold  
 was this, for you may share the prophecy:  
 some traveller falling in with me will say:  
 'A winnowing fan, that on your shoulder, sir?'

270

<sup>4</sup>See Book XI.

There I must plant my oar,<sup>5</sup> on the very spot,  
 with burnt offerings to Poseidon of the Waters:  
 a ram, a bull, a great buck boar. Thereafter  
 when I come home again, I am to slay  
 full hekatombs to the gods who own broad heaven,  
 one by one.

280

Then death will drift upon me  
 from seaward, mild as air, mild as your hand,  
 in my well-tended weariness of age,  
 contented folk around me on our island.  
 He said all this must come.”

Penélopê said:

“If by the gods’ grace age at least is kind,  
 we have that promise—trials will end in peace.”

290

So he confided in her, and she answered.  
 Meanwhile Eurýnomê and the nurse together  
 laid soft coverlets on the master’s bed,  
 working in haste by torchlight. Eurýkleia  
 retired to her quarters for the night,  
 and then Eurýnomê, as maid-in-waiting,  
 lighted her lord and lady to their chamber  
 with bright brands.

She vanished.

So they came  
 into that bed so steadfast, loved of old,  
 opening glad arms to one another.  
 Telémakhos by now had hushed the dancing,  
 hushed the women. In the darkened hall  
 he and the cowherd and the swineherd slept.

300

The royal pair mingled in love again  
 and afterward lay revelling in stories:  
 hers of the siege her beauty stood at home  
 from arrogant suitors, crowding on her sight,  
 and how they fed their courtship on his cattle,  
 oxen and fat sheep, and drank up rivers  
 of wine out of the vats.

Odyseus told  
 of what hard blows he had dealt out to others  
 and of what blows he had taken—all that story.  
 She could not close her eyes till all was told.

310

<sup>5</sup> The point of this gesture would be to appease the sea god by spreading his fame even into places where the sea is unknown. This excursion does not, in fact, take place in the *Odyssey*.

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579

His raid on the Kikonês, first of all,  
 then how he visited the Lotos Eaters,  
 and what the Kyklops did, and how those shipmates,  
 pitilessly devoured, were avenged.  
 Then of his touching Aiolos's isle  
 and how that king refitted him for sailing  
 to Ithaka; all vain: gales blew him back  
 groaning over the fishcold sea. Then how  
 he reached the Laistrygonians' distant bay  
 and how they smashed his ships and his companions.  
 Kirkê, then: of her deceits and magic,  
 then of his voyage to the wide underworld  
 of dark, the house of Death, and questioning  
 Teirêsiass, Theban spirit.

320

Dead companions,  
 many, he saw there, and his mother, too.  
 Of this he told his wife, and told how later  
 he heard the choir of maddening Seirênês,  
 coasted the Wandering Rocks, Kharybdis' pool  
 and the fiend Skylla who takes toll of men.  
 Then how his shipmates killed Lord Hêlios' cattle  
 and how Zeus thundering in towering heaven  
 split their fast ship with his fuming bolt,  
 so all hands perished.

330

He alone survived,  
 cast away on Kalypso's isle, Ogýgia.  
 He told, then, how that nymph detained him there  
 in her smooth caves, craving him for her husband,  
 and how in her devoted lust she swore  
 he should not die nor grow old, all his days,  
 but he held out against her.

340

Last of all  
 what sea-toil brought him to the Phaiákians;  
 their welcome; how they took him to their hearts  
 and gave him passage to his own dear island  
 with gifts of garments, gold and bronze . . .

Remembering,

he drowsed over the story's end. Sweet sleep  
 relaxed his limbs and his care-burdened breast.

Other affairs were in Athena's keeping.  
 Waiting until Odysseus had his pleasure  
 of love and sleep, the grey-eyed one bestirred  
 the fresh Dawn from her bed of paling Ocean  
 to bring up daylight to her golden chair,  
 and from his fleecy bed Odysseus  
 arose. He said to Penélopê:

350

"My lady,  
 what ordeals have we not endured! Here, waiting  
 you had your grief, while my return dragged out—

my hard adventures, pitting myself against  
 the gods' will, and Zeus, who pinned me down  
 far from home. But now our life resumes:  
 we've come together to our longed-for bed.  
 Take care of what is left me in our house;  
 as to the flocks that pack of wolves laid waste  
 they'll be replenished: scores I'll get on raids  
 and other scores our island friends will give me  
 till all the folds are full again.

360

This day

I'm off up country to the orchards. I must see  
 my noble father, for he missed me sorely.  
 And here is my command for you—a strict one,  
 though you may need none, clever as you are.  
 Word will get about as the sun goes higher  
 of how I killed those lads. Go to your rooms  
 on the upper floor, and take your women. Stay there  
 with never a glance outside or a word to anyone.”

370

Fitting cuirass and swordbelt to his shoulders,  
 he woke his herdsmen, woke Telémakhos,  
 ordering all in arms. They dressed quickly,  
 and all in war gear sallied from the gate,  
 led by Odysseus.

Now it was broad day

but these three men Athena hid in darkness,  
 going before them swiftly from the town.

380

## BOOK TWENTY-FOUR: WARRIORS, FAREWELL

Meanwhile the suitors' ghosts were called away  
 by Hermês of Kyllênê,<sup>1</sup> bearing the golden wand  
 with which he charms the eyes of men or wakens  
 whom he wills.

He waved them on, all squeaking  
 as bats will in a cavern's underworld,  
 all flitting, flitting criss-cross in the dark  
 if one falls and the rock-hung chain is broken.  
 So with faint cries the shades trailed after Hermês,  
 pure Deliverer.

He led them down dank ways,  
 over grey Ocean tides, the Snowy Rock,  
 past shores of Dream and narrows of the sunset,  
 in swift flight to where the Dead inhabit  
 wastes of asphodel at the world's end.

10

<sup>1</sup> Birthplace and home of Hermês, in Arcadia.

Crossing the plain they met Akhilleus'<sup>2</sup> ghost,  
 Patróklos and Antílokhos, then Aías,  
 noblest of Danaans after Akhilleus  
 in strength and beauty. Here the newly dead  
 drifted together, whispering. Then came  
 the soul of Agamémnon, son of Atreus,  
 in black pain forever, surrounded by men-at-arms  
 who perished with him in Aigísthos' hall.  
 Akhilleus greeted him:

20

“My lord Atreidês,  
 we held that Zeus who loves the play of lightning  
 would give you length of glory, you were king  
 over so great a host of soldiery  
 before Troy, where we suffered, we Akhaians.  
 But in the morning of your life  
 you met that doom that no man born avoids.  
 It should have found you in your day of victory,  
 marshal of the army, in Troy country;  
 then all Akhaia would have heaped your tomb  
 and saved your honor for your son. Instead  
 piteous death awaited you at home.”

30

And Atreus' son replied:

“Fortunate hero,  
 son of Pêleus, godlike and glorious,  
 at Troy you died, across the sea from Argos,  
 and round you Trojan and Akhaian peers  
 fought for your corpse and died. A dustcloud wrought  
 by a whirlwind hid the greatness of you slain,  
 minding no more the mastery of horses.  
 All that day we might have toiled in battle  
 had not a storm from Zeus broken it off.  
 We carried you out of the field of war  
 down to the ships and bathed your comely body  
 with warm water and scented oil. We laid you  
 upon your long bed, and our officers  
 wept hot tears like rain and cropped their hair.  
 Then hearing of it in the sea, your mother, Thetis,<sup>3</sup>  
 came with nereids of the grey wave crying  
 unearthly lamentation over the water,  
 and trembling gripped the Akhaians to the bone.  
 They would have boarded ship that night and fled  
 except for one man's wisdom—venerable  
 Nestor, proven counselor in the past.

40

50

<sup>2</sup> The following passage mentions several heroes of the Trojan War. Patróklos and Antílokhos were especially close friends of Akhilleus.

<sup>3</sup> A nereid (sea nymph), mother of Akhilleus.

He stood and spoke to allay their fear: 'Hold fast,  
sons of the Akhaians, lads of Argos.  
His mother it must be, with nymphs her sisters,  
come from the sea to mourn her son in death.'

Veteran hearts at this contained their dread  
while at your side the daughters of the ancient  
seagod wailed and wrapped ambrosial shrouding  
around you. 60

Then we heard the Muses sing  
a threnody<sup>4</sup> in nine immortal voices.  
No Argive there but wept, such keening<sup>5</sup> rose  
from that one Muse who led the song.

