

from *The ODYSSEY*
by Homer

TELL THE STORY

Homer opens with an invocation – a prayer to the Muse of epic poetry, Caliope – to help him sing his tale.

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 of Troy.

5 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.
10 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
15 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
20 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.

- 25 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.
- 30 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)

PART ONE: THE WANDERINGS

CALYPSO, THE SWEET NYMPH

Books 1–4 of the epic tell about Odysseus’s son, Telemachus. Telemachus has been searching the Mediterranean world for his father, who has never returned from the ten-year Trojan War. (Today, Odysseus would be listed as missing in action.)

When we first meet Odysseus, in Book 5 of the epic, he is a prisoner of the beautiful goddess Calypso. The old soldier is in despair: He has spent ten years (seven of them as Calypso’s not entirely unwilling captive) trying to get home.

The goddess Athena has supported and helped Odysseus on his long journey. Now she begs her father, Zeus, to help her favorite, and Zeus agrees. He sends the messenger god Hermes to Calypso’s island to order Odysseus released. Although Calypso is not described as evil, her seductive charms – even her promises of immortality for Odysseus – threaten to keep the hero away from his wife, Penelope.

No words were lost on Hermes the Wayfinder
 35 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.
 40 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;
 45 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.
 50 Upon her hearthstone a great fire blazing
 scented the farthest shores with cedar smoke
 and smoke of thyme, and singing high and low
 in her sweet voice, before her loom aweaving,
 she passed her golden shuttle to and fro.

55 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.
60 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.
65 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,
70 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,
his eyes wet, scanning the bare horizon of the sea....

Hermes tells Calypso that she must give up Odysseus forever. Now we are directly introduced to Odysseus. Notice what this great warrior is doing when we first meet him.

75 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
80 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
85 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
 90 your life consumed here; I have pondered it,
 and I shall help you go....”

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

Swiftly she turned and led him to her cave,
 and they went in, the mortal and immortal.

He took the chair left empty now by Hermes,
 95 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
 100 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 —
 105 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?

110 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 —
 115 would seem a shade before your majesty,
 death and old age being unknown to you,
 while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day
 I long for home, long for the sight of home....”

So Odysseus builds the raft and sets sail. But the sea god Poseidon is by no means ready to allow an easy passage over his watery domain. He raises a storm and destroys the raft. It is only with the help of Athena and a sea nymph that Odysseus arrives, broken and battered, on the island of Scheria. There he hides himself in a pile of leaves and falls into a deep sleep.

A man in a distant field, no hearth fires near,
120 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.
125 In quiet sleep she sealed his cherished eyes.

(from Book 5)

"I AM LAERTES' SON...."

Odysseus is found by the daughter of Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians. That evening he is a guest at court (Books 6–8).

To the ancient people of Greece and Asia Minor, all guests were godsent. They had to be treated with great courtesy before they could be asked to identify themselves and state their business. That night, at the banquet, the stranger who was washed up on the beach is seated in the guest's place of honor. A minstrel, or singer, is called, and the mystery guest gives him a gift of pork, crisp with fat, and requests a song about Troy. In effect, Odysseus is asking for a song about himself. Odysseus weeps as the minstrel's song reminds him of all his companions, who will never see their homes again. Now Odysseus is asked by the king to identify himself. It is here that he begins the story of his journey.

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.

- 130 My home is on the peaked seamount 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,
135 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
140 in her smooth caves, to be her heart's delight,
as Circe of Aea, 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
145 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?

Of my rough adventure, weathered under Zeus?
The wind that carried west from Ilion

150 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 –
 155 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
 160 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,
 165 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;
 170 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:
 175 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
 180 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
 worn out and sick at heart, tasting our grief,
 until a third Dawn came with ringlets shining.
 Then we put up our masts, hauled sail, and rested,

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.
195 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
200 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,
205 who showed no will to do us harm, only
offering the sweet Lotus to our friends –
but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotus,
never cared to report, nor to return:
they longed to stay forever, browsing on
210 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
215 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

In his next adventure, Odysseus describes his encounter with the Cyclops named Polyphemus, Poseidon's one-eyed monster son. Odysseus must rely on the special intelligence associated with his name and the fact that he is guided by the goddess of wisdom, Athena.

