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

“Then said the Lady Circe:

‘So: all those trials are over.

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

Steer wide;

keep well to seaward; plug your 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.
What then? One of two courses you may take,
and you yourself must weigh them. I shall not
plan the whole action for you now, but only
tell you of both.
Ahead are beetling rocks and dark blue glancing Amphitrite, surging, roars around them. Prowling Rocks, or Drifters, the gods in bliss have named them—named them well. Not even birds can pass them by. . . .

A second course lies between headlands. One is a sharp mountain piercing the sky, with stormcloud round the peak dissolving never, not in the brightest summer, to show heaven’s azure there, nor in the fall.

No mortal man could scale it, nor so much as land there, not with twenty hands and feet, so sheer the cliffs are—as of polished stone. Midway that height, a cavern full of mist opens toward Erebus and evening. Skirting this in the lugger, great Odysseus, your master Bowman, shooting from the deck, would come short of the cavemouth with his shaft; but 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.’

So her advice ran; but I faced her, saying:

‘Only instruct me, goddess, if you will, how, if possible, can I pass Charybdis, or fight off Scylla when she raids my crew?’

Swiftly that loveliest goddess answered me:

‘Must you have battle in your heart forever? The bloody toil of combat? Old contender, will you not yield to the immortal gods? That nightmare cannot die, being eternal evil itself—horror, and pain, and chaos; there is no fighting her, no power can fight her, all that avails is flight.

Lose headway there along that rockface while you break out arms, and she’ll swoop over you, I fear, once more, taking one man again for every gullet.

No, no, put all your backs into it, row on; invoke Blind Force, that bore this scourge of men, to keep her from a second strike against you.

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

No lambs are dropped, or calves, and these fat cattle never die. Immortal, too, their cowherds are—their shepherds—Phaethusa and Lampetia, sweetly braided nymphs that divine Neaera bore to the overlord of high noon, Helios. These nymphs their gentle mother bred and placed upon Thrinacia, the distant land, in care of flocks and cattle for their father.

Now give those kine a wide berth, keep your thoughts intent upon your course for home, and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca. But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction for ship and crew.
Rough years then lie between you and your homecoming, alone and old, the one survivor, all companions lost.’ . . .”

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

“The crew were on their feet briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then, each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved a massive cake of beeswax into bits and rolled them in my hands until they softened—no long task, for a burning heat came down from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward I carried wax along the line, and laid it thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast, and took themselves again to rowing. Soon, as we came smartly within hailing distance, the two Sirens, noting our fast ship off their point, made ready, and they sang. . . .

The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water made me crave to listen, and I tried to say ‘Untie me!’ to the crew, jerking my brows; but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes got to his feet, he and Eurylochus, and passed more line about, to hold me still. So all rowed on, until the Sirens dropped under the sea rim, and their singing dwindled away.

My faithful company rested on their oars now, peeling off the wax that I had laid thick on their ears; then set me free. But scarcely had that island faded in blue air than I saw smoke and white water, with 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,
Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern,
trying to put heart into them, standing over
every oarsman, saying gently,

‘Friends,
have we never been in danger before this?

More fearsome, is it now, than when the Cyclops
penned us in his cave? What power he had!
Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits
to find a way out for us?

Now I say

by hook or crook this peril too shall be
something that we remember.

Heads up, lads!

We must obey the orders as I give them.
Get the oarshafts in your hands, and lay back
hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.
Zeus help us pull away before we founder.

You at the tiller, listen, and take in
all that I say—the rudders are your duty;
keep her out of the combers and the smoke;
steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we
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 cauldron
seething over intense fire, when the mixture

suddenly heaves and rises.

154 founder: sink.

157 combers: breaking waves.

158–159 watch . . . smother: keep the
ship on course, or it will be crushed in
the rough water.

155

159

160

165

170


travail (trə-väl”) n. painful effort

176 gorge: throat; gullet.

v EPIC HERO
Consider Odysseus’ behavior in lines
108–179. Do you think he is a good
leader? Explain your opinion.
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 surfcasting 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. . . .

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