Now seven  
days and ten, seven nights and ten, we mourned you,  
we mortal men, with nymphs who know no death,  
before we gave you to the flame, slaughtering  
longhorned steers and fat sheep on your pyre.

Dressed by the nereids and embalmed with honey, 70  
honey and unguent in the seething blaze,  
you turned to ash. And past the pyre Akhaia's  
captains paraded in review, in arms,  
clattering chariot teams and infantry.  
Like a forest fire the flame roared on, and burned  
your flesh away. Next day at dawn, Akhilleus,  
we picked your pale bones from the char to keep  
in wine and oil. A golden amphora<sup>6</sup>  
your mother gave for this—Hephaistos' work,  
a gift from Dionysos.<sup>7</sup> In that vase, 80  
Akhilleus, hero, lie your pale bones mixed  
with mild Patróklos' bones, who died before you,  
and nearby lie the bones of Antílokhos,  
the one you cared for most of all companions  
after Patróklos.

We of the Old Army,  
we who were spearmen, heaped a tomb for these  
upon a foreland over Hellê's waters,<sup>8</sup>  
to be a mark against the sky for voyagers  
in this generation and those to come.  
Your mother sought from the gods magnificent trophies 90  
and set them down midfield for our champions. Often

<sup>4</sup>Dirge; lament. The Muses are goddesses of song, literature, and the arts. Homer does not describe them elsewhere as being nine in number; this is one of several anomalies about the present scene in Hades that have caused certain commentators to reject it as unauthentic.

<sup>5</sup>Loud, shrill lamenting for the dead.

<sup>6</sup>A type of jar.

<sup>7</sup>God of wine and revelry.

<sup>8</sup>The Hellespont; the modern Dardanelles, the strait connecting the Aegean Sea with the Sea of Marmara; located just north of Troy.

at funeral games after the death of kings  
 when you yourself contended, you've seen athletes  
 cinch their belts when trophies went on view.  
 But these things would have made you stare—the treasures  
 Thetis on her silver-slipped feet  
 brought to your games—for the gods held you dear.  
 You perished, but your name will never die.  
 It lives to keep all men in mind of honor  
 forever, Akhilleus.

As for myself, what joy  
 is this, to have brought off the war? Foul death  
 Zeus held in store for me at my coming home;  
 Aigísthos and my vixen cut me down.”

100

While they conversed, the Wayfinder<sup>9</sup> came near,  
 leading the shades of suitors overthrown  
 by Lord Odysseus. The two souls of heroes  
 advanced together, scrutinizing these.  
 Then Agamémnon recognized Amphiédon,  
 son of Meláneus—friends of his on Ithaka—  
 and called out to him:

“Amphiédon,  
 what ruin brought you into this undergloom?  
 All in a body, picked men, and so young?  
 One could not better choose the kingdom's pride.  
 Were you at sea, aboard ship, and Poseidon  
 blew up a dire wind and foundering waves,  
 or cattle-raiding, were you, on the mainland,  
 or in a fight for some stronghold, or women,  
 when the foe hit you to your mortal hurt?  
 Tell me, answer my question. Guest and friend  
 I say I am of yours—or do you not remember  
 I visited your family there? I came  
 with Prince Meneláos, urging Odysseus  
 to join us in the great sea raid on Troy.  
 One solid month we beat our way, breasting  
 south sea and west, resolved to bring him round,  
 the wily raider of cities.”

110

120

The new shade said:

“O glory of commanders, Agamémnon,  
 all that you bring to mind I remember well.  
 As for the sudden manner of our death  
 I'll tell you of it clearly, first to last.  
 After Odysseus had been gone for years  
 we were all suitors of his queen. She never  
 quite refused, nor went through with a marriage,

130

<sup>9</sup> Hermês.

hating it, ever bent on our defeat.

Here is one of her tricks: she placed her loom,  
her big loom, out for weaving in her hall,  
and the fine warp of some vast fabric on it.

We were attending her, and she said to us:

‘Young men, my suitors, now my lord is dead,

let me finish my weaving before I marry,

140

or else my thread will have been spun in vain.

This is a shroud I weave for Lord Laërtês

when cold Death comes to lay him on his bier.

The country wives would hold me in dishonor  
if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.’

We had men’s hearts; she touched them; we agreed.

So every day she wove on the great loom—

but every night by torchlight she unwove it,

and so for three years she deceived the Akhaians.

150

But when the seasons brought the fourth around,

as long months waned, and the slow days were spent,

one of her maids, who knew the secret, told us.

We found her unraveling the splendid shroud,

and then she had to finish, willy nilly—

finish, and show the big loom woven tight

from beam to beam with cloth. She washed the shrouding  
clean as sun or moonlight.

Then, heaven knows

from what quarter of the world, fatality

brought in Odysseus to the swineherd’s wood

far up the island. There his son went too

160

when the black ship put him ashore from Pylos.

The two together planned our death-trap. Down

they came to the famous town—Telémakhos

long in advance: we had to wait for Odysseus.

The swineherd led him to the manor later

in rags like a foul beggar, old and broken,

propped on a stick. These tatters that he wore

hid him so well that none of us could know him

when he turned up, not even the older men.

We jeered at him, took potshots at him, cursed him.

170

Daylight and evening in his own great hall

he bore it, patient as a stone. That night

the mind of Zeus beyond the stormcloud stirred him

with Telémakhos at hand to shift his arms

from mégaron to storage room and lock it.

Then he assigned his wife her part: next day

she brought his bow and iron axeheads out

to make a contest. Contest there was none;

that move doomed us to slaughter. Not a man

could bend the stiff bow to his will or string it,

180

until it reached Odysseus. We shouted,

‘Keep the royal bow from the beggar’s hands



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no matter how he begs!’ Only Telémakhos  
would not be denied.

So the great soldier  
took his bow and bent it for the bowstring  
effortlessly. He drilled the axeheads clean,  
sprang, and decanted arrows on the door sill,  
glared, and drew again. This time he killed  
Antínoös.

There facing us he crouched  
and shot his bolts of groaning at us, brought us  
down like sheep. Then some god, his familiar,<sup>10</sup>  
went into action with him round the hall,  
after us in a massacre. Men lay groaning,  
mortally wounded, and the floor smoked with blood.

190

That was the way our death came, Agamémnon.  
Now in Odysseus’ hall untended still  
our bodies lie,<sup>11</sup> unknown to friends or kinsmen  
who should have laid us out and washed our wounds  
free of the clotted blood, and mourned our passing.  
So much is due the dead.”

But Agamémnon’s  
tall shade when he heard this cried aloud:

200

“O fortunate Odysseus, master mariner  
and soldier, blessed son of old Laërtês!  
The girl you brought home made a valiant wife!  
True to her husband’s honor and her own,  
Penélopê, Ikários’ faithful daughter!  
The very gods themselves will sing her story  
for men on earth—mistress of her own heart,  
Penélopê!  
Tyndáreus’ daughter waited, too—how differently!  
Klytaimnéstra, the adulteress,  
waited to stab her lord and king. That song  
will be forever hateful. A bad name  
she gave to womankind, even the best.”

210

These were the things they said to one another  
under the rim of earth where Death is lord.

Leaving the town, Odysseus and his men  
that morning reached Laërtês’ garden lands,  
long since won by his toil from wilderness—  
his homestead, and the row of huts around it

220

<sup>10</sup>A friendly attendant spirit.

<sup>11</sup>It is unusual in Homer that the souls of unburied men should be admitted to Hades.

where fieldhands rested, ate and slept. Indoors  
he had an old slave woman, a Sikel,<sup>12</sup> keeping  
house for him in his secluded age.

Odysseus here took leave of his companions.

“Go make yourselves at home inside,” he said.  
“Roast the best porker and prepare a meal.  
I’ll go to try my father. Will he know me?  
Can he imagine it, after twenty years?”

He handed spear and shield to the two herdsmen,  
and in they went, Telémakhos too. Alone  
Odysseus walked the orchard rows and vines.  
He found no trace of Dólios and his sons  
nor the other slaves—all being gone that day  
to clear a distant field, and drag the stones  
for a boundary wall.

230

But on a well-banked plot  
Odysseus found his father in solitude  
spading the earth around a young fruit tree.

