The Odyssey
by Homer

Mrs. Brown’s Class Set
Please do not mark on in any way.
The Trojan War

Greece and Troy were traditional rivals, according to legend. Their quarrelling finally led to a long and bitter war. It started with the love story of Paris and Helen.

Paris
Paris was the son of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. At his birth, it was predicted that Paris would cause the downfall of Troy, so he was left on a hill to die. He was saved by a she-bear, then found by a herdsman who cared for him.

The Judgment of Paris
Eris, the goddess of spite, began her revenge after not being invited to the wedding of Thetis and Peleus. It was a magnificent wedding and all of the gods of Olympus attended. Eris arrived during the wedding feast with an apple inscribed, “For the fairest.” Hera (queen of the gods), Athena (goddess of wisdom), and Aphrodite (goddess of love) all reached for it. Zeus did not want to choose between them, imagining the fury of the two not chosen. He decided someone else must judge and picked Paris. Paris was guarding his foster-father’s sheep when Hermes arrived with the goddesses and asked Paris to choose the loveliest.

Each goddess tried to bribe Paris: Hera offered him power and wealth, while Athena offered wisdom and great victories. Aphrodite just smiled and promised him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world if he choose her. Paris could not resist Aphrodite and gave her the apple, earning the hatred of Hera and Athena.

Aphrodite said that the most beautiful woman in the world was Helen and that she lived in Greece at the court of Menelaus of Sparta. She did not mention that Helen was Menelaus’s wife.

Paris returns to Troy
Soon after, Paris competed in some Games in Troy and won more prizes than any other Trojan prince. Afraid that someone might harm Paris out of jealousy, his foster-father revealed who he really was. The Trojans welcomed him, forgetting the prophesy.

Helen
Helen’s parents were Zeus and Leda. All the Greek princes wanted to marry her. Her foster-father, Tyndareus, cleverly made all the suitors swear to support the man picked as her husband. He chose Menelaus as Helen’s husband.

Earlier, the Greeks had kidnapped Princess Hesione of Troy, Priam’s sister. Priam sent Paris with some men to arrange her release and agreed that if the Greeks did not comply, they would seize a Greek princess in return.

Helen had never loved Menelaus, and when Paris came to Sparta she fell in love with him, as Aphrodite promised. Helen agreed to run off with him, so the Trojans returned with a Greek princess as planned. Menelaus was furious when Helen disappeared. He knew that she left willingly and that his own men had started the trouble by kidnapping Hesione, but he could not accept the insult. He asked his brother, Agamemnon, and Helen’s former suitors, who swore their alliance, to help get her back.
The Suitors
Many of the suitors did not want to go to war, despite their promise to support Helen’s husband. One, Odysseus, pretended to be mad when Menelaus’s men came to fetch him. He started plowing the fields but they placed his baby son, Telemachus, in his path and Odysseus swerved, proving he was sane.

At last, a thousand ships were prepared and armed to go to war against Troy.

The Trojans were willing to go to war for Helen because she had charmed them all. Only Cassandra, Paris’s sister, predicted disaster. She could see the future, but had displeased Apollo, who cursed her to never be believed.

Odysseus
In the years before the war, Odysseus had married the beautiful and ever-faithful Penelope, one of the several strong women in a man’s world. Penelope and Odysseus had one son, Telemachus, who was just a toddler when Odysseus left for the war.

The Wooden Horse Trick
Once in Troy, Odysseus performed extremely well as a soldier and commander. It was he who thought of the famous wooden horse trick that would lead to the downfall of Troy. For ten years the Greeks had been fighting the Trojans, but they were fighting outside Troy’s massive city walls, unable to break through and enter the city. Odysseus’s plan was to build an enormous wooden horse and hide a few Greek soldiers inside its hollow belly. After the horse was built, the Greeks pushed it up to the gates of Troy and withdrew their armies, so that the camp appeared abandoned. Thinking that the Greeks had given up the fight and that the horse was a peace offering, the Trojans brought the horse into their city. That night, the Greeks hidden inside the hollow belly came out, opened the gates of Troy to the whole Greek army, and began the battle that was to win the war. Troy was taken by surprise and every man was killed, the women and children enslaved. Odysseus and his men loaded up their ships with booty and set sail for home.

Now we are ready to begin our journey with Odysseus.
Tell the Story

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

He saw the townlands
and learned the minds of many distant men,
and weathered many bitter nights and days
in his deep heart at sea, while he fought only
to save his life, to bring his shipmates home.

But not by will nor valor could he save them,
for their own recklessness destroyed them all—
children and fools, they killed and feasted on
the cattle of Lord Helios, the Sun,
and he who moves all day through heaven
took from their eyes the dawn of their return.

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

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

(from Book 1)
CALYPSO, THE SWEET NYMPH

No words were lost on Hermes the Wayfinder who bent to tie his beautiful sandals on,
ambrosial, golden, that carry him over water or over endless land in a swish of the wind, and took the wand with which he charms asleep—or when he wills, awake—the eyes of men.
So wand in hand he paced into the air, shot from Pieria down, down to sea level, and veered to skim the swell. A gull patrolling between the wave crests of the desolate sea will dip to catch a fish, and douse his wings; no higher above the whitecaps Hermes flew until the distant island lay ahead, then rising shoreward from the violet ocean he stepped up to the cave. Divine Calypso, the mistress of the isle, was now at home.
A deep wood grew outside, with summer leaves of alder and black poplar, pungent cypress. Ornate birds here rested their stretched wings—horned owls, falcons, cormorants—long-tongued beachcombing birds, and followers of the sea.

Around the smooth-walled cave a crooking vine held purple clusters under ply of green; and four springs, bubbling up near one another shallow and clear, took channels here and there through beds of violets and tender parsley.

Even a god who found this place would gaze, and feel his heart beat with delight: so Hermes did; but when he had gazed his fill he entered the wide cave. Now face-to-face the magical Calypso recognized him, as all immortal gods know one another on sight—though seeming strangers, far from home.

But he saw nothing of the great Odysseus, who sat apart, as a thousand times before, and racked his own heart groaning, with eyes wet scanning the bare horizon of the sea. . . .

The strong god glittering left her as he spoke, and now her ladyship, having given heed to Zeus’s mandate, went to find Odysseus in his stone seat to seaward—tear on tear brimming his eyes. The sweet days of his lifetime were running out in anguish over his exile, for long ago the nymph had ceased to please. Though he fought shy of her and her desire,
he lay with her each night, for she compelled him.

But when day came he sat on the rocky shore

and broke his own heart groaning, with eyes wet

scanning the bare horizon of the sea.

Now she stood near him in her beauty, saying:

“O forlorn man, be still.

Here you need grieve no more; you need not feel

your life consumed here; I have pondered it,

and I shall help you go.

Swiftly she turned and led him to her cave,

and they went in, the mortal and immortal.

