Homer

ODYSSEY

Translated by

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Introduced by

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BOOK 3

Book 4

They came to the hollows of Lacedaemon
And drove to Menelaus' palace,
Which they found filled with guests. Menelaus
Was hosting a double wedding party
For his son and his daughter. He was sending her
To wed the son of Achilles, as he had promised
Long ago in Troy, and now the gods
Were bringing the marriage to pass.
He was sending her off with horses and chariots
For her journey to the city of the Myrmidons,
Over whom her husband-to-be was lord.
For his son he was bringing a bride
From Sparta, the daughter of Alector.
This son, Megapenthes, was born from a slave woman,
For the gods had made Helen barren
After the birth of her daughter Hermione,
Who had the beauty of golden Aphrodite.
So Menelaus' kinsfolk and neighbors
Were feasting in the great hall. A bard
Was singing and playing the lyre,
And two tumblers whirled among the guests
And led them in the dancing.

Telemachus

And Nestor's son halted their horses
At the gate, and Eteoneus,

Menelaus' right-hand man, came out and saw them
And went through the hall to bring the news
To the shepherd of the people. He stood
At Menelaus' shoulder and his words flew fast:

"Two strangers have arrived, Lord Menelaus,
Two men in the line of Zeus by their looks.
Should we unyoke their horses, or should we
Send them elsewhere for hospitality?"

And red-haired Menelaus, greatly displeased:

"It's not like you to talk nonsense like this,
Eteoneus. How many times have you and I
Enjoyed the hospitality of others,
Hoping that Zeus would someday put an end
To our hard traveling? Unyoke their horses
And bring our new guests in to the feast."

He spoke, and Eteoneus hurried through the halls,
Calling other attendants to come along with him.
They unyoked the sweating horses and tied them
At the stalls, where they threw before them
A mixture of spelt and white barley. They leaned
The chariot against the gleaming entrance walls
And led the men into the palace. Their eyes
Went wide as they looked around the mansion
Of this sky-bred king, for a light as of the sun
Or the moon played over the high-roofed home
Of glorious Menelaus. When they had taken it all in,

They went into the polished tubs. When the maids
Had bathed them and rubbed them down with oil,
And clothed them in tunics and fleecy cloaks,
They sat down on chairs beside Menelaus.
A maid poured water from a golden pitcher
Into a silver basin for them to wash their hands
And then set up a polished table nearby.
Another serving woman, grave and dignified,
Set out bread and served generous helpings
From the other dishes she had; a carver set down
Cuts of meat by the platter and golden cups;
And a herald came by and poured them wine.
Then red-haired Menelaus said in greeting:

"Enjoy yourselves and eat. After supper
We will ask who you are—your bloodlines
Have not been lost in you. You belong
To the race of men who are sceptered kings,
Bred from Zeus. You're not just anybody."

And he set before them the prime cut of roast beef
That had been served to him as a mark of honor.
They helped themselves to the feast before them,
And when they had enough of food and drink,
Telemachus spoke to Nestor's son, holding
His head close so the others wouldn't hear:

"Do you see all this, Peisistratus, my friend,
These echoing halls flashing with bronze,
With gold, amber, silver, and ivory?

This must be what the court of Olympian Zeus
Looks like. This is unimaginable wealth!"

Menelaus, the red-haired king, overheard him,
And, speaking to both of them, had this to say:

"No mortal man could challenge Zeus, my boys.
His halls and possessions are everlasting.
My wealth may be matched by another man's
Or maybe not. For it is true I brought home
Shiploads after wandering for eight hard years.
Cyprus, Phoenicia, Egypt—I went all over,
Came to the Ethiopians, the Sidonians,
The Erembi, even to Libya,
Where the lambs have horns soon after they're born.
The ewes give birth three times a year there,
And neither shepherd nor lord ever runs short
Of cheese, meat or milk; the flocks are milked year round.
While I wandered through those lands amassing wealth
My brother was murdered, caught off guard
By treachery and the guile of his accursed wife.
So I do not enjoy being lord of this wealth.
You may have heard of all this from your fathers,
Whoever they may be, for I suffered greatly
And saw my house ruined, with all its treasures.
I would gladly live with a third of my wealth
And have those men back who perished in Troy
Far from the bluegrass pastures of Argos. And yet,
Though I weep for them often in my halls,
Easing my heart, I do not grieve constantly—

A man can get too much of chill grief.
I miss them all, but there is one man I miss
More than all the others. When I think of him
I don't want to sleep or eat, for no one
In the entire Greek army worked as hard
As Odysseus, and all he ever got for it
Was pain and sorrow, and I cannot forget
My sorrow for him. He has been gone so long,
And we do not know whether he is alive or dead.
Old Laertes must mourn for him, Penelope too,
And Telemachus, who was an infant when he left."

His words roused in Telemachus the desire
To weep for his father. Hot tears
Fell from his eyes when he heard his father's name,
And he pulled his purple cloak over his face.
Seeing this, Menelaus wondered
Whether he should allow Telemachus
To bring up his father himself, or whether
He should draw him out with pointed questions.

While Menelaus pondered this,
Helen came from her fragrant bedroom
Like gold-spindled Artemis. Adraste,
Her attendant, drew up a beautiful chair for her,
And Alcippe brought her a soft wool rug.
Another maid, Phylo, brought a silver basket—
A gift from Alcandre, wife of Polybus,
Who lived in Thebes, the city in Egypt

That has the wealthiest houses in the world.
Polybus had given Menelaus two silver baths,
Two tripods, and ten bars of gold.
And his wife, Alcandre, gave to Helen
Beautiful gifts of her own—a golden spindle
And a silver basket with gold-rimmed wheels.
This basket Phylo now placed beside her,
Filled with fine-spun yarn, and across it
Was laid the spindle, twirled with violet wool.
Helen sat upon the chair, a footstool
Under her feet, and questioned her husband:

"Do we know, Menelaus, who our guests
Claim to be? Shall I speak my mind or not?
My heart urges me to speak. I have never seen
Such a resemblance between any two people,
Man or woman, as between this man
And Odysseus' son—as I imagine him now—
Telemachus, who was a newborn baby
When for my sake, shameless thing that I was,
The Greeks came to Troy with war in their hearts."

And Menelaus, the red-haired king:

"Now that you mention it, I see
The resemblance myself—the feet, the hands,
The way he looks at you, that head of hair.
And just now when I was talking about Odysseus,
Saying how much he went through for my sake,
Tears welled up in his eyes, bitter tears,

And he covered his face with his purple cloak."

At this Nestor's son Peisistratus spoke up:

"Menelaus, son of Atreus, Zeus-bred king,
This is indeed, as you say, Odysseus' son.
But he is prudent and would not think it proper,
When he just got here, to make a big speech
Before you—whose voice delights us as a god's.
Nestor of Gerenia sent me with him as a guide,
For he was eager to see you, hoping that
You could suggest something he could do or say.
A son has many problems to face at home
When his father is gone and there is no one else
To help him. So it is now with Telemachus,
Whose father is gone, and there is no one else
Among the people to keep him from harm."

And Menelaus, the red-haired king:

"What's this? Here in my house, the son
Of my dear friend who did so much for me!
I used to think that if he came back
I would give him a welcome no other Greek
Could ever hope to have—if Olympian Zeus
Had brought us both home from over the sea
In our swift ships. I would have given him
A city of his own in Argos, built him a house,
Brought him over from Ithaca with his goods,
His son and all of his people—a whole city

Cleared out just for him! We would have been together,
Enjoying each other's company, and nothing
Would have parted us until death's black cloud
Finally enfolded us. But I suppose Zeus himself
Begrudged us this, for Odysseus alone,
That unlucky man, was never brought home."

His words aroused in all of them
A longing for lamentation. Argive Helen,
A child of Zeus, wept; Telemachus wept;
And Menelaus wept, the son of Atreus.
Nor could Nestor's son keep his eyes dry,
For he remembered Antilochus,
His flawless brother, who had been killed
By Memnon, Dawn's resplendent son,
And this memory gave wings to his words:

"Son of Atreus, old Nestor used to say,
Whenever we talked about things like this,
That no one could match your understanding.
So please understand me when I say
That I do not enjoy weeping after supper—
And it will be dawn before we know it.
Not that I think it's wrong to lament the dead.
This is all we can do—cut our hair
And shed some tears. I lost someone myself
At Troy, my brother, not the least hero there.
You probably knew him. I am too young
Ever to have seen him, but men say Antilochus
Could run and fight as well as any man alive."