He wore a tunic, patched and soiled, and leggings—  
oxhide patches, bound below his knees  
against the brambles; gauntlets<sup>13</sup> on his hands  
and on his head a goatskin cowl of sorrow.<sup>14</sup>  
This was the figure Prince Odysseus found—  
wasted by years, racked, bowed under grief.  
The son paused by a tall pear tree and wept,  
then inwardly debated: should he run  
forward and kiss his father, and pour out  
his tale of war, adventure, and return,  
or should he first interrogate him, test him?  
Better that way, he thought—  
first draw him out with sharp words, trouble him.  
His mind made up, he walked ahead. Laërtēs  
went on digging, head down, by the sapling,  
stamping the spade in. At his elbow then  
his son spoke out:

240

250

“Old man, the orchard keeper  
you work for is no townsman. A good eye  
for growing things he has; there’s not a nurseling,  
fig tree, vine stock, olive tree or pear tree  
or garden bed uncared for on this farm.  
But I might add—don’t take offense—your own  
appearance could be tidier. Old age  
yes—but why the squalor, and rags to boot?

260

<sup>12</sup> Sicilian.      <sup>13</sup> Gloves with protective cuffs.

<sup>14</sup> The goatskin cap is an expression of his mourning.

It would not be for sloth, now, that your master  
 leaves you in this condition; neither at all  
 because there's any baseness in your self.  
 No, by your features, by the frame you have,  
 a man might call you kingly,  
 one who should bathe warm, sup well, and rest easy  
 in age's privilege. But tell me:  
 who are your masters? whose fruit trees are these  
 you tend here? Tell me if it's true this island 270  
 is Ithaka, as that fellow I fell in with  
 told me on the road just now? He had  
 a peg loose, that one: couldn't say a word  
 or listen when I asked about my friend,  
 my Ithakan friend. I asked if he were alive  
 or gone long since into the underworld.  
 I can describe him if you care to hear it:  
 I entertained the man in my own land  
 when he turned up there on a journey; never  
 had I a guest more welcome in my house. 280  
 He claimed his stock was Ithakan: Laërtês  
 Arkeísiadês, he said his father was.  
 I took him home, treated him well, grew fond of him—  
 though we had many guests—and gave him  
 gifts in keeping with his quality: seven  
 bars of measured gold, a silver winebowl  
 filigreed with flowers, twelve light cloaks,  
 twelve rugs, robes and tunics—not to mention  
 his own choice of women trained in service,  
 the four well-favored ones he wished to take.” 290

His father's eyes had filled with tears. He said:  
 “You've come to that man's island, right enough,  
 but dangerous men and fools hold power now.  
 You gave your gifts in vain. If you could find him  
 here in Ithaka alive, he'd make  
 return of gifts and hospitality,  
 as custom is, when someone has been generous.  
 But tell me accurately—how many years  
 have now gone by since that man was your guest?  
 your guest, my son—if he indeed existed— 300  
 born to ill fortune as he was. Ah, far  
 from those who loved him, far from his native land,  
 in some sea-dingle<sup>15</sup> fish have picked his bones,  
 or else he made the vultures and wild beasts  
 a trove<sup>16</sup> ashore! His mother at his bier  
 never bewailed him, nor did I, his father,

<sup>15</sup> Dell; valley.<sup>16</sup> A valuable find.

nor did his admirable wife, Penélopê,  
 who should have closed her husband's eyes in death  
 and cried aloud upon him as he lay.  
 So much is due the dead.

But speak out, tell me further:

who are you, of what city and family?  
 where have you moored the ship that brought you here,  
 where is your admirable crew? Are you a peddler  
 put ashore by the foreign ship you came on?"

310

Again Odysseus had a fable ready.

"Yes," he said, "I can tell you all those things.  
 I come from Rover's Passage where my home is,  
 and I'm King Allwoes' only son. My name  
 is Quarrelman."<sup>17</sup>

Heaven's power in the westwind  
 drove me this way from Sikania,<sup>18</sup>  
 off my course. My ship lies in a barren  
 cove beyond the town there. As for Odysseus,  
 now is the fifth year since he put to sea  
 and left my homeland—bound for death, you say.  
 Yet landbirds flying from starboard crossed his bow—  
 a lucky augury. So we parted joyously,  
 in hope of friendly days and gifts to come."

320

A cloud of pain had fallen on Laërtês.  
 Scooping up handfuls of the sunburnt dust  
 he sifted it over his grey head, and groaned,  
 and the groan went to the son's heart. A twinge  
 prickling up through his nostrils warned Odysseus  
 he could not watch this any longer.  
 He leaped and threw his arms around his father,  
 kissed him, and said:

330

"Oh, Father, I am he!  
 Twenty years gone, and here I've come again  
 to my own land!

Hold back your tears! No grieving!  
 I bring good news—though still we cannot rest.  
 I killed the suitors to the last man!  
 Outrage and injury have been avenged!"

340

Laërtês turned and found his voice to murmur:

"If you are Odysseus, my son, come back,  
 give me some proof, a sign to make me sure."

<sup>17</sup> Rover's Passage, Allwoes, and Quarrelman are imaginary assumed (though appropriate) names.

<sup>18</sup> Sicily, perhaps.

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His son replied:

“The scar then, first of all.  
Look, here the wild boar’s flashing tusk  
wounded me on Parnassos; do you see it?  
You and my mother made me go, that time,  
to visit Lord Autólykos, her father,  
for gifts he promised years before on Ithaka.  
Again—more proof—let’s say the trees you gave me  
on this revetted<sup>19</sup> plot of orchard once. 350  
I was a small boy at your heels, wheedling  
amid the young trees, while you named each one.  
You gave me thirteen pear, ten apple trees,  
and forty fig trees. Fifty rows of vines  
were promised too, each one to bear in turn.  
Bunches of every hue would hang there ripening,  
weighed down by the god of summer days.”

The old man’s knees failed him, his heart grew faint,  
recalling all that Odysseus calmly told. 360  
He clutched his son. Odysseus held him swooning  
until he got his breath back and his spirit  
and spoke again:

“Zeus, Father! Gods above!—  
you still hold pure Olympos, if the suitors  
paid for their crimes indeed, and paid in blood!  
But now the fear is in me that all Ithaka  
will be upon us. They’ll send messengers  
to stir up every city of the islands.”

Odysseus the great tactician answered:

“Courage, and leave the worrying to me. 370  
We’ll turn back to your homestead by the orchard.  
I sent the cowherd, swineherd, and Télémakhos  
ahead to make our noonday meal.”

Conversing  
in this vein they went home, the two together,  
into the stone farmhouse. There Télémakhos  
and the two herdsmen were already carving  
roast young pork, and mixing amber wine.  
During these preparations the Sikel woman  
bathed Laértês and anointed him,  
and dressed him in a new cloak. Then Athena, 380  
standing by, filled out his limbs again,  
gave girth and stature to the old field captain  
fresh from the bathing place. His son looked on

<sup>19</sup> Buttressed by stones.

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in wonder at the godlike bloom upon him,  
and called out happily:

“Oh, Father,  
surely one of the gods who are young forever  
has made you magnificent before my eyes!”

Clearheaded Laërtês faced him, saying:

“By Father Zeus, Athena and Apollo,  
I wish I could be now as once I was,  
commander of Kephallenians,<sup>20</sup> when I took  
the walled town, Nêrikos, on the promontory!  
Would god I had been young again last night  
with armor on me, standing in our hall  
to fight the suitors at your side! How many  
knees I could have crumpled, to your joy!”

390

While son and father spoke, cowherd and swineherd  
attended, waiting, for the meal was ready.  
Soon they were all seated, and their hands  
picked up the meat and bread.

But now old Dólios  
appeared in the bright doorway with his sons,  
work-stained from the field. Laërtês’ housekeeper,  
who reared the boys and tended Dólios  
in his bent age, had gone to fetch them in.  
When it came over them who the stranger was  
they halted in astonishment. Odysseus  
hit an easy tone with them. Said he:

400

“Sit down and help yourselves. Shake off your wonder.  
Here we’ve been waiting for you all this time,  
and our mouths watering for good roast pig!”

410

But Dólios came forward, arms outstretched,  
and kissed Odysseus’ hand at the wrist bone,  
crying out:

“Dear master, you returned!  
You came to us again! How we had missed you!  
We thought you lost. The gods themselves have brought you!  
Welcome, welcome; health and blessings on you!  
And tell me, now, just one thing more: Penélopê,  
does she know yet that you are on the island?  
or should we send a messenger?”

<sup>20</sup>Inhabitants of the large island (modern Cephalonia) near Ithaka. Nêrikos is on a nearby island.