It is Odysseus's famed curiosity that leads him to the Cyclops's cave and that makes him insist on waiting for the barbaric giant. Odysseus is still speaking to the court of King Alcinous.

"We lit a fire, burnt an offering,
 220 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,
 225 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
 230 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
 235 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.
 240 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
 245 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
 250 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
 255 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
 260 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
 265 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 –
 270 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.
 275 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
 280 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,
 285 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,
290 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
295 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,
300 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,
305 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.

310 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' hand. And it was like a mast
a lugger of twenty oars, broad in the beam –
315 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
320 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
325 along with me? Whose hand could bear to thrust

and grind that spike in Cyclops' eye, when mild
 sleep had mastered him? As luck would have it,
 the men I would have chosen won the toss –
 four strong men, and I made five as captain.

330 At evening came the shepherd with his flock,
 his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,
 entered the cave: by some shepherding whim –
 or a god's bidding – none were left outside.
 He hefted his great boulder into place
 335 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
 340 holding an ivy bowl of my dark drink,
 looking up, saying:

'Here's wine 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
 345 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:

350 '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!'
 355 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.
 360 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,
 365 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,
 370 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
 375 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
 380 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
 385 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.
 390 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
 395 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.
 400 Sure no man's driving off your flock? No man

has tricked you, ruined you?’

Out of the cave the mammoth Polyphemus roared:

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

To this rough shout they made a sage reply:

- 405 ‘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.’
They trailed away. And I was filled with laughter
410 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 –
415 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,
420 until a trick came – and it pleased me well.
The Cyclops’ rams were handsome, fat, with heavy
fleeces, a dark violet. Three abreast, I tied them together,
twining cords of willow from the ogre’s bed;
425 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,
430 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,
435 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
440 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
445 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.
450 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.
455 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,
465 and drove them down to where the good ship lay.
We saw, as we came near, our fellows’ faces
shining; then we saw them turn to grief
tallying those who had not fled from death.
I hushed them, jerking head and eyebrows up,
470 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,
475 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
 480 under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!

The blind thing in his doubled fury broke
 a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us.
 Ahead of our black prow it struck and sank
 whelmed in a spuming geyser, a giant wave
 485 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
 490 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!’
 495 ‘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.
 He’ll smash our timbers and our heads together!’
 500 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:
 505 Laertes’ son, whose home’s on Ithaca!’
 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
 510 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.
 515 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
 520 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
 525 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,
 530 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
 535 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)

Here we will imagine that Homer stops reciting for the night. The blind poet might take a glass of wine before turning in. The listeners would go off to various corners of the local nobleman's house. They might discuss highlights of the poet's tale among themselves and look forward to the next evening's installment.

THE ENCHANTRESS CIRCE

After sailing from the Cyclops's island, Odysseus and his men land on the island of Aeolia. There the wind king, Aeolus, does Odysseus a favor and puts all the stormy winds in a bag so that they will not harm the Ithacans. During the voyage, when the curious and suspicious sailors open the bag, thinking it contains treasure, the evil winds roar up into hurricanes that blow the ships back to Aeolia. Aeolus drives them away again.

On the island of the Laestrygonians, gigantic cannibals, all the ships but one are destroyed and their crews devoured. Odysseus's ship escapes and lands on Aea, the home of the enchantress goddess Circe. Here, twenty-three men, led by Eurylochus, goes off to explore the island.

“In the wild wood they found an open glade,
 540 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
 545 like hounds, who look up when their master comes
 with tidbits for them – as he will – from table.
 Humbly those wolves and lions with mighty paws
 fawned on our men – who met their yellow eyes with fear.
 In the entranceway they stayed
 550 to listen there: inside her quiet house
 they heard the goddess Circe. Low she sang,
 in her beguiling voice, while on her loom
 she wove ambrosial fabric sheer and bright,
 by that craft known to the goddesses of heaven.
 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 –
 bodies, voices, heads, and bristles, all
 swinish now, though minds were still unchanged.
 So, squealing, in they went. And Circe tossed them
- 575 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
- 580 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)

Odysseus leaves the ship and rushes to Circe's hall. The god Hermes stops him to give him a plant that will weaken Circe's power. (Homer calls it a moly; it might have been a kind of garlic.) Protected by the plant's magic, Odysseus resists Circe's sorcery. The goddess, realizing she has met her match, frees Odysseus's men. Now Circe, "loveliest of all immortals," persuades Odysseus to stay with her.

