FROM
THE ODYSSEY
Homer

Translated by Robert Fitzgerald
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.

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
in his sea 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—
children and fools, they killed and feasted on
the cattle of Lord Helios, 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.

We learn that Odysseus is alive, twenty years older than when
he had left for the war in Troy. He is being kept prisoner on
Ogygia, the island of the nymph Calypso, who wants him for
herself.

Meanwhile, the gods on Mount Olympus are discussing Odysseus. His patroness there, the goddess Athena, begs her father,
Zeus, to allow Odysseus to return safely to his home in Ithaca.
But Odysseus has an enemy among the gods. The sea god,
Poseidon, is angry at the hero for having blinded his son, the
Cyclops called Polyphemus. Zeus agrees with Athena, and Hermes, the messenger god, is to be sent to Ogygia to command
Calypso to free Odysseus.

Athena's next move is to make her way to Ithaca to help
Odysseus's young son, Telemachus, cope with another problem.
His home—the palace of Odysseus—is overrun by his mother's
suitors. Those arrogant men have taken over Odysseus's house.
They are partying on the boy's inheritance and are demanding
that his mother, Penelope, take one of them as a husband.

Here we now have the main themes of the epic:
Now the goddess Athena arrives on the scene in Ithaca. Disguised as Mentor, an old family friend, she mingles with the mob of suitors and waits to talk to Telemachus:

Long before anyone else, the prince Telemachus 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:

"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 splendidcovet, he sealed 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.

As Telemachus and the goddess-in-disguise talk, the suitors are partying loudly all around them. Telemachus tells the goddess that the men are eating through all they have, courting his mother, and using his house as if it were theirs to wreck and plunder.

"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.

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 traveler's tale, or rumored fame
issued from Zeus abroad in the world of men.
Talk to that noble sage⁶ at Pylos, Nestor,
then go to Menelaus, the red-haired king
at Sparta, last man home of all the Achaeans.

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.

When you have done all this, or seen it done,
it will be time to ponder
concerning these contenders in your house—
how you should kill them, outright or by guile.⁷
You need not bear this insolence⁸ of theirs,
you are a child no longer.⁸

Book 2: Telemachus Confronts the Suitors

Frustrated in his attempts to control the suitors, who are older
and more powerful than he is, Telemachus decides to follow
Athena's advice. He tries in public to become his "father's son."

When primal Dawn spread on the eastern sky
her fingers of pink light, Odysseus's 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 clarion⁹ voices and told them
to muster the unshorn® Achaeans in full assembly.
The call sang out, and the men came streaming in;
and when they filled the assembly ground, he entered,
spear in hand, with two quick hounds at heel;
Athena lavished on him a sunlit grace.

⁶ sage: wise person.
⁷ guile: slyness, trickery.
⁸ insolence: rudeness, lack of respect.
⁹ clarion: clear and ringing.
® unshorn: unshaven.
that held the eye of the multitude. Old men
made way for him as he took his father's chair.

Telemachus complains of the way his family is treated by the
suitors. He especially resents the way they treat his mother. The
suitors answer through Antinous, the most arrogant suitor of
them all. He demands that Penelope choose one of them in
marriage, and he blames her for her trickery.

"For three years now—and it will soon be four—
she has been breaking the hearts of the Achaeans,
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;
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 Laertes, 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—but every night by torchlight she unwove it; and so for three years she deceived the Achaeans. 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 Achaeans, mark it well; dismiss your mother from the house, or make her marry the man her father names and she prefers. Does she intend to keep us dangling forever?'

In the face of this stalemate, Telemachus decides to sail away in search of his father.

The assembly broke up; everyone went home—the suitors home to Odysseus's house again. But Telemachus walked down along the shore and washed his hands in the foam of the gray sea, then said this prayer:

"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 Achaeans 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, the warm voice in a lucid flight of words:

"You'll never be fainthearted or a fool, Telemachus, 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, Penelope'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, 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...."

Quietly, Telemachus goes home and again bears the mockery of the suitors. With the help of his old nurse, Eurycleia, he prepares for the journey in search of his father. Athena, still disguised as Mentor, borrows a ship and rounds up a crew, and off they sail in the night. Telemachus's only concern is a human one: he worries about his mother and begs the nurse not to tell her he has gone until some days have passed.

Book 3: The Visit to Nestor

At sunrise, Telemachus's ship arrives at Pylos, the land of King Nestor. Homer's listeners must have felt their interest quickening at the appearance of this familiar hero of the Trojan War days—\textit{we feel the same pleasure today when a favorite character from one book or movie suddenly turns up in another}. Surrounded by his faithful sons and subjects, and dutifully offering prayers to the gods, Nestor stands in perfect contrast to Odysseus's family and their chaotic situation in Ithaca. Telemachus and Athena arrive during a religious ritual, in honor of the sea god Poseidon, the 'blue-maned god who makes the islands tremble.'

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, tied out nine bulls apiece to sacrifice, taking the tripes\textsuperscript{e} 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 Telemachus hung back in disembarking, so that Athena turned and said:

"Not the least shyness, now, Telemachus. 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,\textsuperscript{f} 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."