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Odysseus gruffly said,

“Old man, she knows.  
Is it for you to think of her?”

420

So Dólios  
quietly took a smooth bench at the table  
and in their turn his sons welcomed Odysseus,  
kissing his hands; then each went to his chair  
beside his father. Thus our friends  
were occupied in Laërtês' house at noon.

Meanwhile to the four quarters of the town  
the news ran: bloody death had caught the suitors;  
and men and women in a murmuring crowd  
gathered before Odysseus' hall. They gave  
burial to the piteous dead, or bore  
the bodies of young men from other islands  
down to the port, thence to be ferried home.  
Then all the men went grieving to assembly  
and being seated, rank by rank, grew still,  
as old Eupeithês rose to address them. Pain  
lay in him like a brand for Antínôös,  
the first man that Odysseus brought down,  
and tears flowed for his son as he began:

430

“Heroic feats that fellow did for us  
Akhaïans, friends! Good spearmen by the shipload  
he led to war and lost—lost ships and men,  
and once ashore again killed these, who were  
the islands' pride.

440

Up with you! After him!—  
before he can take flight to Pylos town  
or hide at Elis, under Epeian law!  
We'd be disgraced forever! Mocked for generations  
if we cannot avenge our sons' blood, and our brothers!  
Life would turn to ashes—at least for me;  
rather be dead and join the dead!

I say  
we ought to follow now, or they'll gain time  
and make the crossing.”

450

His appeal, his tears,  
moved all the gentry listening there;  
but now they saw the crier and the minstrel  
come from Odysseus' hall, where they had slept.  
The two men stood before the curious crowd,  
and Medôn said:

“Now hear me, men of Ithaka.  
When these hard deeds were done by Lord Odysseus  
the immortal gods were not far off. I saw

with my own eyes someone divine who fought  
beside him, in the shape and dress of Mentor;  
it was a god who shone before Odysseus,  
a god who swept the suitors down the hall  
dying in droves.”

460

At this pale fear assailed them,  
and next they heard again the old forecaster,  
Halithersês Mastóridês. Alone  
he saw the field of time, past and to come.  
In his anxiety for them he said:

“Ithakans, now listen to what I say.  
Friends, by your own fault these deaths came to pass.  
You would not heed me nor the captain, Mentor;  
would not put down the riot of your sons.  
Heroic feats they did!—all wantonly  
raiding a great man’s flocks, dishonoring  
his queen, because they thought he’d come no more.  
Let matters rest; do as I urge; no chase,  
or he who wants a bloody end will find it.”

470

The greater number stood up shouting “Aye!”  
But many held fast, sitting all together  
in no mind to agree with him. Eupeithês  
had won them to his side. They ran for arms,  
clapped on their bronze, and mustered  
under Eupeithês at the town gate  
for his mad foray.

480

Vengeance would be his,  
he thought, for his son’s murder; but that day  
held bloody death for him and no return.

At this point, querying Zeus, Athena said:

“O Father of us all and king of kings,  
enlighten me. What is your secret will?  
War and battle, worse and more of it,  
or can you not impose a pact on both?”

490

The summoner of cloud replied:

“My child,  
why this formality of inquiry?  
Did you not plan that action by yourself—  
see to it that Odysseus, on his homecoming,  
should have their blood?

Conclude it as you will.  
There is one proper way, if I may say so:  
Odysseus’ honor being satisfied,



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593

let him be king by a sworn pact forever,  
and we, for our part, will blot out the memory  
of sons and brothers slain. As in the old time  
let men of Ithaka henceforth be friends;  
prosperity enough, and peace attend them.”

500

Athena needed no command, but down  
in one spring she descended from Olympos  
just as the company of Odysseus finished  
wheat crust and honeyed wine, and heard him say:

“Go out, someone, and see if they are coming.”

One of the boys went to the door as ordered  
and saw the townsmen in the lane. He turned  
swiftly to Odysseus.

510

“Here they come,”  
he said, “best arm ourselves, and quickly.”

All up at once, the men took helm and shield—  
four fighting men, counting Odysseus,  
with Dólios’ half dozen sons. Laërtês  
armed as well, and so did Dólios—  
greybeards, they could be fighters in a pinch.  
Fitting their plated helmets on their heads  
they sallied out, Odysseus in the lead.

Now from the air Athena, Zeus’s daughter,  
appeared in Mentor’s guise, with Mentor’s voice,  
making Odysseus’ heart grow light. He said  
to put cheer in his son:

520

“Telémakhos,  
you are going into battle against pikemen  
where hearts of men are tried. I count on you  
to bring no shame upon your forefathers.  
In fighting power we have excelled this lot  
in every generation.”

Said his son:

“If you are curious, Father, watch and see  
the stuff that’s in me. No more talk of shame.”

530

And old Laërtês cried aloud:

“Ah, what a day for me, dear gods!  
to see my son and grandson vie in courage!”

Athena halted near him, and her eyes  
shone like the sea. She said:

“Arkeísiadês,  
dearest of all my old brothers-in-arms,  
invoke the grey-eyed one and Zeus her father,  
heft your spear and make your throw.”

Power flowed into him from Pallas Athena,  
whom he invoked as Zeus’s virgin child,  
and he let fly his heavy spear.

540

It struck  
Eupeithês on the cheek plate of his helmet,  
and undeflected the bronze head punched through.  
He toppled, and his armor clanged upon him.  
Odysseus and his son now furiously  
closed, laying on with broadswords, hand to hand,  
and pikes: they would have cut the enemy down  
to the last man, leaving not one survivor,  
had not Athena raised a shout  
that stopped all fighters in their tracks.

“Now hold!”

550

she cried, “Break off this bitter skirmish;  
end your bloodshed, Ithakans, and make peace.”

Their faces paled with dread before Athena,  
and swords dropped from their hands unnerved, to lie  
strewn the ground, at the great voice of the goddess.  
Those from the town turned fleeing for their lives.  
But with a cry to freeze their hearts  
and ruffling like an eagle on the pounce,  
the lord Odysseus reared himself to follow—  
at which the son of Kronos dropped a thunderbolt  
smoking at his daughter’s feet.

560

Athena  
cast a grey glance at her friend and said:

“Son of Laërtês and the gods of old,  
Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways,  
command yourself. Call off this battle now,  
or Zeus who views the wide world may be angry.”

He yielded to her, and his heart was glad.  
Both parties later swore to terms of peace  
set by their arbiter, Athena, daughter  
of Zeus who bears the stormcloud as a shield—  
though still she kept the form and voice of Mentor.

570

## Aesop

(*Sixth Century B.C.*)

Nowadays, fables are generally thought of as children's literature: little animal stories that culminate in simplistic "morals" ("Haste makes waste," or "Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today"). Marcel Gutwirth, one of the shrewdest students of the fable, points out that it is commonly thought of as "the place where the archaic and the puerile meet." There are reasons for this modern link between fables and children. Renaissance educators used Aesop's fables to teach Greek and Latin, thus creating an association between childhood and fables. The link was further strengthened in the nineteenth century by teachers of the young who used translations of the fables to teach moral lessons (not noticing, perhaps, how flimsily the morals are sometimes linked to the stories or how the morals sometimes seem contradictory). The connection persists; "Aesop" is to be found in the children's sections of bookstores.

The infantilizing of Aesop is unfortunate insofar as it leads us to ignore a voice from classical Greece that is very different from the heroic, aristocratic ones of epic and tragedy: the voice of ordinary people. It is true that the voice is muffled in Aesop—the texts have gone through too many transmogrifications to be perfectly clear—but they express, however indistinctly, a view of Greece from the bottom up rather than from the top down. In Aesop, as in many later fabulists, the fable is, in the words of another fine critic, Annabel Patterson, "a medium of political analysis and communication, especially in the form of a communication from or on behalf of the politically powerless."

The serious student of Aesop is immediately confronted with two difficulties: We do not know who Aesop was (if, indeed, he really existed), and we do not know what he wrote. By the second half of the fifth century, his name was well-known in Greece as a writer of fables who had lived in the previous century. A book of his fables was in circulation at least by the time of Plato, and the Greek historian Herodotus, in his *Histories*, identified him as a sixth-century slave who lived on the island of Samos. References to him in a number of other writers—Aristophanes, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, and others—suggest that his name was generally recognizable as a writer of witty fables. There would be no reason to doubt Herodotus's facts (if they are facts) if it were not that over the years the figure of Aesop became the subject of fantastic legends. A fanciful "biography" of him was in circulation very early and for centuries was attached to collections of the fables. This biography asserted that he was hideously ugly and had a speech impediment, that he recurrently clashed with the philosopher Xanthus (always coming out on top, of course), and that his death came when the people of Delphi flung him from a rock into the sea while he recited his fable of "The Eagle and the Scarab Beetle." One version even asserted that after his death he revived in order to fight at the battle of Thermopylae. Perhaps it is appropriate that a fable-writer be given a life so fabulous, but the effect of the legend was to cast into doubt everything about Aesop, even his existence.