And Menelaus, the red-haired king:

"No one could have put that better, my friend,
Not even someone much older. Your speech,
Wise and clear, shows the sort of father you have.
It's easy to spot a man for whom Zeus
Has spun out happiness in marriage and children,
As he has done for Nestor throughout his life.
And now he has reached a sleek old age in his halls,
And his sons are wise and fight with the best.
So we will stop this weeping, and once more
Think of supper. Let the servants pour water
Over our hands. Telemachus and I will have
Much to say to each other come morning."

So he spoke, and Asphalion,
Menelaus' attendant, poured water
Over their hands, and they reached out
For all the good cheer spread out before them.

But Helen, child of Zeus, had other ideas.
She threw a drug into the wine bowl
They were drinking from, a drug
That stilled all pain, quieted all anger
And brought forgetfulness of every ill.
Whoever drank wine laced with this drug
Would not be sad or shed a tear that day,
Not even if his own father and mother

Should lie there dead, or if someone killed
His brother, or son, before his eyes.
Helen had gotten this potent, cunning drug
From Polydamna, the wife of Thon,
A woman in Egypt, where the land
Proliferates with all sorts of drugs,
Many beneficial, many poisonous.
Men there know more about medicines
Than any other people on earth,
For they are of the race of Paeeon, the Healer.
When she had slipped the drug into the wine,
Helen ordered another round to be poured,
And then she turned to the company and said:

"Menelaus, son of Atreus in the line of Zeus,
And you sons of noble fathers, it is true
That Zeus gives easy lives to some of us
And hard lives to others—he can do anything, after all—
But you should sit now in the hall and feast
And entertain yourselves by telling stories.
I'll start you off. I couldn't begin to tell you
All that Odysseus endured and accomplished,
But listen to what that hero did once
In the land of Troy, where the Achaeans suffered.
First, he beat himself up—gave himself some nasty bruises—
Then put on a cheap cloak so he looked like a slave,
And in this disguise he entered the wide streets
Of the enemy city. He looked like a beggar,
Far from what he was back in the Greek camp,
And fooled everyone when he entered Troy.

I alone recognized him in his disguise
And questioned him, but he cleverly put me off.
It was only after I had bathed him
And rubbed him down with oil and clothed him
And had sworn a great oath not to tell the Trojans
Who he really was until he got back to the ships,
That he told me, at last, what the Achaeans planned.
He killed many Trojans before he left
And arrived back at camp with much to report.
The other women in Troy wailed aloud,
But I was glad inside, for my heart had turned
Homeward, and I rued the infatuation
Aphrodite gave me when she led me away
From my native land, leaving my dear child,
My bridal chamber, and my husband,
A man who lacked nothing in wisdom or looks."

And Menelaus, the red-haired king:

"A very good story, my wife, and well told.
By now I have come to know the minds
Of many heroes, and have traveled far and wide,
But I have never laid eyes on anyone
Who had an enduring heart like Odysseus.
Listen to what he did in the wooden horse,
Where all we Argive chiefs sat waiting
To bring slaughter and death to the Trojans.
You came there then, with godlike Deiphobus.
Some god who favored the Trojans
Must have lured you on. Three times you circled

Our hollow hiding place, feeling it
With your hands, and you called out the names
Of all Argive leaders, making your voice
Sound like each of our wives' in turn.
Diomedes and I, sitting in the middle
With Odysseus, heard you calling
And couldn't take it. We were frantic
To come out, or answer you from inside,
But Odysseus held us back and stopped us.
Then everyone else stayed quiet also,
Except for Anticlus, who wanted to answer you,
But Odysseus saved us all by clamping
His strong hands over Anticlus' mouth
And holding them there until Athena led you off."

Then Telemachus said in his clear-headed way:

"Menelaus, son of Atreus in the line of Zeus,
It is all the more unbearable then, isn't it?
My father may have had a heart of iron,
But it didn't do him any good in the end.
Please send us to bed now. It is time
We rested and enjoyed some sweet sleep."

He spoke, and Helen of Argos told her maids
To place beds on the porch and spread upon them
Beautiful purple blankets and fleecy cloaks.
The maids went out of the hall with torches
And made up the beds, and a herald
Led the guests out to them. So they slept there

On the palace porch, the hero Telemachus
And Nestor's glorious son. But Menelaus slept
In the innermost chamber of that high house
Next to Helen, Zeus' brightness upon her.

Dawn brushed her pale rose fingers across the sky,
And Menelaus got out of bed and dressed.
He slung his sharp sword around his shoulder,
Tied oiled leather sandals onto his feet,
And walked out of the bedroom like a god.
Then he sat down next to Telemachus and said:

"Tell me, Telemachus, what has brought you here
To gleaming Sparta over the sea's broad back?
Public business or private? Tell me the truth."

Telemachus took a deep breath and said:

"Menelaus, son of Atreus in the line of Zeus,
I came to see if you could tell me anything
About my father. My land is in ruin.
I'm being eaten out of house and home
By hostile men who constantly throng my halls
Slaughtering my sheep and horned cattle
In their arrogant courtship of my mother.
And so I am at your knees. Tell me
How my father, Odysseus, met his end,
Whether you saw it with your own eyes,
Or heard about it from someone else,

Some wanderer. He was born to sorrow,
More than any man on earth. And do not,
Out of pity, spare me the truth, but tell me
Whatever you have seen, whatever you know.
I beseech you, if my father, noble Odysseus,
Ever fulfilled a promise he made to you
In the land of Troy, where the Achaeans suffered,
Remember it now, and tell me the truth."

And Menelaus, deeply troubled by this:

"Those dogs! Those puny weaklings,
Wanting to sleep in the bed of a hero!
A doe might as well bed her suckling fawns
In the lair of a lion, leaving them there
In the bush and then going off over the hills
Looking for grassy fields. When the lion
Comes back, the fawns die an ugly death.
That's the kind of death these men will die
When Odysseus comes back. O Father Zeus,
And Athena and Apollo, bring Odysseus back
With the strength he showed in Lesbos once
When he wrestled a match with Philomeleides
And threw him hard, making all of us cheer—
That's the Odysseus I want the suitors to meet!
They'd get married all right—to bitter death.
But, as to what you ask me about,
I will not stray from the point or deceive you.
No, I will tell you all that the infallible
Old Man of the Sea told me, and hide nothing.

I was in Egypt, held up by the gods
Because I failed to offer them sacrifice.
The gods never allow us to forget them.
There is an island in the whitecapped sea
Just north of Egypt. Men call it Pharos,
And it lies one hard day's sailing offshore.
There is a good harbor there where ships
Take on fresh water before heading out to sea.
The gods kept me stuck in that harbor
For twenty days. A good sailing breeze
Never rose up, and all my supplies
Would have been exhausted, and my crew spent,
Had not one of the gods taken pity on me
And saved me. This was Eidothea,
Daughter of Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea.
Somehow I had moved her heart. She met me
As I wandered alone, apart from my crew,
Who roamed the island continually, fishing
With bent hooks, their bellies cramped with hunger.
She came close to me and spoke:

'Are you completely out of your mind, stranger,
Or do you actually like suffering like this?
You've been marooned on this island a long time
With no end in sight, and your crew's fading fast.'

"She spoke like this, and I answered her:

'I tell you, goddess—whichever goddess you are—
That I am not stranded here of my own free will.

I must have offended one of the immortals.
But you tell me—for gods know everything—
Which of the immortals is pinning me down here
And won't let me go. And tell me how
I can sail back home over the teeming sea.'

"And the shining goddess answered me:

'Well, all right, stranger, since you ask.
This is the haunt of an unerring immortal,
Egyptian Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea,
Who serves Poseidon and knows all the deeps.
They say he's my father. If you can
Somehow catch him in ambush here,
He will tell you the route, and the distance too,
Of your journey home over the teeming sea.
And he will tell you, prince, if you so wish,
What has been done in your house for better or worse
While you have been gone on your long campaign.'

"So she spoke, and I answered her:

'Show me yourself how to ambush
The old god, or he may give me the slip.
It's hard for a mortal to master a god.'

"And the shining goddess answered me:

'I'll tell you exactly what you need to know.
When the sun is at high noon, the unerring

Old Man of the Sea comes from the salt water,
Hidden in dark ripples the West Wind stirs up,
And then lies down to sleep in the scalloped caves.
All around him seals, the brine-spirit's brood,
Sleep in a herd. They come out of the grey water
With breath as fetid as the depths of the sea.
I will lead you there at break of day
And lay you in a row, you and three comrades
Chosen by you as the best on your ship.
Now I'll tell you all the old man's wiles.
First, he will go over the seals and count them,
And when he has counted them off by fives,
He will lie down like a shepherd among them.
As soon as you see him lying down to rest,
Screw up your courage to the sticking point
And pin him down, no matter how he struggles
And tries to escape. He will try everything,
And turn into everything that moves on the earth,
And into water also, and a burning flame.
Just hang on and grip him all the more tightly.
When he finally speaks to you of his own free will
In the shape you saw him in when he lay down to rest,
Then ease off, hero, and let the old man go,
And ask him which of the gods is angry with you,
And how you can sail home over the teeming sea.'