He took the chair left empty now by Hermes,

where the divine Calypso placed before him

victuals and drink of men; then she

sat down facing Odysseus, while her serving maids

brought nectar and ambrosia to her side.

Then each one’s hands went out on each one’s feast

until they had had their pleasure; and she said:

“Son of Laertes, versatile Odysseus,

after these years with me, you still desire

your old home? Even so, I wish you well.

If you could see it all, before you go—

all the adversity you face at sea—

you would stay here, and guard this house, and be

immortal—though you wanted her forever,

that bride for whom you pine each day.

Can I be less desirable than she is?

Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals

compare with goddesses in grace and form?”

To this the strategist Odysseus answered:

“My lady goddess, there is no cause for anger.

My quiet Penelope—how well I know—

would seem a shade before your majesty,

death and old age being unknown to you,

while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day

I long for home, long for the sight of home. . . .”

A man in a distant field, no hearth fires near,

will hide a fresh brand in his bed of embers

to keep a spark alive for the next day;

so in the leaves Odysseus hid himself,

while over him Athena showered sleep

that his distress should end, and soon, soon.

In quiet sleep she sealed his cherished eyes.

(from Book 5)

I AM LAERTES’ SON. . . .”

Now this was the reply Odysseus made: . . .

“I am Laertes’ son, Odysseus.

Men hold me

formidable for guile in peace and war:

this fame has gone abroad to the sky’s rim.

My home is on the peaked seamark of Ithaca
under Mount Neion’s windblown robe of leaves,
in sight of other islands—Doulikhion,
Same, wooded Zakynthos—Ithaca
being most lofty in that coastal sea,
and northwest, while the rest lie east and south.
A rocky isle, but good for a boy’s training;
I shall not see on earth a place more dear,
though I have been detained long by Calypso,
loveliest among goddesses, who held me
in her smooth caves, to be her heart’s delight,
as Circe of Aeaea, the enchantress,
desired me, and detained me in her hall.
But in my heart I never gave consent.
Where shall a man find sweetness to surpass
his own home and his parents? In far lands
he shall not, though he find a house of gold.
What of my sailing, then, from Troy?
What of those years
of rough adventure, weathered under Zeus?
The wind that carried west from Ilion
brought me to Ismaros, on the far shore,
a strongpoint on the coast of the Cicones.
I stormed that place and killed the men who fought.
Plunder we took, and we enslaved the women,
to make division, equal shares to all—
but on the spot I told them: ‘Back, and quickly!
Out to sea again!’ My men were mutinous,
fools, on stores of wine. Sheep after sheep
they butchered by the surf, and shambling cattle,
feasting—while fugitives went inland, running
to call to arms the main force of Cicones.
This was an army, trained to fight on horseback
or, where the ground required, on foot. They came
with dawn over that terrain like the leaves
and blades of spring. So doom appeared to us,
dark word of Zeus for us, our evil days.
My men stood up and made a fight of it—
backed on the ships, with lances kept in play,
from bright morning through the blaze of noon
holding our beach, although so far outnumbered;
but when the sun passed toward unyoking time,
then the Achaeans, one by one, gave way.
Six benches were left empty in every ship
that evening when we pulled away from death.
And this new grief we bore with us to sea:
our precious lives we had, but not our friends.
No ship made sail next day until some shipmate
had raised a cry, three times, for each poor ghost
unfleshed by the Cicones on that field.
Now Zeus the lord of cloud roused in the north
a storm against the ships, and driving veils
of squall moved down like night on land and sea.
The bows went plunging at the gust; sails
cracked and lashed out strips in the big wind.
We saw death in that fury, dropped the yards, 
185 unshipped the oars, and pulled for the nearest lee: 
then two long days and nights we lay offshore 
worried out and sick at heart, tasting our grief, 
until a third Dawn came with ringlets shining. 
Then we put up our masts, hauled sail, and rested, 
190 letting the steersmen and the breeze take over. 
I might have made it safely home, that time, 
but as I came round Malea the current 
took me out to sea, and from the north 
a fresh gale drove me on, past Cythera. 
Nine days I drifted on the teeming sea 
before dangerous high winds.”
(from Book 9)

THE LOTUS EATERS

“Upon the tenth 
we came to the coastline of the Lotus Eaters, 
who live upon that flower. We landed there 
to take on water. All ships’ companies 
mustered alongside for the midday meal. 
Then I sent out two picked men and a runner 
to learn what race of men that land sustained. 
They fell in, soon enough, with Lotus Eaters, 
who showed no will to do us harm, only 
offering the sweet Lotus to our friends—
but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotus, 
ever cared to report, nor to return: 
they longed to stay forever, browsing on 
that native bloom, forgetful of their homeland. 
I drove them, all three wailing, to the ships, 
tied them down under their rowing benches, 
and called the rest: ‘All hands aboard; 
come, clear the beach and no one taste 
the Lotus, or you lose your hope of home.’
Filing in to their places by the rowlocks 
my oarsmen dipped their long oars in the surf, 
and we moved out again on our seafaring. . . .”
(from Book 9)
THE CYCLOPS

“We lit a fire, burnt an offering,
and took some cheese to eat; then sat in silence
around the embers, waiting. When he came
he had a load of dry boughs on his shoulder
to stoke his fire at suppertime. He dumped it
with a great crash into that hollow cave,
and we all scattered fast to the far wall.
Then over the broad cavern floor he ushered
the ewes he meant to milk. He left his rams
and he-goats in the yard outside, and swung
high overhead a slab of solid rock
to close the cave. Two dozen four-wheeled wagons,
with heaving wagon teams, could not have stirred
the tonnage of that rock from where he wedged it
over the doorsill. Next he took his seat
and milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job
he made of it, giving each ewe her suckling;
thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey,
sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets,
and poured the whey to stand in bowls
cooling until he drank it for his supper.
When all these chores were done, he poked the fire,
heaping on brushwood. In the glare he saw us.
‘Strangers,’ he said, ‘who are you? And where from?
What brings you here by seaways—a fair traffic?
Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives
like dice, and ravage other folk by sea?’
We felt a pressure on our hearts, in dread
of that deep rumble and that mighty man.
But all the same I spoke up in reply:
‘We are from Troy, Achaeans, blown off course
by shifting gales on the Great South Sea;
homeward bound, but taking routes and ways
uncommon; so the will of Zeus would have it.
We served under Agamemnon, son of Atreus—
the whole world knows what city
he laid waste, what armies he destroyed.
It was our luck to come here; here we stand,
beholden for your help, or any gifts
you give—as custom is to honor strangers.
We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care
for the gods' courtesy; Zeus will avenge
the unoffending guest.’