It is similarly impossible to determine what in "Aesop's fables" is genuinely Aesopian and what is not. There is no reason to believe that, if he existed,

he ever wrote anything down; the legends present him as a teller rather than a writer. The collections that were in circulation in the fifth century, insofar as we know anything about them, seem to have been miscellaneous collections of tales from various sources, some of them demonstrably predating Aesop. Within a century after he was said to have lived, Aesop had become "Aesop," a generalized name that could be cited as the author of a large body of folk narrative gathered from oral as well as written tradition.

Several collections of Aesop's fables were apparently made in classical times; one we know of indirectly was made by someone named Demetrius in about 300 B.C. But modern versions of Aesop derive mainly from the two earliest collections to survive: a collection in Latin made by Phaedrus, a freed slave who lived in Rome during the first century A.D., and a collection in Greek verse by Babrius in the second century A.D. These early versions apparently lacked the "morals" now generally assumed to be a defining characteristic of fables; these were tacked onto the fables in medieval versions, probably less to inculcate morality than to serve as a quick guide for using the fables to make points in public speaking. The present translators, Olivia and Robert Temple, comment that the morals are "often silly and inferior in wit and interest to the fables themselves" and that "some of them are truly appalling, even idiotic." At least one modern translator, Lloyd W. Daly, has refused to print the morals and calls his version *Aesop Without Morals*. In some ironic modern versions—those of La Fontaine, for example—the disjuncture between fable and moral becomes significant in itself; a bland, innocuous moral sometimes becoming a device of concealment for the genuinely subversive content of the fable.

When we strip away the accretions of sentimentality and childishness that have gathered around Aesop's *Fables*, we glimpse a grim world indeed. The Temples describe it well when they write that "the fables are not the pretty purveyors of Victorian morals that we have been led to believe. They are instead savage, coarse, brutal, lacking in all mercy or compassion, and lacking also in any political system other than absolute monarchy. . . . This is largely a world of brutal, heartless men—and of cunning, of wickedness, of murder, of treachery and deceit, of laughter at the misfortune of others, of mockery and contempt. It is also a world of savage humor, of deft wit, of clever wordplay, of one-upmanship, of 'I told you so!'"

This bleak assessment of the Aesopian world is accurate, but it perhaps understates the variety of that world. The *Fables* are, among other things, a joke book, and many of them seem intended as harmless entertainment. Many of them, too, satirize common human foibles: conceit, laziness, drunkenness, gluttony, and avarice. A number of others, underrepresented here, are bawdy tales of sexual infidelity, often turning around an unfaithful wife and her gullible husband. The gallery of animals, too, that inhabit the fables are not undifferentiated predators. The lion and the wolf are always ferocious, but the smaller animals, the nightingales, lambs, and chickens, are always victims.

The pervasive theme of the *Fables*—insofar as so heterogeneous a collection can be said to have a theme—is power, the war of those who have it upon those who do not, the strategies that the powerful employ to dominate the powerless, and those that the powerless employ to resist that dominance. This theme is stated most nakedly in such fables as 12: "The Cat and the Cock," and 221: "The Wolf and the Lamb." In both, a powerful predator proposes

to eat a powerless victim, and despite rational arguments against such an action, the predator eats the victim anyway. As the wolf says in “The Wolf and the Lamb,” “Whatever you say to justify yourself, I will eat you all the same,” and he does.

Plato, in his dialogue *Phaedo*, reports that Socrates had Aesop’s fables very much on his mind during his last days in prison, awaiting execution by poisoning for religious heresy and “corrupting the youth.” When Socrates’ fetters were removed on the day of his death, he commented on how closely pleasure is linked with pain and wondered how Aesop would have composed a fable on the subject. Then he told his friend that he had spent much of his time in prison turning Aesop’s fables into verse. A recurring dream had told him to turn from philosophy to music, and Socrates tells his auditors,

I thought that it would be safer to acquit my conscience by creating poetry in obedience to the dream before I departed. So . . . I turned such fables of Aesop as I knew, and had ready to my hand, into verse . . . for I reflected that a man who means to be a poet has to use fiction and not facts for his poems; and I could not invent fiction myself.

Socrates may have been drawn to Aesop by something more than his ability to make up stories. A person sentenced by an authoritarian state to die for having told the truth may well have found a special wisdom and relevance in Aesop’s fierce fables of power.

FURTHER READING: There is no such thing as an authoritative complete works of Aesop. As Olivia and Robert Temple, the present translators, comment, “The ‘complete fables of Aesop’ is whatever the editor of its Greek text chooses to say it is.” There have three main twentieth-century attempts to establish the most reliable texts, by Emile Chambry (1925–1926), Ben Edwin Perry (1952), and A. Hausrath (1956–1959). The Temples’ translation, 1998, of the 358 fables in Chambry’s edition is the closest thing we have in English to a complete Aesop. Serious analyses of the fables are scarce. Marcel Gutwirth’s *Fable*, 1980, is about the form in general, but he has some useful things to say about Aesop in particular. Perry’s *Aesopica*, 1952, largely consists of Greek texts, but the introductory material contains some interesting commentary. Annabel Patterson’s *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History*, 1991, concentrates on political fables in England between 1575 and 1725, but her analysis of the fable form and its connection with censorship has wide applicability to the fable tradition in general.

## FABLES

Translated by Olivia and Robert Temple

### 3

## THE EAGLE AND THE FOX

An eagle and a fox, having become friends, decided to live near one another and be neighbors. They believed that this proximity would strengthen their friendship. So the eagle flew up and established herself on a very high branch

of a tree, where she made her nest. And the fox, creeping about among the bushes which were at the foot of the same tree, made her den there, depositing her babies right beneath the eagle.

But, one day when the fox was out looking for food, the eagle, who was very short of food too, swooped down to the bushes and took the fox cubs up to her nest and feasted on them with her own young.

When the fox returned, she was less distressed at the death of her little ones than she was driven mad by frustration at the impossibility of ever effectively avenging herself. For she, a land animal [*chersaia*], could never hope to pursue a winged bird. She had no option but to content herself, in her powerlessness and feebleness, with cursing her enemy from afar.

Now it was not long afterwards that the eagle did actually receive her punishment for her crime against her friend.

Some men were sacrificing a goat in the countryside and the eagle swooped down on the altar, carrying off some burning entrails, which she took up to her nest. A strong wind arose which blew the fire from the burning entrails into some old straw that was in the nest. The eaglets were singed and, as they were not yet able to fly, when they leaped from the nest they fell to the ground. The fox rushed up and devoured them all in front of the eagle's eyes.

*This story shows that if you betray friendship, you may evade the vengeance of those whom you wrong if they are weak, but ultimately you cannot escape the vengeance of heaven.*<sup>1</sup>

## 8

## THE NIGHTINGALE AND THE HAWK

A nightingale, perched on a tall oak, was singing as usual when a hawk saw her. He was very hungry, so he swooped down upon her and seized her. Seeing herself about to die, the nightingale pleaded to the hawk to let her go, saying she was not a sizeable enough meal and would never fill the stomach of a hawk, and that if he were hungry he ought to find some bigger birds. But the hawk replied:

"I would certainly be foolish if I let a meal go which I already have in my talons to run after something else which I haven't yet seen."

*Men are foolish who, in hope of greater things, let those which they have in their grasp escape.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This fable is told in verse by the poet Archilochus (eighth or seventh century B.C.) and also referred to by Aristophanes in 414 B.C. in *The Birds* (651), where it is attributed to Aesop. (Notes to Aesop are by the translators.)

<sup>1</sup>A different fable of "The Hawk and the Nightingale" is related by the poet Hesiod (circa 700 B.C.) in his *Works and Days* (201–210). In that fable the hawk has seized the nightingale, and, as he carries her high up among the clouds, he tells the nightingale she should not cry out or resist his superior might, for: "He is a fool who tries to withstand the stronger, for he does not get the mastery and suffers pain besides his shame." The old fable clearly antedates the time of Aesop, and perhaps he or another wrote a fable with the same characters because they were familiar. Two points particularly noteworthy about the fable recounted by Hesiod are that it clearly preceded him and that it had a clear moral appended to it, showing that this practice of appending morals to animal fables was very ancient.