"And with that she slipped into the surging sea.
I headed for my ships where they stood on the sand
And brooded on many things as I went.
When I had come down to the ships and the sea,

We made supper, and when night came on,
We lay down to take our rest on the beach.
When dawn came, a palmetto of rose,
I went along the shore of the open sea
Praying over and over to the immortal gods,
Taking with me the three of my crew
I trusted the most for any adventure.

"The goddess, meanwhile, dove underwater
And now came back with the skins of four seals,
All newly flayed. She was out to trick her father.
She scooped out hiding places for us in the sand
And sat waiting as we cautiously drew near.
Then she had us lie down in a row, and threw
A seal skin over each of us. It would have been
A gruesome ambush—the stench of the seals
Was unbearable—but the goddess saved us
By putting ambrosia under each man's nose,
Drowning out the stench with its immortal fragrance.
So we waited patiently all morning long,
And then the seals came from the water in throngs.
They lay down in rows along the seashore,
And at noon the Old One came from the sea.
He found the fat seals and went over the herd,
Counting them up. He counted us first,
Never suspecting any kind of trick,
And then he lay down. We rushed him
With a shout and got our hands on him,
And the Old One didn't forget his wiles,
Turning first into a bearded lion,

Then a serpent, a leopard, and a huge boar.
He even turned into flowing water,
And into a high, leafy tree. But we
Held on, gritting our teeth, and at last
The wily Old One grew weary, and said to me:

'Which god have you plotted with, son of Atreus,
To catch me off-guard? What do you want?'

"He spoke, and I answered him:

'You know, old man—don't try to put me off—
How long I have been stuck on this island
With no end in sight. I'm losing heart.
Just tell me this—you gods know everything—
Which of the immortals has marooned me here?
How can I sail home over the teeming sea?'

"When I said this, he answered:

'You should have offered noble sacrifice to Zeus
And the other gods before embarking
If you wanted a speedy journey home
Over the deep purple sea. It is not your fate
To come home to your friends and native land
Until you go once more to the waters of the Aegyptus,
The sky-fed river, and offer holy hecatombs
To the immortal gods who hold high heaven.
Only then will they grant the journey you desire.'

"When he said this my spirit was crushed.
It was a long, hard pull over the misty deep
Back to the Aegyptus. Still, I answered:

'I will do all these things, just as you say.
But tell me this, and tell me the truth:
Did all the Achaeans make it home in their ships,
All those whom Nestor and I left at Troy?
Or did any die on shipboard, or in their friends' arms,
After winding up the war?'

"To which Proteus said:

'Why, son of Atreus, ask me about this?
You don't need to know. Nor do I think
You will be free from tears once you have heard it.
Many were killed in the war. You were there
And know who they were. Many, too, survived.
On the homeward journey two heroes died.
Another still lives, perhaps, held back by the sea.

'Ajax went down among his long-oared ships.
Poseidon had driven him onto Gyrae's rocks
But saved him from the sea. He would have escaped,
Despite Athena's hatred, but he lost his wits
And boasted loudly that he had survived the deep
In spite of the gods. Poseidon heard this boast,
And with his trident he struck Gyrae's rock
And broke it asunder. One part held firm,
But the other part, upon which Ajax sat

In his blind arrogance, fell into the gulf
And took Ajax with it. And so he perished,
His lungs full of saltwater.
Your brother, though,
Outran the fates in his hollow ships,
With the help of Hera. But when he was nearing
Malea's heights, a storm wind caught him
And carried him groaning over the teeming sea
To the frontier of the land where Thyestes once lived
And after him Thyestes' son, Aegisthus.
Then the gods gave him a following wind
And safe passage homeward. Agamemnon
Rejoiced to set foot on his ancestral land.
He fell to the ground and kissed the good earth
And hot tears of joy streamed from his eyes,
So glad was he to see his homeland again.
But from a high lookout a watchman saw him.
Aegisthus had treacherously posted him there
And promised a reward of two bars of gold.
He had been keeping watch for a year by then
So that Agamemnon would not slip by unseen
And unleash his might, and now he reported
His news to Aegisthus, who acted quickly
And set a trap. He chose his twenty best men
And had them wait in ambush. Opposite them,
On the hall's farther side, he had a feast prepared,
And then he drove off in his chariot,
Brooding darkly, to invite Agamemnon.
So he brought Agamemnon up to the palace
Unaware of his doom and slaughtered him

The way an ox is slaughtered at the stall.
None of Agamemnon's men was left alive,
Nor any of Aegisthus'. All were slain in the hall.'

"Proteus spoke, and my heart was shattered.
I wept and wept as I sat on the sand, losing
All desire to live and see the light of the sun.
When I could not weep or flail about any more,
The unerring Old Man of the Sea addressed me:

'Weep no more, son of Atreus. We gain nothing
By such prolonged bouts of grief. Instead,
Go as quickly as you can to your native land.
Either Aegisthus will still be alive, or
Orestes may have beat you to it and killed him,
And you may happen to arrive during his funeral.'

"These words warmed my heart, although
I was still in shock. Then I asked him:

'I know now what became of these two,
But who is the third man, the one who's alive,
But held back by the sea, or perhaps is dead.
I want to hear about him, despite my grief.'

"Proteus answered me without hesitation:

'It is Laertes' son, whose home is in Ithaca.
I saw him on an island, shedding salt tears,
In the halls of Calypso, who keeps him there

Against his will. He has no way to get home
To his native land. He has no ships left,
No crew to row him over the sea's broad back.
As for you, Menelaus, Zeus' cherished king,
You are not destined to die and to meet your fate
In bluegrass Argos. The immortals will take you
To the ends of the earth and the Elysian Fields,
Where Rhadamanthus lives and life is easiest.
No snow, nor storm, nor heavy rain comes there,
But a sighing wind from the West always blows
Off the Ocean, a cooling breeze for men.
For Helen is your wife, and in the gods' eyes
You are the son-in-law of great Zeus himself.'

"And with that he dove into the surging sea.
I went back to the ships with my godlike companions
And brooded on many things as I went.
When we had come down to the ships and the sea,
And had made supper, immortal night came on,
And we lay down to take our rest on the beach.
When dawn came with palmettoes of rose,
We hauled our ships down to the shining water,
And set up the masts and sails in the hulls.
The crews came aboard, and sitting in rows
They beat the sea white with their churning oars.
And so I sailed back to the rain-fed Aegyptus,
Moored my ships, and offered perfect sacrifice.
When I had appeased the everlasting gods
I heaped up a barrow for Agamemnon
So that his memory would not fade. Only then

Did I set sail for home, and the gods gave me
A following wind that brought me back swiftly.
Well, now, I want you to stay in my halls
Until eleven or twelve days have passed,
And then I will give you a royal send-off
And these splendid gifts: three horses
And a polished chariot, and a beautiful cup,
So that you can pour libations to the deathless gods
And remember me all the days of your life."

Telemachus answered in his clear-headed way:

"Son of Atreus, do not keep me here long.
I could spend a year in your house
And never miss my home or my parents.
That's how much I enjoy listening to you
And hearing your tales. But even now
My crew is getting restless back in Pylos
And you are keeping me long here.
As for gifts,
Give me whatever treasure you will,
But I will not take horses to Ithaca.
They are better off here for you to enjoy,
For you rule a wide plain, with lotus
Everywhere, and galingale, and wheat and spelt,
And heavy ears of white barley. But Ithaca
Has no broad horse-runs or meadowlands at all.
Its pasture is for goats, and more lovely
Than horse pasture. None of the islands
That slope to the sea has rich meadows, or is good

For driving horses, and Ithaca least of all."

And Menelaus, who could make his voice
Carry in battle, said to Telemachus:

"You are of good blood, my boy, to talk like that!
All right, I will change my gifts, as I easily can.
Of all the gifts that lie stored in my house
I will give you the most beautiful—
And the most valuable—a well-wrought bowl,
Solid silver, with the lip finished in gold,
The work of Hephaestus. The hero Phaedimus,
King of the Sidonians, gave it to me
When I stayed at his house on my way home.
Now I want you to take it home with you."

And while they talked to each other,
The banqueters came to their lord's palace,
Driving sheep with them and bringing wine,
And bread that their veiled wives had sent with them.
And so they were busy with the feast in Menelaus' halls.