He answered this
from his brute chest, unmoved:
'You are a ninny,
or else you come from the other end of nowhere,
telling me, mind the gods! We Cyclopes
care not a whistle for your thundering Zeus
or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far.
I would not let you go for fear of Zeus—
you or your friends—unless I had a whim to.
Tell me, where was it, now, you left your ship—
around the point, or down the shore, I wonder?’
He thought he’d find out, but I saw through this,
and answered with a ready lie:
‘My ship?
Poseidon Lord, who sets the earth atremble,
broke it up on the rocks at your land’s end.
A wind from seaward served him, drove us there.
We are survivors, these good men and I.’
Neither reply nor pity came from him,
but in one stride he clutched at my companions
and caught two in his hands like squirming puppies
to beat their brains out, spattering the floor.
Then he dismembered them and made his meal,
gaping and crunching like a mountain lion—
everything: innards, flesh, and marrow bones.
We cried aloud, lifting our hands to Zeus,
powerless, looking on at this, appalled;
but Cyclops went on filling up his belly
with manflesh and great gulps of whey,
then lay down like a mast among his sheep.
My heart beat high now at the chance of action,
and drawing the sharp sword from my hip I went
along his flank to stab him where the midriff
holds the liver. I had touched the spot
when sudden fear stayed me: if I killed him
we perished there as well, for we could never
move his ponderous doorway slab aside.
So we were left to groan and wait for morning.
When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose
lit up the world, the Cyclops built a fire
and milked his handsome ewes, all in due order,
putting the sucklings to the mothers. Then,
his chores being all dispatched, he caught
another brace of men to make his breakfast,
and whisked away his great door slab.
to let his sheep go through—but he, behind,
reset the stone as one would cap a quiver.
There was a din of whistling as the Cyclops
rounded his flock to higher ground, then stillness.
And now I pondered how to hurt him worst,
if but Athena granted what I prayed for.

Here are the means I thought would serve my turn:
a club, or staff, lay there along the fold—
an olive tree, felled green and left to season
for Cyclops’s hand. And it was like a mast
a lugger of twenty oars, broad in the beam—
a deep-seagoing craft—might carry:
so long, so big around, it seemed. Now I
chopped out a six-foot section of this pole
and set it down before my men, who scraped it;
and when they had it smooth, I hewed again

to make a stake with pointed end. I held this
in the fire’s heart and turned it, toughening it,
then hid it, well back in the cavern, under
one of the dung piles in profusion there.
Now came the time to toss for it: who ventured
along with me? Whose hand could bear to thrust
and grind that spike in Cyclops’s eye, when mild
sleep had mastered him? As luck would have it,
the men I would have chosen won the toss—
four strong men, and I made five as captain.

At evening came the shepherd with his flock,
his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,
entered the cave: by some sheepherding whim—
or a god’s bidding—none were left outside.
He hefted his great boulder into place
and sat him down to milk the bleating ewes
in proper order, put the lambs to suck,
and swiftly ran through all his evening chores.
Then he caught two more men and feasted on them.
My moment was at hand, and I went forward
holding an ivy bowl of my dark drink,
looking up, saying:
‘Cyclops, try some wine.
Here’s liquor to wash down your scraps of men.
Taste it, and see the kind of drink we carried
under our planks. I meant it for an offering
if you would help us home. But you are mad,
unbearable, a bloody monster! After this,
will any other traveler come to see you?’
He seized and drained the bowl, and it went down
so fiery and smooth he called for more:
‘Give me another, thank you kindly. Tell me,
how are you called? I’ll make a gift will please you.
Even Cyclopes know the wine grapes grow
out of grassland and loam in heaven’s rain,
but here’s a bit of nectar and ambrosia!’
Three bowls I brought him, and he poured them down.
I saw the fuddle and flush come over him,
then I sang out in cordial tones:

‘Cyclops,
you ask my honorable name? Remember
the gift you promised me, and I shall tell you.

My name is Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends,
everyone calls me Nohbdy.’

And he said:

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

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

In a smithy one sees a white-hot axhead or an adze plunged and wrung in a cold tub, screeching steam—the way they make soft iron hale and hard—just so that eyeball hissed around the spike.

The Cyclops bellowed and the rock roared round him, and we fell back in fear. Clawing his face he tugged the bloody spike out of his eye, threw it away, and his wild hands went groping; then he set up a howl for Cyclopes who lived in caves on windy peaks nearby. Some heard him; and they came by divers ways to clump around outside and call:

‘What ails you, Polyphemus? Why do you cry so sore in the starry night? You will not let us sleep.

Sure no man’s driving off your flock? No man has tricked you, ruined you?’

Out of the cave the mammoth Polyphemus roared in answer:

‘Nohbdy, Nohbdy’s tricked me. Nohbdy’s ruined me!’

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

So saying
they trailed away. And I was filled with laughter

to see how like a charm the name deceived them.

Now Cyclops, wheezing as the pain came on him,
fumbled to wrench away the great doorstone
and squatted in the breach with arms thrown wide
for any silly beast or man who bolted—

hoping somehow I might be such a fool.

But I kept thinking how to win the game:
death sat there huge; how could we slip away?
I drew on all my wits, and ran through tactics,
reasoning as a man will for dear life,

until a trick came—and it pleased me well.
The Cyclops's rams were handsome, fat, with heavy
fleeces, a dark violet.

I tied them silently together, twining
cords of willow from the ogre's bed;

then slung a man under each middle one
to ride there safely, shielded left and right.
So three sheep could convey each man. I took
the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,
and hung myself under his kinky belly,
pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep
in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.
So, breathing hard, we waited until morning.
When Dawn spread out her fingertips of rose
the rams began to stir, moving for pasture,

and peals of bleating echoed round the pens
where dams with udders full called for a milking.
Blinded, and sick with pain from his head wound,
the master stroked each ram, then let it pass,
but my men riding on the pectoral fleece

the giant's blind hands blundering never found.
Last of them all my ram, the leader, came,
weighted by wool and me with my meditations.
The Cyclops patted him, and then he said:
'Sweet cousin ram, why lag behind the rest
in the night cave? You never linger so,
but graze before them all, and go afar
to crop sweet grass, and take your stately way
leading along the streams, until at evening
you run to be the first one in the fold.

Why, now, so far behind? Can you be grieving
over your Master's eye? That carrion rogue
and his accurst companions burnt it out
when he had conquered all my wits with wine.
Nohbdy will not get out alive, I swear.

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

460 He sent us into the open, then. Close by,
I dropped and rolled clear of the ram’s belly,
going this way and that to untie the men.
With many glances back, we rounded up
his fat, stiff-legged sheep to take aboard,
and drove them down to where the good ship lay.