## 12

## THE CAT AND THE COCK

A cat who had caught a cock wanted to give a plausible reason for devouring it. So she accused it of annoying people by crowing at night and disturbing their sleep.

The cock defended himself by saying that he did it to be helpful. For, if he woke people up, it was to summon them to their accustomed work.

Then the cat produced another grievance and accused the cock of insulting Nature by his relationship with his mother and sisters.

The cock replied that in this also he was serving his master's interests, since it was thanks to this that the chickens laid lots of eggs.

"Ah well!" cried the cat, "I'm not going to go without food just because you can produce a lot of justifications!" And she ate the cock.

*This fable shows that someone with a wicked nature who is determined to do wrong, when he cannot do so in the guise of a good man, does his evil deeds openly.*

## 20

## THE TWO COCKS AND THE EAGLE

Two cockerels were fighting over some hens. One triumphed and saw the other off. The defeated one then withdrew into a thicket where he hid himself. The victor fluttered up into the air and sat atop a high wall, where he began to crow with a loud voice.

Straight away an eagle fell upon him and carried him off. And, from then on, the cockerel hidden in the shadows possessed all the hens at his leisure.

*This fable shows that the Lord resisteth the proud but giveth grace unto the humble.<sup>1</sup>*

## 21

## THE COCKS AND THE PARTRIDGE

A man who kept some cocks at his house, having found a partridge for sale privately, bought it and took it back home with him to feed it along with the cocks. But, as the cocks pecked it and pursued it, the partridge, with heavy heart, imagined that this rejection was because she was of a foreign race.

<sup>1</sup>This moral, which calls the fable by the late term *mythos*, uses the term *Kyrios* (Lord) which, though it was used in inscriptions to Zeus and other Greek deities, is used as an epithet for both God and Jesus in the Christian gospels. S. A. Handford pointed out that the moral was the same as a passage in the New Testament Epistle to James (iv.6). We have accordingly quoted the relevant words from the King James Bible. Handford believed that this moral was appended by a Christian, which is probably more likely than that the Epistle to James was quoting a popular maxim derived from an edition of Aesop.

However, a little while later, having seen that the cocks fought among themselves as well and never stopped until they drew blood, she said to herself:

"I'm not going to complain at being attacked by these cocks any longer, because I see that they do not have any mercy on each other either."

*This fable shows that sensible men easily tolerate the outrages of their neighbors when they see that the latter do not even spare their parents.*

## 32

## THE FOX AND THE BUNCH OF GRAPES

A famished fox, seeing some bunches of grapes hanging [from a vine which had grown] in a tree, wanted to take some, but could not reach them. So he went away saying to himself:

"Those are unripe."

*Similarly, certain people, not being able to run their affairs well because of their inefficiency, blame the circumstances.<sup>1</sup>*

## 40

## THE FOX AND THE BILLY-GOAT

A fox, having fallen into a well, was faced with the prospect of being stuck there. But then a billy-goat came along to that same well because he was thirsty and saw the fox. He asked him if the water was good.

The fox decided to put a brave face on it and gave a tremendous speech about how wonderful the water was down there, so very excellent. So the billy-goat climbed down the well, thinking only of his thirst. When he had had a good drink, he asked the fox what he thought was the best way to get back up again.

The fox said:

"Well, I have a very good way to do that. Of course, it will mean our working together. If you just push your front feet up against the wall and hold your horns up in the air as high as you can, I will climb up on to them, get out, and then I can pull you up behind me."

The billy-goat willingly consented to this idea, and the fox briskly clambered up the legs, the shoulders, and finally the horns of his companion. He found himself at the mouth of the well, pulled himself out, and immediately scampered off. The billy-goat shouted after him, reproaching him for breaking their agreement of mutual assistance. The fox came back to the top of the well and shouted down to the billy-goat:

<sup>1</sup>This famous fable gave rise to the common English expression "sour grapes." *Omphakes* can mean "sour," but it is more accurate to translate it as "unripe," since the sourness was a result of the unripeness, and when Greeks used the word to describe grapes they were usually referring to their unripe state rather than to their taste. The same word was used to describe girls who had not yet reached sexual maturity.



“Ha! If you had as many brains as you have hairs on your chin, you wouldn’t have got down there in the first place without thinking of how you were going to get out again.”

*It is thus that sensible men should not undertake any action without having first examined the end result.*

## 52

## THE MIDDLE-AGED MAN AND HIS MISTRESSES

A middle-aged man who was going gray had two mistresses, one young and the other old. Now she who was advanced in years had a sense of shame at having sexual intercourse with a lover younger than herself. And so she did not fail, each time that he came to her house, to pull out all of his black hairs.

The young mistress, on her part, recoiled from the idea of having an old lover, and so she pulled out his white hairs.

Thus it happened that, plucked in turn by the one and then the other, he became bald.

*That which is ill-matched always gets into difficulties.*<sup>1</sup>

## 53

## THE SHIPWRECKED MAN

A rich Athenian was sailing with some other travellers. A violent tempest suddenly arose, and the boat capsized. Then, while the other passengers were trying to save themselves by swimming, the Athenian continually invoked the aid of the goddess Athena [patroness of his city], and promised offering after offering if only she would save him.

One of his shipwrecked companions, who swam beside him, said to him: “Appeal to Athena by all means, but also move your arms!”

*We also invoke the gods, but we mustn’t forget to put in our own efforts to save ourselves. We count ourselves lucky if, in making our own efforts, we obtain the protection of the gods. But if we abandon ourselves to our fate, the daimons alone can save us.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A *hetaira* was a “female companion,” a courtesan or concubine, as opposed to a legal wife. The English word “mistress” does not adequately convey the full social meaning if we wish to be precise about ancient Greek society. Similarly, the man is described as a *mesopolios*, a form of *mesaipolios*, which means “half-gray” but is also the word used by association to mean “middle-aged” in Greek.

<sup>1</sup>The *daimons* were semidivine beings intermediate between men and the gods, who might come to the aid of men from time to time if whimsy took them, or they might even be persuaded by promises of offerings.

## 59

## THE MAN AND THE LION TRAVELLING TOGETHER

A man and a lion were travelling along together one day when they began to argue about which of them was the stronger. Just then they passed a stone statue representing a man strangling a lion.

"There, you see, we are stronger than you," said the man, pointing it out to the lion.

But the lion smiled and replied:

"If lions could make statues, you would see plenty of men under the paws of lions."

*Many people boast of how brave and fearless they are, but when put to the test are exposed as frauds.*

## 65

## THE ASTRONOMER

The astronomer was in the habit of going out every evening to look at the stars. Then, one night when he was in the suburbs absorbed in contemplating the sky, he accidentally fell into a well. A passer-by heard him moaning and calling out. When the man realized what had happened, he called down to him:

"Hey, you there! You are so keen to see what is up in the sky that you don't see what is down here on the ground!"

*One could apply this fable to men who boast of doing wonders and who are incapable of carrying out the everyday things of life.*

## 73

## THE NORTH WIND AND THE SUN

The North Wind [*Boreas*] and the Sun had a contest of strength. They decided to allot the palm of victory to whichever of them could strip the clothes off a traveller.

The North Wind tried first. He blew violently. As the man clung on to his clothes, the North Wind attacked him with greater force. But the man, uncomfortable from the cold, put on more clothes. So, disheartened, the North Wind left him to the Sun.

The Sun now shone moderately, and the man removed his extra cloak [*himation*]. Then the Sun darted beams which were more scorching until

the man, not being able to withstand the heat, took off his clothes and went to take a dip in a nearby river.

*This fable shows that persuasion is often more effective than violence.*<sup>1</sup>

## 76

## THE HOUSE-FERRET AND APHRODITE

A house-ferret, having fallen in love with a handsome young man, begged Aphrodite, goddess of love, to change her into a human girl. The goddess took pity on this passion and changed her into a gracious young girl. The young man, when he saw her, fell in love with her and led her to his home. As they rested in the nuptial chamber [*thalamos*], Aphrodite, wanting to see if in changing body the house-ferret had also changed in character, released a mouse in the middle of the room. The house-ferret, forgetting her present condition, leapt up from the bed and chased the mouse in order to eat it. Then the indignant goddess changed her back to her former state.