But clear-headed Telemachus 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 gray-eyed goddess said:
"Reason and heart will give you words, Telemachus;
and a spirit will counsel others. I should say
the gods were never indifferent to your life."

She went on quickly, and he followed her
to where the men of Pylos had their altars.
Nestor appeared enthroned among his sons,
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. . . .
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:
"Now is the time," he said, "for a few questions,
now that our young guests have enjoyed their dinner.
Who are you, strangers? . . ."

Telemachus says he is Odysseus's son, and he asks for news of
his lost father. Nestor is full of praise for the lost soldier, and he
quickly recognizes the heroic qualities of the son. Notice how
Nestor prepares us for the later entrance of the absent hero
himself.

"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, 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. . . .
Who knows, your father might come home some day
alone or backed by troops, and have it out with them.
If gray-eyed Athena loved you
the way she did Odysseus in the old days,
in Troy country, where we all went through so much—
ever 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."

But prudently Telemachus replied:
"I can't think what you say will ever happen, sir. It is a dazzling hope. But not for me. It could not be—even if the gods willed it."

At this gray-eyed Athena broke in, saying:

"What strange talk you permit yourself, Telemachus. A god could save the man by simply wishing it—from the farthest shore in the world."

Book 4: The Visit to Menelaus and Helen

Nestor sends Telemachus off to continue his search in Sparta. There, two more favorites of the Trojan War story, King Menelaus and his wife, Helen, now live peacefully. Like Homer's Greek audience, we remember throughout Telemachus's stay in Sparta that this Helen was the very cause of the Trojan War itself.

Telemachus is awed at Menelaus's palace, luminous with bronze, gold, amber, silver, and ivory. He does not reveal his identity to Menelaus or to Helen; Athena is still disguised as Mentor.

The old commander Menelaus begins to tell war stories. As he reminisces about Odysseus, the absent hero becomes more and more vivid. Remember that Menelaus does not realize here that he is talking to Odysseus's own son. Menelaus speaks:

"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, Penelope, must miss him still!

And Telemachus, whom he left as a newborn child."

Now hearing these things said, the boy's heart rose in a long pang for his father, and he wept, holding his purple mantle with both hands before his eyes, Menelaus 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, straight as a shaft of gold. . . . Reclining in her light chair with its footrest, Helen gazed at her husband and demanded:

"Menelaus, 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,

Telemachus, the child he left at home
that year the Achaean host made war on Troy—
daring all for the wanton that I was.”

Menelaus and Helen tell Telemachus they have heard that Odysseus is alive, that he is living with the nymph, Calypso, and that he longs for a way of returning home.

Having increased our suspense, Homer at this point takes us back to Ithaca where we learn that the suitors intend to ambush and kill Telemachus upon his return.

Now, with the themes of the epic established, we are ready to meet Odysseus in person.

Here we will imagine that Homer stops for the night. The listeners would now go off to various corners of the local nobleman’s house—as Telemachus and his friends would have done after their evening of talk and feasting with Menelaus and Helen. The blind poet might well have taken a glass of wine before turning in. The people who had heard the bard’s stories might have asked questions among themselves and looked forward to the next evening’s installment.
Part Two: The Wanderings of Odysseus

Book 5: Calypso, the Sweet Nymph

Again the story begins with the gods. Zeus, unable to resist the pleas of his favorite daughter, Athena, sends the messenger-god Hermes to Calypso’s island to order Odysseus released. Notice the particularly beautiful epic simile—the extended comparison—that gives life to Hermes’ swift voyage to Ogygia (lines 251–257), and notice the wonderful description of the nymph’s lair. It is important to remember that although Calypso is not described as evil, her seductive charms—even her promises of immortality for Odysseus—threaten to lead the hero away from the straight and narrow path back to Penelope.

No words were lost on Hermes the Wayfinder who bent to tie his beautiful sandals on,

245 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,

250 shot from Pieria 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 Hermes flew until the distant island lay ahead, then rising shoreward from the violet ocean he stepped up to the cave. Divine Calypso, the mistress of the isle, was now at home. Upon her hearthstone a great fire blazing

255 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. 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

260 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

245. ambrosial: fit for the gods.

259. Pieria: a place in central Greece, a favorite spot of Hermes. It is not far from Olympus.
would gaze, and feel his heart beat with delight; so Hermes did; but when he had gazed his fill he entered the wide cave. Now face to face the magical Calypso 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, . . .

Hermes tells Calypso that she must give up Odysseus forever. And now, one quarter of the way through the epic, we are directly introduced to Odysseus. Notice what this great warrior is doing when we first meet him.

The strong god glittering left her as he spoke, and now her ladyship, having given heed to Zeus's mandate, went to find Odysseus

A view of the sea from one of the Greek islands.
in his stone seat to seaward—tear on tear.
brimming his eyes. The sweet days of his lifetime
were running out in anguish over his exile,
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,
and I shall help you go...."

**Calypso promises Odysseus a raft and provisions, to help him homeward without harm—provided the gods with it. Now Odysseus and Calypso say goodbye.**

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 Hermes,
where the divine Calypso 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:

"Son of Laertes, 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?"