465 We saw, as we came near, our fellows’ faces
shining; then we saw them turn to grief
tallying those who had not fled from death.
I hushed them, jerking head and eyebrows up,
and in a low voice told them: ‘Load this herd;
move fast, and put the ship’s head toward the breakers.’
They all pitched in at loading, then embarked
and struck their oars into the sea. Far out,
as far offshore as shouted words would carry,

470 I sent a few back to the adversary:
‘O Cyclops! Would you feast on my companions?
Puny, am I, in a Caveman’s hands?
How do you like the beating that we gave you,
you damned cannibal? Eater of guests
under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!’
The blind thing in his doubled fury broke
a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us.
Ahead of our black prow it struck and sank
whelmed in a spuming geyser, a giantwave

475 that washed the ship stern foremost back to shore.
I got the longest boathook out and stood
fending us off, with furious nods to all
to put their backs into a racing stroke—
row, row or perish. So the long oars bent
kicking the foam sternward, making head
until we drew away, and twice as far.
Now when I cupped my hands I heard the crew
in low voices protesting:
‘Godsake, Captain!
Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!’

480 ‘That tidal wave he made on the first throw
all but beached us.’
‘All but stove us in!’
‘Give him our bearing with your trumpeting,
he’ll get the range and lob a boulder.’
‘Aye
He’ll smash our timbers and our heads together!’

485 I would not heed them in my glorying spirit,
but let my anger flare and yelled:
‘Cyclops,
if ever mortal man inquire
how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him
Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye:
Laertes’ son, whose home’s on Ithaca!’

490 At this he gave a mighty sob and rumbled:
Now comes the weird upon me, spoken of old.
A wizard, grand and wondrous, lived here—Telemus,
a son of Eurymus great length of days
he had in wizardry among the Cyclopes,
and these things he foretold for time to come:
my great eye lost, and at Odysseus’ hands.
Always I had in mind some giant, armed
in giant force, would come against me here.

But this, but you—small, pitiful, and twiggy—
you put me down with wine, you blinded me.
Come back, Odysseus, and I’ll treat you well,
praying the god of earthquake to befriend you—
his son I am, for he by his avowal
fathered me, and, if he will, he may
heal me of this black wound—he and no other
of all the happy gods or mortal men.’
Few words I shouted in reply to him:
‘If I could take your life I would and take
your time away, and hurl you down to hell!
The god of earthquake could not heal you there!
‘At this he stretched his hands out in his darkness
toward the sky of stars, and prayed Poseidon:
‘O hear me, lord, blue girdler of
the islands,
if I am thine indeed, and thou art father:
grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, never
see his home: Laertes’ son, I mean,
who kept his hall on Ithaca. Should destiny
intend that he shall see his roof again
among his family in his fatherland,
far be that day, and dark the years between.
Let him lose all companions, and return
under strange sail to bitter days at home.’ . . .”
(from Book 9)

THE WITCH CIRCE

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

In the entranceway they stayed
to listen there: inside her quiet house
they heard the goddess Circe.

15
Low she sang
in her beguiling voice, while on her loom
she wove ambrosial fabric sheer and bright,
by that craft known to the goddesses of heaven.

555 No one would speak, until Polites—most
faithful and likable of my officers—said:

‘Dear friends, no need for stealth: here’s a young weaver
singing a pretty song to set the air
atingle on these lawns and paven courts.

560 Goddess she is, or lady. Shall we greet her?’
So reassured, they all cried out together,
and she came swiftly to the shining doors
to call them in. All but Eurylochus—
who feared a snare—the innocents went after her.

565 On thrones she seated them, and lounging chairs,
while she prepared a meal of cheese and barley
and amber honey mixed with Pramnian wine,
adding her own vile pinch, to make them lose
desire or thought of our dear fatherland.

570 Scarce had they drunk when she flew after them
with her long stick and shut them in a pigsty—
odies, voices, heads, and bristles, all
swinish now, though minds were still unchanged.
So, squealing, in they went. And Circe tossed them
acorns, mast, and cornel berries—fodder
for hogs who rut and slumber on the earth.
Down to the ship Eurylochus came running
to cry alarm, foul magic doomed his men!
But working with dry lips to speak a word
he could not, being so shaken; blinding tears
welled in his eyes; foreboding filled his heart.
When we were frantic questioning him, at last
we heard the tale: our friends were gone . . .”
(from Book 10)

THE LAND OF THE DEAD

“Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead,

585 vowing to slaughter my best heifer for them
before she calved, at home in Ithaca,
and burn the choice bits on the altar fire;
as for Teiresias, I swore to sacrifice
a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock.

590 Thus to assuage the nations of the dead
I pledged these rites, then slashed the lamb and ewe,
letting their black blood stream into the well pit.
Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebus,
brides and young men, and men grown old in pain,

595 and tender girls whose hearts were new to grief;
many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads,
battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear.
From every side they came and sought the pit
with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear.
But presently I gave command to my officers
to flay those sheep the bronze cut down, and make
burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below—
to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone.
Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep
the surging phantoms from the bloody pit

till I should know the presence of Teiresias... Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward
bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me:
'Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master of landways and seaways,
why leave the blazing sun, O man of woe,
to see the cold dead and the joyless region?
Stand clear, put up your sword;
let me but taste of blood, I shall speak true.'

At this I stepped aside, and in the scabbard
let my long sword ring home to the pommel silver,
as he bent down to the somber blood. Then spoke
the prince of those with gift of speech:
'Great captain,
a fair wind and the honey lights of home
are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;
the god who thunders on the land prepares it,
not to be shaken from your track, implacable,
in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded.
One narrow strait may take you through his blows:
denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.
When you make landfall on Thrinakia first
and quit the violet sea, dark on the land
you'll find the grazing herds of Helios
by whom all things are seen, all speech is known.
Avoid those kine, hold fast to your intent,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.
But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction
for ship and crew. Though you survive alone,
bered of all companions, lost for years,
under strange sail shall you come home, to find
your own house filled with trouble: insolent men
eating your livestock as they court your lady.
Aye, you shall make those men atone in blood!
But after you have dealt out death—in open
combat or by stealth—to all the suitors,
go overland on foot, and take an oar,
until one day you come where men have lived
with meat unsalted, never known the sea,
nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows
and oars that fledge light hulls for dipping flight.
The spot will soon be plain to you, and I
can tell you how: some passerby will say,
"What winnowing fan is that upon your shoulder?"
Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf
and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon:
a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back,
and carry out pure hecatombs at home

...
to all wide heaven’s lords, the undying gods,
to each in order. Then a seaborne death
soft as this hand of mist will come upon you
when you are wearied out with rich old age,
your countryfolk in blessed peace around you.
And all this shall be just as I foretell. . . ."
(from Book 11)

THE SIRENS; SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

“Listen with care
to this, now, and a god will arm your mind.
Square in your ship’s path are Sirens, crying
beauty to bewitch men coasting by;
woe to the innocent who hears that sound!
He will not see his lady nor his children
in joy, crowding about him, home from sea;
the Sirens will sing his mind away
on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones
of dead men rotting in a pile beside them
and flayed skins shrivel around the spot.