*Bad people who change their appearance do not change their character.*<sup>1</sup>

## 96

## THE ORATOR DEMADES

The orator Demades spoke one day to the people of Athens. As no one was taking much notice of what he was saying, someone asked if he could tell one of Aesop's fables. Agreeing to the request, he commenced thus:

"The goddess Demeter, the swallow, and the eel all took the same route. They arrived at the edge of a river. Then the swallow flew up into the air and the eel dived into the water."

At that point he stopped speaking.

"And Demeter?" someone asked. "What did she do?"

<sup>1</sup>This fable was cleverly utilized by the playwright Sophocles, according to Hieronymus of Rhodes in his lost work, *Historical Notes*, where he related a picaresque story of Sophocles seducing a young boy outside the city wall of Athens. They wrapped themselves in Sophocles's cape while they pursued their physical delights, and when he had consummated their act, the boy ran off with the playwright's cape, leaving him with his own boyish cloak. This story led to the ridicule of Sophocles by the townsmen, and his rival Euripides boasted that he had consorted with the same boy without having to pay any such price. Sophocles then used the fable to form an epigram, claiming that it was the Sun God, and not the boy, who had stripped him of his cape, whereas the North Wind blew when Euripides seduced another man's wife. See Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* (xiii, 604).

<sup>1</sup>Before cats came to Greece, or when they were still rare, the house-ferret, otherwise known as the domesticated polecat, was the chief household pet. The cat eventually usurped the polecat's position, so that people today no longer remember that polecats were once their intimate companions.

“She got angry with you,” he replied, “who are neglecting the affairs of the state to listen to the fables of Aesop.”

*Thus men are unreasonable who neglect important things in preference to things which give them pleasure.<sup>1</sup>*

## 135

## THE KITE AND THE SNAKE

A kite swooped down and carried off a snake but the snake twisted round and bit the bird. So the two of them then hurtled down from a great height and the kite was killed by the fall.

The snake declaimed:

“Why were you so stupid as to harm me, who had done nothing against you? It serves you right to be punished for having carried me off.”

*People who give in to jealousy and hurt those who are weaker than themselves could fall into the same trap: they pay the price when all the harm they have done is unexpectedly revealed.*

## 150

## THE CRAB AND THE FOX

A crab, having climbed up out of the sea on to the shore, was pursuing his solitary life. A starving fox spotted him and, as he had not a scrap of food to put between his teeth, he ran up and pounced on the crab to devour him. As he was about to be eaten, the crab cried out:

“I deserve this fate! I, who lived in the sea, had the folly to imagine I could live on the land!”

*It is thus with men also: those who abandon their own occupations to mix themselves up in affairs which don't concern them meet with misfortune as a natural consequence.*

## 151

## THE CRAB AND HER MOTHER

“Don't walk sideways,” said a mother crab to her child, “and don't drag your sides against the wet rock.”

<sup>1</sup>Demades was an Athenian of the fourth century B.C. who commenced life as a sailor but became one of the leading orators of the Athenian Assembly and a great favorite of King Philip of Macedon. Later in his career he became corrupt and was convicted of taking political bribes. Cicero says the wittiest orators were the Athenians, but the wittiest of them was Demades. He was renowned for devastatingly quick-witted sarcasm, and would demolish a long and carefully crafted speech by Demosthenes with an impromptu aside, which made him a favorite of the populace. It is even probable that this little tale, which has been preserved among the Aesop fables—since it contains a part of a fable otherwise unknown—is an excerpt from a lost historical work, and represents a true incident from the life of Demades.

“Mother,” the young crab replied, “if you want to teach me, walk straight yourself. I will watch you and then I will copy you.”

*When one reproves others, it is just as well to live straight and walk straight oneself before starting to preach a lesson.*

## 162

## THE JACKDAW AND THE BIRDS

Wishing to establish a King of the Birds, Zeus set a date for summoning them all before him for comparison: he would choose the most beautiful one to reign over them. The birds went off then to the shallow water near the shore of a river to wash. Now the jackdaw, realizing his ugliness, went around gathering up the feathers which fell from the other birds, which he then arranged and attached to his own body. Thus he became the most handsome of all.

Then the big day arrived and all the birds presented themselves before Zeus. The jackdaw, with his motley adornment, was among them. And Zeus voted for him to be the royal bird on account of his beauty. But the other birds, outraged at this decision, each pulled out the feather that had come from him. The result was that the jackdaw was stripped and once again became just a jackdaw.

*Likewise with men who have debts: as long as they possess the wealth of other people, they seem to be somebody. But when they have paid their debts they find that they are once again their old selves.*<sup>1</sup>

## 165

## THE RAVEN AND THE FOX

A raven stole a piece of meat and flew up and perched on a branch with it. A fox saw him there and determined to get the meat for himself. So he sat at the base of the tree and said to the raven:

“Of all the birds you are by far the most beautiful. You have such elegant proportions, are so stately and sleek. You were ideally made to be the king of all the birds. And if you only had a voice you would surely be the king.”

The raven, wanting to demonstrate to him that there was nothing wrong with his voice, dropped the meat and uttered a great cry. The fox rushed forward, pounced on the meat, and said:

<sup>1</sup>This fable was doubtless suggested by the jackdaw's actual habit of collecting colorful bits, including other birds' feathers, for its nest.

“Oh, raven, if only you also had judgment, you would want for nothing to be the king of the birds.”

*This fable is a lesson to all fools.*<sup>1</sup>

## 180

## THE DOG, THE COCK, AND THE FOX

A dog and a cockerel, having made friends, were strolling along a road together. As evening fell, the cockerel flew up into a tree to sleep there, and the dog went to sleep at the foot of the tree, which was hollow.

According to his habit, the cockerel crowed just before daybreak. This alerted a fox nearby, who ran up to the tree and called up to the cockerel:

“Do come down, sir, for I dearly wish to embrace a creature who could have such a beautiful voice as you!”

The cockerel said:

“I shall come down as soon as you awaken the doorkeeper who is asleep at the foot of the tree.”

Then, as the fox went to look for the “doorkeeper,” the dog pounced briskly on him and tore him to pieces.

*This fable teaches us that sensible men, when their enemies attack them, divert them to someone better able to defend them than they are themselves.*

## 185

## THE DOG WHO CARRIED THE MEAT

A dog was crossing a river holding a piece of meat in his mouth. Catching sight of his reflection in the water, he believed that it was another dog who was holding a bigger piece of meat. So, dropping his own piece, he leaped into the water to take the piece from the other dog. But the result was that he ended up with neither piece—one didn’t even exist and the other was swept away by the current.

*This fable applies to the covetous.*

<sup>1</sup>Two versions of this fable occur in India. Both are preserved in the Buddhist collection of *Jataka* tales, many of which are pre-Buddhist. One version is number 294. In this version, a jackal persuades a crow to shake the branch of a fruit tree so that he can get some fruit. In the other version, number 295, the crow sees a jackal eating a carcass and devises flattery to try and get some meat from the jackal. Another *Jataka* tale, number 215, describes a tortoise being carried through the air while he bites on a stick and, by opening his mouth to speak, he falls and is killed; this motif is somewhat similar to the Aesop fable of being undone by opening one’s mouth and letting go of something.

## 192

## THE HARE AND THE FOX

The hare, wishing to ingratiate himself with the fox to avoid trouble, said:

"I know you are called wily. But I have heard it is really because you know how to while away the hours better than anybody else. Is that so?"

"If you have any doubts," replied the fox, "come to my place and I will entertain you to dinner and show you how I pass an evening."

The hare followed him home. Once inside, the fox had nothing for dinner but the hare. As it realized its fate, the hare bewailed:

"Oh, to learn by such misfortune! For I see that your name truly comes from your wiles."

*Great misfortunes often happen to the curious who abandon themselves to a clumsy indiscretion.*<sup>1</sup>

## 194

## THE LIONESS AND THE VIXEN

A vixen criticized a lioness for only ever bearing one child.

"Only one," she said, "but a lion."

*Do not judge merit by quantity, but by worth.*

## 205

## THE LION, THE WOLF, AND THE FOX

A very old lion lay ill in his cave. All of the animals came to pay their respects to their king except for the fox. The wolf, sensing an opportunity, accused the fox in front of the lion:

"The fox has no respect for you or your rule. That's why he hasn't even come to visit you."