To this the strategist Odysseus answered:

"My lady goddess, there is no cause for anger.
My quiet Penelope—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.
So Odysseus builds the raft and sets sail. But the sea god Poseidon, still angry at Odysseus, is by no means ready to allow an easy passage over his watery domain. He raises a storm and destroys the raft. It is only with the help of Athena and a sea nymph that Odysseus arrives, broken and battered, on the island of Scheria, home of the Phaeacians. There he hides himself in a pile of leaves and falls into a deep sleep.

Farewell to Calypso by Samuel Palmer (1848). Watercolor.

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.
Book 6: The Princess Nausicaa

In this important episode, we meet the lovely teen-age princess, Nausicaa, and learn something about domestic life in those days. (Homer is not above telling us about doing laundry or taking baths.) We also learn here something about natural modesty and standards of moral behavior. The world of epic is the world of heroes, but it is also the world of everyday reality.

Far gone in weariness, in oblivion,
the noble and enduring man slept on;
but Athena in the night went down the land
of the Phaeacians, entering their city.

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 Alcmnus, Nausicaa.
On either side, as Graces's might have slept,
hersmaids were sleeping. The bright doors were shut,
but like a sudden stir of wind, Athena
moved to the bedside of the girl, and grew
visible as the shipman Dymas's daughter,
a girl the princess's age, and her dear friend.

In this form gray-eyed Athena said to her:
"How so remiss, and yet thy mother's daughter?
leaving thy clothes uncared for, Nausicaa,
when soon thou must have store of marriage linen,
and put thy minstrelsy in wedding dress!
Beauty, in these, will make the 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 Phaeacians
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."

On this word she departed, gray-eyed Athena,
to where the gods have their eternal dwelling—
as men say—in the fastness of Olympus.

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 gray-eyed one withdrew, leaving the princess.
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:

"My dear Papa, 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!"
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 the traces.
Meanwhile the girl fetched all her soiled apparel
to bundle in the polished wagon box.
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.
Nausicaa 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, maidens, and laundry drawn behind.
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; then, putting off their veils, they ran and passed a ball to a rhythmic beat. Nausicaa flashing first with her white arms.

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

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 lusty 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."

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-buffeted, 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 Alcinous's daughter stood her ground, being given a bold heart by Athena, and steady knees.

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:

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

So fair, once time, I thought a young palm tree
at Delos 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 wine-dark sea,
on the ever-lunging swell, under gale winds,
getting away from the Island of Ogygia.
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,
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, Nausicaa, replied:
"Stranger, there is no quirk or evil in you
that I can see. You know Zeus metes out fortune
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. The town lies this way, and the men are called Phaeacians, who own the land and city. I am daughter to the Prince Alcinous, by whom the power of our people stands.”

Turning, she called out to her maids-in-waiting:

“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 pilferage 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.”

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.”

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 Hephaestus taught him, or Athena; one whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished...
beauty over Odysseus's 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:

565 "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.

570 I wish my husband could be fine as he
and glad to stay forever on Scheria!
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.
The princess Nausicaa 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 Phacacians.
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,
with fieldstone benches bedded in the earth,
lies either side Poseidon's shrine—for there
men arc at work on pitch-black hulls and rigging,
cables and sails, and tapering of oars.
The archer's craft is not for Phacacians,
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.
And some scadog might say, after we passed:
'Who is this handsome stranger trailing Nausicaa?
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?
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.'

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."

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394. agora: marketplace, or town square.
1. flout: scorn, insult.
Book 8: The Song of the Minstrel

Odysseus is received in Book 7 as an unknown guest by Nausicaa's father, King Alcinous, and by the Phaeacian court. To the ancient people of Greece and Asia Minor, all guests were god-sent and had to be treated with great care before they could be asked to identify themselves and state their business.

Alcinous orders a banquet for his mystery guest. When everything is prepared, Odysseus is seated in the guest's place of honor. The famous blind minstrel, Demodocus, is called. Odysseus gives the singer a gift of pork crisp with fat and requests a song about the wooden horse of Troy. In effect, he asks for a song about himself.

The minstrel stirred, murmuring to the god, and soon clear words and notes came one by one, a vision of the Achaeans 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 Troy must perish, as ordained, that day she harbored the great horse of timber; hidden the flower of Achaea lay, and bore slaughter and death upon the men of Troy.

He sang, then, of the town sacked by Achaeans pouring down from the horse's hollow cave, this way and that way raping the steep city...

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...

Here Alcinous notices Odysseus's tears and demands that his guest reveal his identity.

"... 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—"

At this moment of suspense, Homer might have put aside his harp until the next night.
Alcinous’s call to Odysseus to reveal his identity is Odysseus’s cue to begin telling of the adventures that will literally make his name. Homer’s greatest hero is himself a famous storyteller. (Perhaps all successful heroes must contain aspects of their creators.)

The adventures that follow are the ones for which the epic is most remembered. Imagine the excitement of the Phaeacians, having just heard Demodocus sing the story of the Trojan horse, when they discover the identity of their guest. Alcinous has just asked Odysseus to reveal his name:

Now this was the reply Odysseus made:

“I am Laertes’ son, Odysseus.

