

The Sirens; Scylla and Charybdis

Odysseus and his men return to Circe's island. While the men sleep, Circe takes Odysseus aside to hear about the underworld and to offer advice.

Then said the Lady Circe:
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 Sirens, 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 Sirens 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.

Steer wide;
keep well to seaward; plug your oarsman's
ears with beeswax kneaded soft; none of the
rest should hear that song.

But if you wish to listen, let the men tie you in
the lugger, hand and foot, back to the mast,
lashed to the mast, so you may hear those
harpies thrilling voices;
shout as you will, begging to be untied,
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.



A second course

lies between headlands. One is a sharp
mountain piercing the sky... No mortal man
could scale it, nor so much as land there, not
with twenty hands and feet, so sheer the cliffs
are like polished stone. There in the mouth of
the cave lives a dreadful creature Scylla, she
is huge and monstrous. 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 the air, outside her horrid cleft,
hunting the sea around that promontory for
dolphins, dogfish, or what bigger game. 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.



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 Charybdis 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 whirlpool.
if you come upon her then the god who
makes earth tremble could not save you.
No, hug the cliff of Scylla, take your ship
through on a racing stroke. Better to mourn
six men than lose them all, and the ship, too.



So her advice ran; but I faced her saying:
Only instruct me, goddess, if you will,
how, if possible, can I pass Charybdis,
or fight off Scylla when she raids my crew?
Swiftly that loveliest goddess answered me:
Must you have a battle in your heart forever?
there is no fighting her, no power can fight
her, all that avails is flight.

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 Thrinacia, the island
where Helios' cattle graze, fine herds, and
flocks of goodly sheep. The herds and flocks
are seven, with fifty beasts in each.



No Lambs are dropped
or calves, and these fat cattle never die.
Immortal, too, their cowherds are their
shepherds Phaethusa and Lampetia, sweetly
braided nymphs that divine Neaera bore
to the overlord of high noon, Helios.
These nymphs their gentle mother bred and
placed upon Thrinacia, 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 Ithaca.
But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction
for ship and crew.
Rough years then lie between
you and your homecoming, alone and old,
the one survivor, all companions lost.

At dawn, Odysseus and his men continue their journey. Odysseus decides to tell the men only of Circe's warnings about the Sirens, whom they will soon encounter. He is fairly sure that they can survive this peril if he keeps their spirits up. Suddenly, the wind stops.

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 Helios, 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 Sirens, noting our fast ship
off their point, made ready, and they sang. . .



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 Perimedes got to his feet, he and Eurylochus, and passed more line about, to hold me still. So all rowed on, until the Sirens dropped under the sea rim, and their singing dwindled away.

My faithful Company rested on their oars now, peeling off the wax that I had laid thick on their ears; then set me free.

But scarcely had that island



Faded in blue air than I saw smoke
and white water, with the 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 oar blades 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
Cyclops 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?

Now I say
by hook or crook this peril too shall be
something that we remember.
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...
keep her out of the combbers and the smoke;
steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we
fetch up in the smother, and you drown us.
That was all, and it brought them round to
action.

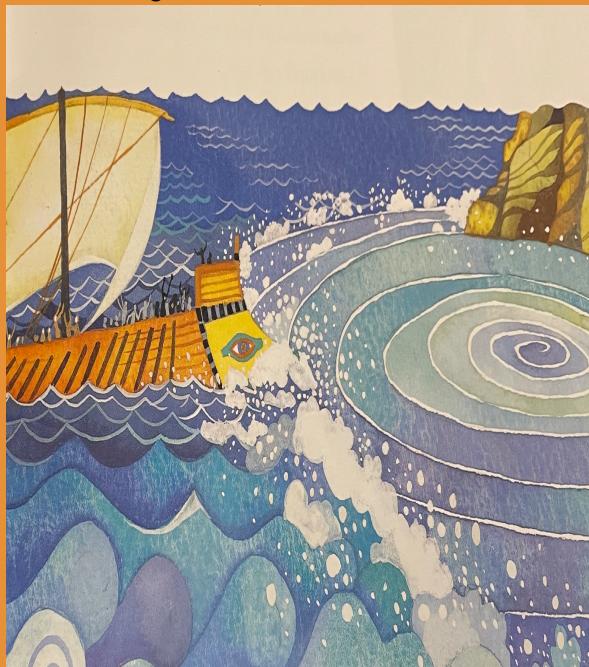
But as I sent them on toward
Scylla, I told them nothing, as
they could do nothing.
They would have dropped
their oars again, in panic, to
roll for cover under the
decking. Circe's
bidding against arms had
slipped my mind, so I tied on
my cuirass and took up two heavy spears,
then made my way along to the foredeck
thinking to see her first from there.



I strained my eyes upon that cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere could I catch sight of her.

And all this time, in travail, sobbing, gaining on the current, we rowed into the strait Scylla to port and on our starboard beam Charybdis, 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.

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 whirlpool, 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.



Then Scylla 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.



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. The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too, and Scylla dropped astern.

Odysseus tries to persuade his men to bypass Thrinacia, the island of the sun god, Helios, but they insist on landing. Driven by hunger, they ignore Odysseus' warning not to feast on Helios' cattle. This disobedience angers the sun god, who threatens to stop shining if payment is not made for the loss of his cattle. To appease Helios, Zeus sends down a thunderbolt to sink Odysseus' ship. Odysseus alone survives. He eventually drifts to Ogygia, the home of Calypso, who keeps him on her island for seven years. With this episode, Odysseus ends the telling of his tale to King Alcinous.