Just as the wolf was saying this, the fox arrived, and he overheard these words. Then the lion roared in rage at him, but the fox managed to say in his own defense:

"And who, of all those who have gathered here, has rendered Your Majesty as much service as I have done? For I have travelled far and wide asking physicians for a remedy for your illness, and I have found one."

<sup>1</sup>The Greek original is based upon a nontranslatable pun using the word *kerdos*, which means both "profit" and "wily." We have substituted an English pun which, though the meaning is not exact, gives some impression of the fable. In the original the hare ingratiatingly says he thinks the fox is really called *wily* only because he knows how to make a *profit*, but discovers how wrong he is!

The lion demanded to know at once what cure he had found, and the fox said:

"It is necessary for you to flay a wolf alive, and then take his skin and wrap it around you while it is still warm."

The wolf was ordered to be taken away immediately and flayed alive. As he was carried off, the fox turned to him with a smile and said:

"You should have spoken well of me to His Majesty rather than ill."

*This fable shows that if you speak ill of someone, you yourself will fall into a trap.*

## 206

### THE LION AND THE MOUSE WHO RETURNED A KINDNESS

Once, a lion was asleep and a mouse ran all along his body. The lion woke up with a start, seized the mouse and was about to eat him, when the mouse begged him to spare his life, promising that he would repay the favor.

The lion was so amused at this that he let the little fellow go.

Not very long afterwards, the mouse was able to return the favor. For, as a matter of fact, some hunters caught the lion and tied him to a tree with a rope. The mouse heard him groaning, ran up and gnawed through the rope until the lion was free.

"You see?" squeaked the mouse. "Not long ago you mocked me when I said I would return your favor. But now you can see that even mice are grateful!"

*This fable shows how, through the changes of fortune, the strong can come to depend on the weak.<sup>1</sup>*

## 209

### THE LION, THE ASS, AND THE FOX

The lion, the ass, and the fox, having made an agreement together, went off hunting for game. When they had taken plenty of game, the lion asked the ass to divide the spoils between them. The ass divided the food into three equal parts and invited the lion to choose his portion. The lion became enraged, pounced on the ass, and devoured him.

Then the lion asked the fox to divide the spoils. The fox took all that they had accumulated and gathered it into one large heap, retaining only the tiniest possible morsel for himself. He then invited the lion to choose.

The lion then said:

<sup>1</sup>A version of this fable occurs in the Indian fable collection, the *Panchatantra*, in the "Winning of Friends" section (169), only there it is a large number of mice who gnawed the ropes tying the king-elephant in a trap and set him free. The probability is that the Indian version is an adaptation of the Greek fable done after the time of Alexander the Great.



“Well, my good fellow, who taught you to divide so well? You are excellent at it.”

The fox replied:

“I learned this technique from the ass’s misfortune.”

*This fable shows that we learn from the misfortunes of others.*

## 221

### THE WOLF AND THE LAMB

A wolf saw a lamb drinking at a stream and wanted to devise a suitable pretext for devouring it. So, although he was himself upstream, he accused the lamb of muddying the water and preventing him from drinking. The lamb replied that he only drank with the tip of his tongue and that, besides, being downstream he couldn’t muddy the water upstream. The wolf’s stratagem having collapsed, he replied:

“But last year you insulted my father.”

“I wasn’t even born then,” replied the lamb.

So the wolf resumed:

“Whatever you say to justify yourself, I will eat you all the same.”

*This fable shows that when some people decide upon doing harm, the fairest defense has no effect whatever.*

## 224

### THE WOLF AND THE HERON

A wolf swallowed a bone and looked everywhere for relief from his predicament. He met a heron who, for a certain fee, agreed to retrieve the bone. So the heron lowered his head into the wolf’s throat, pulled out the bone, and then claimed his promised fee.

“Listen, pal!” replied the wolf. “Isn’t it enough to have pulled your head safe and sound from a wolf’s throat? What more do you want?”

*This fable shows that the most we can expect from bad people is that they won’t commit an injury against us in addition to their lack of gratitude.*

## 241

### THE ANT AND THE SCARAB BEETLE

All summer an ant roamed the countryside gathering up grains of wheat and barley and storing them up for winter. Seeing this, a scarab beetle expressed surprise that she was working so hard at the time of year when most other animals rested from their labors and had a holiday. At the time

the ant didn't reply. But when winter had come and rain soaked the dung, the scarab beetle was hungry. She asked the ant to lend her a bit of food. Then the ant replied:

"Oh, beetle! If you had worked when I took the trouble to, instead of mocking me, you would have plenty of food now too."

*Similarly, in times of abundance we should plan ahead lest we suffer distress when times change.*<sup>1</sup>

## 243

## THE FIELD MOUSE AND THE TOWN MOUSE

A field mouse had a town mouse for a friend. The field mouse invited the town mouse to dinner in the country. When he saw that there was only barley and corn to eat, the town mouse said:

"Do you know, my friend, that you live like an ant? I, on the other hand, have an abundance of good things. Come home with me and I will share it all with you."

So they set off together. The house mouse showed his friend some beans and bread-flour, together with some dates, a cheese, honey, and fruit. And the field mouse was filled with wonder and blessed him with all his heart, cursing his own lot. Just as they were preparing to start their meal, a man suddenly opened the door. Alarmed by the noise, the mice rushed fearfully into the crevices. Then, as they crept out again to taste some dried figs, someone else came into the room and started looking for something. So they again rushed down the holes to hide. Then the field mouse, forgetting his hunger, sighed, and said to his friend:

"Farewell, my friend. You can eat your fill and be glad of heart, but at the price of a thousand fears and dangers. I, poor little thing, will go on living by nibbling barley and corn without fear or suspicion of anyone."

*This fable shows that one should:*

*Live simply and free from passion  
Instead of luxuriously in fear and dread.*<sup>1</sup>

## 267

THE ASS CLOTHED IN THE SKIN  
OF A LION, AND THE FOX

As ass who had clothed himself in the skin of a lion went about the countryside frightening all the animals. He encountered a fox and tried to frighten him also. But the fox, who had heard his voice before, said to him:

<sup>1</sup>In later versions, the scarab beetle (which was sacred in Egypt) becomes a grasshopper. (Editor's note.)

<sup>1</sup>This fable, like several others, is in verse, but we have only rendered the moral in verse. Horace also did a version of this fable in *Satires* (II, 6, 79–117); it is a witty verse tale told to conclude Satire 6 of Book II, which hints that the story was a popular one in Rome at that time. Fontaine's fable of "The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse" derives only its title from Aesop and differs otherwise.

“You would have scared me too, there’s no doubt about it, if I hadn’t heard you bray.”

*Thus, uneducated people who put on airs betray themselves by their longing to speak.<sup>1</sup>*

## 287

## THE HEN THAT LAID THE GOLDEN EGGS

A man had a beautiful hen who laid golden eggs. Believing that she might have a lump of gold in her belly, the man killed her and found that she was just the same inside as other hens. He had hoped to find riches in one go, and was thus deprived of even the little profit that he had.

*This fable shows that we should be content with our lot, and shun insatiable greed.*

## 318

## THE JOKING SHEPHERD

A shepherd who led his flock rather far from the village frequently indulged in the following practical joke. He called to the people of the village to help him, crying that wolves were attacking his sheep. Two or three times the villagers were alarmed and rushed forth, then returned home having been fooled. But, in the end, it happened that some wolves really did appear. While they ravaged the flock, the shepherd called out for help to the villagers. But they, imagining that he was hoaxing them as usual, didn’t bother with him. So it was that he lost his sheep.

*This fable shows that liars gain only one thing, which is not to be believed even when they tell the truth.*

## 352

## THE TORTOISE AND THE HARE

The tortoise and the hare argued over which was the swifter. So, as a result, they agreed on a fixed period of time and a place and parted company. Now the hare, trusting in his natural speed, didn’t hurry to set out. He lay down at the side of the road and fell asleep. But the tortoise, well aware of his slowness, didn’t stop running and, overtaking the sleeping hare, he arrived first and won the contest.

*This fable shows that hard work often prevails over natural talents if they are neglected.*

<sup>1</sup>A version of this fable is found in the “Loss or Gain” section of the Indian *Panchatantra* (44), but there a donkey is clothed in a tiger’s skin by his owner so that he can browse in other people’s barley fields safely and the farmers would be too frightened to drive him off. However, the donkey brays and the enraged farmers then kill him with stones, arrows, and blows with wooden staves. This is probably an adaptation of the Greek fable done after the time of Alexander the Great.