Men hold me formidable for guile in peace and war:
this fame has gone abroad to the sky’s rim.
My home is on the peaked sea-mark of Ithaca
under Mount Neion’s wind-blown robe of leaves,
in sight of other islands—Doulkhion.
Same, wooded Zakynthos—Ithaca 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 Calypso,
loveliest among goddesses, who held me
in her smooth caves, to be her heart’s delight,
as Circe of Aeaea, 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...”
we came to the coastline of the Lotus Eaters, who live upon that flower. We landed there to take on water. All ships' companies mustered alongside for the midday 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 Lotus Eaters, who showed no will to do us harm, only offering the sweet Lotus to our friends—but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotus, never cared to report, nor to return: they longed to stay forever, browsing on that native bloom, forgetful of their homeland. I drove them, all three wailing, to the ships, tied them down under their rowing benches, and called the rest: 'All hands aboard; come, clear the beach and no one taste the Lotus, 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 seafaring.'

*Salvation from the next adventure requires the special intelligence associated with Odysseus's name. Odysseus is the cleverest of the ancient Greek heroes because his divine guardian is the goddess of wisdom, Athena. As a result of this confrontation with the Cyclops named Polyphemus, the one-eyed monster son*
of the god Poseidon, Odysseus incurs the wrath of the sea god. Polyphemus might be said to represent the brute force and a negative singleness of purpose that any hero must overcome before he can reach home.

It is Odysseus's famed curiosity that leads him to the Cyclops's cave and that makes him insist on waiting for the barbaric giant.

"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 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 shifted 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, sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets, 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, but all the same I spoke up in reply:

'We are from Troy, Achaeans, 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 Agamemnon, 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.
you give—as custom is to honor strangers.
We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care
for the gods' courtesy; Zeus will avenge
the unoffending guest.'

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 Cyclopes
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?'

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

'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 Cyclops went on filling up his belly
with man flesh 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.

When the young Dawn with finger tips of rose
lit up the world, the Cyclops 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.

775 There was a din of whistling as the Cyclops 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:

780 a club, or staff, lay there along the fold—an olive tree, felled green and left to season for Cyclops' hand. And it was like a mast a lugger of twenty oars, broad in the beam—a deep-seagoing craft—might carry:

785 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 Cyclops' 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.

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:

810 'Cyclops, try some wine. Here's liquor to wash down your scraps of men. Taste it, and see the kind of drink we carried 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 traveler come to see you?'
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 Cyclopes 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:

'Cyclops, 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.'

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.

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 Cyclops
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.

In a smithy*

one sees a white-hot axhead 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 Cyclops 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 Cyclopes
who lived in caves on windy peaks nearby.
Some heard him; and they came by divers' ways
to clump around outside and call:

'What ails you,
Polyphemus? 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?'

Out of the cave
the mammoth Polyphemus roared in answer:

'Nobbdy, Nobbdy's tricked me, Nobbdy'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

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854. smithy: a blacksmith's shop, where iron work is done.
855. adze: a tool like an ax, but with a longer, curved blade.
865. divers: diverse, various.
given by great Zeus. Let it be your father,
Poseidon Lord, to whom you pray.

So saying they trailed away. And I was filled with laughter
to see how like a charm the name deceived them.

880 Now Cyclops, 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.

885 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.

890 The Cyclops's rams were handsome, fat, with heavy
fleeces, a dark violet.

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.

Ulysses escaping from Polyphemus
(c. 510 B.C.). Krater.

Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe
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.

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 Cyclops patted him, and then he said:

'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. Nobody will not get out alive, I swear. 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 Nobody worked upon me.'

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 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:

945 'O Cyclops! Would you feast on my companions?
How do you like the beating that we gave you,
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
960 until we drew away, and twice as far.
Now when I cupped my hands I heard the crew
in low voices protesting:

‘Godsake, Captalal
Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!’

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

965 ‘All but stove us in!’

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

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

975 At this he gave a mighty sob and rumbled:

‘Now comes the weird’ upon me, spoken of old.
A wizard, grand and wondrous, lived here—Telemus,
a son of Eurymus; great length of days
he had in wizardry among the Cyclopcs,
980 and these things he foretold for time to come:
my great eye lost, and at Odysseus’s 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—
985 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
990 heal me of this black wound—he and no other
of all the happy gods or mortal men.’

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!
995 The god of earthquake could not heal you there!’

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

'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: Laertes' son, I mean, who kept his hall on Ithaca. Should destiny intend that he shall see his roof again among his family in his fatherland,

far be that day, and dark the years between. Let him lose all companions, and return under strange sail to bitter days at home.'

Book 10: The Bag of Winds and the Witch Circe

Odysseus and his men land next on the island of Aeolus. There the wind king, Aeolus, does Odysseus a favor. He puts all the stormy winds in a bag so that they will not harm the Ithacans. The hull's hide bag containing the winds is wedged under Odysseus's afterdeck. During the voyage, the suspicious and curious sailors open the bag (thinking it contains treasure), and the evil winds roar up into hurricanes to plague the luckless Odysseus again.

After more of his men are killed and eaten by the gigantic cannibals called the Laestrygonians, Odysseus's ship lands on Aeaea, the home of the witch Circe. Here a party of twenty-two men, led by Eurylochus, goes off to explore the island. Odysseus is still speaking:

"In the wild wood they found an open glade, around a smooth stone house—the hall of Circe—

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.