Meanwhile, back in Ithaca,
The suitors were entertaining themselves
In front of Odysseus' palace again,
Throwing the javelin and discus
On the level terrace, arrogant as ever.
Antinous and Eurymachus, who were
Their natural leaders, were sitting there,

And Noemon, son of Phronius,
Came up to them and asked Antinous:

"Antinous, do we have any idea
When Telemachus will return from Pylos?
He's gone off with a ship of mine,
And I need her to cross over to Elis,
Where I have twelve brood mares
And ten mules still at the teat. I would like
To drive one of them off and break him in."

When he said this, Antinous and Eurymachus
Just looked at each other. They had no idea
Telemachus had gone to Neleian Pylos.
They thought he was somewhere out in the field
With the sheep flocks, or off with the swineherd.
Antinous questioned Noemon closely:

"Tell me exactly when Telemachus left
And who went with him, a hand-picked crew
From the island, or his own fieldhands and slaves?
He could have done it either way. And tell me this,
So I'll have it right. Did he force you to give him
The ship, or were you just doing him a favor?"

And Noemon answered him:

"I gave it freely. What else could I do,
When a man like that, with all his troubles,
Asks me? It would be hard to refuse him.

Those who went with him are the best in town,
After ourselves, and when they boarded
I noticed Mentor going on board, too,
As their leader, either Mentor or a god
Who looked just like him. I wonder about this,
Because I saw Mentor here yesterday morning,
After he had set sail for sandy Pylos."

With that, Noemon left for his father's house.
Antinous and Eurymachus were furious.
They made the suitors stop their games
And had them sit down. Antinous
Addressed them. His black heart was seething
With anger, and his eyes burned like fire:

"Unbelievable! Telemachus has some nerve,
Pulling off this voyage. We never thought
We'd see it happen, and the boy is up and gone,
Just like that, with all of us against it,
Launching a ship and picking the best crew around.
He's going to start giving us trouble soon.
May Zeus cripple him before he reaches manhood!
All right, now, give me a ship and twenty men
So I can lie in ambush and watch for him
As he comes through the strait between Ithaca
And rocky Samos. He'll be sorry
He ever made this voyage in search of his father."

They all praised his speech and urged him on.
Then they stood up and went to Odysseus' palace.

It did not take Penelope long to find out
The suitors' dark intentions. The herald,
Medon, was the one who brought her word.
He had overheard the suitors talking
As he stood outside the courtyard
Where they were weaving their plots, and now
He went through the hall to tell Penelope.
As he crossed the threshold, she asked him:

"Medon, why have the suitors sent you here?
To tell the handmaids of divine Odysseus
To drop everything and prepare a feast for them?
May this be their last courtship, their last party,
Oh, may this latest feast be their last of all!
Do you hear me, you thronging leeches
Who are eating away Telemachus' property?
You surely weren't listening to your fathers
When you were children, or you would have heard
What kind of man Odysseus was to them,
How he never wronged anyone in word or deed,
How he was fair to everyone, unlike
Most sceptered kings, who all have their favorites.
He never lost his temper with any man at all.
But your vile deeds and hearts are plain to see,
And there is no gratitude for kindness past."

Then Medon, the tactful herald:

"If only this were the greatest evil, Lady,

But there is a greater and more grievous.
The suitors are planning—and may Zeus
Never bring their plans to pass—to kill Telemachus
On his way back home. He went to sandy Pylos
And gleaming Lacedaemon for news of his father."

When Medon said these things, Penelope felt
That her heart had been unstrung. Her eyes
Filled with tears, and she was unable to speak
For a long time. Finally she said to the herald:

"Medon, why is my son gone? There was no need
For him to board any sea-going ships,
Which men use to cross the wide water
As they use horses on land. Why did he go?
So that not even his name would be left among men?"

And Medon, the tactful herald:

"I do not know whether a god urged him on,
Or his own heart moved him to go to Pylos
To learn either of his father's return
Or of the manner in which he met his fate."

So saying, Medon went into Odysseus' house.
Pain washed over Penelope and seeped
Into her bones. She could not bring herself
To sit down in one of the many chairs
That were there in the house, but sat curled
On the worn threshold of her bedroom

And wept. Around her the women of the house
Moaned softly, the old and the young,
And Penelope spoke to them through her tears:

"Hear me, my friends, for the god on Olympus
Has given me pain beyond all other women
Of my generation. I have lost a fine husband
With a heart like a lion, the glory of the Danaans,
The pride of all Hellas, a man of many virtues.
And now the winds have ripped my beloved son
From my house. I never even heard him leave.
You were cruel, each of you, not to think
Of getting me from bed, for you must have known
He was going aboard that hollow black ship.
If I had known he was setting out on this journey,
He would have stayed here, despite his willfulness,
Or else he would have left me dead in our halls.
Quick now, someone go get old Dolios,
The servant whom my father gave me
Before I left home and who now tends my orchards.
He should sit with Laertes and tell him all this.
Laertes may be able to weave some plan
And complain to the people about these men
Who want to destroy his and Odysseus' line."

And her beloved nurse, Eurycleia, said:

"Child, you can spare me or stab me
With a sword, but I will not hide what I know.
I was in on all this. I got his provisions,

Bread and sweet wine. He made me swear
Not to tell you until twelve days had passed
Or until you missed him yourself or heard
He had gone. He didn't want you crying.
Now take a bath and put on some clean clothes.
Then go upstairs with the serving women
And pray to Athena, daughter of Zeus.
No matter what, she can save your son from death.
But do not trouble the old man. He has
Troubles enough. Yet I do not think
The line of Laertes, son of Arcesius,
Is entirely hated by the blessed gods.
There may still be someone in that line to own
This high hall and all the rich fields around."

So the old nurse soothed Penelope's grief
And kept her eyes dry. Penelope bathed
And put on clean clothes. Then she went upstairs
With the serving women, put barley for strewing
In a basket, and prayed to Athena:

"Hear me, Mystic Daughter of Zeus.
If ever in these halls my cunning Odysseus
Burned fat thighbones of bulls or sheep for you,
Remember it now and save my beloved son.
Protect him from the arrogant suitors' violence."

Penelope voiced this prayer, and Athena heard it,
While down in the shadowy halls below
These same suitors were talking noisily,

Making crude comments such as these:

"So while the lady upstairs gets ready to marry
One of her suitors, she has no idea
That her suitors are arranging to murder her son!"

But they had no idea of what was being arranged.
Antinous had some words for all of them:

"Are you crazy? Stow that kind of talk,
Or someone may report it to those inside.
We're going to do what we said we would
Under cover of silence. We're all in this together."

And he picked out the twenty best men there.
They went down to the shore of the sea
And hauled a fast ship out onto the water.
They set up mast and sail in that black ship
And fit the oars into the leather thole-straps,
All in due order. Then they unfurled the white sails.
Their attendants brought all their gear aboard,
And they moored the ship where she would catch
The evening breeze. Then they disembarked,
Ate their dinner, and waited for twilight.

Penelope lay in her room upstairs.
She would not touch any food or drink
But only lay there worrying about her son,
Wondering whether he would escape from death

Or be killed by the insolent suitors.

Surrounded by men, a lion broods and then panics
When they begin to tighten their crafty ring.

So too Penelope, until sleep drifted over her,
And she sank back with all her body relaxed.

Athena's eyes were flashing in the dark.
She made a phantom in the form of a woman,
Iphthime, daughter of great Icarius,
Now wed to Eumelus, whose home was in Pherae.
She sent the phantom into Odysseus' house
To stop Penelope's weeping and sobbing.
It drifted into her room through the keyhole
And stood above her head, and spoke to her:

"Asleep, Penelope, and broken-hearted?
The blessed gods are unwilling that you
Should weep and be sad, for your son will return.
He has not offended the gods at all."

And Penelope, slumbering sweetly
At the gate of dreams, answered her:

"Why have you come here, sister? You live
Far away and have seldom come before.
You tell me to stop grieving, tell me to rest
From the sorrows that plague my mind and heart.
Long ago now I lost my fine husband,

A lion-hearted man, the glory of the Danaans,
The pride of Hellas, a man of many virtues.
And now my beloved son has gone away
In a hollow ship, a mere child, who knows nothing
Of the world of men. I grieve for him even more
Than for my husband. I am trembling with fear
That he will get hurt, either among the people
He has gone off to visit, or on the open sea.
For his many enemies are plotting against him
And mean to kill him before he gets home."

The glimmering phantom answered her:

"Take heart, and don't be so afraid. The guide
Who goes with him is one many men pray for
To stand at their side, a powerful ally—
Pallas Athena. And she pities you in your grief,
For it is she who sent me to tell you this."

And Penelope, in her circumspect way:

"If you are truly a god and have heard a god's voice,
Tell me also of that man of many sorrows,
Whether he still lives and sees the light of the sun,
Or whether he is dead and in Hades' dark world."

The glimmering phantom answered her:

"No, I will not speak of him, whether he be
Alive or dead. Empty words are ill spoken."