Odysseus shares her meat and wine, and she restores his heart. After many seasons of feasting and other pleasures, Odysseus and his men beg Circe to help them return home.

She responds to their pleas with the command that Odysseus alone descend to the Land of the Dead, "the cold homes of Death and pale Persephone," queen of the underworld. There Odysseus must seek the wisdom of the blind prophet Teiresias.

THE LAND OF THE DEAD

In the Land of the Dead, Odysseus seeks to learn his destiny. The source of his information is Teiresias, the famous blind prophet from the city of Thebes. The prophet's lack of external sight suggests the presence of true insight. Circe has told Odysseus exactly what rites he must perform to bring Teiresias up from the dead. Odysseus continues telling his story to Alcinous's court.

“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.
 600 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
 605 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,
 610 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.'

615 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
620 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:
625 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.
630 Avoid those kine, hold fast to your intent,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.
But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction
for ship and crew. Though you survive alone,
bereft of all companions, lost for years,
635 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
640 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
645 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
650 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
655 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

Odysseus and his men return to Circe's island, where Circe warns Odysseus of the perils that await him. In the following passage, Odysseus, quoting Circe, is still speaking at Alcinous's court.

- 660 "Listen with care, 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
 665 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.
- 670 Steer wide; 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,
 675 so you may hear those Harpies'° thrilling voices;
 shout as you will, begging to be untied,
 your crew must only twist more line around you
 and keep their stroke up, till the singers fade...."

The next peril lies between two headlands. Circe continues her warning.

- 680 "...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
 685 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
 690 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.
 695 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
 700 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
 705 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.

710 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.
 715 But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction
 for ship and crew...''

The Ithacans set off. Odysseus does not tell his men of Circe's last prophecy – that he will be the only survivor of their long journey. Still speaking to Alcinous's court, Odysseus continues his tale.

“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
 720 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
 725 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,
 730 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.
 735 Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm
 came over all the sea, as though some power
 lulled the swelled. The crew were on their feet
 briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,
 each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades
 740 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
 745 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,
 750 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;
 755 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.

760 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
 765 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.

770 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
 775 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!

780 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
 785 all that I say — the rudders are your duty;
 keep her out of the combers^o and the smoke;
 steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we
 fetch up in the smother,^o and you drown us.'
 That was all, and it brought them round to action.

790 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,
 795 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
 800 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
 805 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.
 810 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
 815 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
 820 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,
 825 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 –
 830 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.

835 Then we were coasting the noble island of the god
where grazed those cattle, 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
840 and sheep bleating; and heard, too, in my heart
the words of blind Teiresias of Thebes
and Circe of Aeaëa: both forbade me
the island of the world's delight, the Sun...."

(from Book 12)

THE CATTLE OF THE SUN GOD

Odysseus urges his exhausted crew to bypass Thrinakia, the island of the sun god, Helios. When the men insist on landing, Odysseus makes them swear not to touch the god's cattle. Odysseus is still speaking to Alcinous's court.

“In the small hours of the third watch, when stars
 845 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
 850 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;
 855 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
 860 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,
 865 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.
 870 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.
 875 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. Eurylochus
 made his insidious plea: 'Comrades,' he said,
 880 '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
 885 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.
 890 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!
 895 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.
 900 They plucked the leaves that shone on a tall oak –
 having no barley meal – to strew^o 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,
 905 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^o first;
 and when the bones were burnt and tripe shared,
 they spitted the carved meat.

 910 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:
 915 '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
 920 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,
 925 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
 930 to light the dead men in the underworld.’ ...”