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

Low she sang in her beguiling voice, while on her loom she wove ambrosial fabric sheer and bright, by that craft known to the goddesses of heaven.
No one would speak, until Polites—most faithfull 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?"

So reassured, they all cried out together, and she came swiftly to the shining doors to call them in. All but Eurylochus—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 fatherland.

Scarce had they drank 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 Circe tossed them acorns, mast, and cornel berries—fodder for hogs who rut and slumber on the earth.

Down to the ship Eurylochus 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.

Odysseus leaves the ship and rushes to Circe's hall. The god Hermes stops him to give him a plant that will act as an antidote to Circe's power. (Homer calls it a molu; it might have been a kind of garlic.) Odysseus uses the molu and the witch, overcome by the plant's magic, frees Odysseus's men. Now, Circe, "loveliest of all immortals," persuades Odysseus to stay, share her meat and wine, and restore his heart. After many seasons of feasting and other pleasures, Odysseus and his men beg Circe to help them get home:

"Son of Laertes 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 Persephone. You shall hear prophecy from the rapt shade
of blind Tiresias of Thebes, forever
carged with reason even among the dead;
to him alone, of all the flitting ghosts,
Persephone 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.

Book 11: The Land of the Dead

Odysseus is not alone among the ancient heroes who must descend to the Land of the Dead. The Sumerian hero Gilgamesh, the Greek heroes Theseus and Hercules, and many other heroes made similar journeys. It is as if the ancient myth-makers are telling us that the truly significant voyages in life involve journeys to the deepest parts of ourselves, and a confrontation with the darkest reality of all—death.

In the Land of the Dead, Odysseus seeks his destiny. The source of his information is Tiresias, the famous blind prophet from the city of Thebes, whose lack of external sight suggests the presence of true insight. Circe has told Odysseus exactly what rites he must perform to bring Tiresias up from the dead. Odysseus is speaking:
"Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead,
vowing to slaughter my best heifer for them
before she calved, at home in Ithaca,
and burn the choice bits on the altar fire;
as for Teiresias, I swore to sacrifice
a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock.
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 Erebus,
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 Persephone.
Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep
the surging phantoms from the bloody pit
 till I should know the presence of Teiresias . . . .

Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward
bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me:

'Son of Laertes 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.'

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 somber 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:
its denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.
When you make landfall on Thrinakia® first
and quit the violet sea, dark on the land
you'll find the grazing herds of Helios
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 Ithaca.

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 livestocks as they court your lady. Aye, you shall make those men stone 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 is that upon your shoulder?' Hail, 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 hecatombs at home to all wide heaven's lords, the unyielding 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.

When he had done, I said at once, 'Teiresias, 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?'

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 will speak to you, and speak the truth; but those deprived will grow remote again and fade.'

When he had prophesied, Teiresias's shade retired lordly to the halls of Death.
Now Odysseus meets a familiar ghost, his mother Anticleia, who died of a broken heart when her son failed to return from Troy.

"I bit my lip,
\[42x676]\text{rising perplexed, with longing to embrace her,}\\ \text{and tried three times, putting my arms around her,}\\ \text{but she went sifting through my hands, impalpable}\\ \text{as shadows are, and wavering like a dream.}\\ \text{Now this embittered all the pain I bore,}\\ \text{and I cried in the darkness:}\\ \text{\textquotedblright'O my mother,}\\ \text{will you not stay, be still, here in my arms,}\\ \text{may we not, in this place of Death, as well,}\\ \text{hold one another, touch with love, and taste}\\ \text{salt tears\textquoteright relief, the twinge of welling tears?}\\ \text{Or is this all hallucination, sent}\\ \text{against me by the iron queen, Persephone,}\\ \text{to make me groan again?\textquoteright}\\ \text{My noble mother}\\ \text{answered quickly:}\\ \text{\textquotedblright'O my child—alas,}\\ \text{most sorely tried of men—great Zeus\textquoteright s daughter,}\\ \text{Persephone, knits no illusion for you.}\\ \text{All mortals meet this judgment when they die.}\\ \text{No flesh and bone are here, none bound by sinew,}\\ \text{since the bright-hearted pyre\textsuperscript{e} consumed them down—}\\ \text{the white bones long exanimate\textsuperscript{a}—to ash;}\\ \text{the soul flies, insubstantial.}\\ \text{You must crave sunlight soon.}\\ \text{Note all things strange}\\ \text{seen here, to tell your lady in after days.'\textquoteright}\\

The afterlife envisioned by Homer was not a happy place of rest. This society, which so relished the joys, accomplishments, and passions of the physical life, found little pleasure in an eternal life among mere shadows. After many more encounters in the Land of the Dead, Odysseus returns to Circe's island for further instructions.

Book 12: The Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis

The witch Circe is speaking. She warns Odysseus of the perils that await him—the forces that would prevent him from achieving his destiny.
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 oarsmen'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..."

The next peril lies between two headlands with sheer cliffs. Circe continues:

"... That is the den of Scylla, where she yaps abominably, a newborn whelp's cry, 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 Amphitrite 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.