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

But if you wish to listen,
let the men tie you in the lugger, hand
and foot, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,
so you may hear those Harpies’ thrilling voices;
shout as you will, begging to be untied,
your crew must only twist more line around you
and keep their stroke up, till the singers fade. . . .”
“. . . That is the den of Scylla, where she yaps
abominably, a newborn whelp’s cry,
though she is huge and monstrous. God or man,
no one could look on her in joy. Her legs—
and there are twelve—are like great tentacles,
unjointed, and upon her serpent necks
are borne six heads like nightmares of ferocity,
with triple serried rows of fangs and deep
gullets of black death. Half her length, she sways
her heads in air, outside her horrid cleft,
hunting the sea around that promontory
for dolphins, dogfish, or what bigger game
thundering Amphitrite feeds in thousands.
And no ship’s company can claim
to have passed her without loss and grief; she takes,
from every ship, one man for every gullet.
The opposite point seems more a tongue of land
you’d touch with a good bowshot, at the narrows.
A great wild fig, a shaggy mass of leaves,
grows on it, and Charybdis lurks below
to swallow down the dark sea tide. Three times

from dawn to dusk she spews it up
and sucks it down again three times, a whirling
maelstrom; if you come upon her then
the god who makes earth tremble could not save you.
No, hug the cliff of Scylla, take your ship

through on a racing stroke. Better to mourn
six men than lose them all, and the ship, too.
Then you will coast Thrinakia, the island
where Helios’s cattle graze, fine herds, and flocks
of goodly sheep. The herds and flocks are seven,
with fifty beasts in each.

No, hug the cliff of Scylla, take your ship

No lambs are dropped,
or calves, and these fat cattle never die.
Now give those kine a wide berth, keep your thoughts
intent upon your course for home,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.

But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction
for ship and crew.

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

‘Dear friends,
more than one man, or two, should know those things

 Circe foresaw for us and shared with me,
so let me tell her forecast: then we die
with our eyes open, if we are going to die,
or know what death we baffle if we can. Sirens
weaving a haunting song over the sea

we are to shun, she said, and their green shore
all sweet with clover; yet she urged that I
alone should listen to their song. Therefore
you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,
erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,

and if I shout and beg to be untied,
take more turns of the rope to muffle me.’
I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast,
while our good ship made time, bound outward down
the wind for the strange island of Sirens.

Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm
came over all the sea, as though some power
 lulled the swell.
The crew were on their feet
briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,
each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades

and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved
a massive cake of beeswax into bits
and rolled them in my hands until they softened—
no long task, for a burning heat came down
from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward

I carried wax along the line, and laid it
thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb
amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,
and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,
as we came smartly within hailing distance,
the two Sirens, noting our fast ship
off their point, made ready, and they sang. . . .
The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water
made me crave to listen, and I tried to say
‘Untie me!’ to the crew, jerking my brows;
but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes
got to his feet, he and Eurylochus,
and passed more line about, to hold me still.
So all rowed on, until the Sirens
dropped under the sea rim, and their singing
dwindled away.

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

But scarcely had that island
faded in blue air when I saw smoke
and white water, with sound of waves in tumult—
a sound the men heard, and it terrified them.
Oars flew from their hands; the blades went knocking
wild alongside till the ship lost way,
with no oar blades to drive her through the water.

Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern,
trying to put heart into them, standing over
every oarsman, saying gently,
‘Friends,
have we never been in danger before this?
More fearsome, is it now, than when the Cyclops
penned us in his cave? What power he had!
Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits
to find a way out for us?
Now I say
by hook or crook this peril too shall be
something that we remember.
Heads up, lads!

We must obey the orders as I give them.
Get the oar shafts in your hands, and lie back
hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.
Zeus help us pull away before we founder.
You at the tiller, listen, and take in
all that I say—the rudders are your duty;
keep her out of the combers and the smoke;
steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we
fetch up in the smother, and you drown us.’
That was all, and it brought them round to action.

But as I sent them on toward Scylla, I
told them nothing, as they could do nothing.
They would have dropped their oars again, in panic,
to roll for cover under the decking. Circe’s
bidding against arms had slipped my mind,
so I tied on my cuirass and took up
two heavy spears, then made my way along
to the foredeck—thinking to see her first from there,
the monster of the gray rock, harboring
torment for my friends. I strained my eyes
upon that cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere
could I catch sight of her.

And all this time,
in travail, sobbing, gaining on the current,
we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port
and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire
gorge of the salt sea tide. By heaven! when she
vomited, all the sea was like a caldron
seething over intense fire, when the mixture
suddenly heaves and rises.

The shot spume
soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain.

But when she swallowed the sea water down
we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard
the rock bellowing all around, and dark
sand raged on the bottom far below.
My men all blanched against the gloom, our eyes
were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear
of being devoured.

Then Scylla made her strike,
whisking six of my best men from the ship.
I happened to glance aft at ship and oarsmen
and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling
high overhead. Voices came down to me
in anguish, calling my name for the last time.
A man surf-casting on a point of rock
for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod
to drop the sinker and the bait far out,
will hook a fish and rip it from the surface
to dangle wriggling through the air;
so these
were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.
She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den,
in the dire grapple, reaching still for me—
and deathly pity ran me through
at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered
questing the passes of the strange sea.
We rowed on.
The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too,
and Scylla dropped astern.

Then we were coasting
the noble island of the god, where grazed
those cattle with wide brows, and bounteous flocks
of Helios, lord of noon, who rides high heaven.
From the black ship, far still at sea, I heard
the lowing of the cattle winding home
and sheep bleating; and heard, too, in my heart
the words of blind Teiresias of Thebes
and Circe of Aeaea: both forbade me
the island of the world’s delight, the Sun. . . .”
(from Book 12)
THE CATTLE OF THE SUN GOD

“In the small hours of the third watch, when stars that shone out in the first dusk of evening had gone down to their setting, a giant wind blew from heaven, and clouds driven by Zeus shrouded land and sea in a night of storm; so, just as Dawn with fingertips of rose touched the windy world, we dragged our ship to cover in a grotto, a sea cave where nymphs had chairs of rock and sanded floors. I mustered all the crew and said:

‘Old shipmates, our stores are in the ship’s hold, food and drink; the cattle here are not for our provision, or we pay dearly for it. Fierce the god is who cherishes these heifers and these sheep: Helios; and no man avoids his eye.’ To this my fighters nodded. Yes. But now we had a month of onshore gales, blowing day in, day out—south winds, or south by east. As long as bread and good red wine remained to keep the men up, and appease their craving, they would not touch the cattle. But in the end, when all the barley in the ship was gone, hunger drove them to scour the wild shore with angling hooks, for fishes and sea fowl, whatever fell into their hands; and lean days wore their bellies thin.

The storms continued.

So one day I withdrew to the interior to pray the gods in solitude, for hope that one might show me some way of salvation. Slipping away, I struck across the island to a sheltered spot, out of the driving gale. I washed my hands there, and made supplication to the gods who own Olympus, all the gods—but they, for answer, only closed my eyes under slow drops of sleep.

Now on the shore Eurylochus made his insidious plea:

‘Comrades,’ he said, ‘You’ve gone through everything; listen to what I say. All deaths are hateful to us, mortal wretches, but famine is the most pitiful, the worst end that a man can come to. Will you fight it? Come, we’ll cut out the noblest of these cattle for sacrifice to the gods who own the sky; and once at home, in the old country of Ithaca, if ever that day comes—
we’ll build a costly temple and adorn it
with every beauty for the Lord of Noon.

But if he flares up over his heifers lost,
wishing our ship destroyed, and if the gods
make cause with him, why, then I say: Better
open your lungs to a big sea once for all
than waste to skin and bones on a lonely island!

Thus Eurylochus; and they murmured ‘Aye!’
trooping away at once to round up heifers.
Now, that day tranquil cattle with broad brows
were grazing near, and soon the men drew up
around their chosen beasts in ceremony.

They plucked the leaves that shone on a tall oak—
having no barley meal—to strew the victims,
performed the prayers and ritual, knifed the kine
and flayed each carcass, cutting thighbones free
to wrap in double folds of fat. These offerings,
with strips of meat, were laid upon the fire.
Then, as they had no wine, they made libation
with clear spring water, broiling the entrails first;
and when the bones were burnt and tripe shared,
they spitted the carved meat.

Just then my slumber
left me in a rush, my eyes opened,
and I went down the seaward path. No sooner
had I caught sight of our black hull, than savory
odors of burnt fat eddied around me;
grief took hold of me, and I cried aloud:

‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,
you made me sleep away this day of mischief!
O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour!
Here they sat, and a great work they contrived.’

Lampetia in her long gown meanwhile
had borne swift word to the Overlord of Noon:
‘They have killed your kine.’
And the Lord Helios
burst into angry speech amid the immortals:
‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,
punish Odysseus’ men! So overweening,
now they have killed my peaceful kine, my joy
at morning when I climbed the sky of stars,
and evening, when I bore westward from heaven.
Restitution or penalty they shall pay—
and pay in full—or I go down forever
to light the dead men in the underworld.’ . . .”
(from Book 12)
The Meeting of Father and Son

But there were two men in the mountain hut—
Odysseus and the swineherd. At first light
blowing their fire up, they cooked their breakfast
and sent their lads out, driving herds to root
in the tall timber.

935 When Telemachus came,
the wolfish troop of watchdogs only fawned on him
as he advanced. Odysseus heard them go
and heard the light crunch of a man’s footfall—
at which he turned quickly to say:

“Eumaeus,

940 here is one of your crew come back, or maybe
another friend: the dogs are out there snuffling
belly down; not one has even growled.
I can hear footsteps—”

But before he finished
his tall son stood at the door.

945 The swineherd
rose in surprise, letting a bowl and jug
tumble from his fingers. Going forward,
he kissed the young man’s head, his shining eyes
and both hands, while his own tears brimmed and fell.
Think of a man whose dear and only son,

950 born to him in exile, reared with labor,
has lived ten years abroad and now returns:
how would that man embrace his son! Just so
the herdsman clapped his arms around Telemachus
and covered him with kisses—for he knew

955 the lad had got away from death. He said:
“Light of my days, Telemachus,
you made it back! When you took ship for Pylos
I never thought to see you here again.
Come in, dear child, and let me feast my eyes;

960 here you are, home from the distant places!
How rarely, anyway, you visit us,
your own men, and your own woods and pastures!
Always in the town, a man would think
you loved the suitors’ company, those dogs!”

965 Telemachus with his clear candor said:
“I am with you, Uncle. See now, I have come
because I wanted to see you first, to hear from you
if Mother stayed at home—or is she married
off to someone, and Odysseus’ bed

970 left empty for some gloomy spider’s weaving?”
Gently the forester replied to this:”
At home indeed your mother is, poor lady
still in the women’s hall. Her nights and days
are wearied out with grieving.”
Stepping back he took the bronze-shod lance, and the young prince entered the cabin over the worn door stone. Odysseus moved aside, yielding his couch, but from across the room Telemachus checked him: “Friend, sit down; we’ll find another chair in our own hut. Here is the man to make one!” The swineherd, when the quiet man sank down, built a new pile of evergreens and fleeces—a couch for the dear son of great Odysseus—then gave them trenchers of good meat, left over from the roast pork of yesterday, and heaped up willow baskets full of bread, and mixed an ivy bowl of honey-hearted wine. Then he in turn sat down, facing Odysseus, their hands went out upon the meat and drink as they fell to, ridding themselves of hunger. . . . She tipped her golden wand upon the man, making his cloak pure white, and the knit tunic fresh around him. Lithe and young she made him, ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard no longer gray upon his chin. And she withdrew when she had done. Then Lord Odysseus reappeared—and his son was thunderstruck. Fear in his eyes, he looked down and away as though it were a god, and whispered: “Stranger, you are no longer what you were just now! Your cloak is new; even your skin! You are one of the gods who rule the sweep of heaven! Be kind to us, we’ll make you fair oblation and gifts of hammered gold. Have mercy on us!” The noble and enduring man replied: “No god. Why take me for a god? No, no. I am that father whom your boyhood lacked and suffered pain for lack of. I am he.” Held back too long, the tears ran down his cheeks as he embraced his son. Only Telemachus, uncomprehending, wild with incredulity, cried out: “You cannot be my father Odysseus! Meddling spirits conceived this trick to twist the knife in me! No man of woman born could work these wonders by his own craft, unless a god came into it with ease to turn him young or old at will. I swear you were in rags and old, and here you stand like one of the immortals!” Odysseus brought his ranging mind to bear and said: “This is not princely, to be swept away by wonder at your father’s presence.
No other Odysseus will ever come, for he and I are one, the same; his bitter fortune and his wanderings are mine.

Twenty years gone, and I am back again on my own island. . . ."

Then, throwing his arms around this marvel of a father, Telemachus began to weep. Salt tears rose from the wells of longing in both men, and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering as those of the great taloned hawk, whose nestlings farmers take before they fly. So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears, and might have gone on weeping so till sundown. . . .

(from Book 16)

The Beggar and the Faithful Dog

While he spoke an old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argos, trained as a puppy by Odysseus, but never taken on a hunt before his master sailed for Troy. The young men, afterward, hunted wild goats with him, and hare, and deer, but he had grown old in his master’s absence. Treated as rubbish now, he lay at last upon a mass of dung before the gates—manure of mules and cows, piled there until field hands could spread it on the king’s estate. Abandoned there, and half destroyed with flies, old Argos lay.

But when he knew he heard Odysseus’ voice nearby, he did his best to wag his tail, nose down, with flattened ears, having no strength to move nearer his master. And the man looked away, wiping a salt tear from his cheek; but he hid this from Eumaeus. Then he said: "I marvel that they leave this hound to lie here on the dung pile; he would have been a fine dog, from the look of him, though I can’t say as to his power and speed when he was young. You find the same good build in house dogs, table dogs landowners keep all for style."

And you replied, Eumaeus: "A hunter owned him—but the man is dead in some far place. If this old hound could show the form he had when Lord Odysseus left him, going to Troy, you’d see him swift and strong. He never shrank from any savage thing he’d brought to bay in the deep woods; on the scent
no other dog kept up with him. Now misery has him in leash. His owner died abroad,
and here the women slaves will take no care of him.
You know how servants are: without a master they have no will to labor, or excel.
For Zeus who views the wide world takes away half the manhood of a man, that day he goes into captivity and slavery.” Eumaeus crossed the court and went straight forward into the megaron among the suitors; but death and darkness in that instant closed the eyes of Argos, who had seen his master, Odysseus, after twenty years. . . .
(from Book 17)

The Test of the Great Bow

Now the queen reached the storeroom door and halted. Here was an oaken sill, cut long ago and sanded clean and bedded true. Foursquare the doorjambs and the shining doors were set by the careful builder. Penelope untied the strap around the curving handle, pushed her hook into the slit, aimed at the bolts inside, and shot them back. Then came a rasping sound as those bright doors the key had sprung gave way—a bellow like a bull’s vaunt in a meadow—followed by her light footfall entering over the plank floor. Herb-scented robes lay there in chests, but the lady’s milk-white arms went up to lift the bow down from a peg in its own polished bow case.

Now Penelope sank down, holding the weapon on her knees, and drew her husband’s great bow out, and sobbed and bit her lip and let the salt tears flow.

Then back she went to face the crowded hall tremendous bow in hand, and on her shoulder hung the quiver spiked with coughing death. Behind, her maids bore a basket full of ax heads, bronze and iron implements for the master’s game.

Thus in her beauty she approached the suitors, and near a pillar of the solid roof she paused, her shining veil across her cheeks, her maids on either hand and still, then spoke to the banqueters:

“My lords, hear me: suitors indeed, you recommended this house to feast and drink in, day and night, my husband being long gone, long out of mind. You found no justification for yourselves—none except your lust to marry me. Stand up, then:
we now declare a contest for that prize.
Here is my lord Odysseus' hunting bow.
Bend and string it if you can. Who sends an arrow
through iron ax-helve sockets, twelve in line?
I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home,
to be remembered, though I dream it only.” . . .

Two men had meanwhile left the hall:
swineherd and cowherd, in companionship,
one downcast as the other. But Odysseus
followed them outdoors, outside the court,
and coming up said gently:
“You, herdsman,
and you, too, swineherd, I could say a thing to you,
or should I keep it dark?
No, no; speak,
my heart tells me. Would you be men enough
to stand by Odysseus if he came back?
Suppose he dropped out of a clear sky, as I did?
Suppose some god should bring him?
Would you bear arms for him, or for the suitors?”
The cowherd said:
“Ah, let the master come!
Father Zeus, grant our old wish! Some courier
guide him back! Then judge what stuff is in me
and how I manage arms!”
Likewise Eumaeus
fell to praying all heaven for his return,
so that Odysseus, sure at least of these,
told them:
“I am at home, for I am he.
I bore adversities, but in the twentieth year
I am ashore in my own land. I find
the two of you, alone among my people,
longsed for my coming. Prayers I never heard
except your own that I might come again.
So now what is in store for you I'll tell you:
If Zeus brings down the suitors by my hand
I promise marriages to both, and cattle,
and houses built near mine. And you shall be
brothers-in-arms of my Telemachus.
Here, let me show you something else, a sign
that I am he, that you can trust me, look:
this old scar from the tusk wound that I got
boar hunting on Parnassus—. . .”
Shifting his rags
he bared the long gash. Both men looked, and knew
and threw their arms around the old soldier, weeping,
kissing his head and shoulders. He as well
took each man’s head and hands to kiss, then said—
to cut it short, else they might weep till dark—
“Break off, no more of this.
Anyone at the door could see and tell them.
Drift back in, but separately at intervals after me.

Now listen to your orders:
when the time comes, those gentlemen, to a man,
will be dead against giving me bow or quiver.
Defy them. Eumaeus, bring the bow and put it in my hands there at the door.
Tell the women to lock their own door tight.
Tell them if someone hears the shock of arms
or groans of men, in hall or court, not one must show her face, but keep still at her weaving.
Philoeteus, run to the outer gate and lock it.
Throw the crossbar and lash it.” . . .
And Odysseus took his time,
turning the bow, tapping it, every inch,
for borings that termites might have made while the master of the weapon was abroad.
The suitors were now watching him, and some jested among themselves:
“A bow lover!”
“Dealer in old bows!”
“Maybe he has one like it at home!”
“Or has an itch to make one for himself.”
“See how he handles it, the sly old buzzard!”
And one disdainful suitor added this:
“May his fortune grow an inch for every inch he bends it!”
But the man skilled in all ways of contending,
satisfied by the great bow’s look and heft,
like a musician, like a harper, when with quiet hand upon his instrument
he draws between his thumb and forefinger
a sweet new string upon a peg: so effortlessly Odysseus in one motion strung the bow.
Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it,
so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang a swallow’s note.
In the hushed hall it smote the suitors and all their faces changed. Then Zeus thundered overhead, one loud crack for a sign. And Odysseus laughed within him that the son of crooked-minded Cronus had flung that omen down. He picked one ready arrow from his table
where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still in the quiver for the young men’s turn to come.
He nocked it, let it rest across the handgrip, and drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow, aiming from where he sat upon the stool.
Now flashed arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle through every socket ring, and grazed not one, to thud with heavy brazen head beyond.
Then quietly Odysseus said:
“Telemachus, the stranger
you welcomed in your hall has not disgraced you.

I did not miss, neither did I take all day
stringing the bow. My hand and eye are sound,
not so contemptible as the young men say.
The hour has come to cook their lordships’ mutton—
supper by daylight. Other amusements later,
with song and harping that adorn a feast.”

He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince
Telemachus, true son of King Odysseus,
belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear,
and with a clink and glitter of keen bronze
stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.

(from Book 21)

Death at the Palace

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest fighter of the
islands
leapt and stood on the broad doorsill, his own bow in his
hand.
He poured out at his feet a rain of arrows from the quiver
and spoke to the crowd:
“So much for that. Your clean-cut game is over.

Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before,
if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo.”

He drew to his fist the cruel head of an arrow for
Antinous
just as the young man leaned to lift his beautiful drinking
cup,
embossed, two-handled, golden: the cup was in his
fingers,
the wine was even at his lips, and did he dream of death?
How could he? In that revelry amid his throng of friends
who would imagine a single foe—though a strong foe
indeed—
could dare to bring death’s pain on him and darkness on
his eyes?
Odysseus’ arrow hit him under the chin
and punched up to the feathers through his throat.
Backward and down he went, letting the wine cup fall
from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted
crimson runnels, a river of mortal red,
and one last kick upset his table
knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood.
Now as they craned to see their champion where he lay
the suitors jostled in uproar down the hall,
everyone on his feet. Wildly they turned and scanned
the walls in the long room for arms; but not a shield,
not a good ashen spear was there for a man to take and
throw.

All they could do was yell in outrage at Odysseus:
"Foul! to shoot at a man! That was your last shot!"
"Your own throat will be slit for this!"
   "Our finest lad is down!
You killed the best on Ithaca."
   "Buzzards will tear your eyes out!"

For they imagined as they wished—that it was a wild
shot,
an unintended killing—fools, not to comprehend
they were already in the grip of death.
But glaring under his brows Odysseus answered:
"You yellow dogs, you thought I’d never make it
home from the land of Troy. You took my house to
plunder,
twisted my maids to serve your beds. You dared
bid for my wife while I was still alive.
Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide
heaven,
contempt for what men say of you hereafter.
Your last hour has come. You die in blood."
   As they all took this in, sickly green fear
   pulled at their entrails,
   and their eyes flickered
   looking for some hatch or hideaway from death.
Eurymachus alone could speak. He said:
"If you are Odysseus of Ithaca come back,
all that you say these men have done is true.
Rash actions, many here, more in the countryside.
But here he lies, the man who caused them all.
Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on
to do these things. He cared less for a marriage
than for the power Cronion has denied him
as king of Ithaca. For that
he tried to trap your son and would have killed him.
He is dead now and has his portion. Spare
your own people. As for ourselves, we’ll make
restitution of wine and meat consumed,
and add, each one, a tithe of twenty oxen
with gifts of bronze and gold to warm your heart.
Meanwhile we cannot blame you for your anger."
Odysseus glowered under his black brows
and said:
   "Not for the whole treasure of your fathers,
   all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold
   put up by others, would I hold my hand.
   There will be killing till the score is paid.
You forced yourselves upon this house. Fight your way out,
or run for it, if you think you’ll escape death.
I doubt one man of you skins by.” . . .
At this moment that unmanning thundercloud,
the aegis, Athena’s shield,
took form aloft in the great hall.
And the suitors mad with fear
at her great sign stampeded like stung cattle by a river
when the dread shimmering gadfly strikes in summer,
in the flowering season, in the long-drawn days.
After them the attackers wheeled, as terrible as falcons
from eyries in the mountains veering over and diving
1295 down
with talons wide unsheathed on flights of birds,
who cower down the sky in chutes and bursts along the valley—
but the pouncing falcons grip their prey, no frantic wing avails,
and farmers love to watch those beakèd hunters.

1300 So these now fell upon the suitors in that hall,
turning, turning to strike and strike again,
while torn men moaned at death, and blood ran smoking
over the whole floor. . . .
(from Book 22)
Odysseus and Penelope

Crossing the doorsill she sat down at once
in firelight, against the nearest wall,
across the room from the lord Odysseus.

There
leaning against a pillar, sat the man
and never lifted up his eyes, but only waited
for what his wife would say when she had seen him.

And she, for a long time, sat deathly still
in wonderment—for sometimes as she gazed
she found him—yes, clearly—like her husband,
but sometimes blood and rags were all she saw.
Telemachus’s voice came to her ears:

“Mother,
cruel mother, do you feel nothing,
drawing yourself apart this way from Father?
Will you not sit with him and talk and question him?
What other woman could remain so cold?
Who shuns her lord, and he come back to her
from wars and wandering, after twenty years?
Your heart is hard as flint and never changes!”
Penelope answered:

“I am stunned, child.
I cannot speak to him. I cannot question him.
I cannot keep my eyes upon his face.
If really he is Odysseus, truly home,
beyond all doubt we two shall know each other
better than you or anyone. There are
secret signs we know, we two.”

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

“Peace: let your mother test me at her leisure.
Before long she will see and know me best.
These tatters, dirt—all that I’m caked with now—
make her look hard at me and doubt me still. . . .”

Greathearted Odysseus, home at last,
was being bathed now by Eurynome
and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again
in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena
lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him
taller, and massive, too, with crisping hair
in curls like petals of wild hyacinth
but all red-golden. Think of gold infused
on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art
Hephaestus taught him, or Athena: one
whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished
beauty over Odysseus’ head and shoulders.
He sat then in the same chair by the pillar,
facing his silent wife, and said:

“Strange woman,
the immortals of Olympus made you hard,
harder than any. Who else in the world would keep aloof as you do from her husband if he returned to her from years of trouble, cast on his own land in the twentieth year? Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on. Her heart is iron in her breast.”

Penelope spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

“Strange man, if man you are... This is no pride on my part nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely. I know so well how you—how he—appeared boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same . . . Make up his bed for him, Eurycleia. Place it outside the bedchamber my lord built with his own hands. Pile the big bed with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen.”

With this she tried him to the breaking point, and he turned on her in a flash, raging: “Woman, by heaven you’ve stung me now! Who dared to move my bed?

No builder had the skill for that—unless a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal in his best days could budge it with a crowbar. There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign, built into that bed—my handiwork and no one else’s!

An old trunk of olive grew like a pillar on the building plot, and I laid out our bedroom round that tree, lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof, gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors. Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches, hewed and shaped the stump from the roots up into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve as model for the rest, I planed them all, inlaid them all with silver, gold, and ivory, and stretched a bed between—a pliant web of oxhide thongs dyed crimson.

There’s our sign! I know no more. Could someone else’s hand have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?” Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.

With eyes brimming tears she ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him, murmuring: “Do not rage at me, Odysseus!

No one ever matched your caution! Think what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us life together in our prime and flowering years, kept us from crossing into age together. Forgive me, don’t be angry. I could not
welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself long ago against the frauds of men,
impostors who might come—and all those many whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . .
But here and now, what sign could be so clear as this of our own bed?
No other man has ever laid eyes on it—
only my own slave, Actoris, that my father sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.
You make my stiff heart know that I am yours.”
Now from his breast into his eyes the ache of longing mounted, and he wept at last,
his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms, longed for
as the sun-warmed earth is longed for by a swimmer spent in rough water where his ship went down under Poseidon’s blows, gale winds and tons of sea.
Few men can keep alive through a big surf
to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind:
and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband, her white arms round him pressed, as though forever. . . .
(from Book 23)