And the phantom slipped through the keyhole
And became a sigh in the air. Penelope
Started up from sleep, and her heart was warmed
By the clear dream that had come in the soft black night.

By now the suitors had embarked and set sail,
Their hearts set on murdering Telemachus.
There is a rocky island out in the sea,
Midway between Ithaca and rugged Samos.
Asteris is its name, not very big,
But it has a harbor with outlets on either side
Where a ship can lie. There the suitors waited.

Book 5

Dawn reluctantly
Left Tithonus in her rose-shadowed bed,
Then shook the morning into flakes of fire.

Light flooded the halls of Olympus
Where Zeus, high Lord of Thunder,
Sat with the other gods, listening to Athena
Reel off the tale of Odysseus' woes.
It galled her that he was still in Calypso's cave:

"Zeus, my father—and all you blessed immortals—
Kings might as well no longer be gentle and kind
Or understand the correct order of things.
They might as well be tyrannical butchers
For all that any of Odysseus' people
Remember him, a godly king as kind as a father.
No, he's still languishing on that island, detained
Against his will by that nymph Calypso,
No way in the world for him to get back to his land.
His ships are all lost, he has no crew left
To row him across the sea's crawling back.
And now the islanders are plotting to kill his son
As he heads back home. He went for news of his father
To sandy Pylos and white-bricked Sparta."

Storm Cloud Zeus had an answer for her:

"Quite a little speech you've let slip through your teeth,
Daughter. But wasn't this exactly your plan
So that Odysseus would make them pay for it later?
You know how to get Telemachus
Back to Ithaca and out of harm's way
With his mother's suitors sailing in a step behind."

Zeus turned then to his son Hermes and said:

"Hermes, you've been our messenger before.
Go tell that ringleted nymph it is my will
To let that patient man Odysseus go home.
Not with an escort, mind you, human or divine,
But on a rickety raft—tribulation at sea—
Until on the twentieth day he comes to Scherία
In the land of the Phaeacians, our distant relatives,
Who will treat Odysseus as if he were a god
And take him on a ship to his own native land
With gifts of bronze and clothing and gold,
More than he ever would have taken back from Troy
Had he come home safely with his share of the loot.
That's how he's destined to see his dear ones again
And return to his high-gabled Ithacan home."

Thus Zeus, and the quicksilver messenger
Laced on his feet the beautiful sandals,
Golden, immortal, that carry him over
Landscape and seascape on a puff of wind.

And he picked up the wand he uses to charm
Mortal eyes to sleep and make sleepers awake.

Holding this wand the tough quicksilver god
Took off, bounded onto Pieria
And dove through the ether down to the sea,

Skimming the waves like a cormorant,
The bird that patrols the saltwater billows
Hunting for fish, seaspume on its plumage,

Hermes flying low and planing the whitecaps.

When he finally arrived at the distant island
He stepped from the violet-tinctured sea
On to dry land and proceeded to the cavern
Where Calypso lived. She was at home.
A fire blazed on the hearth, and the smell
Of split cedar and arbor vitae burning
Spread like incense across the whole island.
She was seated inside, singing in a lovely voice
As she wove at her loom with a golden shuttle.
Around her cave the woodland was in bloom,
Alder and poplar and fragrant cypress.
Long-winged birds nested in the leaves,
Horned owls and larks and slender-throated shorebirds
That screech like crows over the bright saltwater.
Tendrils of ivy curled around the cave's mouth,
The glossy green vine clustered with berries.

Four separate springs flowed with clear water, criss-
Crossing channels as they meandered through meadows
Lush with parsley and blossoming violets.
It was enough to make even a visiting god
Enraptured at the sight. Quicksilver Hermes
Took it all in, then turned and entered
The vast cave.
Calypso knew him at sight.
The immortals have ways of recognizing each other,
Even those whose homes are in outlying districts.
But Hermes didn't find the great hero inside.
Odysseus was sitting on the shore,
As ever those days, honing his heart's sorrow,
Staring out to sea with hollow, salt-rimmed eyes.

Calypso, sleek and haloed, questioned Hermes
Politely, as she seated him on a lacquered chair:

"My dear Hermes, to what do I owe
The honor of this unexpected visit? Tell me
What you want, and I'll oblige you if I can."

The goddess spoke, and then set a table
With ambrosia and mixed a bowl of rosy nectar.
The quicksilver messenger ate and drank his fill,
Then settled back from dinner with heart content
And made the speech she was waiting for:

"You ask me, goddess to god, why I have come.
Well, I'll tell you exactly why. Remember, you asked.

Zeus ordered me to come here; I didn't want to.
Who would want to cross this endless stretch
Of deserted sea? Not a single city in sight
Where you can get a decent sacrifice from men.
But you know how it is: Zeus has the aegis,
And none of us gods can oppose his will.
He says you have here the most woebegone hero
Of the whole lot who fought around Priam's city
For nine years, sacked it in the tenth, and started home.
But on the way back they offended Athena,
And she swamped them with hurricane winds and waves.
His entire crew was wiped out, and he
Drifted along until he was washed up here.
Anyway, Zeus wants you to send him back home. Now.
The man's not fated to rot here far from his friends.
It's his destiny to see his dear ones again
And return to his high-gabled Ithacan home."

He finished, and the nymph's aura stiffened.
Words flew from her mouth like screaming hawks:

"You gods are the most jealous bastards in the universe—
Persecuting any goddess who ever openly takes
A mortal lover to her bed and sleeps with him.
When Dawn caressed Orion with her rosy fingers,
You celestial layabouts gave her nothing but trouble
Until Artemis finally shot him on Ortygia—
Gold-throned, holy, gentle-shafted assault goddess!
When Demeter followed her heart and unbound
Her hair for Iasion and made love to him

In a late-summer field, Zeus was there taking notes
And executed the man with a cobalt lightning blast.
And now you gods are after me for having a man.
Well, I was the one who saved his life, unprying him
From the spar he came floating here on, sole survivor
Of the wreck Zeus made of his streamlined ship,
Slivering it with lightning on the wine-dark sea.
I loved him, I took care of him, I even told him
I'd make him immortal and ageless all of his days.
But you said it, Hermes: Zeus has the aegis
And none of us gods can oppose his will.
So all right, he can go, if it's an order from above,
Off on the sterile sea. How I don't know.
I don't have any oared ships or crewmen
To row him across the sea's broad back.
But I'll help him. I'll do everything I can
To get him back safely to his own native land."

The quicksilver messenger had one last thing to say:

"Well send him off now and watch out for Zeus' temper.
Cross him and he'll really be rough on you later."

With that the tough quicksilver god made his exit.

Calypso composed herself and went to Odysseus,
Zeus' message still ringing in her ears.
She found him sitting where the breakers rolled in.
His eyes were perpetually wet with tears now,

His life draining away in homesickness.
The nymph had long since ceased to please.
He still slept with her at night in her cavern,
An unwilling lover mated to her eager embrace.
Days he spent sitting on the rocks by the breakers,
Staring out to sea with hollow, salt-rimmed eyes.
She stood close to him and started to speak:

"You poor man. You can stop grieving now
And pining away. I'm sending you home.
Look, here's a bronze axe. Cut some long timbers
And make yourself a raft fitted with topdecks,
Something that will get you across the sea's misty spaces.
I'll stock it with fresh water, food and red wine—
Hearty provisions that will stave off hunger—and
I'll clothe you well and send you a following wind
To bring you home safely to your own native land,
If such is the will of the gods of high heaven,
Whose minds and powers are stronger than mine."

Odysseus' eyes shone with weariness. He stiffened,
And shot back at her words fletched like arrows:

"I don't know what kind of send-off you have in mind,
Goddess, telling me to cross all that open sea on a raft,
Painful, hard sailing. Some well-rigged vessels
Never make it across with a stiff wind from Zeus.
You're not going to catch me setting foot on any raft
Unless you agree to swear a solemn oath
That you're not planning some new trouble for me."

Calypso's smile was like a shower of light.
She touched him gently, and teased him a little:

"Blasphemous, that's what you are—but nobody's fool!
How do you manage to say things like that?
All right. I swear by Earth and Heaven above
And the subterranean water of Styx—the greatest
Oath and the most awesome a god can swear—
That I'm not planning more trouble for you, Odysseus.
I'll put my mind to work for you as hard as I would
For myself, if ever I were in such a fix.
My heart is in the right place, Odysseus,
Nor is it a cold lump of iron in my breast."