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

1197. harpies: monstrous winged women, greedy for victims.
1202. whelp's: puppy's.
1208. serried: dense, compact.
1213. Amphitrite (am-fvrit'e): goddess of the sea, wife of Poseidon.
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 Scylla, take your ship
through on a racing stroke. Better to mourn
six men than lose them all, and the ship, too...

Then you will coast Thrinacia, the island
where Helios’s 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...

Now give these 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."

The Ithacans set off. But Odysseus never reveals to them Circe’s
last prophecy—that he will be the only survivor of their long
journey. Odysseus is still speaking to Alcinous’s court:

"The crew being now silent before me, I
addressed them, sore at heart:

more than one man, or two, should know those things
Circe 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. Sirens
weaving a haunting song over the sea
we are to shun, she said, and their green shore
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.

I rather dwell on this part of the forecast,
while our good ship made time, bound outward down
the wind for the strange island of Sirens.
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 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 then 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 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.

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

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, the monster of the gray rock, harboring torment for my friends, 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 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.

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.

A man surf-casting 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: 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—for 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.
Then we were coasting
the noble island of the god, where grazed
those cattle with wide brows, and bounteous flocks
of Helios, 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 Teiresias of Thebes
and Circe of Aeaea: both forbade me
the island of the world’s delight, the Sun..."

Because they are dying of starvation, Odysseus’s men disobey
his orders, and shortly after they land, they eat the sacred cattle
of the sun god, Helios. When they set sail again, they are punished by death—a thunderbolt from Zeus destroys their boat and
all the men drown. Only Odysseus survives. He makes his way
to Calypso’s island, where we met him originally in Book 5.
Odysseus the storyteller has brought us up to date. He can now
rest.

Responding to the Epic

Analyzing the Epic

Identifying Facts
1. Describe the internal conflict Odysseus and his men encounter in the land of the Lotus Eaters.
2. Describe three strategies that the wily Odysseus uses to outwit the Cyclops Polyphemus. What mistake does the hero make near the end of the Cyclops adventure?
3. What curse concludes the Cyclops adventure—foreshadowing trouble ahead for Odysseus?
4. What are Circe’s powers? How does Circe first treat Odysseus and his men?
5. Homer’s audience would have known who Teiresias was and they would have known that the prophet could not possibly be wrong. Summarize all that Odysseus finds out from Teiresias about his own future.
6. What does Odysseus’s mother tell him about death and the soul?
7. Describe the threats posed by the Sirens and by Scylla and Charybdis. How does Odysseus survive these perils?
8. What happens to his men?

Interpreting Meanings
9. What simile does Homer use to help his audience see what happens when Scylla whisks six men from Odysseus’s ship? What do Odysseus’s feelings here tell you about his character?
10. It is important to remember, as we listen to Odysseus’s adventures, that the Odyssey was used as part of Greek children’s education for centuries after the poem was written down. How could the adventure with the Lotus Eaters teach them about the temptation to “forget” one’s troubles by dropping out? How could the Cyclops adventure be used to teach the dangers of violence and of curiosity?
11. Explain what we can learn about the deceptive nature of beauty from the Circe episode.
12. Odysseus considers the Cyclopes to be barbarians. Describe Polyphemus’s home and his way of life, especially his attitude toward the treatment of guests. Explain how the Cyclopes and their society contrast with what we have seen on Ithaca and on Pylos and Sparta.
Part Three: The Return of the Hero

In Book 13, Odysseus, laden with gifts, is returned in secret to Ithaca in one of the magically swift Phaeacian ships. In Ithaca, Athena herself appears to the hero. She advises him how to proceed and disguises him as a beggar. Notice that this new hero of the postwar age of disillusionment will achieve success not only by physical power but also by guile and wisdom.

In Book 14, Odysseus, in his beggar disguise, finds his way to the house of his old and trusty swineherd, Eumaeus. Eumaeus is the very image of faithfulness in a servant—a quality much prized by Homer's society. The introduction of the so-called servant class as important actors is unusual in epic poetry, and it indicates Homer's originality. Odysseus is simply but politely entertained in the swineherd's hut, but he remains disguised from Eumaeus.

In Book 15, we go back to Telemachus, who is still with Menelaus and Helen. The plots of the father and the son are

Ulysses disguised as a beggar.
Attic red figure vase.
Etruscan Museum, Chiusi. Photo: Art Resource
now about to be brought together. Athena appears to the boy
and advises him to return home. She warns him that the evil
suitors plan to ambush him. Telemachus boards ship for home,
lands secretly on Ithaca, and heads toward the cottage of the
swineherd. As father and son were moved closer and closer
together, the suspense in the audience must have become great.
Now Homer is ready for what could be the most dramatic mo-
ment in the epic.

Book 16: The Meeting of 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 Telemachus came,
the wolffish 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:

"Eumaeus,

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 Telemachus
and covered him with kisses—for he knew
the lad had got away from death. He said:

"Light of my days, Telemachus,
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!"

1400 Telemachus 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’s bed
1405 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

1410 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 Telemachus checked him:
“Friend, sit down; we’ll find another chair
1415 in our own hut. Here is the man to make one!”