(from Book 12)

When Odysseus and his men set sail again, they are punished with death – a thunderbolt from Zeus destroys their boat, and all the men drown. Only Odysseus survives. Exhausted and nearly drowned, he makes his way to Calypso’s island, where we met him originally, in Book 5.

Odysseus has brought us up to date. He can now rest and enjoy the comforts of Alcinous’s court – but not for long. Ahead lies his most difficult task – reclaiming his own kingdom.

Part Two: Coming Home

In Book 13, Odysseus, laden with gifts, is returned in secret to Ithaca in one of the magically swift Phaeacian ships. In Ithaca, Athena appears to the hero. Because his home is full of enemies, she advises him to proceed disguised as a beggar. Now Odysseus must succeed not only by physical power but also by intelligence.

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

In Book 15, Athena appears to Odysseus's son, Telemachus. The young man has gone to Pylos and Sparta to talk to old comrades of his father's to try to discover if Odysseus is alive or dead. Athena advises him to return to Ithaca. His home – the palace of Odysseus – has been overrun by his mother's suitors. These arrogant men are spending money from Telemachus's inheritance on feasting and drinking, and they are demanding that his mother, Penelope, take one of them as a husband. Athena warns Telemachus that the suitors plan to ambush him. Telemachus boards a ship for home, lands secretly on Ithaca, and heads toward the hut of the swineherd.

As father and son move closer and closer together, the suspense becomes great. Now Homer is ready to recount what could be the most dramatic moment in the epic. Remember that Odysseus has not seen his son for twenty years. Telemachus has been away from Ithaca for a year.

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
 935 in the tall timber. 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. The swineherd
 945 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
 975 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
 980 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^o of good meat, left over
 985 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
 990 as they fell to, ridding themselves of hunger....

Not realizing that the stranger is his father, Telemachus tries to protect him as best he can. The swineherd is sent to Penelope with news of her son's return. Now even Athena cannot stand the suspense any longer. She turns to Odysseus, who is still in beggar's rags:

... She tipped her golden wand upon the man,
 making his cloak pure white, and the knit tunic
 fresh around him. Lithe^o and young she made him,
 ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard
 995 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,
 1000 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!"

- 1005 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
 1010 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!
 1015 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!"
- 1020 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
 1025 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
 1030 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,
 1035 and might have gone on weeping so till sundown....

(from Book 16)

THE BEGGAR AND THE FAITHFUL DOG

Telemachus returns to the family compound and is greeted tearfully by his mother, Penelope, and his old nurse, Eurycleia. A soothsayer has told his mother that Odysseus is alive and in Ithaca. However, Telemachus does not report that he has seen his father. The suspense builds as Odysseus, once again disguised as a beggar, returns to his home, accompanied only by the swineherd. He has been away for twenty years. Only one creature recognizes him.

While he spoke, an old hound pricked up his ears
and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argos,
trained as a puppy by Odysseus,
1040 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
1045 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
1050 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
1055 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
1060 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
1065 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

1070 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.
1075 For Zeus who views the wide world takes away
half the manhood of a man, that day
he goes into captivity and slavery."

1080 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....

(Book 17)

The Epic Continues

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

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

In Book 19, the suitors depart for the night, and Odysseus and Telemachus discuss their strategy. The clever hero goes as appointed to Penelope with the idea of testing her and her maids. (Some of the maids have not been loyal to the household and have been involved with the suitors.) The faithful wife receives her disguised husband. We can imagine the tension Homer’s audience must have felt. Would Odysseus be recognized?

The “beggar” spins a yarn about his origins, pretending that he has met Odysseus on his travels. He cannot resist praising the lost hero, and he does so successfully enough to bring tears to Penelope’s eyes. We can be sure that this does not displease her husband.

The storytelling beggar reveals that he has heard that Odysseus is alive and is even now sailing for home. Penelope calls for the old nurse and asks her to wash the guest’s feet – a sign of respect and honor. As Eurycleia does so, she recognizes Odysseus from a scar on his leg.

Quickly Odysseus swears the old nurse to secrecy. Meanwhile, Athena has cast a spell on Penelope so that she has taken no notice of this recognition scene. Penelope adds to the suspense by deciding on a test for the suitors on the next day. Without realizing it, she has now given Odysseus a way to defeat the men who threaten his wife and kingdom.

In Book 20, Odysseus, brooding over the shameless behavior of the maidservants and the suitors, longs to destroy his enemies but fears the revenge of their friends. Athena reassures him. Odysseus is told that the suitors will die.

THE TEST OF THE GREAT BOW

In Book 21, Penelope, like many unwilling princesses of myth and fairy tale, proposes an impossible task for those who wish to marry her. By so doing, she causes the bloody events that lead to the restoration of her husband. The test involves stringing Odysseus's huge bow, an impossible feat for anyone except Odysseus himself. Odysseus had left his bow home in Ithaca twenty years earlier.

Now the queen reached the storeroom door and halted.
 Here was an oaken sill, cut long ago
 and sanded clean and bedded true. Foursquare
 1085 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
 1090 as those bright doors the key had sprung gave way –
 a bellow like a bull's vaunt^o 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
 1095 went up to lift the bow down from a peg
 in its own polished bow case.

Now Penelope sank down, holding the weapon,
 and drew her husband's great bow out, and sobbed
 and bit her lip and let the salt tears flow.
 1100 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.
 1105 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:
 1110 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:
 1115 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,^o twelve in line?
 I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home,
 1120 my rich and beautiful bridal house, forever
 to be remembered, though I dream it only." ...

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

Two men had meanwhile left the hall:
 swineherd and cowherd, in companionship,
 one downcast as the other. But Odysseus
 1125 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
 1130 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!
 1135 Father Zeus, grant our old wish! Some courier^o
 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,
 1140 told them: "I am at home, for I am he.
 I bore adversities, but in the twentieth year
 I am ashore in my own land. I find
 the two of you, alone among my people,
 longed for my coming. Prayers I never heard
 1145 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
 1150 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
 1155 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 —
 1160 “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,
 1165 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
 1170 or groans of men, in hall or court, not one
 must show her face, but keep still at her weaving.
 Philoeteus, run to the outer gate and lock it.
 Throw the crossbar and lash it.” ...

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

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

And Odysseus took his time,
 1175 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!"

1180 "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!"

1185 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
 1190 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
 1195 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
 1200 where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still
 in the quiver for the young men's turn to come.
 He knocked 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
 1205 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.
 1210 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,
1215 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
1220 stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.

(from Book 21)

DEATH AT THE PALACE

The climax of the story is here, in Book 22. Although Odysseus is ready to reclaim his rightful kingdom, he must first confront more than a hundred hostile suitors. The first one he turns to is Antinous. All through the story, Antinous has been the meanest of the suitors and their ringleader. He hit Odysseus with a stool when the hero appeared in the hall as a beggar, and he ridiculed the disguised king by calling him a bleary vagabond, a pest, and a tramp.

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest fighter of the islands
leapt and stood on the broad 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 "Your clean-cut game is over.
1225 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,
1230 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
1235 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
1240 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,
1245 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!"
"You killed the best on Ithaca."

1250 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
 1255 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.
 1260 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:
 1265 “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
 1270 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
 1275 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.”
 1280 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.
 1285 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.” ...

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

At this moment that unmanning thundercloud,
 the aegis, Athena's shield, took form aloft in the great hall.
 1290 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
 1295 from eyries in the mountains veering over and diving
 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

Odysseus now calls forth the maids who have betrayed his household by associating with the suitors. He orders them to clean up the house and dispose of the dead. Telemachus then “pays” them by hanging them in the courtyard. Eurycleia tells Penelope about the return of Odysseus and the defeat of the suitors. The faithful wife – the perfect mate for the wily Odysseus – suspects a trick from the gods. She decides to test the stranger who claims to be her husband.

1305 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.

1310 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,
1315 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
1320 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.

1325 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,
1330 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....”

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

1335 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
 1340 taller, and massive, too, with crisper 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
 1345 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,
 1350 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.
 1355 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
 1360 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."
 1365 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
 1370 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
 1375 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,
 1380 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
 1385 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.
 1390 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
 1395 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,
 1400 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 –
1405 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,
1410 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
1415 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)