With that the haloed goddess walked briskly away
And the man followed in the deity's footsteps.
The two forms, human and divine, came to the cave
And he sat down in the chair which moments before
Hermes had vacated, and the nymph set out for him
Food and drink such as mortal men eat.
She took a seat opposite godlike Odysseus
And her maids served her ambrosia and nectar.
They helped themselves to as much as they wanted,
And when they had their fill of food and drink
Calypso spoke, an immortal radiance upon her:

"Son of Laertes in the line of Zeus, my wily Odysseus,
Do you really want to go home to your beloved country
Right away? Now? Well, you still have my blessings.

But if you had any idea of all the pain
You're destined to suffer before getting home,
You'd stay here with me, deathless—
Think of it, Odysseus!—no matter how much
You missed your wife and wanted to see her again.
You spend all your daylight hours yearning for her.
I don't mind saying she's not my equal
In beauty, no matter how you measure it.
Mortal beauty cannot compare with immortal."

Odysseus, always thinking, answered her this way:

"Goddess and mistress, don't be angry with me.
I know very well that Penelope,
For all her virtues, would pale beside you.
She's only human, and you are a goddess,
Eternally young. Still, I want to go back.
My heart aches for the day I return to my home.
If some god hits me hard as I sail the deep purple,
I'll weather it like the sea-bitten veteran I am.
God knows I've suffered and had my share of sorrows
In war and at sea. I can take more if I have to."

The sun set on his words, and the shadows darkened.
They went to a room deep in the cave, where they made
Sweet love and lay side by side through the night.

Dawn came early, touching the sky with rose.

Odysseus put on a shirt and cloak,
And the nymph slipped on a long silver robe
Shimmering in the light, cinched it at the waist
With a golden belt and put a veil on her head.
What to do about sending Odysseus off?
She handed him an axe, bronze, both edges honed.
The olive-wood haft felt good in his palms.
She gave him a sharp adze, too, then led the way
To the island's far side where the trees grew tall,
Alder and poplar and silver fir, sky-topping trees
Long-seasoned and dry that would keep him afloat.
Calypso showed him where the trees grew tall
Then went back home, a glimmer in the woods,
While Odysseus cut timber.

Working fast,
He felled twenty trees, cut them to length,
Smoothed them skillfully and trued them to the line.
The glimmer returned—Calypso with an auger—
And he drilled the beams through, fit them up close
And hammered them together with joiners and pegs.
About the size of a deck a master shipwright
Chisels into shape for a broad-bowed freighter
Was the size Odysseus made his wide raft.
He fit upright ribs close-set in the decking
And finished them with long facing planks.
He built a mast and fit in a yardarm,
And he made a rudder to steer her by.
Then he wove a wicker-work barrier
To keep off the waves, plaiting it thick.
Calypso brought him a large piece of cloth

To make into a sail, and he fashioned that, too.
He rigged up braces and halyards and lines,
Then levered his craft down to the glittering sea.

Day four, and the job was finished.
Day five, and Calypso saw him off her island,
After she had bathed him and dressed him
In fragrant clothes. She filled up a skin
With wine that ran black, another large one
With water, and tucked into a duffel
A generous supply of hearty provisions.
And she put a breeze at his back, gentle and warm.

Odysseus' heart sang as he spread sail to the wind,
And he steered with the rudder, a master mariner
Aboard his craft. Sleep never fell on his eyelids
As he watched the Pleiades and slow-setting Bootes
And the Bear (also known as the Wagon)
That pivots in place and chases Orion
And alone is aloof from the wash of Ocean.
Calypso, the glimmering goddess, had told him
To sail with the stars of the Bear on his left.
Seventeen days he sailed the deep water,
And on the eighteenth day the shadowy mountains
Of the Phaeacians' land loomed on the horizon,
To his eyes like a shield on the misty sea.

And Poseidon saw him.
From the far Solymi Mountains

The Lord of Earthquake, returning from Ethiopia,
Saw him, an image in his mind bobbing on the sea.
Angrier than ever, he shook his head
And cursed to himself:

"Damn it all, the gods
Must have changed their minds about Odysseus
While I was away with the Ethiopians.
He's close to Phaeacia, where he's destined to escape
The great ring of sorrow that has closed around him.
But I'll bet I can still blow some trouble his way."

He gathered the clouds, and gripping his trident
He stirred the sea. And he raised all the blasts
Of every wind in the world and covered with clouds
Land and sea together. Night rose in the sky.
The winds blew hard from every direction,
And lightning-charged Boreas rolled in a big wave.
Odysseus felt his knees and heart weaken.
Hunched over, he spoke to his own great soul:

"Now I'm in for it.
I'm afraid that Calypso was right on target
When she said I would have my fill of sorrow
On the open sea before I ever got home.
It's all coming true. Look at these clouds
Zeus is piling like flowers around the sky's rim,
And he's roughened the sea, and every wind
In the world is howling around me.
Three times, four times luckier than I

Were the Greeks who died on Troy's wide plain!
If only I had gone down on that day
When the air was whistling with Trojan spears
In the desperate fight for Achilles' dead body.
I would have had burial then, honored by the army.
As it is I am doomed to a wretched death at sea."

His words weren't out before a huge cresting wave
Crashed on his raft and shivered its timbers.
He was pitched clear of the deck. The rudder flew
From his hands, the mast cracked in two
Under the force of the hurricane winds,
And the yardarm and sail hove into the sea.
He was under a long time, unable to surface
From the heaving swell of the monstrous wave,
Weighed down by the clothes Calypso had given him.
At last he came up, spitting out saltwater,
Seabrine gurgling from his nostrils and mouth.
For all his distress, though, he remembered his raft,
Lunged through the waves, caught hold of it
And huddled down in its center shrinking from death.

An enormous wave rode the raft into cross-currents.

The North Wind in autumn sweeps through a field
Rippling with thistles and swirls them around.

So the winds swirled the raft all over the sea,
South Wind colliding at times with the North,
East Wind shearing away from the West.

And the White Goddess saw him, Cadmus' daughter
Ino, once a human girl with slim, beautiful ankles
Who had won divine honors in the saltwater gulfs.
She pitied Odysseus his wandering, his pain,
And rose from the water like a flashing gull,
Perched on his raft, and said this to him:

"Poor man. Why are you so odious to Poseidon,
Odysseus, that he sows all this grief for you?
But he'll not destroy you, for all of his fury.
Now do as I say—you're in no way to refuse:
Take off those clothes and abandon your raft
To the winds' will. Swim for your life
To the Phaeacians' land, your destined safe harbor.
Here, wrap this veil tightly around your chest.
It's immortally charmed: Fear no harm or death.
But when with your hands you touch solid land
Untie it and throw it into the deep blue sea
Clear of the shore so it can come back to me."

With these words the goddess gave him the veil
And slipped back into the heavy seas
Like a silver gull. The black water swallowed her.
Godlike Odysseus brooded on his trials
And spoke these words to his own great soul:

"Not this. Not another treacherous god
Scheming against me, ordering me to abandon my raft.
I will not obey. I've seen with my own eyes

How far that land is where she says I'll be saved.
I'll play it the way that seems best to me.
As long as the timbers are still holding together
I'll hang on and gut it out right here where I am.
When and if a wave shatters my raft to pieces,
Then I'll swim for it. What else can I do?"

As he churned these thoughts in the pit of his stomach
Poseidon Earthshaker raised up a great wave—
An arching, cavernous, cresting tsunami—
And brought it crashing down on him.

As storm winds blast into a pile of dry chaff
And scatter the stuff all over the place,

So the long beams of Odysseus' raft were scattered.
He went with one beam and rode it like a stallion,
Stripping off the clothes Calypso had given him
And wrapping the White Goddess' veil round his chest.
Then he dove into the sea and started to swim
A furious breaststroke. The Lord of Earthquake saw him
And said to himself with a slow toss of his head:

"That's right. Thrash around in misery on the open sea
Until you come to human society again.
I hope that not even then will you escape from evil."

With these words he whipped his sleek-coated horses
And headed for his fabulous palace on Aegae.

But Zeus' daughter Athena had other ideas.
She barricaded all the winds but one
And ordered them to rest and fall asleep.
Boreas, though, she sent cracking through the waves,
A tailwind for Odysseus until he was safe on Phaeacia,
And had beaten off the dark birds of death.

Two nights and two days the solid, mitered waves
Swept him on, annihilation all his heart could foresee.
But when Dawn combed her hair in the third day's light,
The wind died down and there fell
A breathless calm. Riding a swell
He peered out and saw land nearby.

You know how precious a father's life is
To children who have seen him through a long disease,
Gripped by a malevolent spirit and melting away,
But then released from suffering in a spasm of joy.