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
1420 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...

Not realizing that the stranger is his father, Telemachus agrees
to protect him as best he can. But he tells the beggar that he
cannot stay in the palace hall because he will be abused by the
drunken suitors.

The swineherd is sent to Penelope with news of her son’s
return. And now it seems that even Athena cannot stand the
suspense any longer. She turns to Odysseus, in beggar’s rags:

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
1430 no longer gray upon his chin. And she
withdrew when she had done.

1401. Uncle: here, an affectionate greeting.
1419. trenchers: wooden platters.
1428. Lithe: limber.
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:

"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."

Held back too long, the tears ran down his cheeks as he embraced his son.

Only Telemachus, uncomprehending, wild with incredulity, cried out:

"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!"

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..."

Then, throwing his arms around this marvel of a father, Telemachus 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..."
Book 17: The Beggar and the Faithful Dog

Telemachus returns to the family compound and is greeted tearfully by his mother and his old nurse, Eurykleia. A soothsayer tells Penelope that Odysseus is alive and is already in Ithaca. The suspense builds, as Odysseus, once again disguised as a beggar, finally returns to his home accompanied only by the swineherd. He has been away for twenty years. Only one creature recognizes him.

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, 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.

But when he knew he heard Odysseus’s 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 Eumaeus. 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."

And you replied, Eumaeus:

"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."

Eumaeus crossed the court and went straight forward into the megaron among the suitors; but death and darkness in that instant closed the eyes of Argos, who had seen his master, Odysseus, after twenty years.

In the hall, the beggar is taunted by the suitors, but Penelope supports him. She has heard that the ragged stranger claims to have news of her husband. Unaware of who this beggar is, she invites him to visit her later in the night to talk about Odysseus.

In Book 18, Penelope appears among the suitors and chastises Telemachus for allowing the stranger to be abused. She certainly must have warmed her husband's heart by doing this and by further singing the praises of her lost Odysseus.

Book 19: Penelope, the Beggar, and the Nurse

After the suitors depart for the night and after Odysseus and Telemachus discuss their strategy, the wily hero goes as appointed to Penelope with the idea of testing her and her maids. (Remember that some of the maids have not been loyal to the
Willing hands
brought a smooth bench, and dropped a fleece upon it.
Here the adventurer and king sat down;
then carefully, Penelope began:

"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
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.

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."

And Penelope replied:

"Stranger, my looks,
my face, my carriage, were soon lost or faded
when the Achaeans 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,
Doulikhion, Same, wooded Zakynthos,
with native Ithacans, 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?

wasted with longing for Odysseus, while here they press for marriage.

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.

confide in me, tell me your ancestry.

You were not born of mythic oak or stone."

Here the beggar spins a yarn about his origins, pretending that he has met Odysseus on his travels. He cannot resist praising
The story-telling beggar reveals that he has heard Odysseus is alive and is even now sailing for home. Penelope calls for the old nurse and asks her to wash the guest's feet—a sign of respect and honor. What follows is a scene of great emotional suspense. Eurycleia speaks to the supposed beggar:

"My heart within me stirs, mindful of something. Listen to what I say: strangers have come here, many through the years, but no one ever came, I swear, who seemed so like Odysseus—body, voice, and limbs— as you do."

Ready for this, Odysseus answered:

"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.

An old wound a boar's white tusk inflicted, on Parnassus years ago, . . .

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:

"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!"

Quickly, Odysseus swears Eurycleia to secrecy. Meanwhile, Athena has cast a spell on Penelope so that she has taken no notice of this recognition scene. Penelope adds to the suspense by deciding on a test for the suitors on the next day. Without realizing it, she now has given Odysseus a way to defeat the suitors.
Book 21: The Test of the Great Bow

Like many unwilling princesses of myth, fairy tale, and legend, Penelope proposes an impossible task for those who wish to marry her. By so doing, she causes the bloody events that lead to the restoration of her true husband. The test will involve Odysseus's huge bow, which no one could string except Odysseus himself. Odysseus had left his bow home in Ithaca twenty years ago.

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. Penelope 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.

Now Penelope sank down, holding the weapon on her knees, and drew her husband's great bow cut, 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 axheads, 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:

"My lords, hear me: suitors indeed, you recommended 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's hunting bow."
Bend and string it if you can. Who sends an arrow through iron ax-helve sockets, 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."

Many of the suitors boldly try the bow, but not a man can even bend it enough to string it.

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?"

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 Eumacus fell to praying all heaven for his return, so that Odysseus, sure at least of these, told them:

"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 Telemachus. Here, let me show you something else, a sign that I am he, that you can trust me, look:
Shifting his rags
he bared the long gash. Both men looked, and knew
and threw their arms around the old soldier, weeping,
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. Eumaeus, bring the bow
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.
Philoeteus, run to the outer gate and lock it.
Throw the crossbar and lash it."

Now Odysseus, still in his beggar's clothes, asks to try the bow.
The suitors refuse to allow a mere beggar to try where they have
ever failed, but Penelope insists that the stranger be given his chance.
The suspense is very great—by this act, Penelope has accepted
her husband as a suitor.

Eumaeus, the swineherd, hands Odysseus the bow and tells
the nurse to retire with Penelope and the maids to the family
chambers (the harem) and to bolt the doors. Odysseus had earlier
told Telemachus to remove the suitors' weapons from the great
hall. Now he takes the bow...

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!"

And one disdainful suitor added this:

1735 "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, 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.

1740 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 Cronus had flung that omen down.

1745 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.

1750 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:

"Telemachus, 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."

He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince Telemachus, 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.
The climax of the story is here. Odysseus is ready to claim his rightful kingdom. But first he must deal with more than a hundred young and hostile suitors. The first one he turns to is Antinous. Antinous has been, all through the story, the meanest of the suitors and their ringleader. He had hit Odysseus with a stool when the hero appeared in the hall as a beggar; and he had ridiculed the disguised king by calling him a bleary vagabond, a pest, and a tramp.

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 Antinous 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? 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's 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. 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 Ithaca." "Buzzards will tear your eyes out!" For they imagined as they wished—that it was a wild shot, 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!"

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. Eurymachus alone could speak. He said:

"If you are Odysseus of Ithaca 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. Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on to do these things. He cared less for a marriage than for the power Cronion has denied him as king of Ithaca. 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.”

Odysseus glowered under his black brows and said:

“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 skims by.”

Telemachus joins his father in the fight. They are helped by the swineherd and cowherd. Now the suitors, trapped in the hall without weapons, are struck right and left by arrows, and many of them lie dying on the floor.

At this moment that unmanned thunder cloud, the aegis, 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 eagles 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 eagles grip their prey, no frantic wing avails.

and farmers love to watch those beaked 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.

Odysseus now calls forth the maids who have betrayed his household by associating with the suitors. He orders them to clean up the house and dispose of the dead. He then “pays” them by hanging them in the courtyard.
Eurychla runs to Penelope to announce the return of Odysseus and the defeat of the suitors. The faithful wife—the perfect mate for the wily Odysseus—suspects a trick from the gods and decides to test her would-be husband. She succeeds in teasing him to distraction.

1855 Crossing the door sill she sat down at once
in fireshight, against the nearest wall,
across the room from the lord Odysseus.

1860 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.

1865 Telemachus's voice came to her ears:

1866 “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?

1870 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!”

Penelope answered:

1875 “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.”

1880 A smile
came now to the lips of the patient hero, Odysseus,
who turned to Telemachus and said:

1885 “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. . . .”
Odysseus orders Telemachus, the swineherd, and the cowherd
to bathe and put on fresh clothing . . .

Greathearted Odysseus, home at last,
was being bathed now by Eurynome
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
but all red-golden. Think of gold infused
on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art
Hephaestus taught him, or Athena: one
whose work moves to delight just so she lavished
beauty over Odysseus's head and shoulders.
He sat then in the same chair by the pillar,
facing his silent wife, and said:

"Strange woman,
the immortals of Olympus 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?
Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.
Her heart is iron in her breast."

Penelope
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, Eurycleia.
Place it outside the bedchamber my lord
built with his own hands. Pile the big bed
with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen."

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!

Mirror with the head of a woman
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Rogers Fund
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 the stump from the roots up
into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve
as model for the rest, I planed them all,
inklaid 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:

"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! . . .
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, Actoris, that my father
sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.
You make my stiff heart know that I am yours."

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
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 ghosts of the suitors drift away through dank places to where the Dead dwell at the world's end.

Odysseus has one more duty. He must go to old Laertes, his grieving father, who lives alone outside of town. A natural storyteller to the end, Odysseus cannot resist teasing his father. He pretends to be a traveler, who had entertained Odysseus five years ago. As Laertes hears his son spoken of, the old man's eyes fill with tears.

A cloud of pain had fallen on Laertes.
Scooping up handfuls of the sunburnt dust
he sifted it over his gray 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:

"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!"
Laertes 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."

His son replied:

"The scar then, first of all.
Look, here the wild boar's flashing tusk
wounded me on Parnassus; do you see it? . . .
Again—more proof—let's say the trees you gave me
on this revetted plot of orchard once.
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.
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 Olympus, if the suitors
paid for their crimes indeed, and paid in blood!"

They went home, the two together,
into the stone farmhouse. There Telemachus
and the two herdsmen were already carving
roast young pork, and mixing amber wine.
During these preparations the Sikel woman®
bathed Laertes and anointed him,
and dressed him in a new cloak. Then Athena,
estanding by, filled out his limbs again,
gave girth and stature to the old field captain
fresh from the bathing place. His son looked on
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!"

The families of the dead suitors arrive with revenge in their
hearts. A blood feud seems inevitable, and a battle has already
begun, when Pallas Athena, directed by Zeus, ends once and for
all, the power struggle in Ithaca.

"Now hold!"

she cried, "Break off this bitter skirmish;
end your bloodshed, Ithacans, and make peace."

Their faces paled with dread before Athena,
and swords dropped from their hands unnerved, to lie
strewing 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 Cronus dropped a thunderbolt
smoking at his daughter's feet.

cast a gray glance at her friend and said:

"Son of Laertes 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.

Statuette of Zeus (Etruscan,
c. 480 B.C.) Bronze.
The J. Paul Getty Museum