



Athena Inspires the Prince

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
driven time and again off course, once he had plundered
the hallowed heights of Troy.
Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,
fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.
But he could not save them from disaster, hard as he strove—
the recklessness of their own ways destroyed them all,
the blind fools, they devoured the cattle of the Sun
and the Sun god blotted out the day of their return.
Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus,
start from where you will—sing for our time too.

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By now,
all the survivors, all who avoided headlong death
were safe at home, escaped the wars and waves.

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But one man alone . . .
 his heart set on his wife and his return—Calypso,
 the bewitching nymph, the lustrous goddess, held him back,
 deep in her arching caverns, craving him for a husband.
 But then, when the wheeling seasons brought the year around,
 that year spun out by the gods when he should reach his home,
 Ithaca—though not even there would he be free of trials,
 even among his loved ones—then every god took pity,
 all except Poseidon. He raged on, seething against
 the great Odysseus till he reached his native land.

But now

Poseidon had gone to visit the Ethiopians worlds away,
 Ethiopians off at the farthest limits of mankind,
 a people split in two, one part where the Sun god sets
 and part where the Sun god rises. There Poseidon went
 to receive an offering, bulls and rams by the hundred—
 far away at the feast the Sea-lord sat and took his pleasure.
 But the other gods, at home in Olympian Zeus's halls,
 met for full assembly there, and among them now
 the father of men and gods was first to speak,
 sorely troubled, remembering handsome Aegisthus,
 the man Agamemnon's son, renowned Orestes, killed.
 Recalling Aegisthus, Zeus harangued the immortal powers:
 "Ah how shameless—the way these mortals blame the gods.
 From us alone, they say, come all their miseries, yes,
 but they themselves, with their own reckless ways,
 compound their pains beyond their proper share.
 Look at Aegisthus now . . .

above and beyond *his* share he stole Atrides' wife,
 he murdered the warlord coming home from Troy
 though he knew it meant his own total ruin.
 Far in advance we told him so ourselves,
 dispatching the guide, the giant-killer Hermes.
 'Don't murder the man,' he said, 'don't court his wife.
 Beware, revenge will come from Orestes, Agamemnon's son,
 that day he comes of age and longs for his native land.'
 So Hermes warned, with all the good will in the world,

but would Aegisthus' hardened heart give way?
 Now he pays the price—all at a single stroke."

And sparkling-eyed Athena drove the matter home:
 "Father, son of Cronus, our high and mighty king,
 surely he goes down to a death he earned in full!
 Let them all die so, all who do such things.
 But my heart breaks for Odysseus,
 that seasoned veteran cursed by fate so long—
 far from his loved ones still, he suffers torments
 off on a wave-washed island rising at the center of the seas. 60
 A dark wooded island, and there a goddess makes her home,
 a daughter of Atlas, wicked Titan who sounds the deep
 in all its depths, whose shoulders lift on high
 the colossal pillars thrusting earth and sky apart.
 Atlas' daughter it is who holds Odysseus captive,
 luckless man—despite his tears, forever trying
 to spellbind his heart with suave, seductive words
 and wipe all thought of Ithaca from his mind.
 But he, straining for no more than a glimpse
 of hearth-smoke drifting up from his own land, 70
 Odysseus longs to die . . .

Olympian Zeus,

have you no care for *him* in your lofty heart?
 Did he never win your favor with sacrifices
 burned beside the ships on the broad plain of Troy?
 Why, Zeus, why so dead set against Odysseus?"

"My child," Zeus who marshals the thunderheads replied,
 "what nonsense you let slip through your teeth. Now,
 how on earth could I forget Odysseus? Great Odysseus
 who excels all men in wisdom, excels in offerings too
 he gives the immortal gods who rule the vaulting skies? 80
 No, it's the Earth-Shaker, Poseidon, unappeased,
 forever fuming against him for the Cyclops
 whose giant eye he blinded: godlike Polyphemus,
 towering over all the Cyclops' clans in power.

The nymph Thoosa bore him, daughter of Phorcys,
 lord of the barren salt sea—she met Poseidon
 once in his vaulted caves and they made love.
 And now for his blinded son the earthquake god—
 though he won't quite kill Odysseus—
 drives him far off course from native land.
 But come, all of us here put heads together now,
 work out his journey home so Odysseus can return.
 Lord Poseidon, I trust, will let his anger go.
 How can he stand his ground against the will
 of all the gods at once—one god alone?"

Athena, her eyes flashing bright, exulted,
 "Father, son of Cronus, our high and mighty king!
 If now it really pleases the blissful gods
 that wise Odysseus shall return—home at last—
 let us dispatch the guide and giant-killer Hermes
 down to Ogygia Island, down to announce at once
 to the nymph with lovely braids our fixed decree:
 Odysseus journeys home—the exile must return!
 While I myself go down to Ithaca, rouse his son
 to a braver pitch, inspire his heart with courage
 to summon the flowing-haired Achaeans to full assembly,
 speak his mind to all those suitors, slaughtering on and on
 his droves of sheep and shambling longhorn cattle.
 Next I will send him off to Sparta and sandy Pylos,
 there to learn of his dear father's journey home.
 Perhaps he will hear some news and make his name
 throughout the mortal world."

So Athena vowed
 and under her feet she fastened the supple sandals,
 ever-glowing gold, that wing her over the waves
 and boundless earth with the rush of gusting winds.
 She seized the rugged spear tipped with a bronze point—
 weighted, heavy, the massive shaft she wields to break the lines
 of heroes the mighty Father's daughter storms against.
 And down she swept from Olympus' craggy peaks
 and lit on Ithaca, standing tall at Odysseus' gates,

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the threshold of his court. Gripping her bronze spear,
 she looked for all the world like a stranger now,
 like Mentès, lord of the Taphians.
 There she found the swaggering suitors, just then
 amusing themselves with rolling dice before the doors,
 lounging on hides of oxen they had killed themselves.
 While heralds and brisk attendants bustled round them,
 some at the mixing-bowls, mulling wine and water,
 others wiping the tables down with sopping sponges,
 setting them out in place, still other servants
 jointed and carved the great sides of meat.

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First by far to see her was Prince Telemachus,
 sitting among the suitors, heart obsessed with grief.
 He could almost see his magnificent father, here . . .
 in the mind's eye—if only *he* might drop from the clouds
 and drive these suitors all in a rout throughout the halls
 and regain his pride of place and rule his own domains!
 Daydreaming so as he sat among the suitors,
 he glimpsed Athena now
 and straight to the porch he went, mortified
 that a guest might still be standing at the doors.
 Pausing beside her there, he clasped her right hand
 and relieving her at once of her long bronze spear,
 met her with winged words: "Greetings, stranger!
 Here in our house you'll find a royal welcome.
 Have supper first, then tell us what you need."

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He led the way and Pallas Athena followed.
 Once in the high-roofed hall, he took her lance
 and fixed it firm in a burnished rack against
 a sturdy pillar, there where row on row of spears,
 embattled Odysseus' spears, stood stacked and waiting.
 Then he escorted her to a high, elaborate chair of honor,
 over it draped a cloth, and here he placed his guest
 with a stool to rest her feet. But for himself
 he drew up a low reclining chair beside her,
 richly painted, clear of the press of suitors,

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concerned his guest, offended by their uproar,
 might shrink from food in the midst of such a mob.
 He hoped, what's more, to ask him about his long-lost father.
 A maid brought water soon in a graceful golden pitcher
 and over a silver basin tipped it out
 so they might rinse their hands,
 then pulled a gleaming table to their side.
 A staid housekeeper brought on bread to serve them,
 appetizers aplenty too, lavish with her bounty.
 A carver lifted platters of meat toward them,
 meats of every sort, and set beside them golden cups
 and time and again a page came round and poured them wine.

But now the suitors trooped in with all their swagger
 and took their seats on low and high-backed chairs.
 Heralds poured water over their hands for rinsing,
 serving maids brought bread heaped high in trays
 and the young men brimmed the mixing-bowls with wine.
 They reached out for the good things that lay at hand,
 and when they'd put aside desire for food and drink
 the suitors set their minds on other pleasures,
 song and dancing, all that crowns a feast.
 A herald placed an ornate lyre in Phemius' hands,
 the bard who always performed among them there;
 they forced the man to sing.

A rippling prelude—
 and no sooner had he struck up his rousing song
 than Telemachus, head close to Athena's sparkling eyes,
 spoke low to his guest so no one else could hear:
 "Dear stranger, would you be shocked by what I say?
 Look at them over there. Not a care in the world,
 just lyres and tunes! It's easy for them, all right,
 they feed on another's goods and go scot-free—
 a man whose white bones lie strewn in the rain somewhere,
 rotting away on land or rolling down the ocean's salty swells.
 But that man—if they caught sight of him home in Ithaca,
 by god, they'd all pray to be faster on their feet
 than richer in bars of gold and heavy robes.

But now, no use, he's died a wretched death.
 No comfort's left for us . . . not even if
 someone, somewhere, says he's coming home.
 The day of his return will never dawn.

Enough.

Tell me about yourself now, clearly, point by point.
 Who are you? where are you from? your city? your parents?
 What sort of vessel brought you? Why did the sailors
 land you here in Ithaca? Who did they say they are?
 I hardly think you came this way on foot!
 And tell me this for a fact—I need to know—
 is this your first time here? Or are you a friend of father's,
 a guest from the old days? Once, crowds of other men
 would come to our house on visits—visitor that he was,
 when he walked among the living."

Her eyes glinting,

goddess Athena answered, "My whole story, of course,
 I'll tell it point by point. Wise old Anchialus
 was my father. My own name is Mentès,
 lord of the Taphian men who love their oars.
 And here I've come, just now, with ship and crew,
 sailing the wine-dark sea to foreign ports of call,
 to Temese, out for bronze—our cargo gleaming iron.
 Our ship lies moored off farmlands far from town,
 riding in Rithron Cove, beneath Mount Nion's woods.
 As for the ties between your father and myself,
 we've been friends forever, I'm proud to say,
 and he would bear me out
 if you went and questioned old lord Laertes.
 He, I gather, no longer ventures into town
 but lives a life of hardship, all to himself,
 off on his farmstead with an aged serving-woman
 who tends him well, who gives him food and drink
 when weariness has taken hold of his withered limbs
 from hauling himself along his vineyard's steep slopes.
 And now I've come—and why? I heard that he was back . . .
 your father, that is. But no, the gods thwart his passage.
 Yet I tell you great Odysseus is not dead. He's still alive,

somewhere in this wide world, held captive, out at sea
on a wave-washed island, and hard men, savages,
somehow hold him back against his will.

Wait,

I'll make you a prophecy, one the immortal gods
have planted in my mind—it will come true, I think,
though I am hardly a seer or know the flights of birds.
He won't be gone long from the native land he loves,
not even if iron shackles bind your father down.
He's plotting a way to journey home at last;
he's never at a loss.

But come, please,
tell me about yourself now, point by point.
You're truly Odysseus' son? You've sprung up so!
Uncanny resemblance . . . the head, and the fine eyes—
I see him now. How often we used to meet in the old days
before he embarked for Troy, where other Argive captains,
all the best men, sailed in the long curved ships.
From then to this very day
I've not set eyes on Odysseus or he on me."

And young Telemachus cautiously replied,
"I'll try, my friend, to give you a frank answer.
Mother has always told me I'm his son, it's true,
but I am not so certain. Who, on his own,
has ever really known who gave him life?
Would to god I'd been the son of a happy man
whom old age overtook in the midst of his possessions!
Now, think of the most unlucky mortal ever born—
since you ask me, yes, they say I am his son."

"Still," the clear-eyed goddess reassured him,
"trust me, the gods have not marked out your house
for such an unsung future,
not if Penelope has borne a son like you.
But tell me about all this and spare me nothing.
What's this banqueting, this crowd carousing here?
And what part do you play yourself? Some wedding-feast,

some festival? Hardly a potluck supper, I would say.
How obscenely they lounge and swagger here, look,
gorging in your house. Why, any man of sense
who chanced among them would be outraged,
seeing such behavior."

Ready Telemachus

took her up at once: "Well, my friend,
seeing you want to probe and press the question,
once this house was rich, no doubt, beyond reproach
when the man you mentioned still lived here, at home.
Now the gods have reversed our fortunes with a vengeance—
wiped that man from the earth like no one else before.
I would never have grieved so much about his death
if he'd gone down with comrades off in Troy
or died in the arms of loved ones,
once he had wound down the long coil of war.
Then all united Achaea would have raised his tomb
and he'd have won his son great fame for years to come.
But now the whirlwinds have ripped him away, no fame for him!
He's lost and gone now—out of sight, out of mind—and I . . .
he's left me tears and grief. Nor do I rack my heart
and grieve for him alone. No longer. Now the gods
have invented other miseries to plague me.

Listen.

All the nobles who rule the islands round about,
Dulichion, and Same, and wooded Zacynthus too,
and all who lord it in rocky Ithaca as well—
down to the last man they court my mother,
they lay waste my house! And mother . . .
she neither rejects a marriage she despises
nor can she bear to bring the courting to an end—
while they continue to bleed my household white.
Soon—you wait—they'll grind *me* down as well."

"Shameful!"—

brimming with indignation, Pallas Athena broke out.
"Oh how much you need Odysseus, gone so long—
how *he'd* lay hands on all these brazen suitors!
If only he would appear, now,

at his house's outer gates and take his stand,
 armed with his helmet, shield and pair of spears,
 as strong as the man I glimpsed that first time
 in our own house, drinking wine and reveling there . . .
 just come in from Ephyra, visiting Ilus, Mermerus' son.
 Odysseus sailed that way, you see, in his swift trim ship,
 hunting deadly poison to smear on his arrows' bronze heads.
 Ilus refused—he feared the wrath of the everlasting gods—
 but father, so fond of him, gave him all he wanted.
 If only *that* Odysseus sported with these suitors,
 a blood wedding, a quick death would take the lot!
 True, but all lies in the lap of the great gods,
 whether or not he'll come and pay them back,
 here, in his own house.

But you, I urge you,
 think how to drive these suitors from your halls.
 Come now, listen closely. Take my words to heart.
 At daybreak summon the island's lords to full assembly,
 give your orders to all and call the gods to witness:
 tell the suitors to scatter, each to his own place.
 As for your mother, if the spirit moves her to marry,
 let her go back to her father's house, a man of power.
 Her kin will arrange the wedding, provide the gifts,
 the array that goes with a daughter dearly loved.

For you,

I have some good advice, if only you will accept it.
 Fit out a ship with twenty oars, the best in sight,
 sail in quest of news of your long-lost father.
 Someone may tell you something
 or you may catch a rumor straight from Zeus,
 rumor that carries news to men like nothing else.
 First go down to Pylos, question old King Nestor,
 then cross over to Sparta, to red-haired Menelaus,
 of all the bronze-armored Achaeans the last man back.
 Now, if you hear your father's alive and heading home,
 hard-pressed as you are, brave out one more year.
 If you hear he's dead, no longer among the living,
 then back you come to the native land you love,

raise his grave-mound, build his honors high
 with the full funeral rites that he deserves—
 and give your mother to another husband.

Then,

once you've sealed those matters, seen them through,
 think hard, reach down deep in your heart and soul
 for a way to kill these suitors in your house,
 by stealth or in open combat.
 You must not cling to your boyhood any longer—
 it's time you were a man. Haven't you heard
 what glory Prince Orestes won throughout the world
 when he killed that cunning, murderous Aegisthus,
 who'd killed his famous father?

And you, my friend—

how tall and handsome I see you now—be brave, you too,
 so men to come will sing your praises down the years.
 But now I must go back to my swift trim ship
 and all my shipmates, chafing there, I'm sure,
 waiting for my return. It all rests with you.
 Take my words to heart.”