The land and woods were that welcome a sight
To Odysseus. He kicked hard for the shoreline,
But when he was as close as a shout would carry
He heard the thud of waves on the rocks,
Thundering surf that pounded the headland
And bellowed eerily. The sea churned with foam.
There were no harbors for ships, no inlets or bays,
Only jutting cliffs and rocks and barnacled crags.
Odysseus' heart sank and his knees grew weak.
With a heavy sigh he spoke to his own great soul:

"Ah, Zeus has let me see land I never hoped to see
And I've cut my way to the end of this gulf,
But there's no way to get out of the grey saltwater.
Only sharp rocks ahead, laced by the breakers,
And beyond them slick stone rising up sheer
Right out of deep water, no place for a foothold,
No way to stand up and wade out of trouble.
If I try to get out here a wave might smash me
Against the stone cliff. Some mooring that would be!
If I swim around farther and try to find
A shelving shore or an inlet from the sea,
I'm afraid that a squall will take me back out
Groaning deeply on the teeming dark water,
Or some monster will attack me out of the deep
From the swarming brood of great Amphitrítê.
I know how odious I am to the Earthshaker."

As these thoughts welled up from the pit of his stomach
A breaker bore him onto the rugged coast.
He would have been cut to ribbons and his bones crushed
But grey-eyed Athena inspired him.
Slammed onto a rock he grabbed it with both hands
And held on groaning until the breaker rolled by.
He had no sooner ducked it when the backwash hit him
And towed him far out into open water again.

It was just like an octopus pulled out of its hole
With pebbles stuck to its tentacles,

Odysseus' strong hands clinging to the rocks

Until the skin was ripped off. The wave
Pulled him under, and he would have died
Then and there. But Athena was with him.
He surfaced again: the wave spat him up landwards,
And he swam along parallel to the coast, scanning it
For a shelving beach, an inlet from the sea,
And when he swam into the current of a river delta
He knew he had come to the perfect spot,
Lined with smooth rocks and sheltered from the wind.
He felt the flowing of the rivergod, and he prayed:

"Hear me, Riverlord, whoever you are
And however men pray to you:
I am a fugitive from the sea
And Poseidon's persecution,
A wandering mortal, pitiful
To the gods, I come to you,
To your water and your knees.
I have suffered much, O Lord,
Lord, hear my prayer."

At these words the god stopped his current,
Made his waters calm and harbored the man
In his river's shallows. Odysseus crawled out
On hands and knees. The sea had broken his spirit.
His whole body was swollen, and saltwater trickled
From his nose and mouth. Breath gone, voice gone,
He lay scarcely alive, drained and exhausted.
When he could breathe again and his spirit returned
He unbound the goddess' veil from his body

And threw it into the sea-melding river
Where it rode the crest of a wave down the current
And into Ino's own hands. He turned away from the river,
Sank into a bed of rushes, and kissed the good earth.
Huddled over he spoke to his own great soul:

"What am I in for now? How will this end?
If I keep watch all night here by the river
I'm afraid a hard frost—or even a gentle dew—
Will do me in, as weak as I am.
The wind blows cold from a river toward dawn.
But if I climb the bank to the dark woods up there
And fall asleep in a thicket, even if I survive
Fatigue and cold and get some sweet sleep,
I'm afraid I'll fall prey to some prowling beast."

He thought it over and decided it was better
To go to the woods. They were near the water
On an open rise. He found two olive trees there,
One wild, one planted, their growth intertwined,
Proof against blasts of the wild, wet wind,
The sun unable to needle light through,
Impervious to rain, so thickly they grew
Into one tangle of shadows. Odysseus burrowed
Under their branches and scraped out a bed.
He found a mass of leaves there, enough to keep warm
Two or three men on the worst winter day.
The sight of these leaves was a joy to Odysseus,
And the godlike survivor lay down in their midst
And covered himself up.

A solitary man
Who lives on the edge of the wilderness
And has no neighbors, will hide a charred log
Deep in the black embers and so keep alive
The fire's seed and not have to rekindle it
From who knows where.

So Odysseus buried
Himself in the leaves. And Athena sprinkled
His eyes with sleep for quickest release
From pain and fatigue.
And she closed his eyelids.

Book 6

So Odysseus slept, the godlike survivor
Overwhelmed with fatigue.
But the goddess Athena
Went off to the land of the Phaeacians,
A people who had once lived in Hypereia,
Near to the Cyclopes, a race of savages
Who marauded their land constantly. One day
Great Nausithous led his people
Off to Schería, a remote island,
Where he walled off a city, built houses
And shrines, and parceled out fields.
After he died and went to the world below,
Alcinous ruled, wise in the gods' ways.
Owl-eyed Athena now came to his house
To devise a passage home for Odysseus.
She entered a richly decorated bedroom
Where a girl as lovely as a goddess was sleeping,
Nausicaa, daughter of noble Alcinous.
Two maids, blessed with the beauty of Graces,
Slept on either side of the closed, polished doors.
Athena rushed in like a breath of wind,
Stood over Nausicaa's head, and spoke to her
In the guise of her friend, the daughter
Of the famed mariner Dymas. Assuming
This girl's form, the owl-eyed goddess spoke:

"Nausicaa, how could your mother have raised
Such a careless child? Your silky clothes
Are lying here soiled, and your wedding is near!
You'll have to dress yourself and your party well,
If you want the people to speak highly of you
And make your mother and father glad.
We'll wash these clothes at the break of dawn.
I'll go with you and help so you'll get it done quickly.
You're not going to be a virgin for long, you know!
All the best young men in Phaeacia are eager
To marry you—as well they should be.
Wake up now, and at dawn's first blush
Ask your father if he will hitch up the mulecart
To carry all these sashes and robes and things.
It'll be much more pleasant than going on foot.
The laundry pools are a long way from town."

The grey-eyed goddess spoke and was gone,
Off to Olympus, which they say is forever
The unmoving abode of the gods, unshaken
By winds, never soaked by rain, and where the snow
Never drifts, but the brilliant sky stretches
Cloudless away, and brightness streams through the air.
There, where the gods are happy all the world's days,
Went the Grey-eyed One after speaking to the girl.

Dawn came throned in light, and woke Nausicaa,
Who wondered at the dream as it faded away.

She went through the house to tell her parents,
Her dear father and mother. She found them within,
Her mother sitting by the hearth with her women,
Spinning sea-blue yarn. Her father she met
As he headed for the door accompanied by elders
On his way to a council the nobles had called.
She stood very close to her father and said:

"Daddy, would you please hitch up a wagon for me—
A high one that rolls well—so I can go to the river
And wash our good clothes that are all dirty now.
You yourself should wear clean clothes
When you sit among the first men in council.
And you have five sons who live in the palace,
Two married and three still bachelors.
They always want freshly washed clothes
To wear to the dances. This has been on my mind."

She was too embarrassed to mention marriage
To her father, but he understood and said:

"Of course you can have the mules, child,
And anything else. Go on. The servants will rig up
A high, smooth-rolling wagon fitted with a trunk."

He called the servants, and they got busy
Rolling out a wagon and hitching up mules.
Nausicaa brought out a pile of laundry
And loaded it into the polished cart,
While her mother packed a picnic basket

With all sorts of food and filled a goatskin with wine.
The girl put these up on the cart, along with
A golden flask of oil her mother gave her
For herself and her maids to rub on their skin.
She took the lash and the glossy reins
And had the mules giddyup. They jangled along
At a steady pace, pulling the clothes and the girl,
While the other girls, her maids, ran alongside.

They came to the beautiful, running river
And the laundry pools, where the clear water
Flowed through strongly enough to clean
Even the dirtiest clothes. They unhitched the mules
And shooed them out along the swirling river's edge
To munch the sweet clover. Then they unloaded
The clothes, brought them down to the water,
And trod them in the trenches, working fast
And making a game of it. When the clothes were washed
They spread them out neatly on the shore of the sea
Where the waves scoured the pebbled beach clean.
Then they bathed themselves and rubbed rich olive oil
Onto their skin, and had a picnic on the river's banks
While they waited for the sun to dry the clothes.
When the princess and her maids had enough to eat
They began to play with a ball, their hair streaming free.

Artemis sometimes roams the mountains—
Immense Taygetus, or Erymanthus—
Showering arrows upon boars or fleet antelope,
And with her play the daughters of Zeus

Who range the wild woods—and Leto is glad
That her daughter towers above them all
With her shining brow, though they are beautiful all—

So the unwed princess among her attendants.

But when she was about to fold the clothes,
Yoke the mules, and head back home,
The Grey-eyed One sprung her plan:
Odysseus would wake up, see the lovely girl,
And she would lead him to the Phaeacians' city.
The princess threw the ball to one of the girls,
But it sailed wide into deep, swirling water.
The girls screamed, and Odysseus awoke.
Sitting up, he tried to puzzle it out:

"What kind of land have I come to now?
Are the natives wild and lawless savages,
Or godfearing men who welcome strangers?
That sounded like girls screaming, or the cry
Of the spirit women who hold the high peaks,
The river wells, and the grassy meadows.
Can it be I am close to human voices?
I'll go have a look and see for myself."