“Oh stranger,”

heedful Telemachus replied, “indeed I will.
 You've counseled me with so much kindness now,
 like a father to a son. I won't forget a word.
 But come, stay longer, keen as you are to sail,
 so you can bathe and rest and lift your spirits,
 then go back to your ship, delighted with a gift,
 a prize of honor, something rare and fine
 as a keepsake from myself. The kind of gift
 a host will give a stranger, friend to friend.”

Her eyes glinting, Pallas declined in haste:

“Not now. Don't hold me here. I long to be on my way.
 As for the gift—whatever you'd give in kindness—
 save it for my return so I can take it home.
 Choose something rare and fine, and a good reward
 that gift is going to bring you.”

With that promise,

off and away Athena the bright-eyed goddess flew
like a bird in soaring flight
but left his spirit filled with nerve and courage,
charged with his father's memory more than ever now.
He felt his senses quicken, overwhelmed with wonder—
this was a god, he knew it well and made at once
for the suitors, a man like a god himself.

Amidst them still

the famous bard sang on, and they sat in silence, listening
as he performed The Achaeans' Journey Home from Troy:
all the blows Athena doomed them to endure.

And now,

from high above in her room and deep in thought,
she caught his inspired strains . . .
Icarius' daughter Penelope, wary and reserved,
and down the steep stair from her chamber she descended,
not alone: two of her women followed close behind.
That radiant woman, once she reached her suitors,
drawing her glistening veil across her cheeks,
paused now where a column propped the sturdy roof,
with one of her loyal handmaids stationed either side.
Suddenly, dissolving in tears and bursting through
the bard's inspired voice, she cried out, "Phemius!
So many other songs you know to hold us spellbound,
works of the gods and men that singers celebrate.
Sing one of those as you sit beside them here
and they drink their wine in silence.

But break off this song—

the unendurable song that always rends the heart inside me . . .
the unforgettable grief, it wounds me most of all!
How I long for my husband—alive in memory, always,
that great man whose fame resounds through Hellas
right to the depths of Argos!"

"Why, mother,"

poised Telemachus put in sharply, "why deny
our devoted bard the chance to entertain us
any way the spirit stirs him on?
Bards are not to blame—

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Zeus is to blame. He deals to each and every
laborer on this earth whatever doom he pleases.
Why fault the bard if he sings the Argives' harsh fate?
It's always the latest song, the one that echoes last
in the listeners' ears, that people praise the most.
Courage, mother. Harden your heart, and listen.
Odysseus was scarcely the only one, you know,
whose journey home was blotted out at Troy.
Others, so many others, died there too.

So, mother,

go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks,
the distaff and the loom, and keep the women
working hard as well. As for giving orders,
men will see to that, but I most of all:
I hold the reins of power in this house."

Astonished,

she withdrew to her own room. She took to heart
the clear good sense in what her son had said.
Climbing up to the lofty chamber with her women,
she fell to weeping for Odysseus, her beloved husband,
till watchful Athena sealed her eyes with welcome sleep.

But the suitors broke into uproar through the shadowed halls,
all of them lifting prayers to lie beside her, share her bed,
until discreet Telemachus took command: "You suitors
who plague my mother, you, you insolent, overweening . . .
for this evening let us dine and take our pleasure,
no more shouting now. What a fine thing it is
to listen to such a bard as we have here—
the man sings like a god.

But at first light

we all march forth to assembly, take our seats
so I can give my orders and say to you straight out:
You must leave my palace! See to your feasting elsewhere,
devour your own possessions, house to house by turns.
But if you decide the fare is better, richer here,
destroying one man's goods and going scot-free,
all right then, carve away!

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But I'll cry out to the everlasting gods in hopes
that Zeus will pay you back with a vengeance—all of you
destroyed in my house while I go scot-free myself!"

So Telemachus declared. And they all bit their lips,
amazed the prince could speak with so much daring.

Eupithes' son Antinous broke their silence:
"Well, Telemachus, only the gods could teach you
to sound so high and mighty! Such brave talk.
I pray that Zeus will never make *you* king of Ithaca,
though your father's crown is no doubt yours by birth."

But cool-headed Telemachus countered firmly:
"Antinous, even though my words may offend you,
I'd be happy to take the crown if Zeus presents it.
You think that nothing worse could befall a man?
It's really not so bad to be a king. All at once
your palace grows in wealth, your honors grow as well.
But there are hosts of other Achaean princes, look—
young and old, crowds of them on our island here—
and any one of the lot might hold the throne,
now great Odysseus is dead . . .
But I'll be lord of my own house and servants,
all that King Odysseus won for me by force."

And now Eurymachus, Polybus' son, stepped in:
"Surely this must lie in the gods' lap, Telemachus—
which Achaean will lord it over seagirt Ithaca.
Do hold on to your own possessions, rule your house.
God forbid that anyone tear your holdings from your hands
while men still live in Ithaca.

But about your guest,
dear boy, I have some questions. Where does he come from?
Where's his country, his birth, his father's old estates?
Did he bring some news of your father, his return?
Or did he come on business of his own?
How he leapt to his feet and off he went!

No waiting around for proper introductions.
And no mean man, not by the looks of him, I'd say."

"Eurymachus," Telemachus answered shrewdly, 470
"clearly my father's journey home is lost forever.
I no longer trust in rumors—rumors from the blue—
nor bother with any prophecy, when mother calls
some wizard into the house to ask him questions.
As for the stranger though,
the man's an old family friend, from Taphos,
wise Anchialus' son. He says his name is Mentès,
lord of the Taphian men who love their oars."

So he said

but deep in his mind he knew the immortal goddess. 480
Now the suitors turned to dance and song,
to the lovely beat and sway,
waiting for dusk to come upon them there . . .
and the dark night came upon them, lost in pleasure.
Finally, to bed. Each to his own house.

Telemachus,
off to his bedroom built in the fine courtyard—
a commanding, lofty room set well apart—
retired too, his spirit swarming with misgivings.
His devoted nurse attended him, bearing a glowing torch,
Eurycleia the daughter of Ops, Pisenor's son. 490
Laertes had paid a price for the woman years ago,
still in the bloom of youth. He traded twenty oxen,
honored her on a par with his own loyal wife at home
but fearing the queen's anger, never shared her bed.
She was his grandson's escort now and bore a torch,
for she was the one of all the maids who loved
the prince the most—she'd nursed him as a baby.
He spread the doors of his snug, well-made room,
sat down on the bed and pulled his soft shirt off,
tossed it into the old woman's conscientious hands, 500
and after folding it neatly, patting it smooth,
she hung it up on a peg beside his corded bed,
then padded from the bedroom,

drawing the door shut with the silver hook,
sliding the doorbolt home with its rawhide strap.
There all night long, wrapped in a sheep's warm fleece,
he weighed in his mind the course Athena charted.



In the One-Eyed Giant's Cave

Odysseus, the great teller of tales, launched out on his story:
 "Alcinous, majesty, shining among your island people,
 what a fine thing it is to listen to such a bard
 as we have here—the man sings like a god.
 The crown of life, I'd say. There's nothing better
 than when deep joy holds sway throughout the realm
 and banqueters up and down the palace sit in ranks,
 enthralled to hear the bard, and before them all, the tables
 heaped with bread and meats, and drawing wine from a mixing-bowl
 the steward makes his rounds and keeps the winecups flowing. 10
 This, to my mind, is the best that life can offer.

But now

you're set on probing the bitter pains I've borne,
 so I'm to weep and grieve, it seems, still more.
 Well then, what shall I go through first,

what shall I save for last?
 What pains—the gods have given me my share.
 Now let me begin by telling you my name . . .
 so you may know it well and I in times to come,
 if I can escape the fatal day, will be your host,
 your sworn friend, though my home is far from here.
 I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, known to the world
 for every kind of craft—my fame has reached the skies.
 Sunny Ithaca is my home. Atop her stands our seamark,
 Mount Neriton's leafy ridges shimmering in the wind.
 Around her a ring of islands circle side-by-side,
 Dulichion, Same, wooded Zacynthus too, but mine
 lies low and away, the farthest out to sea,
 rearing into the western dusk
 while the others face the east and breaking day.
 Mine is a rugged land but good for raising sons—
 and I myself, I know no sweeter sight on earth
 than a man's own native country.

True enough,
 Calypso the lustrous goddess tried to hold me back,
 deep in her arching caverns, craving me for a husband.
 So did Circe, holding me just as warmly in her halls,
 the bewitching queen of Aeaean keen to have me too.
 But they never won the heart inside me, never.
 So nothing is as sweet as a man's own country,
 his own parents, even though he's settled down
 in some luxurious house, off in a foreign land
 and far from those who bore him.

No more. Come,
 let me tell you about the voyage fraught with hardship
 Zeus inflicted on me, homeward bound from Troy . . .

The wind drove me out of Ilium on to Ismarus,
 the Cicones' stronghold. There I sacked the city,
 killed the men, but as for the wives and plunder,
 that rich haul we dragged away from the place—
 we shared it round so no one, not on my account,
 would go deprived of his fair share of spoils.

Then I urged them to cut and run, set sail,
 but would they listen? Not those mutinous fools;
 there was too much wine to swill, too many sheep to slaughter
 down along the beach, and shambling longhorn cattle.
 And all the while the Cicones sought out other Cicones,
 called for help from their neighbors living inland:
 a larger force, and stronger soldiers too,
 skilled hands at fighting men from chariots,
 skilled, when a crisis broke, to fight on foot.
 Out of the morning mist they came against us—
 packed as the leaves and spears that flower forth in spring—
 and Zeus presented us with disaster, me and my comrades
 doomed to suffer blow on mortal blow. Lining up,
 both armies battled it out against our swift ships,
 both raked each other with hurtling bronze lances.
 Long as morning rose and the blessed day grew stronger
 we stood and fought them off, massed as they were, but then,
 when the sun wheeled past the hour for unyoking oxen,
 the Cicones broke our lines and beat us down at last.
 Out of each ship, six men-at-arms were killed;
 the rest of us rowed away from certain doom.

From there we sailed on, glad to escape our death
 yet sick at heart for the dear companions we had lost.
 But I would not let our rolling ships set sail until the crews
 had raised the triple cry, saluting each poor comrade
 cut down by the fierce Cicones on that plain.
 Now Zeus who masses the stormclouds hit the fleet
 with the North Wind—

a howling, demonic gale, shrouding over
 in thunderheads the earth and sea at once—

and night swept down
 from the sky and the ships went plunging headlong on,
 our sails slashed to rags by the hurricane's blast!
 We struck them—cringing at death we rowed our ships
 to the nearest shoreline, pulled with all our power.
 There, for two nights, two days, we lay by, no letup,
 eating our hearts out, bent with pain and bone-tired.

When Dawn with her lovely locks brought on the third day,
then stepping the masts and hoisting white sails high,
we lounged at the oarlocks, letting wind and helmsmen
keep us true on course . . .

And now, at long last,
I might have reached my native land unscathed,
but just as I doubled Malea's cape, a tide-rip
and the North Wind drove me way off course
careering past Cythera.

Nine whole days
I was borne along by rough, deadly winds
on the fish-infested sea. Then on the tenth
our squadron reached the land of the Lotus-eaters,
people who eat the lotus, mellow fruit and flower.
We disembarked on the coast, drew water there
and crewmen snatched a meal by the swift ships.
Once we'd had our fill of food and drink I sent
a detail ahead, two picked men and a third, a runner,
to scout out who might live there—men like us perhaps,
who live on bread? So off they went and soon enough
they mingled among the natives, Lotus-eaters, Lotus-eaters
who had no notion of killing my companions, not at all,
they simply gave them the lotus to taste instead . . .
Any crewmen who ate the lotus, the honey-sweet fruit,
lost all desire to send a message back, much less return,
their only wish to linger there with the Lotus-eaters,
grazing on lotus, all memory of the journey home
dissolved forever. But I brought them back, back
to the hollow ships, and streaming tears—I forced them,
hauled them under the rowing benches, lashed them fast
and shouted out commands to my other, steady comrades:
'Quick, no time to lose, embark in the racing ships!'
so none could eat the lotus, forget the voyage home.
They swung aboard at once, they sat to the oars in ranks
and in rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke.

From there we sailed on, our spirits now at a low ebb,
and reached the land of the high and mighty Cyclops,

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lawless brutes, who trust so to the everlasting gods
they never plant with their own hands or plow the soil.
Unsovn, unplowed, the earth teems with all they need,
wheat, barley and vines, swelled by the rains of Zeus
to yield a big full-bodied wine from clustered grapes.
They have no meeting place for council, no laws either,
no, up on the mountain peaks they live in arching caverns—
each a law to himself, ruling his wives and children,
not a care in the world for any neighbor.

Now,
a level island stretches flat across the harbor,
not close inshore to the Cyclops' coast, not too far out,
thick with woods where the wild goats breed by hundreds.
No trampling of men to start them from their lairs,
no hunters roughing it out on the woody ridges,
stalking quarry, ever raid their haven.
No flocks browse, no plowlands roll with wheat;
unplowed, unsovn forever—empty of humankind—
the island just feeds droves of bleating goats.
For the Cyclops have no ships with crimson prows,
no shipwrights there to build them good trim craft
that could sail them out to foreign ports of call
as most men risk the seas to trade with other men.
Such artisans would have made this island too
a decent place to live in . . . No mean spot,
it could bear you any crop you like in season.
The water-meadows along the low foaming shore
run soft and moist, and your vines would never flag.
The land's clear for plowing. Harvest on harvest,
a man could reap a healthy stand of grain—
the subsoil's dark and rich.
There's a snug deep-water harbor there, what's more,
no need for mooring-gear, no anchor-stones to heave,
no cables to make fast. Just beach your keels, ride out
the days till your shipmates' spirit stirs for open sea
and a fair wind blows. And last, at the harbor's head
there's a spring that rushes fresh from beneath a cave
and black poplars flourish round its mouth.

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Well,

here we landed, and surely a god steered us in
 through the pitch-black night.
 Not that he ever showed himself, with thick fog
 swirling around the ships, the moon wrapped in clouds
 and not a glimmer stealing through that gloom.
 Not one of us glimpsed the island—scanning hard—
 or the long combers rolling us slowly toward the coast,
 not till our ships had run their keels ashore.
 Beaching our vessels smoothly, striking sail,
 the crews swung out on the low shelving sand
 and there we fell asleep, awaiting Dawn's first light.

160

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
 we all turned out, intrigued to tour the island.
 The local nymphs, the daughters of Zeus himself,
 flushed mountain-goats so the crews could make their meal.
 Quickly we fetched our curved bows and hunting spears
 from the ships and, splitting up into three bands,
 we started shooting, and soon enough some god
 had sent us bags of game to warm our hearts.
 A dozen vessels sailed in my command
 and to each crew nine goats were shared out
 and mine alone took ten. Then all day long
 till the sun went down we sat and feasted well
 on sides of meat and rounds of heady wine.
 The good red stock in our vessels' holds
 had not run out, there was still plenty left;
 the men had carried off a generous store in jars
 when we stormed and sacked the Cicones' holy city.
 Now we stared across at the Cyclops' shore, so near
 we could even see their smoke, hear their voices,
 their bleating sheep and goats . . .
 And then when the sun had set and night came on
 we lay down and slept at the water's shelving edge.
 When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
 I called a muster briskly, commanding all the hands,
 'The rest of you stay here, my friends-in-arms.

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I'll go across with my own ship and crew
 and probe the natives living over there.
 What *are* they—violent, savage, lawless?
 or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?'

With that I boarded ship and told the crew
 to embark at once and cast off cables quickly.
 They swung aboard, they sat to the oars in ranks
 and in rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke.
 But as soon as we reached the coast I mentioned—no long trip—
 we spied a cavern just at the shore, gaping above the surf,
 towering, overgrown with laurel. And here big flocks,
 sheep and goats, were stalled to spend the nights,
 and around its mouth a yard was walled up
 with quarried boulders sunk deep in the earth
 and enormous pines and oak-trees looming darkly . . .
 Here was a giant's lair, in fact, who always pastured
 his sheepflocks far afield and never mixed with others.
 A grim loner, dead set in his own lawless ways.
 Here was a piece of work, by god, a monster
 built like no mortal who ever supped on bread,
 no, like a shaggy peak, I'd say—a man-mountain
 rearing head and shoulders over the world.

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Now then,

I told most of my good trusty crew to wait,
 to sit tight by the ship and guard her well
 while I picked out my dozen finest fighters
 and off I went. But I took a skin of wine along,
 the ruddy, irresistible wine that Maron gave me once,
 Euanthes' son, a priest of Apollo, lord of Ismarus,
 because we'd rescued him, his wife and children,
 reverent as we were;
 he lived, you see, in Apollo's holy grove.
 And so in return he gave me splendid gifts,
 he handed me seven bars of well-wrought gold,
 a mixing-bowl of solid silver, then this wine . . .
 He drew it off in generous wine-jars, twelve in all,
 all unmixed—and such a bouquet, a drink fit for the gods!

220

No maid or man of his household knew that secret store,
 only himself, his loving wife and a single servant. 230
 Whenever they'd drink the deep-red mellow vintage,
 twenty cups of water he'd stir in one of wine
 and what an aroma wafted from the bowl—
 what magic, what a godsend—
 no joy in holding back when *that* was poured!
 Filling a great goatskin now, I took this wine,
 provisions too in a leather sack. A sudden foreboding
 told my fighting spirit I'd soon come up against
 some giant clad in power like armor-plate—
 a savage deaf to justice, blind to law. 240

Our party quickly made its way to his cave
 but we failed to find our host himself inside;
 he was off in his pasture, ranging his sleek flocks.
 So we explored his den, gazing wide-eyed at it all,
 the large flat racks loaded with drying cheeses,
 the folds crowded with young lambs and kids,
 split into three groups—here the spring-born,
 here mid-yearlings, here the fresh sucklings
 off to the side—each sort was penned apart.
 And all his vessels, pails and hammered buckets 250
 he used for milking, were brimming full with whey.
 From the start my comrades pressed me, pleading hard,
 'Let's make away with the cheeses, then come back—
 hurry, drive the lambs and kids from the pens
 to our swift ship, put out to sea at once!'
 But I would not give way—
 and how much better it would have been—
 not till I saw him, saw what gifts he'd give.
 But he proved no lovely sight to my companions.

There we built a fire, set our hands on the cheeses, 260
 offered some to the gods and ate the bulk ourselves
 and settled down inside, awaiting his return . . .
 And back he came from pasture, late in the day,
 herding his flocks home, and lugging a huge load

of good dry logs to fuel his fire at supper.
 He flung them down in the cave—a jolting crash—
 we scuttled in panic into the deepest dark recess.
 And next he drove his sleek flocks into the open vault,
 all he'd milk at least, but he left the males outside,
 rams and billy goats out in the high-walled yard. 270
 Then to close his door he hoisted overhead
 a tremendous, massive slab—
 no twenty-two wagons, rugged and four-wheeled,
 could budge that boulder off the ground, I tell you,
 such an immense stone the monster wedged to block his cave!
 Then down he squatted to milk his sheep and bleating goats,
 each in order, and put a suckling underneath each dam.
 And half of the fresh white milk he curdled quickly,
 set it aside in wicker racks to press for cheese, 280
 the other half let stand in pails and buckets,
 ready at hand to wash his supper down.
 As soon as he'd briskly finished all his chores
 he lit his fire and spied us in the blaze and
 'Strangers!' he thundered out, 'now who are you?
 Where did you sail from, over the running sea-lanes?
 Out on a trading spree or roving the waves like pirates,
 sea-wolves raiding at will, who risk their lives
 to plunder other men?'

The hearts inside us shook,
 terrified by his rumbling voice and monstrous hulk.
 Nevertheless I found the nerve to answer, firmly, 290
 'Men of Achaea we are and bound now from Troy!
 Driven far off course by the warring winds,
 over the vast gulf of the sea—battling home
 on a strange tack, a route that's off the map,
 and so we've come to you . . .
 so it must please King Zeus's plotting heart.
 We're glad to say we're men of Atrides Agamemnon,
 whose fame is the proudest thing on earth these days,
 so great a city he sacked, such multitudes he killed!
 But since we've chanced on you, we're at your knees 300
 in hopes of a warm welcome, even a guest-gift,

the sort that hosts give strangers. That's the custom.
Respect the gods, my friend. We're suppliants—at your mercy!
Zeus of the Strangers guards all guests and suppliants:
strangers are sacred—Zeus will avenge their rights!

'Stranger,' he grumbled back from his brutal heart,
'you must be a fool, stranger, or come from nowhere,
telling *me* to fear the gods or avoid their wrath!
We Cyclops never blink at Zeus and Zeus's shield
of storm and thunder, or any other blessed god—
we've got more force by far. 310
I'd never spare you in fear of Zeus's hatred,
you or your comrades here, unless I had the urge.
But tell me, where did you moor your sturdy ship
when you arrived? Up the coast or close in?
I'd just like to know.'

So he laid his trap
but he never caught me, no, wise to the world
I shot back in my crafty way, 'My ship?
Poseidon god of the earthquake smashed my ship,
he drove it against the rocks at your island's far cape, 320
he dashed it against a cliff as the winds rode us in.
I and the men you see escaped a sudden death.'

Not a word in reply to that, the ruthless brute.
Lurching up, he lunged out with his hands toward my men
and snatching two at once, rapping them on the ground
he knocked them dead like pups—
their brains gushed out all over, soaked the floor—
and ripping them limb from limb to fix his meal
he bolted them down like a mountain-lion, left no scrap,
devoured entrails, flesh and bones, marrow and all! 330
We flung our arms to Zeus, we wept and cried aloud,
looking on at his grisly work—paralyzed, appalled.
But once the Cyclops had stuffed his enormous gut
with human flesh, washing it down with raw milk,
he slept in his cave, stretched out along his flocks.
And I with my fighting heart, I thought at first

to steal up to him, draw the sharp sword at my hip
and stab his chest where the midriff packs the liver—
I groped for the fatal spot but a fresh thought held me back.
There at a stroke we'd finish off ourselves as well— 340
how could *we* with our bare hands heave back
that slab he set to block his cavern's gaping maw?
So we lay there groaning, waiting Dawn's first light.

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
the monster relit his fire and milked his handsome ewes,
each in order, putting a suckling underneath each dam,
and as soon as he'd briskly finished all his chores
he snatched up two more men and fixed his meal.
Well-fed, he drove his fat sheep from the cave,
lightly lifting the huge doorslab up and away, 350
then slipped it back in place
as a hunter flips the lid of his quiver shut.
Piercing whistles—turning his flocks to the hills
he left me there, the heart inside me brooding on revenge:
how could I pay him back? would Athena give me glory?
Here was the plan that struck my mind as best . . .
the Cyclops' great club: there it lay by the pens,
olivewood, full of sap. He'd lopped it off to brandish
once it dried. Looking it over, we judged it big enough
to be the mast of a pitch-black ship with her twenty oars, 360
a freighter broad in the beam that plows through miles of sea—
so long, so thick it bulked before our eyes. Well,
flanking it now, I chopped off a fathom's length,
rolled it to comrades, told them to plane it down,
and they made the club smooth as I bent and shaved
the tip to a stabbing point. I turned it over
the blazing fire to char it good and hard,
then hid it well, buried deep under the dung
that littered the cavern's floor in thick wet clumps.
And now I ordered my shipmates all to cast lots— 370
who'd brave it out with me
to hoist our stake and grind it into his eye
when sleep had overcome him? Luck of the draw:

I got the very ones I would have picked myself,
four good men, and I in the lead made five . . .

Nightfall brought him back, herding his woolly sheep
and he quickly drove the sleek flock into the vaulted cavern,
rams and all—none left outside in the walled yard—
his own idea, perhaps, or a god led him on.

Then he hoisted the huge slab to block the door
and squatted to milk his sheep and bleating goats,
each in order, putting a suckling underneath each dam,
and as soon as he'd briskly finished all his chores
he snatched up two more men and fixed his meal.

But this time I lifted a carved wooden bowl,
brimful of my ruddy wine,
and went right up to the Cyclops, enticing,
'Here, Cyclops, try this wine—to top off
the banquet of human flesh you've bolted down!
Judge for yourself what stock our ship had stored.
I brought it here to make you a fine libation,
hoping you would pity me, Cyclops, send me home,
but your rages are insufferable. You barbarian—
how can any man on earth come visit you after *this*?
What you've done outrages all that's right!'

At that he seized the bowl and tossed it off
and the heady wine pleased him immensely—'More'—
he demanded a second bowl—a hearty helping!
And tell me your name now, quickly,
so I can hand my guest a gift to warm *his* heart.
Our soil yields the Cyclops powerful, full-bodied wine
and the rains from Zeus build its strength. But this,
this is nectar, ambrosia—this flows from heaven!'

So he declared. I poured him another fiery bowl—
three bowls I brimmed and three he drank to the last drop,
the fool, and then, when the wine was swirling round his brain,
I approached my host with a cordial, winning word:
'So, you ask me the name I'm known by, Cyclops?

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I will tell you. But you must give me a guest-gift
as you've promised. Nobody—that's my name. Nobody—
so my mother and father call me, all my friends.'

410

But he boomed back at me from his ruthless heart,
'Nobody? I'll eat Nobody last of all his friends—
I'll eat the others first! That's my gift to *you!*'

With that

he toppled over, sprawled full-length, flat on his back
and lay there, his massive neck slumping to one side,
and sleep that conquers all overwhelmed him now
as wine came spurting, flooding up from his gullet
with chunks of human flesh—he vomited, blind drunk.

Now, at last, I thrust our stake in a bed of embers
to get it red-hot and rallied all my comrades:

420

'Courage—no panic, no one hang back now!'

And green as it was, just as the olive stake
was about to catch fire—the glow terrific, yes—

I dragged it from the flames, my men clustering round
as some god breathed enormous courage through us all.

Hoisting high that olive stake with its stabbing point,
straight into the monster's eye they rammed it hard—

I drove my weight on it from above and bored it home
as a shipwright bores his beam with a shipwright's drill

430

that men below, whipping the strap back and forth, whirl
and the drill keeps twisting faster, never stopping—

So we seized our stake with its fiery tip
and bored it round and round in the giant's eye

till blood came boiling up around that smoking shaft
and the hot blast singed his brow and eyelids round the core

and the broiling eyeball burst—

its crackling roots blazed

and hissed—

as a blacksmith plunges a glowing ax or adze
in an ice-cold bath and the metal screeches steam

and its temper hardens—that's the iron's strength—

440

so the eye of the Cyclops sizzled round that stake!

He loosed a hideous roar, the rock walls echoed round

and we scuttled back in terror. The monster wrenched the spike from his eye and out it came with a red geyser of blood—he flung it aside with frantic hands, and mad with pain he bellowed out for help from his neighbor Cyclops living round about in caves on windswept crags. Hearing his cries, they lumbered up from every side and hulking round his cavern, asked what ailed him: ‘What, Polyphemus, what in the world’s the trouble?’
 Roaring out in the godsent night to rob us of our sleep. . . . Surely no one’s rustling your flocks against your will—surely no one’s trying to kill you now by fraud or force!’

450

‘Nobody, friends’—Polyphemus bellowed back from his cave—‘Nobody’s killing me now by fraud and not by force!’

‘If you’re alone,’ his friends boomed back at once, ‘and nobody’s trying to overpower you now—look, it must be a plague sent here by mighty Zeus and there’s no escape from *that*. You’d better pray to your father, Lord Poseidon.’

460

They lumbered off, but laughter filled my heart to think how nobody’s name—my great cunning stroke—had duped them one and all. But the Cyclops there, still groaning, racked with agony, groped around for the huge slab, and heaving it from the doorway, down he sat in the cave’s mouth, his arms spread wide, hoping to catch a comrade stealing out with sheep—such a blithering fool he took me for! But I was already plotting . . . what was the best way out? how could I find escape from death for my crew, myself as well? My wits kept weaving, weaving cunning schemes—life at stake, monstrous death staring us in the face—till this plan struck my mind as best. That flock, those well-fed rams with their splendid thick fleece, sturdy, handsome beasts sporting their dark weight of wool:

470

I lashed them abreast, quietly, twisting the willow-twigs the Cyclops slept on—giant, lawless brute—I took them three by three; each ram in the middle bore a man while the two rams either side would shield him well. So three beasts to bear each man, but as for myself? There was one bellwether ram, the prize of all the flock, and clutching him by his back, tucked up under his shaggy belly, there I hung, face upward, both hands locked in his marvelous deep fleece, clinging for dear life, my spirit steeled, enduring So we held on, desperate, waiting Dawn’s first light.

480

As soon

as young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more the rams went rumbling out of the cave toward pasture, the ewes kept bleating round the pens, unmilked, their udders about to burst. Their master now, heaving in torment, felt the back of each animal halting before him here, but the idiot never sensed my men were trussed up under their thick fleecy ribs. And last of them all came my great ram now, striding out, weighed down with his dense wool and my deep plots. Stroking him gently, powerful Polyphemus murmured, ‘Dear old ram, why last of the flock to quit the cave? In the good old days you’d never lag behind the rest—you with your long marching strides, first by far of the flock to graze the fresh young grasses, first by far to reach the rippling streams, first to turn back home, keen for your fold when night comes on—but now you’re last of all. And why? Sick at heart for your master’s eye that coward gouged out with his wicked crew?—only after he’d stunned my wits with wine—that, that Nobody . . . who’s not escaped his death, I swear, not yet. Oh if only you thought like *me*, had words like *me* to tell me where that scoundrel is cringing from my rage! I’d smash him against the ground, I’d spill his brains—

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flooding across my cave—and that would ease my heart
of the pains that good-for-nothing Nobody made me suffer!’

And with that threat he let my ram go free outside.
But soon as we’d got one foot past cave and courtyard,
first I loosed myself from the ram, then loosed my men,
then quickly, glancing back again and again we drove
our flock, good plump beasts with their long shanks,
straight to the ship, and a welcome sight we were
to loyal comrades—we who’d escaped our deaths—
but for all the rest they broke down and wailed.
I cut it short, I stopped each shipmate’s cries,
my head tossing, brows frowning, silent signals
to hurry, tumble our fleecy herd on board,
launch out on the open sea!
They swung aboard, they sat to the oars in ranks
and in rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke.
But once offshore as far as a man’s shout can carry,
I called back to the Cyclops, stinging taunts:
‘So, Cyclops, no weak coward it was whose crew
you bent to devour there in your vaulted cave—
you with your brute force! Your filthy crimes
came down on your own head, you shameless cannibal,
daring to eat your guests in your own house—
so Zeus and the other gods have paid you back!’

That made the rage of the monster boil over.
Ripping off the peak of a towering crag, he heaved it
so hard the boulder landed just in front of our dark prow
and a huge swell reared up as the rock went plunging under—
a tidal wave from the open sea. The sudden backwash
drove us landward again, forcing us close inshore
but grabbing a long pole, I thrust us off and away,
tossing my head for dear life, signaling crews
to put their backs in the oars, escape grim death.
They threw themselves in the labor, rowed on fast
but once we’d plowed the breakers twice as far,
again I began to taunt the Cyclops—men around me

[458–92]

[493–523]

trying to check me, calm me, left and right:
‘So headstrong—why? Why rile the beast again?’ 550

‘That rock he flung in the sea just now, hurling our ship
to shore once more—we thought we’d die on the spot!’

‘If he’d caught a sound from one of us, just a moan,
he would have crushed our heads and ship timbers
with one heave of another flashing, jagged rock!’

‘Good god, the brute can throw!’

So they begged
but they could not bring my fighting spirit round.
I called back with another burst of anger, ‘Cyclops—
if any man on the face of the earth should ask you
who blinded you, shamed you so—say Odysseus,
raider of cities, *he* gouged out your eye,
Laertes’ son who makes his home in Ithaca!’ 560

So I vaunted and he groaned back in answer,
‘Oh no, no—that prophecy years ago . . .
it all comes home to me with a vengeance now!
We once had a prophet here, a great tall man,
Telemus, Eurymus’ son, a master at reading signs,
who grew old in his trade among his fellow-Cyclops.
All this, he warned me, would come to pass someday—
that I’d be blinded here at the hands of one Odysseus. 570
But I always looked for a handsome giant man to cross my path,
some fighter clad in power like armor-plate, but now,
look what a dwarf, a spineless good-for-nothing,
stuns me with wine, then gouges out my eye!
Come here, Odysseus, let me give you a guest-gift
and urge Poseidon the earthquake god to speed you home.
I am his son and he claims to be my father, true,
and he himself will heal me if he pleases—
no other blessed god, no man can do the work!’

‘Heal you!’—
here was my parting shot—‘Would to god I could strip you 580

of life and breath and ship you down to the House of Death
as surely as no one will ever heal your eye,
not even your earthquake god himself!

But at that he bellowed out to lord Poseidon,
thrusting his arms to the starry skies, and prayed, 'Hear me—
Poseidon, god of the sea-blue mane who rocks the earth!
If I really am your son and you claim to be my father—
come, grant that Odysseus, raider of cities,
Laertes' son who makes his home in Ithaca,
never reaches home. Or if he's fated to see
his people once again and reach his well-built house
and his own native country, let him come home late
and come a broken man—all shipmates lost,
alone in a stranger's ship—
and let him find a world of pain at home!'

So he prayed

and the god of the sea-blue mane, Poseidon, heard his prayer.
The monster suddenly hoisted a boulder—far larger—
wheeled and heaved it, putting his weight behind it,
massive strength, and the boulder crashed close,
landing just in the wake of our dark stern,
just failing to graze the rudder's bladed edge.
A huge swell reared up as the rock went plunging under,
yes, and the tidal breaker drove us out to our island's
far shore where all my well-decked ships lay moored,
clustered, waiting, and huddled round them, crewmen
sat in anguish, waiting, chafing for our return.
We beached our vessel hard ashore on the sand,
we swung out in the frothing surf ourselves,
and herding Cyclops' sheep from our deep holds
we shared them round so no one, not on my account,
would go deprived of his fair share of spoils.
But the splendid ram—as we meted out the flocks
my friends-in-arms made him my prize of honor,
mine alone, and I slaughtered him on the beach
and burnt his thighs to Cronus' mighty son,
Zeus of the thundercloud who rules the world.

590

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But my sacrifices failed to move the god:
Zeus was still obsessed with plans to destroy
my entire oarswept fleet and loyal crew of comrades.
Now all day long till the sun went down we sat
and feasted on sides of meat and heady wine.
Then when the sun had set and night came on
we lay down and slept at the water's shelving edge.
When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
I roused the men straightway, ordering all crews
to man the ships and cast off cables quickly.
They swung aboard at once, they sat to the oars in ranks
and in rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke.
And from there we sailed on, glad to escape our death
yet sick at heart for the comrades we had lost."

620

630



The Kingdom of the Dead

“Now down we came to the ship at the water’s edge,
we hauled and launched her into the sunlit breakers first,
stepped the mast in the black craft and set our sail
and loaded the sheep aboard, the ram and ewe,
then we ourselves embarked, streaming tears,
our hearts weighed down with anguish . . .
But Circe the awesome nymph with lovely braids
who speaks with human voice, sent us a hardy shipmate,
yes, a fresh following wind ruffling up in our wake,
bellying out our sail to drive our blue prow on as we,
securing the running gear from stem to stern, sat back
while the wind and helmsman kept her true on course.
The sail stretched taut as she cut the sea all day
and the sun sank and the roads of the world grew dark.

10

And she made the outer limits, the Ocean River's bounds
 where Cimmerian people have their homes—their realm and city
 shrouded in mist and cloud. The eye of the Sun can never
 flash his rays through the dark and bring them light,
 not when he climbs the starry skies or when he wheels
 back down from the heights to touch the earth once more— 20
 an endless, deadly night overhangs those wretched men.
 There, gaining that point, we beached our craft
 and herding out the sheep, we picked our way
 by the Ocean's banks until we gained the place
 that Circe made our goal.

Here at the spot

Perimedes and Eurylochus held the victims fast,
 and I, drawing my sharp sword from beside my hip,
 dug a trench of about a forearm's depth and length
 and around it poured libations out to all the dead,
 first with milk and honey, and then with mellow wine, 30
 then water third and last, and sprinkled glistening barley
 over it all, and time and again I vowed to all the dead,
 to the drifting, listless spirits of their ghosts,
 that once I returned to Ithaca I would slaughter
 a barren heifer in my halls, the best I had,
 and load a pyre with treasures—and to Tiresias,
 alone, apart, I would offer a sleek black ram,
 the pride of all my herds. And once my vows
 and prayers had invoked the nations of the dead,
 I took the victims, over the trench I cut their throats 40
 and the dark blood flowed in—and up out of Erebus they came,
 flocking toward me now, the ghosts of the dead and gone . . .
 Brides and unwed youths and old men who had suffered much
 and girls with their tender hearts freshly scarred by sorrow
 and great armies of battle dead, stabbed by bronze spears,
 men of war still wrapped in bloody armor—thousands
 swarming around the trench from every side—
 unearthly cries—blanching terror gripped me!
 I ordered the men at once to flay the sheep
 that lay before us, killed by my ruthless blade, 50

and burn them both, and then say prayers to the gods,
 to the almighty god of death and dread Persephone.
 But I, the sharp sword drawn from beside my hip,
 sat down on alert there and never let the ghosts
 of the shambling, shiftless dead come near that blood
 till I had questioned Tiresias myself.

But first

the ghost of Elpenor, my companion, came toward me.
 He'd not been buried under the wide ways of earth,
 not yet, we'd left his body in Circe's house,
 unwept, unburied—this other labor pressed us. 60
 But I wept to see him now, pity touched my heart
 and I called out a winged word to him there: 'Elpenor,
 how did you travel down to the world of darkness?
 Faster on foot, I see, than I in my black ship.'

My comrade groaned as he offered me an answer:
 'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, old campaigner,
 the doom of an angry god, and god knows how much wine—
 they were my ruin, captain . . . I'd bedded down
 on the roof of Circe's house but never thought 70
 to climb back down again by the long ladder—
 headfirst from the roof I plunged, my neck snapped
 from the backbone, my soul flew down to Death. Now,
 I beg you by those you left behind, so far from here,
 your wife, your father who bred and reared you as a boy,
 and Telemachus, left at home in your halls, your only son.
 Well I know when you leave this lodging of the dead
 that you and your ship will put ashore again
 at the island of Aeaëa—then and there,
 my lord, remember me, I beg you! Don't sail off
 and desert me, left behind unwept, unburied, don't, 80
 or my curse may draw god's fury on your head.
 No, burn me in full armor, all my harness,
 heap my mound by the churning gray surf—
 a man whose luck ran out—
 so even men to come will learn my story.

Perform my rites, and plant on my tomb that oar
I swung with mates when I rowed among the living.'

'All this, my unlucky friend,' I reassured him,
'I will do for you. I won't forget a thing.'

So we sat
and faced each other, trading our bleak parting words, 90
I on my side, holding my sword above the blood,
he across from me there, my comrade's phantom
dragging out his story.

But look, the ghost
of my mother came! My mother, dead and gone now . . .
Anticleia—daughter of that great heart Autolycus—
whom I had left alive when I sailed for sacred Troy.
I broke into tears to see her here, but filled with pity,
even throbbing with grief, I would not let her ghost
approach the blood till I had questioned Tiresias myself.

At last he came. The shade of the famous Theban prophet, 100
holding a golden scepter, knew me at once and hailed me:
'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, master of exploits,
man of pain, what now, what brings you here,
forsaking the light of day
to see this joyless kingdom of the dead?
Stand back from the trench—put up your sharp sword
so I can drink the blood and tell you all the truth.'

Moving back, I thrust my silver-studded sword
deep in its sheath, and once he had drunk the dark blood
the words came ringing from the prophet in his power: 110
'A sweet smooth journey home, renowned Odysseus,
that is what you seek
but a god will make it hard for you—I know—
you will never escape the one who shakes the earth,
quaking with anger at you still, still enraged
because you blinded the Cyclops, his dear son.
Even so, you and your crew may still reach home,
suffering all the way, if you only have the power

to curb their wild desire and curb your own, what's more,
from the day your good trim vessel first puts in 120
at Thrinacia Island, flees the cruel blue sea.
There you will find them grazing,
herds and fat flocks, the cattle of Helios,
god of the sun who sees all, hears all things.
Leave the beasts unharmed, your mind set on home,
and you all may still reach Ithaca—bent with hardship,
true—but harm them in any way, and I can see it now:
your ship destroyed, your men destroyed as well.
And even if *you* escape, you'll come home late
and come a broken man—all shipmates lost, 130
alone in a stranger's ship—
and you will find a world of pain at home,
crude, arrogant men devouring all your goods,
courting your noble wife, offering gifts to win her.
No doubt you will pay them back in blood when you come home!
But once you have killed those suitors in your halls—
by stealth or in open fight with slashing bronze—
go forth once more, you must . . .
carry your well-planed oar until you come
to a race of people who know nothing of the sea, 140
whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all
to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars,
wings that make ships fly. And here is your sign—
unmistakable, clear, so clear you cannot miss it:
When another traveler falls in with you and calls
that weight across your shoulder a fan to winnow grain,
then plant your bladed, balanced oar in the earth
and sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea,
Poseidon—a ram, a bull and a ramping wild boar—
then journey home and render noble offerings up 150
to the deathless gods who rule the vaulting skies,
to all the gods in order.
And at last your own death will steal upon you . . .
a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes
to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age
with all your people there in blessed peace around you.

All that I have told you will come true.'

'Oh Tiresias,'

I replied as the prophet finished, 'surely the gods
have spun this out as fate, the gods themselves.
But tell me one thing more, and tell me clearly.
I see the ghost of my long-lost mother here before me.
Dead, crouching close to the blood in silence,
she cannot bear to look me in the eyes—
her own son—or speak a word to me. How,
lord, can I make her know me for the man I am?'

160

'One rule there is,' the famous seer explained,
'and simple for me to say and you to learn.
Any one of the ghosts you let approach the blood
will speak the truth to you. Anyone you refuse
will turn and fade away.'

And with those words,

170

now that his prophecies had closed, the awesome shade
of lord Tiresias strode back to the House of Death.
But I kept watch there, steadfast till my mother
approached and drank the dark, clouding blood.
She knew me at once and wailed out in grief
and her words came winging toward me, flying home:
'Oh my son—what brings you down to the world
of death and darkness? You are still alive!
It's hard for the living to catch a glimpse of this . . .
Great rivers flow between us, terrible waters,
the Ocean first of all—no one could ever ford
that stream on foot, only aboard some sturdy craft.
Have you just come from Troy, wandering long years
with your men and ship? Not yet returned to Ithaca?
You've still not seen your wife inside your halls?'

180

'Mother,'

I replied, 'I had to venture down to the House of Death,
to consult the shade of Tiresias, seer of Thebes.
Never yet have I neared Achaea, never once
set foot on native ground,
always wandering—endless hardship from that day

190

I first set sail with King Agamemnon bound for Troy,
the stallion-land, to fight the Trojans there.
But tell me about yourself and spare me nothing.
What form of death overcame you, what laid you low,
some long slow illness? Or did Artemis showering arrows
come with her painless shafts and bring you down?
Tell me of father, tell of the son I left behind:
do my royal rights still lie in their safekeeping?
Or does some stranger hold the throne by now
because men think that I'll come home no more?
Please, tell me about my wife, her turn of mind,
her thoughts . . . still standing fast beside our son,
still guarding our great estates, secure as ever now?
Or has she wed some other countryman at last,
the finest prince among them?'

200

'Surely, surely,'

my noble mother answered quickly, 'she's still waiting
there in your halls, poor woman, suffering so,
her life an endless hardship like your own . . .
wasting away the nights, weeping away the days.
No one has taken over your royal rights, not yet.
Telemachus still holds your great estates in peace,
he attends the public banquets shared with all,
the feasts a man of justice should enjoy,
for every lord invites him. As for your father,
he keeps to his own farm—he never goes to town—
with no bed for him there, no blankets, glossy throws;
all winter long he sleeps in the lodge with servants,
in the ashes by the fire, his body wrapped in rags.
But when summer comes and the bumper crops of harvest,
any spot on the rising ground of his vineyard rows
he makes his bed, heaped high with fallen leaves,
and there he lies in anguish . . .
with his old age bearing hard upon him, too,
and his grief grows as he longs for your return.
And I with the same grief, I died and met my fate.
No sharp-eyed Huntress showering arrows through the halls
approached and brought me down with painless shafts,

210

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nor did some hateful illness strike me, that so often
 devastates the body, drains our limbs of power.
 No, it was my longing for *you*, my shining Odysseus—
 you and your quickness, you and your gentle ways—
 that tore away my life that had been sweet.'

And I, my mind in turmoil, how I longed
 to embrace my mother's spirit, dead as she was!
 Three times I rushed toward her, desperate to hold her,
 three times she fluttered through my fingers, sifting away
 like a shadow, dissolving like a dream, and each time
 the grief cut to the heart, sharper, yes, and I,
 I cried out to her, words winging into the darkness:
 'Mother—why not wait for me? How I long to hold you!—
 so even here, in the House of Death, we can fling
 our loving arms around each other, take some joy
 in the tears that numb the heart. Or is this just
 some wraith that great Persephone sends my way
 to make me ache with sorrow all the more?'

My noble mother answered me at once:
 'My son, my son, the unluckiest man alive!
 This is no deception sent by Queen Persephone,
 this is just the way of mortals when we die.
 Sinews no longer bind the flesh and bones together—
 the fire in all its fury burns the body down to ashes
 once life slips from the white bones, and the spirit,
 rustling, flitters away . . . flown like a dream.
 But you must long for the daylight. Go, quickly.
 Remember all these things
 so one day you can tell them to your wife.'

And so we both confided, trading parting words,
 and there slowly came a grand array of women,
 all sent before me now by august Persephone,
 and all were wives and daughters once of princes.
 They swarmed in a flock around the dark blood
 while I searched for a way to question each alone,

230

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and the more I thought, the more this seemed the best:
 Drawing forth the long sharp sword from beside my hip,
 I would not let them drink the dark blood, all in a rush,
 and so they waited, coming forward one after another.
 Each declared her lineage, and I explored them all.

And the first I saw there? Tyro, born of kings,
 who said her father was that great lord Salmoneus,
 said that she was the wife of Cretheus, Aeolus' son. 270
 And once she fell in love with the river god, Enipeus,
 far the clearest river flowing across the earth,
 and so she'd haunt Enipeus' glinting streams,
 till taking his shape one day
 the god who girds the earth and makes it tremble
 bedded her where the swirling river rushes out to sea,
 and a surging wave reared up, high as a mountain, dark,
 arching over to hide the god and mortal girl together.
 Loosing her virgin belt, he lapped her round in sleep
 and when the god had consummated his work of love 280
 he took her by the hand and hailed her warmly:
 'Rejoice in our love, my lady! And when this year
 has run its course you will give birth to glorious children—
 bedding down with the gods is never barren, futile—
 and you must tend them, breed and rear them well.
 Now home you go, and restrain yourself, I say,
 never breathe your lover's name but know—
 I am Poseidon, god who rocks the earth!'

With that he dove back in the heaving waves
 and she conceived for the god and bore him Pelias, Neleus, 290
 and both grew up to be stalwart aides of Zeus almighty,
 both men alike. Pelias lived on the plains of Iolcos,
 rich in sheepflocks, Neleus lived in sandy Pylos.
 And the noble queen bore sons to Cretheus too:
 Aeson, Pheres and Amythaon, exultant charioteer.

And after Tyro I saw Asopus' daughter Antiope,
 proud she'd spent a night in the arms of Zeus himself

and borne the god twin sons, Amphion and Zethus,
the first to build the footings of seven-gated Thebes,
her bastions too, for lacking ramparts none could live
in a place so vast, so open—strong as both men were. 300

And I saw Alcmena next, Amphitryon's wife,
who slept in the clasp of Zeus and merged in love
and brought forth Heracles, rugged will and lion heart.
And I saw Megara too, magnanimous Creon's daughter
wed to the stalwart Heracles, the hero never daunted.

And I saw the mother of Oedipus, beautiful Epicaste.
What a monstrous thing she did, in all innocence—
she married her own son . . .
who'd killed his father, then he married *her!* 310
But the gods soon made it known to all mankind.
So he in growing pain ruled on in beloved Thebes,
lording Cadmus' people—thanks to the gods' brutal plan—
while she went down to Death who guards the massive gates.
Lashing a noose to a steep rafter, there she hanged aloft,
strangling in all her anguish, leaving her son to bear
the world of horror a mother's Furies bring to life.

And I saw magnificent Chloris, the one whom Neleus
wooed and won with a hoard of splendid gifts,
so dazzled by her beauty years ago . . . 320
the youngest daughter of Iasus' son Amphion,
the great Minyan king who ruled Orchomenos once.
She was his queen in Pylos, she bore him shining sons,
Nestor and Chromius, Periclymenus too, good prince.
And after her sons she bore a daughter, majestic Pero,
the marvel of her time, courted by all the young lords
round about. But Neleus would not give her to any suitor,
none but the man who might drive home the herds
that powerful Iphiclus had stolen. Lurching,
broad in the brow, those longhorned beasts, 330
and no small task to round them up from Phylace.

Only the valiant seer Melampus volunteered—
he would drive them home—
but a god's iron sentence bound him fast:
barbarous herdsmen dragged him off in chains.
Yet when the months and days had run their course
and the year wheeled round and the seasons came again,
then mighty Iphiclus loosed the prophet's shackles,
once he had told him all the gods' decrees.
And so the will of Zeus was done at last. 340

And I saw Leda next, Tyndareus' wife,
who'd borne the king two sons, intrepid twins,
Castor, breaker of horses, and the hardy boxer Polydeuces,
both buried now in the life-giving earth though still alive.
Even under the earth Zeus grants them that distinction:
one day alive, the next day dead, each twin by turns,
they both hold honors equal to the gods'.

And I saw Iphimedeia next, Aloeus' wife,
who claimed she lay in the Sea-lord's loving waves
and gave the god two sons, but they did not live long, 350
Otus staunch as a god and far-famed Ephialtes.
They were the tallest men the fertile earth has borne,
the handsomest too, by far, aside from renowned Orion.
Nine yards across they measured, even at nine years old,
nine fathoms tall they towered. They even threatened
the deathless gods they'd storm Olympus' heights
with the pounding rush and grinding shock of battle.
They were wild to pile Ossa upon Olympus, then on Ossa
Pelion dense with timber—their toeholds up the heavens.
And they'd have won the day if they had reached peak strength 360
but Apollo the son of Zeus, whom sleek-haired Leto bore,
laid both giants low before their beards had sprouted,
covering cheek and chin with a fresh crop of down.

Phaedra and Procris too I saw, and lovely Ariadne,
daughter of Minos, that harsh king. One day Theseus tried

to spirit her off from Crete to Athens' sacred heights
but he got no joy from her. Artemis killed her first
on wave-washed Dia's shores, accused by Dionysus.

And I saw Clymene, Maera and loathsome Eriphyle—
bribed with a golden necklace 370
to lure her lawful husband to his death . . .
But the whole cortege I could never tally, never name,
not all the daughters and wives of great men I saw there.
Long before that, the godsent night would ebb away.
But the time has come for sleep, either with friends
aboard your swift ship or here in your own house.
My passage home will rest with the gods and you."

Odysseus paused . . . They all fell silent, hushed,
his story holding them spellbound down the shadowed halls 380
till the white-armed queen Arete suddenly burst out,
"Phaeacians! How does this man impress you now,
his looks, his build, the balanced mind inside him?
The stranger is my guest
but each of you princes shares the honor here.
So let's not be too hasty to send him on his way,
and don't scrimp on his gifts. His need is great,
great as the riches piled up in your houses,
thanks to the gods' good will."

Following her,
the old revered Echeneus added his support,
the eldest lord on the island of Phaeacia: 390
"Friends, the words of our considerate queen—
they never miss the mark or fail our expectations.
So do as Arete says, though on Alcinous here
depend all words and action."

"And so it will be"—
Alcinous stepped in grandly—"sure as I am alive
and rule our island men who love their oars!
Our guest, much as he longs for passage home,
must stay and wait it out here till tomorrow,
till I can collect his whole array of parting gifts.

His send-off rests with every noble here 400
but with me most of all:
I hold the reins of power in the realm."

Odysseus, deft and tactful, echoed back,
"Alcinous, majesty, shining among your island people,
if you would urge me now to stay here one whole year
then speed me home weighed down with lordly gifts,
I'd gladly have it so. Better by far, that way.
The fuller my arms on landing there at home,
the more respected, well received I'd be
by all who saw me sailing back to Ithaca." 410

"Ah Odysseus," Alcinous replied, "one look at you
and we know that you are no one who would cheat us—
no fraud, such as the dark soil breeds and spreads
across the face of the earth these days. Crowds of vagabonds
frame their lies so tightly none can test them. But you,
what grace you give your words, and what good sense within!
You have told your story with all a singer's skill,
the miseries you endured, your great Achaeans too.
But come now, tell me truly: your godlike comrades—
did you see any heroes down in the House of Death, 420
any who sailed with you and met their doom at Troy?
The night's still young, I'd say the night is endless.
For us in the palace now, it's hardly time for sleep.
Keep telling us your adventures—they are wonderful.
I could hold out here till Dawn's first light
if only you could bear, here in our halls,
to tell the tale of all the pains you suffered."

So the man of countless exploits carried on:
"Alcinous, majesty, shining among your island people,
there is a time for many words, a time for sleep as well. 430
But if you insist on hearing more, I'd never stint
on telling my own tale and those more painful still,
the griefs of my comrades, dead in the war's wake,
who escaped the battle-cries of Trojan armies

only to die in blood at journey's end—
thanks to a vicious woman's will.

Now then,

no sooner had Queen Persephone driven off
the ghosts of lovely women, scattering left and right,
than forward marched the shade of Atreus' son Agamemnon,
fraught with grief and flanked by all his comrades,
troops of his men-at-arms who died beside him,
who met their fate in lord Aegisthus' halls.
He knew me at once, as soon as he drank the blood,
and wailed out, shrilly; tears sprang to his eyes,
he thrust his arms toward me, keen to embrace me there—
no use—the great force was gone, the strength lost forever,
now, that filled his rippling limbs in the old days.
I wept at the sight, my heart went out to the man,
my words too, in a winging flight of pity:
'Famous Atrides, lord of men Agamemnon!
What fatal stroke of destiny brought you down?
Wrecked in the ships when lord Poseidon roused
some punishing blast of stormwinds, gust on gust?
Or did ranks of enemies mow you down on land
as you tried to raid and cut off herds and flocks
or fought to win their city, take their women?'

The field marshal's ghost replied at once:
'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, mastermind of war,
I was not wrecked in the ships when lord Poseidon
roused some punishing blast of stormwinds, gust on gust,
nor did ranks of enemies mow me down on land—
Aegisthus hatched my doom and my destruction,
he killed me, he with my own accursed wife . . .
he invited me to his palace, sat me down to feast
then cut me down as a man cuts down some ox at the trough!
So I died—a wretched, ignominious death—and round me
all my comrades killed, no mercy, one after another,
just like white-tusked boars
butchered in some rich lord of power's halls

440

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460

for a wedding, banquet or groaning public feast.
You in your day have witnessed hundreds slaughtered,
killed in single combat or killed in pitched battle, true,
but if you'd laid eyes on this it would have wrenched your heart—
how we sprawled by the mixing-bowl and loaded tables there,
throughout the palace, the whole floor awash with blood.
But the death-cry of Cassandra, Priam's daughter—
the most pitiful thing I heard! My treacherous queen,
Clytemnestra, killed her over my body, yes, and I,
lifting my fists, beat them down on the ground,
dying, dying, writhing around the sword.
But she, that whore, she turned her back on me,
well on my way to Death—she even lacked the heart
to seal my eyes with her hand or close my jaws.

470

480

So,

there's nothing more deadly, bestial than a woman
set on works like these—what a monstrous thing
she plotted, slaughtered her own lawful husband!
Why, I expected, at least, some welcome home
from all my children, all my household slaves
when I came sailing back again . . . But she—
the queen hell-bent on outrage—bathes in shame
not only herself but the whole breed of womankind,
even the honest ones to come, forever down the years!

490

So he declared and I cried out, 'How terrible!
Zeus from the very start, the thunder king
has hated the race of Atreus with a vengeance—
his trustiest weapon women's twisted wiles.
What armies of us died for the sake of Helen . . .
Clytemnestra schemed your death while you were worlds away!'

'True, true,' Agamemnon's ghost kept pressing on,
'so even your own wife—never indulge her too far.
Never reveal the whole truth, whatever you may know;
just tell her a part of it, be sure to hide the rest.
Not that you, Odysseus, will be murdered by your wife.

500

She's much too steady, her feelings run too deep,
 Icarus' daughter Penelope, that wise woman.
 She was a young bride, I well remember . . .
 we left her behind when we went off to war,
 with an infant boy she nestled at her breast.
 That boy must sit and be counted with the men now—
 happy man! His beloved father will come sailing home—
 and see his son, and he will embrace his father,
 that is only right. But *my* wife—she never
 even let me feast my eyes on my own son;
 she killed me first, his father!
 I tell you this—bear it in mind, you must—
 when you reach your homeland steer your ship
 into port in secret, never out in the open . . .
 the time for trusting women's gone forever!

Enough. Come, tell me this, and be precise.
 Have you heard news of my son? Where's he living now?
 Perhaps in Orchomenos, perhaps in sandy Pylos
 or off in the Spartan plains with Menelaus?
 He's not dead yet, my Prince Orestes, no,
 he's somewhere on the earth.'

So he probed

but I cut it short: 'Atrides, why ask me that?
 I know nothing, whether he's dead or alive.
 It's wrong to lead you on with idle words.'

So we stood there, trading heartsick stories,
 deep in grief, as the tears streamed down our faces.
 But now there came the ghosts of Peleus' son Achilles,
 Patroclus, fearless Antilochus—and Great Ajax too,
 the first in stature, first in build and bearing
 of all the Argives after Peleus' matchless son.
 The ghost of the splendid runner knew me at once
 and hailed me with a flight of mournful questions:
 'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, man of tactics,
 reckless friend, what next?

510

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530

What greater feat can that cunning head contrive?
 What daring brought you down to the House of Death?—
 where the senseless, burnt-out wraiths of mortals make their home.'

The voice of his spirit paused, and I was quick to answer:
 'Achilles, son of Peleus, greatest of the Achaeans,
 I had to consult Tiresias, driven here by hopes
 he would help me journey home to rocky Ithaca.
 Never yet have I neared Achaea, never once
 set foot on native ground . . .
 my life is endless trouble.

But you, Achilles,

there's not a man in the world more blest than you—
 there never has been, never will be one.
 Time was, when you were alive, we Argives
 honored you as a god, and now down here, I see,
 you lord it over the dead in all your power.
 So grieve no more at dying, great Achilles.'

I reassured the ghost, but he broke out, protesting,
 'No winning words about death to *me*, shining Odysseus!
 By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man—
 some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
 than rule down here over all the breathless dead.
 But come, tell me the news about my gallant son.
 Did he make his way to the wars,
 did the boy become a champion—yes or no?
 Tell me of noble Peleus, any word you've heard—
 still holding pride of place among his Myrmidon hordes,
 or do they despise the man in Hellas and in Phthia
 because old age has lamed his arms and legs?
 For I no longer stand in the light of day—
 the man I was—comrade-in-arms to help my father
 as once I helped our armies, killing the best fighters
 Troy could field in the wide world up there . . .
 Oh to arrive at father's house—the man I was,
 for one brief day—I'd make my fury and my hands,

570

invincible hands, a thing of terror to all those men
who abuse the king with force and wrest away his honor!

So he grieved but I tried to lend him heart:
'About noble Peleus I can tell you nothing,
but about your own dear son, Neoptolemus,
I can report the whole story, as you wish.
I myself, in my trim ship, I brought him
out of Scyros to join the Argives under arms.
And dug in around Troy, debating battle-tactics,
he always spoke up first, and always on the mark—
godlike Nestor and I alone excelled the boy. Yes,
and when our armies fought on the plain of Troy
he'd never hang back with the main force of men—
he'd always charge ahead,
giving ground to no one in his fury,
and scores of men he killed in bloody combat.
How could I list them all, name them all, now,
the fighting ranks he leveled, battling for the Argives?
But what a soldier he laid low with a bronze sword:
the hero Eurypylos, Telephus' son, and round him
troops of his own Cetean comrades slaughtered,
lured to war by the bribe his mother took.
The only man I saw to put Eurypylos
in the shade was Memnon, son of the Morning.
Again, when our champions climbed inside the horse
that Epeus built with labor, and I held full command
to spring our packed ambush open or keep it sealed,
all our lords and captains were wiping off their tears,
knees shaking beneath each man—but not your son.
Never once did I see his glowing skin go pale;
he never flicked a tear from his cheeks, no,
he kept on begging me there to let him burst
from the horse, kept gripping his hilted sword,
his heavy bronze-tipped javelin, keen to loose
his fighting fury against the Trojans. Then,
once we'd sacked King Priam's craggy city,
laden with his fair share and princely prize

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he boarded his own ship, his body all unscarred.
Not a wound from a flying spear or a sharp sword,
cut-and-thrust close up—the common marks of war.
Random, raging Ares plays no favorites.' 610

So I said and
off he went, the ghost of the great runner, Aeacus' grandson
loping with long strides across the fields of asphodel,
triumphant in all I had told him of his son,
his gallant, glorious son.

Now the rest of the ghosts, the dead and gone
came swarming up around me—deep in sorrow there,
each asking about the grief that touched him most.
Only the ghost of Great Ajax, son of Telamon,
kept his distance, blazing with anger at me still 620
for the victory I had won by the ships that time
I pressed my claim for the arms of Prince Achilles.
His queenly mother had set them up as prizes,
Pallas and captive Trojans served as judges.
Would to god I'd never won such trophies!
All for them the earth closed over Ajax,
that proud hero Ajax . . .
greatest in build, greatest in works of war
of all the Argives after Peleus' matchless son. 630
I cried out to him now, I tried to win him over:
'Ajax, son of noble Telamon, still determined,
even in death, not once to forget that rage
you train on me for those accursed arms?
The gods set up that prize to plague the Achaeans—
so great a tower of strength we lost when you went down!
For *your* death we grieved as we did for Achilles' death—
we grieved incessantly, true, and none's to blame
but Zeus, who hated Achaea's fighting spearmen
so intensely, Zeus sealed your doom. 640
Come closer, king, and listen to my story.
Conquer your rage, your blazing, headstrong pride!'

So I cried out but Ajax answered not a word.

He stalked off toward Erebus, into the dark
to join the other lost, departed dead.
Yet now, despite his anger,
he might have spoken to me, or I to him,
but the heart inside me stirred with some desire
to see the ghosts of others dead and gone.

And I saw Minos there, illustrious son of Zeus,
firmly enthroned, holding his golden scepter,
judging all the dead . . .

Some on their feet, some seated, all clustering
round the king of justice, pleading for his verdicts
reached in the House of Death with its all-embracing gates.

I next caught sight of Orion, that huge hunter,
rounding up on the fields of asphodel those wild beasts
the man in life cut down on the lonely mountain-slopes,
brandishing in his hands the bronze-studded club
that time can never shatter.

I saw Tityus too,
son of the mighty goddess Earth—sprawling there
on the ground, spread over nine acres—two vultures
hunched on either side of him, digging into his liver,
beaking deep in the blood-sac, and he with his frantic hands
could never beat them off, for he had once dragged off
the famous consort of Zeus in all her glory,
Leto, threading her way toward Pytho's ridge,
over the lovely dancing-rings of Panopeus.

And I saw Tantalus too, bearing endless torture.
He stood erect in a pool as the water lapped his chin—
parched, he tried to drink, but he could not reach the surface,
no, time and again the old man stooped, craving a sip,
time and again the water vanished, swallowed down,
laying bare the caked black earth at his feet—
some spirit drank it dry. And over his head
leafy trees dangled their fruit from high aloft,
pomegranates and pears, and apples glowing red,

succulent figs and olives swelling sleek and dark,
but as soon as the old man would strain to clutch them fast
a gust would toss them up to the lowering dark clouds.

And I saw Sisyphus too, bound to his own torture,
grappling his monstrous boulder with both arms working,
heaving, hands struggling, legs driving, he kept on
thrusting the rock uphill toward the brink, but just
as it teetered, set to topple over—

time and again
the immense weight of the thing would wheel it back and
the ruthless boulder would bound and tumble down to the plain again—
so once again he would heave, would struggle to thrust it up,
sweat drenching his body, dust swirling above his head.

And next I caught a glimpse of powerful Heracles—
his ghost, I mean: the man himself delights
in the grand feasts of the deathless gods on high,
wed to Hebe, famed for her lithe, alluring ankles,
the daughter of mighty Zeus and Hera shod in gold.
Around him cries of the dead rang out like cries of birds,
scattering left and right in horror as on he came like night,
naked bow in his grip, an arrow grooved on the bowstring,
glaring round him fiercely, forever poised to shoot.
A terror too, that sword-belt sweeping across his chest,
a baldric of solid gold emblazoned with awesome work . . .
bears and ramping boars and lions with wild, fiery eyes,
and wars, routs and battles, massacres, butchered men.
May the craftsman who forged that masterpiece—
whose skills could conjure up a belt like that—
never forge another!
Heracles knew me at once, at first glance,
and hailed me with a winging burst of pity:
'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus famed for exploits,
luckless man, you too? Braving out a fate as harsh
as the fate I bore, alive in the light of day?
Son of Zeus that I was, my torments never ended,
forced to slave for a man not half the man I was:

he saddled me with the worst heartbreaking labors.
Why, he sent me down here once, to retrieve the hound
that guards the dead—no harder task for me, he thought—
but I dragged the great beast up from the underworld to earth
and Hermes and gleaming-eyed Athena blazed the way!’

With that he turned and back he went to the House of Death
but I held fast in place, hoping that others might still come,
shades of famous heroes, men who died in the old days 720
and ghosts of an even older age I longed to see,
Theseus and Pirithous, the gods’ own radiant sons.
But before I could, the dead came surging round me,
hordes of them, thousands raising unearthly cries,
and blanching terror gripped me—panicked now
that Queen Persephone might send up from Death
some monstrous head, some Gorgon’s staring face!
I rushed back to my ship, commanded all hands
to take to the decks and cast off cables quickly.
They swung aboard at once, they sat to the oars in ranks
and a strong tide of the Ocean River swept her on downstream, 730
sped by our rowing first, then by a fresh fair wind.”



Slaughter in the Hall

Now stripping back his rags Odysseus master of craft and battle vaulted onto the great threshold, gripping his bow and quiver bristling arrows, and poured his flashing shafts before him, loose at his feet, and thundered out to all the suitors: "Look—your crucial test is finished, now, at last! But another target's left that no one's hit before—we'll see if *I* can hit it—Apollo give me glory!"

With that he trained a stabbing arrow on Antinous . . . just lifting a gorgeous golden loving-cup in his hands, just tilting the two-handled goblet back to his lips, about to drain the wine—and slaughter the last thing on the suitor's mind: who could dream that one foe in that crowd of feasters, however great his power, would bring down death on himself, and black doom?

But Odysseus aimed and shot Antinous square in the throat
and the point went stabbing clean through the soft neck and out—
and off to the side he pitched, the cup dropped from his grasp
as the shaft sank home, and the man's life-blood came spurting
out his nostrils—

thick red jets—

a sudden thrust of his foot—

he kicked away the table—

food showered across the floor,

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the bread and meats soaked in a swirl of bloody filth.
The suitors burst into uproar all throughout the house
when they saw their leader down. They leapt from their seats,
milling about, desperate, scanning the stone walls—
not a shield in sight, no rugged spear to seize.
They wheeled on Odysseus, lashing out in fury:
"Stranger, shooting at men will cost your life!"

"Your game is over—you, you've shot your last!"

"You'll never escape your own headlong death!"

"You killed the best in Ithaca—our fine prince!"

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"Vultures will eat your corpse!"

Groping, frantic—

each one persuading himself the guest had killed
the man by chance. Poor fools, blind to the fact
that all their necks were in the noose, their doom sealed.
With a dark look, the wily fighter Odysseus shouted back,
"You dogs! you never imagined I'd return from Troy—
so cocksure that you bled my house to death,
ravished my serving-women—wooed my wife
behind my back while I was still alive!
No fear of the gods who rule the skies up there,
no fear that men's revenge might arrive someday—
now all your necks are in the noose—your doom is sealed!"

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Terror gripped them all, blanched their faces white,

each man glancing wildly—how to escape his instant death?
Only Eurymachus had the breath to venture, "If you,
you're truly Odysseus of Ithaca, home at last,
you're right to accuse these men of what they've done—
so much reckless outrage here in your palace,
so much on your lands. But here he lies,
quite dead, and he incited it all—Antinous—
look, the man who drove us all to crime!
Not that he needed marriage, craved it so;
he'd bigger game in mind—though Zeus barred his way—
he'd lord it over Ithaca's handsome country, king himself,
once he'd lain in wait for your son and cut him down!
But now he's received the death that he deserved.
So spare your own people! Later we'll recoup
your costs with a tax laid down upon the land,
covering all we ate and drank inside your halls,
and each of us here will pay full measure too—
twenty oxen in value, bronze and gold we'll give
until we melt your heart. Before we've settled,
who on earth could blame you for your rage?"

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But the battle-master kept on glaring, seething.
"No, Eurymachus! Not if you paid me all your father's wealth—
all you possess now, and all that could pour in from the world's end—
no, not even then would I stay my hands from slaughter
till all you suitors had paid for all your crimes!
Now life or death—your choice—fight me or flee
if you hope to escape your sudden bloody doom!
I doubt one man in the lot will save his skin!"

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His menace shook their knees, their hearts too
but Eurymachus spoke again, now to the suitors: "Friends!
This man will never restrain his hands, invincible hands—
now that he's seized that polished bow and quiver, look,
he'll shoot from the sill until he's killed us all!
So fight—call up the joy of battle! Swords out!
Tables lifted—block his arrows winging death!
Charge him, charge in a pack—

try to rout the man from the sill, the doors,
race through town and sound an alarm at once—
our friend would soon see he's shot his bolt!"

Brave talk—

he drew his two-edged sword, bronze, honed for the kill
and hurled himself at the king with a raw savage cry
in the same breath that Odysseus loosed an arrow
ripping his breast beside the nipple so hard
it lodged in the man's liver—
Out of his grasp the sword dropped to the ground—
over his table, head over heels he tumbled, doubled up,
flinging his food and his two-handed cup across the floor—
he smashed the ground with his forehead, writhing in pain,
both feet flailing out, and his high seat tottered—
the mist of death came swirling down his eyes.

Amphinomus rushed the king in all his glory,
charging him face-to-face, a slashing sword drawn—
if only he could force him clear of the doorway, now,
but Telemachus—too quick—stabbed the man from behind,
plunging his bronze spear between the suitor's shoulders
and straight on through his chest the point came jutting out—
down he went with a thud, his forehead slammed the ground.
Telemachus swerved aside, leaving his long spearshaft
lodged in Amphinomus—fearing some suitor just might
lunge in from behind as he tugged the shaft,
impale him with a sword or hack him down,
crouching over the corpse.
He went on the run, reached his father at once
and halting right beside him, let fly, "Father—
now I'll get you a shield and a pair of spears,
a helmet of solid bronze to fit your temples!
I'll arm myself on the way back and hand out
arms to the swineherd, arm the cowherd too—
we'd better fight equipped!"

"Run, fetch them,"
the wily captain urged, "while I've got arrows left
to defend me—or they'll force me from the doors

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while I fight on alone!"

Telemachus moved to his father's orders smartly.
Off he ran to the room where the famous arms lay stored,
took up four shields, eight spears, four bronze helmets
ridged with horsehair crests and, loaded with these,
ran back to reach his father's side in no time.
The prince was first to case himself in bronze
and his servants followed suit—both harnessed up
and all three flanked Odysseus, mastermind of war,
and he, as long as he'd arrows left to defend himself,
kept picking suitors off in the palace, one by one
and down they went, corpse on corpse in droves.
Then, when the royal archer's shafts ran out,
he leaned his bow on a post of the massive doors—
where walls of the hallway catch the light—and armed:
across his shoulder he slung a buckler four plies thick,
over his powerful head he set a well-forged helmet,
the horsehair crest atop it tossing, bristling terror,
and grasped two rugged lances tipped with fiery bronze.

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Now a side-door was fitted into the main wall—
right at the edge of the great hall's stone sill—
and led to a passage always shut by good tight boards.
But Odysseus gave the swineherd strict commands
to stand hard by the side-door, guard it well—
the only way the suitors might break out.
Agelaus called to his comrades with a plan:
"Friends, can't someone climb through the hatch?—
tell men outside to sound the alarm, be quick—
our guest would soon see he'd shot his last!"

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The goatherd Melanthius answered, "Not a chance,
my lord—the door to the courtyard's much too near,
dangerous too, the mouth of the passage cramped.
One strong man could block us, one and all!
No, I'll fetch you some armor to harness on,
out of the storeroom—there, nowhere else, I'm sure,

the king and his gallant son have stowed their arms!"

150

With that the goatherd clambered up through smoke-ducts high on the wall and scurried into Odysseus' storeroom, bundled a dozen shields, as many spears and helmets ridged with horsehair crests and, loaded with these, rushed back down to the suitors, quickly issued arms. Odysseus' knees shook, his heart too, when he saw them buckling on their armor, brandishing long spears—here was a battle looming, well he knew. He turned at once to Telemachus, warnings flying: "A bad break in the fight, my boy! One of the women's tipped the odds against us—or could it be the goatherd?"

160

"My fault, father," the cool clear prince replied, "the blame's all mine. That snug door to the vault, I left it ajar—they've kept a better watch than I. Go, Eumaeus, shut the door to the storeroom, check and see if it's one of the women's tricks or Dolius' son Melanthius. He's our man, I'd say."

And even as they conspired, back the goatherd climbed to the room to fetch more burnished arms, but Eumaeus spotted him, quickly told his king who stood close by: "Odysseus, wily captain, there he goes again, the infernal nuisance—just as we suspected—back to the storeroom. Give me a clear command! Do I kill the man—if I can take him down—or drag him back to you, here, to pay in full for the vicious work he's plotted in your house?"

170

Odysseus, master of tactics, answered briskly, "I and the prince will keep these brazen suitors crammed in the hall, for all their battle-fury. You two wrench Melanthius' arms and legs behind him, fling him down in the storeroom—lash his back to a plank and strap a twisted cable fast to the scoundrel's body,

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hoist him up a column until he hits the rafters—let him dangle in agony, still alive, for a good long time!"

They hung on his orders, keen to do his will. Off they ran to the storeroom, unseen by him inside—Melanthius, rummaging after arms, deep in a dark recess as the two men took their stand, either side the doorposts, poised till the goatherd tried to cross the doorsill . . . one hand clutching a crested helmet, the other an ample old buckler blotched with mildew, the shield Laertes bore as a young soldier once but there it lay for ages, seams on the handstraps split—Quick, they rushed him, seized him, haled him back by the hair, flung him down on the floor, writhing with terror, bound him hand and foot with a chafing cord, wrenched his limbs back, back till the joints locked tight—just as Laertes' cunning son commanded— they strapped a twisted cable round his body, hoisted him up a column until he hit the rafters, then you mocked him, Eumaeus, my good swineherd: "Now stand guard through the whole night, Melanthius—stretched out on a soft bed fit for *you*, your highness! You're bound to see the Morning rising up from the Ocean, mounting her golden throne—at just the hour you always drive in goats to feast the suitors in the hall!"

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So they left him, trussed in his agonizing sling; they clapped on armor again, shut the gleaming doors and ran to rejoin Odysseus, mastermind of war. And now as the ranks squared off, breathing fury—four at the sill confronting a larger, stronger force arrayed inside the hall—now Zeus's daughter Athena, taking the build and voice of Mentor, swept in and Odysseus, thrilled to see her, cried out, "Rescue us, Mentor, now it's life or death! Remember your old comrade—all the service I offered you! We were boys together!"

210

So he cried
yet knew in his bones it was Athena, Driver of Armies. 220
But across the hall the suitors brayed against her,
Agelaus first, his outburst full of threats:
“Mentor, never let Odysseus trick you into
siding with *him* to fight against the suitors.
Here’s our plan of action, and we will see it through!
Once we’ve killed them both, the father and the son,
we’ll kill you too, for all you’re bent on doing
here in the halls—you’ll pay with your own head!
And once our swords have stopped your violence cold—
all your property, all in your house, your fields, 230
we’ll lump it all with Odysseus’ rich estate
and never let your sons live on in your halls
or free your wife and daughters to walk through town!”

Naked threats—and Athena hit new heights of rage,
she lashed out at Odysseus now with blazing accusations:
“Where’s it gone, Odysseus—your power, your fighting heart?
The great soldier who fought for famous white-armed Helen,
battling Trojans nine long years—nonstop, no mercy,
mowing their armies down in grueling battle—
you who seized the broad streets of Troy 240
with your fine strategic stroke! How can you—
now you’ve returned to your own house, your own wealth—
bewail the loss of your combat strength in a war with *suitors*?
Come, old friend, stand by me! You’ll see action now,
see how Mentor the son of Alcimus, that brave fighter,
kills your enemies, pays you back for service!”

Rousing words—

but she gave no all-out turning of the tide, not yet,
she kept on testing Odysseus and his gallant son,
putting their force and fighting heart to proof. 250
For all the world like a swallow in their sight
she flew on high to perch
on the great hall’s central roofbeam black with smoke.

But the suitors closed ranks, commanded now by Damastor’s son

Agelaus, flanked by Eurynomus, Demoptolemus and Amphimedon,
Pisander, Polyctor’s son, and Polybus ready, waiting—
head and shoulders the best and bravest of the lot
still left to fight for their lives,
now that the pelting shafts had killed the rest.
Agelaus spurred his comrades on with battle-plans:
“Friends, at last the man’s invincible hands are useless! 260
Mentor has mouthed some empty boasts and flitted off—
just four are left to fight at the front doors. So now,
no wasting your long spears—all at a single hurl,
just six of us launch out in the first wave!
If Zeus is willing, we may hit Odysseus,
carry off the glory! The rest are nothing
once the captain’s down!”

At his command,
concentrating their shots, all six hurled as one
but Athena sent the whole salvo wide of the mark—
one of them hit the jamb of the great hall’s doors, 270
another the massive door itself, and the heavy bronze point
of a third ashen javelin crashed against the wall.
Seeing his men untouched by the suitors’ flurry,
steady Odysseus leapt to take command:
“Friends! now it’s for *us* to hurl at them, I say,
into this ruck of suitors! Topping all their crimes
they’re mad to strip the armor off our bodies!”

Taking aim at the ranks, all four let fly as one
and the lances struck home—Odysseus killed Demoptolemus,
Telemachus killed Euryades—the swineherd, Elatus— 280
and the cowherd cut Pisander down in blood.
They bit the dust of the broad floor, all as one.
Back to the great hall’s far recess the others shrank
as the four rushed in and plucked up spears from corpses.

And again the suitors hurled their whetted shafts
but Athena sent the better part of the salvo wide—
one of them hit the jamb of the great hall’s doors,
another the massive door itself, and the heavy bronze point

of a third ashen javelin crashed against the wall.
 True, Amphimedon nicked Telemachus on the wrist—
 the glancing blade just barely broke his skin. 290
 Ctesippus sent a long spear sailing over
 Eumaeus' buckler, grazing his shoulder blade
 but the weapon skittered off and hit the ground.
 And again those led by the brilliant battle-master
 hurled their razor spears at the suitors' ranks—
 and now Odysseus raider of cities hit Eurymachus,
 Telemachus hit Amphimedon—Eumaeus, Polybus—
 and the cowherd stabbed Ctesippus
 right in the man's chest and triumphed over his body: 300
 "Love your mockery, do you? Son of that blowhard Polytherses!
 No more shooting off your mouth, you idiot, such big talk—
 leave the last word to the gods—they're much stronger!
 Take this spear, this guest-gift, for the cow's hoof
 you once gave King Odysseus begging in his house!"

So the master of longhorn cattle had his say—
 as Odysseus, fighting at close quarters, ran Agelaus
 through with a long lance—Telemachus speared Leocritus
 so deep in the groin the bronze came punching out his back
 and the man crashed headfirst, slamming the ground full-face. 310
 And now Athena, looming out of the rafters high above them,
 brandished her man-destroying shield of thunder, terrifying
 the suitors out of their minds, and down the hall they panicked—
 wild, like herds stampeding, driven mad as the darting gadfly
 strikes in the late spring when the long days come round.
 The attackers struck like eagles, crook-clawed, hook-beaked,
 swooping down from a mountain ridge to harry smaller birds
 that skim across the flatland, cringing under the clouds
 but the eagles plunge in fury, rip their lives out—hopeless,
 never a chance of flight or rescue—and people love the sport—
 so the attackers routed suitors headlong down the hall, 320
 wheeling into the slaughter, slashing left and right
 and grisly screams broke from skulls cracked open—
 the whole floor awash with blood.

Leodes now—

he flung himself at Odysseus, clutched his knees,
 crying out to the king with a sudden, winging prayer:
 "I hug your knees, Odysseus—mercy! spare my life!
 Never, I swear, did I harass any woman in your house—
 never a word, a gesture—nothing, no, I tried 330
 to restrain the suitors, whoever did such things.
 They wouldn't listen, keep their hands to themselves—
 so reckless, so they earn their shameful fate.
 But I was just their prophet—
 my hands are clean—and I'm to die their death!
 Look at the thanks I get for years of service!"

A killing look, and the wry soldier answered,
 "Only a priest, a prophet for this mob, you say?
 How hard you must have prayed in my own house
 that the heady day of my return would never dawn—
 my dear wife would be yours, would bear your children! 340
 For that there's no escape from grueling death—you die!"

And snatching up in one powerful hand a sword
 left on the ground—Agelaus dropped it when he fell—
 Odysseus hacked the prophet square across the neck
 and the praying head went tumbling in the dust.

Now one was left,
 trying still to escape black death. Phemius, Terpis' son,
 the bard who always performed among the suitors—
 they forced the man to sing . . .
 There he stood, backing into the side-door,
 still clutching his ringing lyre in his hands, 350
 his mind in turmoil, torn—what should he do?
 Steal from the hall and crouch at the altar-stone
 of Zeus who Guards the Court, where time and again
 Odysseus and Laertes burned the long thighs of oxen?
 Or throw himself on the master's mercy, clasp his knees?
 That was the better way—or so it struck him, yes,
 grasp the knees of Laertes' royal son. And so,
 cradling his hollow lyre, he laid it on the ground
 between the mixing-bowl and the silver-studded throne,

then rushed up to Odysseus, yes, and clutched his knees,
 singing out to his king with a stirring, winged prayer:
 "I hug your knees, Odysseus—mercy! spare my life!
 What a grief it will be to you for all the years to come
 if you kill the singer now, who sings for gods and men.
 I taught myself the craft, but a god has planted
 deep in my spirit all the paths of song—
 songs I'm fit to sing for you as for a god.
 Calm your bloodlust now—don't take my head!
 He'd bear me out, your own dear son Telemachus—
 never of *my* own will, never for any gain did I
 perform in your house, singing after the suitors
 had their feasts. They were too strong, too many—
 they forced me to come and sing—I had no choice!"

The inspired Prince Telemachus heard his pleas
 and quickly said to his father close beside him,
 "Stop, don't cut him down! This one's innocent.
 So is the herald Medon—the one who always
 tended me in the house when I was little—
 spare him too. Unless he's dead by now,
 killed by Philoetius or Eumaeus here—
 or ran into *you* rampaging through the halls."

The herald pricked up his anxious ears at that . . .
 cautious soul, he cowered, trembling, under a chair—
 wrapped in an oxhide freshly stripped—to dodge black death.
 He jumped in a flash from there, threw off the smelly hide
 and scuttling up to Telemachus, clutching his knees,
 the herald begged for life in words that fluttered:
 "Here I am, dear boy—spare me! Tell your father,
 flushed with victory, not to kill me with his sword—
 enraged as he is with these young lords who bled
 his palace white and showed you no respect,
 the reckless fools!"

Breaking into a smile
 the canny Odysseus reassured him, "Courage!
 The prince has pulled you through, he's saved you now

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so you can take it to heart and tell the next man too:
 clearly doing good puts doing bad to shame.
 Now leave the palace, go and sit outside—
 out in the courtyard, clear of the slaughter—
 you and the bard with all his many songs.
 Wait till I've done some household chores
 that call for my attention."

400

The two men scurried out of the house at once
 and crouched at the altar-stone of mighty Zeus—
 glancing left and right,
 fearing death would strike at any moment.

Odysseus scanned his house to see if any man
 still skulked alive, still hoped to avoid black death.
 But he found them one and all in blood and dust . . .
 great hauls of them down and out like fish that fishermen
 drag from the churning gray surf in looped and coiling nets
 and fling ashore on a sweeping hook of beach—some noble catch
 heaped on the sand, twitching, lusting for fresh salt sea
 but the Sungod hammers down and burns their lives out . . .
 so the suitors lay in heaps, corpse covering corpse.
 At last the seasoned fighter turned to his son:
 "Telemachus, go, call the old nurse here—
 I must tell her all that's on my mind."

410

Telemachus ran to do his father's bidding,
 shook the women's doors, calling Eurycleia:
 "Come out now! Up with you, good old woman!
 You who watch over all the household hands—
 quick, my father wants you, needs to have a word!"

420

Crisp command that left the old nurse hushed—
 she spread the doors to the well-constructed hall,
 slipped out in haste, and the prince led her on . . .
 She found Odysseus in the thick of slaughtered corpses,
 splattered with bloody filth like a lion that's devoured
 some ox of the field and lopes home, covered with blood,

his chest streaked, both jaws glistening, dripping red—
 a sight to strike terror. So Odysseus looked now,
 splattered with gore, his thighs, his fighting hands,
 and she, when she saw the corpses, all the pooling blood,
 was about to lift a cry of triumph—here was a great exploit,
 look—but the soldier held her back and checked her zeal
 with warnings winging home: “Rejoice in your heart,
 old woman—peace! No cries of triumph now.
 It’s unholy to glory over the bodies of the dead.
 These men the doom of the gods has brought low,
 and their own indecent acts. They’d no regard
 for any man on earth—good or bad—
 who chanced to come their way. And so, thanks
 to their reckless work, they met this shameful fate.
 Quick, report in full on the women in my halls—
 who are disloyal to me, who are guiltless?”

“Surely, child,”

his fond old nurse replied, “now here’s the truth.
 Fifty women you have inside your house,
 women we’ve trained to do their duties well,
 to card the wool and bear the yoke of service.
 Some dozen in all went tramping to their shame,
 thumbing their noses at me, at the queen herself!
 And Telemachus, just now come of age—his mother
 would never let the boy take charge of the maids.
 But let me climb to her well-lit room upstairs
 and tell your wife the news—
 some god has put the woman fast asleep.”

“Don’t wake her yet,” the crafty man returned,
 “you tell those women to hurry here at once—
 just the ones who’ve shamed us all along.”

Away the old nurse bustled through the house
 to give the women orders, rush them to the king.
 Odysseus called Telemachus over, both herdsmen too,
 with strict commands: “Start clearing away the bodies.
 Make the women pitch in too. Chairs and tables—

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scrub them down with sponges, rinse them clean.
 And once you’ve put the entire house in order,
 march the women out of the great hall—between
 the roundhouse and the courtyard’s strong stockade—
 and hack them with your swords, slash out all their lives—
 blot out of their minds the joys of love they relished
 under the suitors’ bodies, rutting on the sly!”

470

The women crowded in, huddling all together . . .
 wailing convulsively, streaming live warm tears.
 First they carried out the bodies of the dead
 and propped them under the courtyard colonnade,
 standing them one against another. Odysseus
 shouted commands himself, moving things along
 and they kept bearing out the bodies—they were forced.
 Next they scrubbed down the elegant chairs and tables,
 washed them with sopping sponges, rinsed them clean.
 Then Telemachus and the herdsmen scraped smooth
 the packed earth floor of the royal house with spades
 as the women gathered up the filth and piled it outside.
 And then, at last, once the entire house was put in order,
 they marched the women out of the great hall—between
 the roundhouse and the courtyard’s strong stockade—
 crammed them into a dead end, no way out from there,
 and stern Telemachus gave the men their orders:
 “No clean death for the likes of them, by god!
 Not from me—they showered abuse on my head,
 my mother’s too!

480

You sluts—the suitors’ whores!”

490

With that, taking a cable used on a dark-prowed ship
 he coiled it over the roundhouse, lashed it fast to a tall column,
 hoisting it up so high no toes could touch the ground.
 Then, as doves or thrushes beating their spread wings
 against some snare rigged up in thickets—flying in
 for a cozy nest but a grisly bed receives them—
 so the women’s heads were trapped in a line,
 nooses yanking their necks up, one by one

so all might die a pitiful, ghastly death . . .
they kicked up heels for a little—not for long.

Melanthius?

500

They hauled him out through the doorway, into the court,
lopped his nose and ears with a ruthless knife,
tore his genitals out for the dogs to eat raw
and in manic fury hacked off hands and feet.

Then,

once they'd washed their own hands and feet,
they went inside again to join Odysseus.
Their work was done with now.
But the king turned to devoted Eurycleia, saying,
"Bring sulfur, nurse, to scour all this pollution—
bring me fire too, so I can fumigate the house.
And call Penelope here with all her women—
tell all the maids to come back in at once."

510

"Well said, my boy," his old nurse replied,
"right to the point. But wait,
let me fetch you a shirt and cloak to wrap you.
No more dawdling round the palace, nothing but rags
to cover those broad shoulders—it's a scandal!"

"Fire first," the good soldier answered.
"Light me a fire to purify this house."

The devoted nurse snapped to his command,
brought her master fire and brimstone. Odysseus
purged his palace, halls and court, with cleansing fumes.

520

Then back through the royal house the old nurse went
to tell the women the news and bring them in at once.
They came crowding out of their quarters, torch in hand,
flung their arms around Odysseus, hugged him, home at last,
and kissed his head and shoulders, seized his hands, and he,
overcome by a lovely longing, broke down and wept . . .
deep in his heart he knew them one and all.



The Great Rooted Bed

Up to the rooms the old nurse clambered, chuckling all the way,
to tell the queen her husband was here now, home at last.
Her knees bustling, feet shuffling over each other,
till hovering at her mistress' head she spoke:
"Penelope—child—wake up and see for yourself,
with your own eyes, all you dreamed of, all your days!
He's here—Odysseus—he's come home, at long last!
He's killed the suitors, swaggering young brutes
who plagued his house, wolfed his cattle down,
rode roughshod over his son!"

10

"Dear old nurse," wary Penelope replied,
"the gods have made you mad. They have that power,
putting lunacy into the clearest head around

or setting a half-wit on the path to sense.
 They've unhinged you, and you were once so sane.
 Why do you mock me?—haven't I wept enough?—
 telling such wild stories, interrupting my sleep,
 sweet sleep that held me, sealed my eyes just now.
 Not once have I slept so soundly since the day
 Odysseus sailed away to see that cursed city . . .
Destroy, I call it—I hate to say its name!
 Now down you go. Back to your own quarters.
 If any other woman of mine had come to me,
 rousing me out of sleep with such a tale,
 I'd have her bundled back to her room in pain.
 It's only your old gray head that spares you that!"

"Never"—the fond old nurse kept pressing on—
 "dear child, I'd never mock you! No, it's all true,
 he's here—Odysseus—he's come home, just as I tell you!
 He's the stranger they all manhandled in the hall.
 Telemachus knew he was here, for days and days,
 but he knew enough to hide his father's plans
 so *he* could pay those vipers back in kind!"

Penelope's heart burst in joy, she leapt from bed,
 her eyes streaming tears, she hugged the old nurse
 and cried out with an eager, winging word,
 "Please, dear one, give me the whole story.
 If he's really home again, just as you tell me,
 how did he get those shameless suitors in his clutches?—
 single-handed, braving an army always camped inside."

"I have no idea," the devoted nurse replied.
 "I didn't see it, I didn't ask—all I heard
 was the choking groans of men cut down in blood.
 We crouched in terror—a dark nook of our quarters—
 all of us locked tight behind those snug doors
 till your boy Telemachus came and called me out—
 his father rushed him there to do just that. And then
 I found Odysseus in the thick of slaughtered corpses;

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there he stood and all around him, over the beaten floor,
 the bodies sprawled in heaps, lying one on another . . .
 How it would have thrilled your heart to see him—
 splattered with bloody filth, a lion with his kill!
 And now they're all stacked at the courtyard gates—
 he's lit a roaring fire,
 he's purifying the house with cleansing fumes
 and he's sent me here to bring you back to him.
 Follow me down! So now, after all the years of grief,
 you two can embark, loving hearts, along the road to joy.
 Look, your dreams, put off so long, come true at last—
 he's back alive, home at his hearth, and found you,
 found his son still here. And all those suitors
 who did him wrong, he's paid them back, he has,
 right in his own house!"

"Hush, dear woman,"
 guarded Penelope cautioned her at once.
 "Don't laugh, don't cry in triumph—not yet.
 You know how welcome the sight of him would be
 to all in the house, and to me most of all
 and the son we bore together.
 But the story can't be true, not as you tell it,
 no, it must be a god who's killed our brazen friends—
 up in arms at their outrage, heartbreaking crimes.
 They'd no regard for any man on earth—
 good or bad—who chanced to come their way. So,
 thanks to their reckless work they die their deaths.
 Odysseus? Far from Achaea now, he's lost all hope
 of coming home . . . he's lost and gone himself."

"Child," the devoted old nurse protested,
 "what nonsense you let slip through your teeth.
 Here's your husband, warming his hands at his own hearth,
 here—and you, you say he'll never come home again,
 always the soul of trust! All right, this too—
 I'll give you a sign, a proof that's plain as day.
 That scar, made years ago by a boar's white tusk—
 I spotted the scar myself, when I washed his feet,

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and I tried to tell you, ah, but he, the crafty rascal,
clamped his hand on my mouth—I couldn't say a word.
Follow me down now. I'll stake my life on it:
if I am lying to *you*—
kill me with a thousand knives of pain!"

"Dear old nurse," composed Penelope responded,
"deep as you are, my friend, you'll find it hard
to plumb the plans of the everlasting gods.
All the same, let's go and join my son
so I can see the suitors lying dead
and see . . . the one who killed them."

With that thought

Penelope started down from her lofty room, her heart
in turmoil, torn . . . should she keep her distance,
probe her husband? Or rush up to the man at once
and kiss his head and cling to both his hands?
As soon as she stepped across the stone threshold,
slipping in, she took a seat at the closest wall
and radiant in the firelight, faced Odysseus now.
There he sat, leaning against the great central column,
eyes fixed on the ground, waiting, poised for whatever words
his hardy wife might say when she caught sight of him.
A long while she sat in silence . . . numbing wonder
filled her heart as her eyes explored his face.
One moment he seemed . . . Odysseus, to the life—
the next, no, he was not the man she knew,
a huddled mass of rags was all she saw.

"Oh mother," Telemachus reproached her,
"cruel mother, you with your hard heart!
Why do you spurn my father so—why don't you
sit beside him, engage him, ask him questions?
What other wife could have a spirit so unbending?
Holding back from her husband, home at last for *her*
after bearing twenty years of brutal struggle—
your heart was always harder than a rock!"

"My child,"

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Penelope, well-aware, explained, "I'm stunned with wonder,
powerless. Cannot speak to him, ask him questions,
look him in the eyes . . . But if he is truly
Odysseus, home at last, make no mistake:
we two will know each other, even better—
we two have secret signs,
known to us both but hidden from the world."

120

Odysseus, long-enduring, broke into a smile
and turned to his son with pointed, winging words:
"Leave your mother here in the hall to test me
as she will. She soon will know me better.
Now because I am filthy, wear such grimy rags,
she spurns me—your mother still can't bring herself
to believe I am her husband.

130

But you and I,
put heads together. What's our best defense?
When someone kills a lone man in the realm
who leaves behind him no great band of avengers,
still the killer flees, goodbye to kin and country.
But *we* brought down the best of the island's princes,
the pillars of Ithaca. Weigh it well, I urge you."

"Look to it all yourself now, father," his son
deferred at once. "You are the best on earth,
they say, when it comes to mapping tactics.
No one, no mortal man, can touch you there.
But we're behind you, hearts intent on battle,
nor do I think you'll find us short on courage,
long as our strength will last."

140

"Then here's our plan,"
the master of tactics said. "I think it's best.
First go and wash, and pull fresh tunics on
and tell the maids in the hall to dress well too.
And let the inspired bard take up his ringing lyre
and lead off for us all a dance so full of heart
that whoever hears the strains outside the gates—
a passerby on the road, a neighbor round about—

150

will think it's a wedding-feast that's under way.
No news of the suitors' death must spread through town
till we have slipped away to our own estates,
our orchard green with trees. There we'll see
what winning strategy Zeus will hand us then."

They hung on his words and moved to orders smartly.
First they washed and pulled fresh tunics on,
the women arrayed themselves—the inspired bard
struck up his resounding lyre and stirred in all
a desire for dance and song, the lovely lilting beat,
till the great house echoed round to the measured tread
of dancing men in motion, women sashed and lithe.
And whoever heard the strains outside would say,
"A miracle—someone's married the queen at last!"

"One of her hundred suitors."

"That callous woman,
too faithless to keep her lord and master's house
to the bitter end—"

"Till he came sailing home."

So they'd say, blind to what had happened:
the great-hearted Odysseus was home again at last.
The maid Eurynome bathed him, rubbed him down with oil
and drew around him a royal cape and choice tunic too.
And Athena crowned the man with beauty, head to foot,
made him taller to all eyes, his build more massive,
yes, and down from his brow the great goddess
ran his curls like thick hyacinth clusters
full of blooms. As a master craftsman washes
gold over beaten silver—a man the god of fire
and Queen Athena trained in every fine technique—
and finishes off his latest effort, handsome work . . .
so she lavished splendor over his head and shoulders now.
He stepped from his bath, glistening like a god,
and back he went to the seat that he had left
and facing his wife, declared,

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"Strange woman! So hard—the gods of Olympus
made you harder than any other woman in the world!
What other wife could have a spirit so unbending?
Holding back from her husband, home at last for *her*
after bearing twenty years of brutal struggle.
Come, nurse, make me a bed, I'll sleep alone.
She has a heart of iron in her breast."

190

"Strange man,"

wary Penelope said. "I'm not so proud, so scornful,
nor am I overwhelmed by your quick change . . .
You look—how well I know—the way he looked,
setting sail from Ithaca years ago
aboard the long-oared ship.

Come, Eurycleia,
move the sturdy bedstead out of our bridal chamber—
that room the master built with his own hands.
Take it out now, sturdy bed that it is,
and spread it deep with fleece,
blankets and lustrous throws to keep him warm."

200

Putting her husband to the proof—but Odysseus
blazed up in fury, lashing out at his loyal wife:
"Woman—your words, they cut me to the core!
Who could move my bed? Impossible task,
even for some skilled craftsman—unless a god
came down in person, quick to lend a hand,
lifted it out with ease and moved it elsewhere.
Not a man on earth, not even at peak strength,
would find it easy to prise it up and shift it, no,
a great sign, a hallmark lies in its construction.
I know, I built it myself—no one else . . .
There was a branching olive-tree inside our court,
grown to its full prime, the bole like a column, thickset.
Around it I built my bedroom, finished off the walls
with good tight stonework, roofed it over soundly
and added doors, hung well and snugly wedged.
Then I lopped the leafy crown of the olive,
clean-cutting the stump bare from roots up,

210

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planing it round with a bronze smoothing-adze—
 I had the skill—I shaped it plumb to the line to make
 my bedpost, bored the holes it needed with an auger.
 Working from there I built my bed, start to finish,
 I gave it ivory inlays, gold and silver fittings,
 wove the straps across it, oxbide gleaming red.
 There's our secret sign, I tell you, our life story!
 Does the bed, my lady, still stand planted firm?—
 I don't know—or has someone chopped away
 that olive-trunk and hauled our bedstead off?"

Living proof— 230

Penelope felt her knees go slack, her heart surrender,
 recognizing the strong clear signs Odysseus offered.
 She dissolved in tears, rushed to Odysseus, flung her arms
 around his neck and kissed his head and cried out,
 "Odysseus—don't flare up at me now, not you,
 always the most understanding man alive!
 The gods, it was the gods who sent us sorrow—
 they grudged us both a life in each other's arms
 from the heady zest of youth to the stoop of old age.
 But don't fault me, angry with me now because I failed,
 at the first glimpse, to greet you, hold you, so . . .
 In my heart of hearts I always cringed with fear
 some fraud might come, beguile me with his talk;
 the world is full of the sort,
 cunning ones who plot their own dark ends.
 Remember Helen of Argos, Zeus's daughter—
 would *she* have sported so in a stranger's bed
 if she had dreamed that Achaea's sons were doomed
 to fight and die to bring her home again?
 Some god spurred her to do her shameless work.
 Not till then did her mind conceive that madness,
 blinding madness that caused her anguish, ours as well.
 But now, since you have revealed such overwhelming proof—
 the secret sign of our bed, which no one's ever seen
 but you and I and a single handmaid, Actoris,
 the servant my father gave me when I came,

240

250

who kept the doors of our room you built so well . . .
 you've conquered my heart, my hard heart, at last!"

The more she spoke, the more a deep desire for tears
 welled up inside his breast—he wept as he held the wife
 he loved, the soul of loyalty, in his arms at last. 260
 Joy, warm as the joy that shipwrecked sailors feel
 when they catch sight of land—Poseidon has struck
 their well-rigged ship on the open sea with gale winds
 and crushing walls of waves, and only a few escape, swimming,
 struggling out of the frothing surf to reach the shore,
 their bodies crusted with salt but buoyed up with joy
 as they plant their feet on solid ground again,
 spared a deadly fate. So joyous now to her
 the sight of her husband, vivid in her gaze, 270
 that her white arms, embracing his neck
 would never for a moment let him go . . .
 Dawn with her rose-red fingers might have shone
 upon their tears, if with her glinting eyes
 Athena had not thought of one more thing.
 She held back the night, and night lingered long
 at the western edge of the earth, while in the east
 she reined in Dawn of the golden throne at Ocean's banks,
 commanding her not to yoke the windswift team that brings men light,
 Blaze and Aurora, the young colts that race the Morning on. 280
 Yet now Odysseus, seasoned veteran, said to his wife,
 "Dear woman . . . we have still not reached the end
 of all our trials. One more labor lies in store—
 boundless, laden with danger, great and long,
 and I must brave it out from start to finish.
 So the ghost of Tiresias prophesied to me,
 the day that I went down to the House of Death
 to learn our best route home, my comrades' and my own.
 But come, let's go to bed, dear woman—at long last
 delight in sleep, delight in each other, come!" 290

"If it's bed you want," reserved Penelope replied,

"it's bed you'll have, whenever the spirit moves,
now that the gods have brought you home again
to native land, your grand and gracious house.
But since you've alluded to it,
since a god has put it in your mind,
please, tell me about this trial still to come.
I'm bound to learn of it later, I am sure—
what's the harm if I hear of it tonight?"

"Still so strange,"

Odysseus, the old master of stories, answered.
"Why again, why force me to tell you all?
Well, tell I shall. I'll hide nothing now.
But little joy it will bring you, I'm afraid,
as little joy for me.

The prophet said

that I must rove through towns on towns of men,
that I must carry a well-planed oar until
I come to a people who know nothing of the sea,
whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all
to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars,
wings that make ships fly. And here is my sign,
he told me, clear, so clear I cannot miss it,
and I will share it with you now . . .
When another traveler falls in with me and calls
that weight across my shoulder a fan to winnow grain,
then, he told me, I must plant my oar in the earth
and sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea,
Poseidon—a ram, a bull and a ramping wild boar—
then journey home and render noble offerings up
to the deathless gods who rule the vaulting skies,
to all the gods in order.
And at last my own death will steal upon me . . .
a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes
to take me down, borne down with the years in ripe old age
with all my people here in blessed peace around me.
All this, the prophet said, will come to pass."

"And so," Penelope said, in her great wisdom,

"if the gods will really grant a happier old age,
there's hope that we'll escape our trials at last."

So husband and wife confided in each other,
while nurse and Eurynome, under the flaring brands,
were making up the bed with coverings deep and soft.
And working briskly, soon as they'd made it snug,
back to her room the old nurse went to sleep
as Eurynome, their attendant, torch in hand,
lighted the royal couple's way to bed and,
leading them to their chamber, slipped away.
Rejoicing in each other, they returned to their bed,
the old familiar place they loved so well.

Now Telemachus, the cowherd and the swineherd
rested their dancing feet and had the women do the same,
and across the shadowed hall the men lay down to sleep.

But the royal couple, once they'd reveled in all
the longed-for joys of love, reveled in each other's stories,
the radiant woman telling of all she'd borne at home,
watching them there, the infernal crowd of suitors
slaughtering herds of cattle and good fat sheep—
while keen to win her hand—
draining the broached vats dry of vintage wine.
And great Odysseus told his wife of all the pains
he had dealt out to other men and all the hardships
he'd endured himself—his story first to last—
and she listened on, enchanted . . .
Sleep never sealed her eyes till all was told.

He launched in with how he fought the Cicones down,
then how he came to the Lotus-eaters' lush green land.
Then all the crimes of the Cyclops and how he paid him back
for the gallant men the monster ate without a qualm—
then how he visited Aeolus, who gave him a hero's welcome
then he sent him off, but the homeward run was not his fate,
not yet—some sudden squalls snatched him away once more

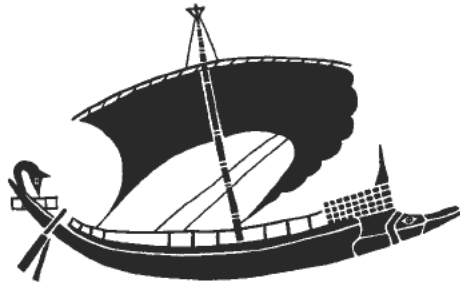
and drove him over the swarming sea, groaning in despair.
 Then how he moored at Telepylus, where Laestrygonians
 wrecked his fleet and killed his men-at-arms.
 He told her of Circe's cunning magic wiles
 and how he voyaged down in his long benched ship
 to the moldering House of Death, to consult Tiresias,
 ghostly seer of Thebes, and he saw old comrades there
 and he saw his mother, who bore and reared him as a child.
 He told how he caught the Sirens' voices throbbing in the wind
 and how he had scudded past the Clashing Rocks, past grim Charybdis,
 past Scylla—whom no rover had ever coasted by, home free—
 and how his shipmates slaughtered the cattle of the Sun
 and Zeus the king of thunder split his racing ship
 with a reeking bolt and killed his hardy comrades,
 all his fighting men at a stroke, but he alone
 escaped their death at sea. He told how he reached
 Ogygia's shores and the nymph Calypso held him back,
 deep in her arching caverns, craving him for a husband—
 cherished him, vowed to make him immortal, ageless, all his days,
 yes, but she never won the heart inside him, never . . . 380
 then how he reached the Phaeacians—heavy sailing there—
 who with all their hearts had prized him like a god
 and sent him off in a ship to his own beloved land,
 giving him bronze and hoards of gold and robes . . .
 and that was the last he told her, just as sleep
 overcame him . . . sleep loosing his limbs,
 slipping the toils of anguish from his mind.

Athena, her eyes afire, had fresh plans.
 Once she thought he'd had his heart's content
 of love and sleep at his wife's side, straightaway 390
 she roused young Dawn from Ocean's banks to her golden throne
 to bring men light and roused Odysseus too, who rose
 from his soft bed and advised his wife in parting,
 "Dear woman, we both have had our fill of trials.
 You in our house, weeping over my journey home,
 fraught with storms and torment, true, and I,
 pinned down in pain by Zeus and other gods,

for all my desire, blocked from reaching home.
 But now that we've arrived at our bed together—
 the reunion that we yearned for all those years— 400
 look after the things still left me in our house.
 But as for the flocks those brazen suitors plundered,
 much I'll recoup myself, making many raids;
 the rest our fellow-Ithacans will supply
 till all my folds are full of sheep again.
 But now I must be off to the upland farm,
 our orchard green with trees, to see my father,
 good old man weighed down with so much grief for me.
 And you, dear woman, sensible as you are,
 I would advise you, still . . . 410
 quick as the rising sun the news will spread
 of the suitors that I killed inside the house.
 So climb to your lofty chamber with your women.
 Sit tight there. See no one. Question no one."

He strapped his burnished armor round his shoulders,
 roused Telemachus, the cowherd and the swineherd,
 and told them to take up weapons honed for battle.
 They snapped to commands, harnessed up in bronze,
 opened the doors and strode out, Odysseus in the lead.
 By now the daylight covered the land, but Pallas, 420
 shrouding them all in darkness,
 quickly led the four men out of town.

PENGUIN BOOKS



H O M E R

The
Odyssey

TRANSLATED BY

Robert Fagles

INTRODUCTION AND
NOTES BY

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