With that Odysseus emerged from the bushes.
He broke off a leafy branch from the undergrowth
And held it before him to cover himself.

A weathered mountain lion steps into a clearing,

Confident in his strength, eyes glowing.
The wind and rain have let up, and he's hunting
Cattle, sheep, or wild deer, but is hungry enough
To jump the stone walls of the animal pens.

So Odysseus advanced upon these ringleted girls,
Naked as he was. What choice did he have?
He was a frightening sight, disfigured with brine,
And the girls fluttered off to the jutting beaches.
Only Alcinous' daughter stayed. Athena
Put courage in her heart and stopped her trembling.
She held her ground, and Odysseus wondered
How to approach this beautiful girl. Should he
Fall at her knees, or keep his distance
And ask her with honeyed words to show him
The way to the city and give him some clothes?
He thought it over and decided it was better
To keep his distance and not take the chance
Of offending the girl by touching her knees.
So he started this soft and winning speech:

"I implore you, Lady: Are you a goddess
Or mortal? If you are one of heaven's divinities
I think you are most like great Zeus' daughter
Artemis. You have her looks, her stature, her form.
If you are a mortal and live on this earth,
Thrice blest is your father, your queenly mother,
Thrice blest your brothers! Their hearts must always
Be warm with happiness when they look at you,
Just blossoming as you enter the dance.

And happiest of all will be the lucky man
Who takes you home with a cartload of gifts.
I've never seen anyone like you,
Man or woman. I look upon you with awe.
Once, on Delos, I saw something to compare—
A palm shoot springing up near Apollo's altar.
I had stopped there with the troops under my command
On what would prove to be a perilous campaign.
I marveled long and hard when I saw that tree,
For nothing like it had ever grown from the earth.
And I marvel now, Lady, and I am afraid
To touch your knees. Yet my pain is great.
Yesterday, after twenty days, I pulled myself out
Of the wine-dark sea. All that time, wind and wave
Bore me away from Ogygia Island,
And now some spirit has cast me up here
To suffer something new. I do not think
My trials will end soon. The gods have much more
In store for me before that ever happens.
Pity me, mistress. After all my hardships
It is to you I have come first. I don't know
A soul who lives here, not a single one.
Show me the way to town, and give me
A rag to throw over myself, some piece of cloth
You may have brought along to bundle the clothes.
And for yourself, may the gods grant you
Your heart's desire, a husband and a home,
And the blessing of a harmonious life.
For nothing is greater or finer than this,
When a man and woman live together

With one heart and mind, bringing joy
To their friends and grief to their foes."

And white-armed Nausicaa answered him:

"Stranger, you do not seem to be a bad man
Or a fool. Zeus himself, the Olympian god,
Sends happiness to good men and bad men both,
To each as he wills. To you he has given these troubles,
Which you have no choice but to bear. But now,
Since you have come to our country,
You shall not lack clothing, nor anything needed
By a sore-tried suppliant who presents himself.
I will show you where the city is and tell you
That the people here are called Phaeacians.
This is their country, and I am the daughter
Of great-hearted Alcinous, the Phaeacians' lord."

Then the princess called to the ringleted girls:

"Stop this now. Running away at the sight of a man!
Do you think he is part of an enemy invasion?
There is no man on earth, nor will there ever be,
Slippery enough to invade Phaeacia,
For we are very dear to the immortal gods,
And we live far out in the surging sea,
At the world's frontier, out of all human contact.
This poor man comes here as a wanderer,
And we must take care of him now. All strangers,
All beggars, are under the protection of Zeus,

And even small gifts are welcome. So let's feed
This stranger, give him something to drink,
And bathe him in the river, out of the wind."

The girls stopped, turned, and urged each other on.
They took Odysseus to a sheltered spot,
As Nausicaa, Alcinous' daughter, had ordered.
They set down a mantle and a tunic,
Gave him a golden flask of olive oil,
And told him to wash in the river.
Then sunlit Odysseus said to them:

"Stay off a ways there, girls, and let me
Wash the brine off my shoulders myself
And rub myself down. It's been a long time
Since my skin has felt oil. But I don't want
To wash in front of you. I'd be ashamed
To come out naked in front of young girls."

The girls went off and talked with Nausicaa,
And Odysseus rinsed off with river water
All the brine that caked his shoulders and back,
And he scrubbed the salty scurf from his scalp.
He finished his bath, rubbed himself down with oil,
And put on the clothes the maiden had given him.
Then Athena, born from Zeus, made him look
Taller and more muscled, and made his hair
Tumble down his head like hyacinth flowers.

Imagine a craftsman overlaying silver

With pure gold. He has learned his art
From Pallas Athena and Lord Hephaestus,
And creates works of breathtaking beauty.

So Athena herself made Odysseus' head and shoulders
Shimmer with grace. He walked down the beach
And sat on the sand. The princess was dazzled,
And she said to her white-armed serving girls:

"Listen, this man hasn't come to Phaeacia
Against the will of the Olympian gods.
Before, he was a terrible sight, but now,
He's like one of the gods who live in the sky.
If only such a man would be called my husband,
Living here, and content to stay here.
Well, go on, give him something to eat and drink."

They were only too glad to do what she said.
They served Odysseus food and drink,
And the long-suffering man ate and drank
Ravenously. It had been a long fast.

Nausicaa had other things on her mind.
She folded the clothes and loaded the wagon,
Hitched up the mules and climbed aboard.
Then she called to Odysseus and said:

"Get ready now, stranger, to go to the city,
So I can show you the way to my father's house,
Where I promise you will meet the best of the Phaeacians.

Now this is what you must do—and I think you understand:
As long as we're going through countryside and farms,
Keep up with my handmaidens behind the wagon.
Just jog along with them. I'll lead the way,
And we'll soon come to the city. It has a high wall
Around it, and a harbor on each side.
The isthmus gets narrow, and the upswept hulls
Are drawn up to the road. Every citizen
Has his own private slip. The market's there, too,
Surrounding Poseidon's beautiful temple
And bounded by stones set deep in the earth.
There men are always busy with their ships' tackle,
With cables and sails, and with planing their oars.
Phaeacians don't care for quivers and bows
But for oars and masts and streamlined ships
In which they love to cross the grey, salt sea.
It's their rude remarks I would rather avoid.
There are some insolent louts in this town,
And I can just hear one of them saying:
'Well, who's this tall, handsome stranger trailing along
Behind Nausicaa? Where'd she pick him up?
She'll probably marry him, some shipwreck she's taken in
From parts unknown. He's sure not local.
Maybe a god has come to answer her prayers,
Dropped out of the sky for her to have and to hold.
It's just as well she's found herself a husband
From somewhere else, since she turns her nose up
At the many fine Phaeacians who woo her.'
That's what they'll say, and it will count against me.
I myself would blame anyone who acted like this,

A girl who, with her father and mother to tell her better,
Kept the company of men before her wedding day.
No, stranger, be quick to understand me,
So that you can win from my father an escort home,
And soon at that.
Close by the road you will find
A grove of Athena, beautiful poplars
Surrounded by a meadow. A spring flows through it.
Right there is my father's estate and vineyard,
About as far from the city as a shout would carry.
Sit down there and wait for a while, until
We reach the city and arrive at my house.
When you think we've had enough time to get there,
Go into the city and ask any Phaeacian
For the house of my father, Lord Alcinous.
It's very easy to spot, and any child
Can lead you there. There's no other house
In all Phaeacia built like the house
Of the hero Alcinous. Once you're safely within
The courtyard, go quickly though the hall
Until you come to my mother. She'll be sitting
By the hearth in the firelight, spinning
Sea-blue yarn—a sight worth seeing—
As she leans against a column, her maids behind her.
Right beside her my father sits on his throne,
Sipping his wine like an immortal god.
Pass him by and throw your arms
Around my mother's knees, if you want to see
Your homeland soon, however far it may be.
If she smiles upon you, there is hope that you will

Return to your home and see your loved ones again."

And she smacked the mules with the shining lash.
They trotted on smartly, leaving the river behind.
She drove so that Odysseus and the girls
Could keep up, and used the lash with care.
The sun had set when they reached the grove
Sacred to Athena. Odysseus sat down there
And said this prayer to great Zeus' daughter:

"Hear me, mystic child of the Storm God,
O hear me now, as you heard me not
When I was shattered by the Earthshaker's blows.
Grant that I come to Phaeacia pitied and loved."

Thus his prayer, and Pallas Athena heard it
But did not appear to him face to face, not yet,
Out of respect for her uncle, who would rage against
Godlike Odysseus until he reached home.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING