

The Odyssey

Homer

Translated by Robert Fitzgerald

PART I FAR FROM HOME

"I Am Odysseus"

Odysseus is in the banquet hall of Alcinous (ăĭ-sĭn'ō-əs), King of Phaeacia (fē-ā'shə), who helps him on his way after all his comrades have been killed and his last vessel destroyed. Odysseus tells the story of his adventures thus far.

"I am Laertes^o son, Odysseus.

Men hold me
formidable for guile in peace and war:
this fame has gone abroad to the sky's rim.
My home is on the peaked sea-mark of Ithaca⁴
under Mount Neion's wind-blown robe of leaves,
in sight of other islands—Dulichium,
Same, wooded Zacynthus—Ithaca
being most lofty in that coastal sea,
and northwest, while the rest lie east and south.
A rocky isle, but good for a boy's training;

1. **Laertes** (lā-ūr'tēz).

4. **Ithaca** (ith'ə-kə): an island off the west coast of Greece.

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I shall not see on earth a place more dear,
though I have been detained long by Calypso,^o
loveliest among goddesses, who held me
in her smooth caves, to be her heart's delight,
as Circe of Aeaea,^o the enchantress,
desired me, and detained me in her hall.
But in my heart I never gave consent.

Where shall a man find sweetness to surpass
his own home and his parents? In far lands
he shall not, though he find a house of gold.
What of my sailing, then, from Troy?

What of those years
of rough adventure, weathered under Zeus?^o

The wind that carried west from Ilion^o
brought me to Ismarus, on the far shore,
a strongpoint on the coast of the Cicones.^o
I stormed that place and killed the men who fought.
Plunder we took, and we enslaved the women,
to make division, equal shares to all –
but on the spot I told them: 'Back, and quickly!

Out to sea again!' My men were mutinous,
fools, on stores of wine. Sheep after sheep
they butchered by the surf, and shambling cattle,
feasting – while fugitives went inland, running
to call to arms the main force of Cicones.

This was an army, trained to fight on horseback
or, where the ground required, on foot. They came
with dawn over that terrain like the leaves
and blades of spring. So doom appeared to us,
dark word of Zeus for us, our evil days.

My men stood up and made a fight of it –
backed on the ships, with lances kept in play,
from bright morning through the blaze of noon
holding our beach, although so far outnumbered;
but when the sun passed toward unyoking time,
then the Achaeans,^o one by one, gave way.

Six benches were left empty in every ship
that evening when we pulled away from death.

And this new grief we bore with us to sea:
our precious lives we had, but not our friends.

No ship made sail next day until some shipmate
had raised a cry, three times, for each poor ghost
unfleshed by the Cicones on that field.

12. **Calypso** (kə-lip'sō).

15. **Circe** (sūr'sē) of **Aeaea** (ē'ē-ə).

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22. **Zeus** (zōos): king of the gods.

23. **Ilion** (il'ē-ōn): Troy.

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25. **Cicones** (sī-kō'nēz).

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45. **Achaeans** (ə-kē'ənz): Greeks
(Odysseus' men).

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The Lotus-Eaters

Now Zeus the lord of cloud roused in the north
a storm against the ships, and driving veils
of squall moved down like night on land and sea. 55

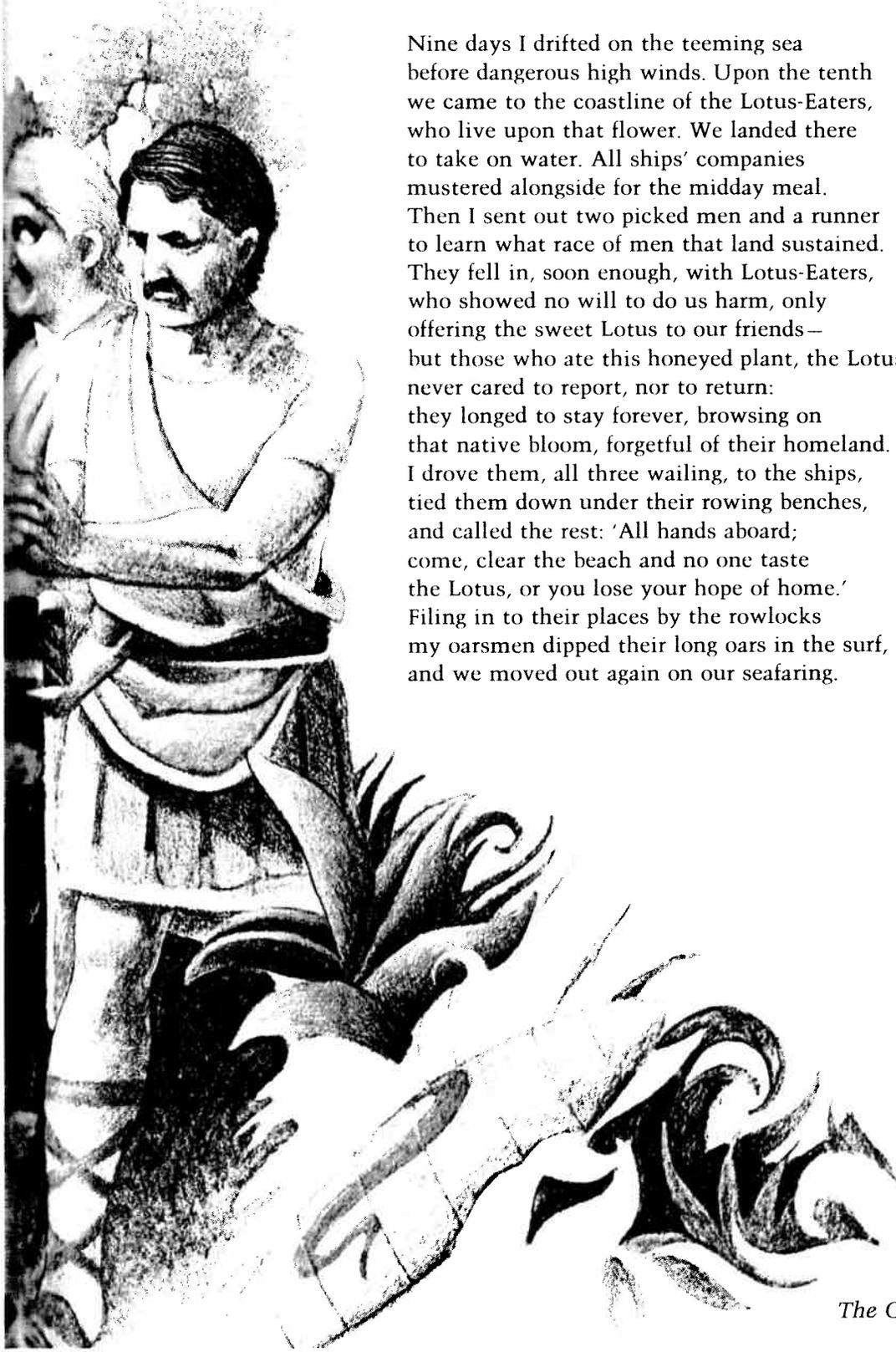
The bows went plunging at the gust; sails
cracked and lashed out strips in the big wind.
We saw death in that fury, dropped the yards,
unshipped the oars, and pulled for the nearest lee:^o
then two long days and nights we lay offshore 60
worn out and sick at heart, tasting our grief,
until a third Dawn came with ringlets shining.
Then we put up our masts, hauled sail, and rested,
letting the steersmen and the breeze take over.

I might have made it safely home, that time, 65
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.

59. *lee*: place sheltered from the wind.



Nine days I drifted on the teeming sea
before dangerous high winds. Upon the tenth 70
we came to the coastline of the Lotus-Eaters,
who live upon that flower. We landed there
to take on water. All ships' companies
mustered alongside for the midday meal.
Then I sent out two picked men and a runner 75
to learn what race of men that land sustained.
They fell in, soon enough, with Lotus-Eaters,
who showed no will to do us harm, only
offering the sweet Lotus to our friends—
but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotus, 80
never cared to report, nor to return:
they longed to stay forever, browsing on
that native bloom, forgetful of their homeland.
I drove them, all three wailing, to the ships,
tied them down under their rowing benches, 85
and called the rest: 'All hands aboard;
come, clear the beach and no one taste
the Lotus, or you lose your hope of home.'
Filing in to their places by the rowlocks
my oarsmen dipped their long oars in the surf, 90
and we moved out again on our seafaring.



The Cyclops

In the next land we found were Cyclopes,^o
 giants, louts, without a law to bless them.
 In ignorance leaving the fruitage of the earth in mystery
 to the immortal gods, they neither plow 95
 nor sow by hand, nor till the ground, though grain—
 wild wheat and barley—grows untended, and
 wine grapes, in clusters, ripen in heaven's rain.
 Cyclopes have no muster and no meeting,
 no consultation or old tribal ways, 100
 but each one dwells in his own mountain cave
 dealing out rough justice to wife and child,
 indifferent to what the others do. . . .

As we rowed on, and nearer to the mainland,
 at one end of the bay, we saw a cavern 105
 yawning above the water, screened with laurel,
 and many rams and goats about the place
 inside a sheepfold—made from slabs of stone
 earthfast between tall trunks of pine and rugged
 towering oak trees.

A prodigious^o man 110
 slept in this cave alone, and took his flocks
 to graze afield—remote from all companions,
 knowing none but savage ways, a brute
 so huge, he seemed no man at all of those
 who eat good wheaten bread; but he seemed rather 115
 a shaggy mountain reared in solitude.

We beached there, and I told the crew
 to stand by and keep watch over the ship;
 as for myself I took my twelve best fighters
 and went ahead. I had a goatskin full 120
 of that sweet liquor that Euanthes' son,
 Maron, had given me. He kept Apollo's^o

holy grove at Ismarus; for kindness
 we showed him there, and showed his wife and child,
 he gave me seven shining golden talents^o 125
 perfectly formed, a solid silver winebowl,
 and then this liquor—twelve two-handled jars
 of brandy, pure and fiery. Not a slave
 in Maron's household knew this drink; only
 he, his wife and the storeroom mistress knew; 130

92. **Cyclopes** (sī-klō'pēz), plural form of Cyclops (sī'-klōps); a race of one-eyed Giants.

110. **prodigious** (prō-dij'əs): gigantic.

122. **Apollo** (ə-pōl'ō): god of music, prophecy, and medicine.

125. **talent**: a unit of money in ancient Greece.

and they would put one cupful – ruby-colored,
honey-smooth – in twenty more of water,
but still the sweet scent hovered like a fume
over the winebowl. No man turned away
when cups of this came round.

A wineskin full 135

I brought along, and victuals in a bag,
for in my bones I knew some towering brute
would be upon us soon – all outward power,
a wild man, ignorant of civility.

We climbed, then, briskly to the cave. But Cyclops 140
had gone afield, to pasture his fat sheep,
so we looked round at everything inside:

a drying rack that sagged with cheeses, pens
crowded with lambs and kids, each in its class:
firstlings apart from middlings, and the ‘dewdrops,’ 145
or newborn lambkins, penned apart from both.

And vessels full of whey were brimming there –
bowls of earthenware and pails for milking.
My men came pressing round me, pleading:

‘Why not

take these cheeses, get them stowed, come back, 150
throw open all the pens, and make a run for it?
We’ll drive the kids and lambs aboard. We say
put out again on good salt water!’

Ah,

how sound that was! Yet I refused. I wished 155
to see the cave man, what he had to offer –
no pretty sight, it turned out, for my friends.

We lit a fire, burnt an offering,
and took some cheese to eat; then sat in silence
around the embers, waiting. When he came
he had a load of dry boughs on his shoulder 160
to stoke his fire at suppertime. He dumped it
with a great crash into that hollow cave,
and we all scattered fast to the far wall.

Then over the broad cavern floor he ushered
the ewes he meant to milk. He left his rams 165
and he-goats in the yard outside, and swung
high overhead a slab of solid rock
to close the cave. Two dozen four-wheeled wagons,

with heaving wagon teams, could not have stirred
the tonnage of that rock from where he wedged it
over the doorsill. Next he took his seat
and milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job
he made of it, giving each ewe her suckling;
thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey,
sieved out the curds to drip in withy" baskets,
and poured the whey to stand in bowls
cooling until he drank it for his supper.
When all these chores were done, he poked the fire,
heaping on brushwood. In the glare he saw us.

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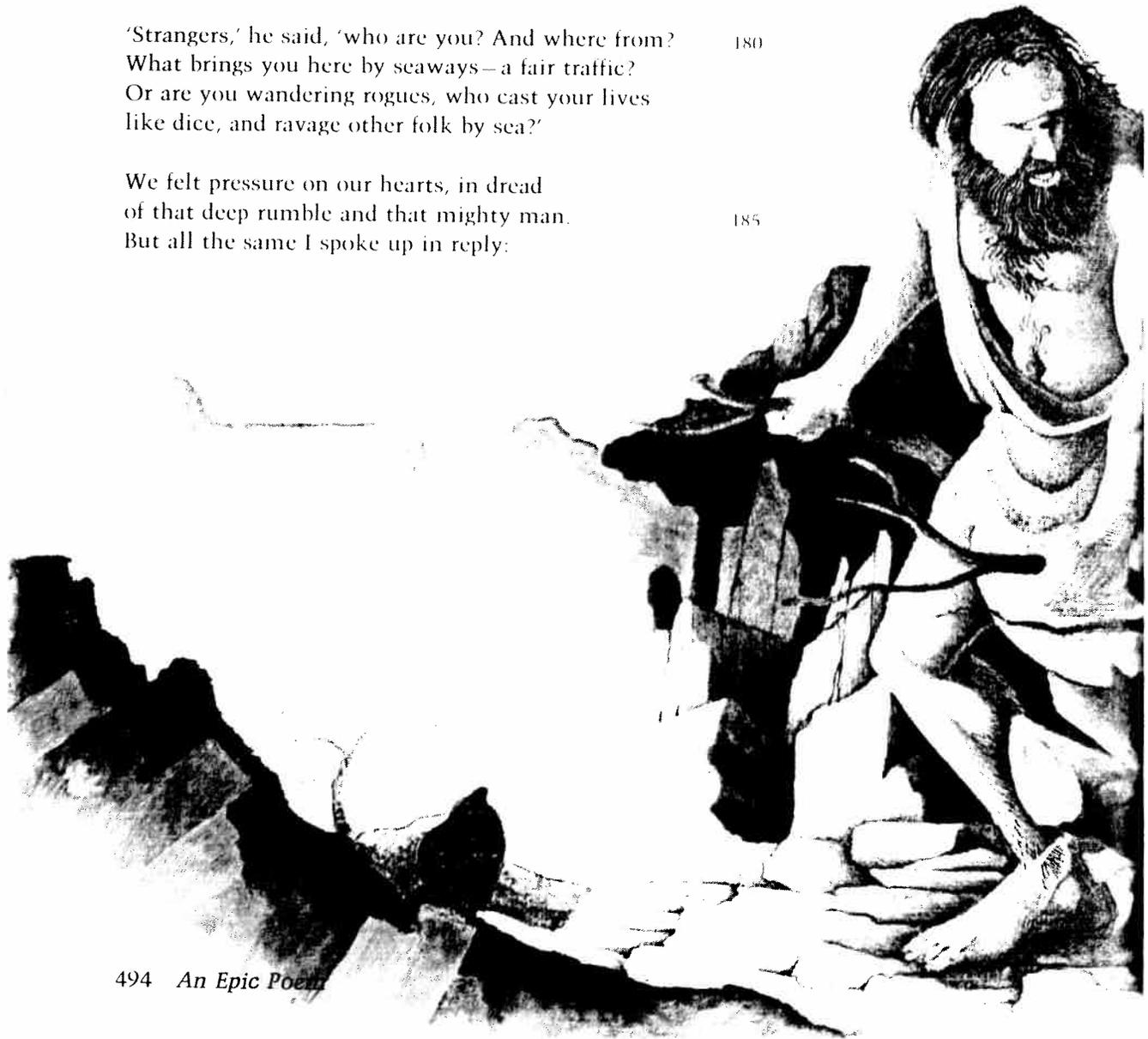
175 175. **withy** (*wīth'ē*): made of
slender twigs.

'Strangers,' he said, 'who are you? And where from?
What brings you here by seaways—a fair traffic?
Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives
like dice, and ravage other folk by sea?'

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We felt pressure on our hearts, in dread
of that deep rumble and that mighty man.
But all the same I spoke up in reply:

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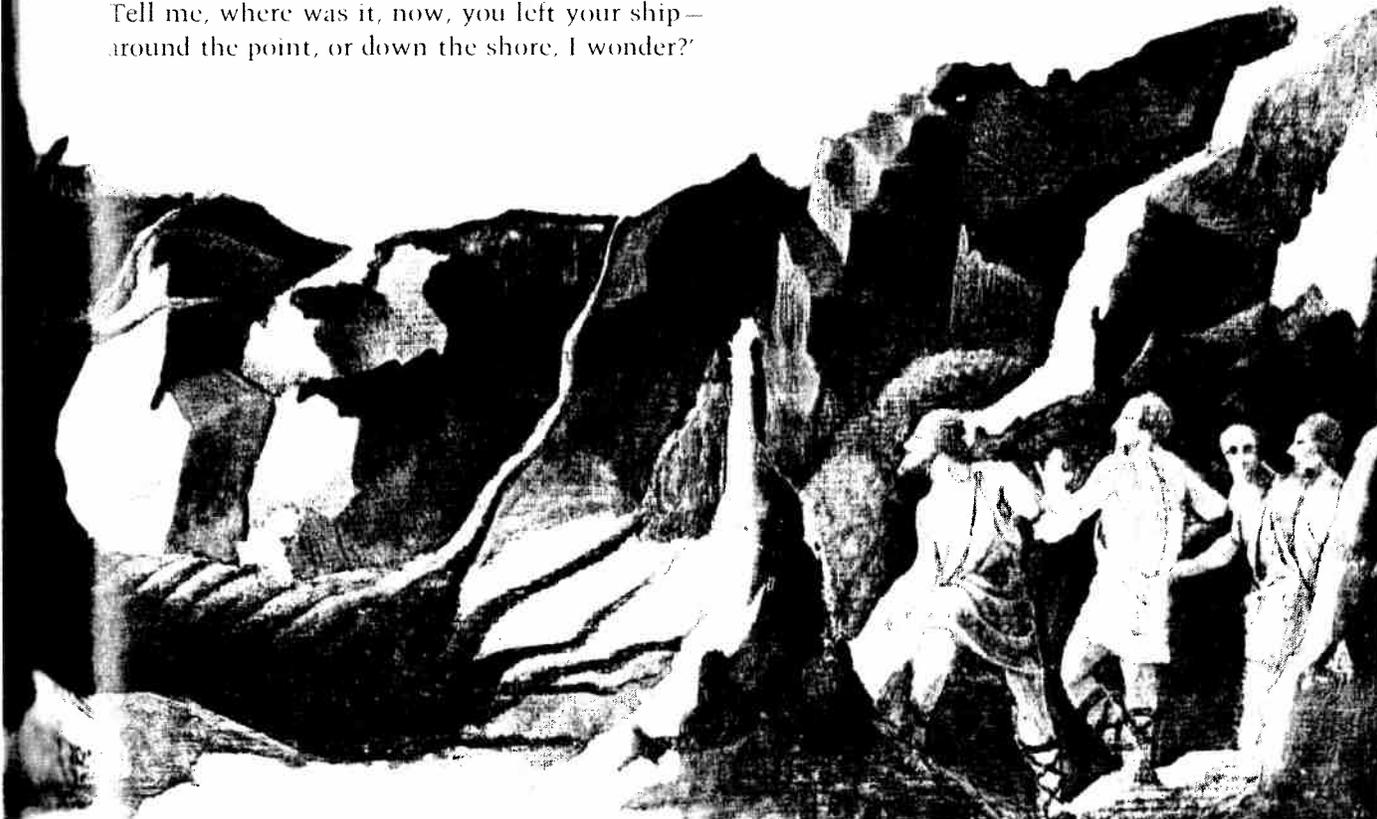
'We are from Troy, Achaeans, blown off course
by shifting gales on the Great South Sea;
homeward bound, but taking routes and ways
uncommon; so the will of Zeus would have it. 190

We served under Agamemnon,^o son of Atreus—
the whole world knows what city
he laid waste, what armies he destroyed.
It was our luck to come here; here we stand,
beholden for your help, or any gifts 195
you give—as custom is to honor strangers.
We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care
for the gods' courtesy; Zeus will avenge
the unoffending guest.'

He answered this
from his brute chest, unmoved:

'You are a ninny, 200
or else you come from the other end of nowhere,
telling me, mind the gods! We Cyclopes
care not a whistle for your thundering Zeus
or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far.
I would not let you go for fear of Zeus— 205
you or your friends—unless I had a whim to.
Tell me, where was it, now, you left your ship—
around the point, or down the shore. I wonder?'

191. **Agamemnon** (āg'ə-mēm'nōn');
Greek king who led the Greeks
against the Trojans.



A club, or staff, lay there along the fold –
an olive tree, felled green and left to season 250
for Cyclops' hand. And it was like a mast
a lugger of twenty oars, broad in the beam –
a deep-sea-going craft – might carry:
so long, so big around, it seemed. Now I
chopped out a six-foot section of this pole 255
and set it down before my men, who scraped it;
and when they had it smooth, I hewed again
to make a stake with pointed end. I held this
in the fire's heart and turned it, toughening it,
then hid it, well back in the cavern, under 260
one of the dung piles in profusion there.
Now came the time to toss for it: who ventured
along with me? whose hand could bear to thrust
and grind that spike in Cyclops' eye, when mild
sleep had mastered him? As luck would have it, 265
the men I would have chosen won the toss –
four strong men, and I made five as captain.

At evening came the shepherd with his flock,
his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,
entered the cave: by some sheepherding whim – 270
or a god's bidding – none were left outside.
He hefted his great boulder into place
and sat him down to milk the bleating ewes
in proper order, put the lambs to suck,
and swiftly ran through all his evening chores. 275
Then he caught two more men and feasted on them.
My moment was at hand, and I went forward
holding an ivy bowl of my dark drink,
looking up, saying:

 'Cyclops, try some wine.
Here's liquor to wash down your scraps of men. 280
Taste it, and see the king of drink we carried
under our planks. I meant it for an offering
if you would help us home. But you are mad,
unbearable, a bloody monster! After this,
will any other traveler come to see you?' 285

He seized and drained the bowl, and it went down
so fiery and smooth he called for more:

'Give me another, thank you kindly. Tell me,
how are you called? I'll make a gift will please you.
Even Cyclopes know the wine grapes grow
out of grassland and loam in heaven's rain,
but here's a bit of nectar and ambrosia!'

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292. **nectar and ambrosia** (ām-brō'zhs): drink and food of the Olympian gods.

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,

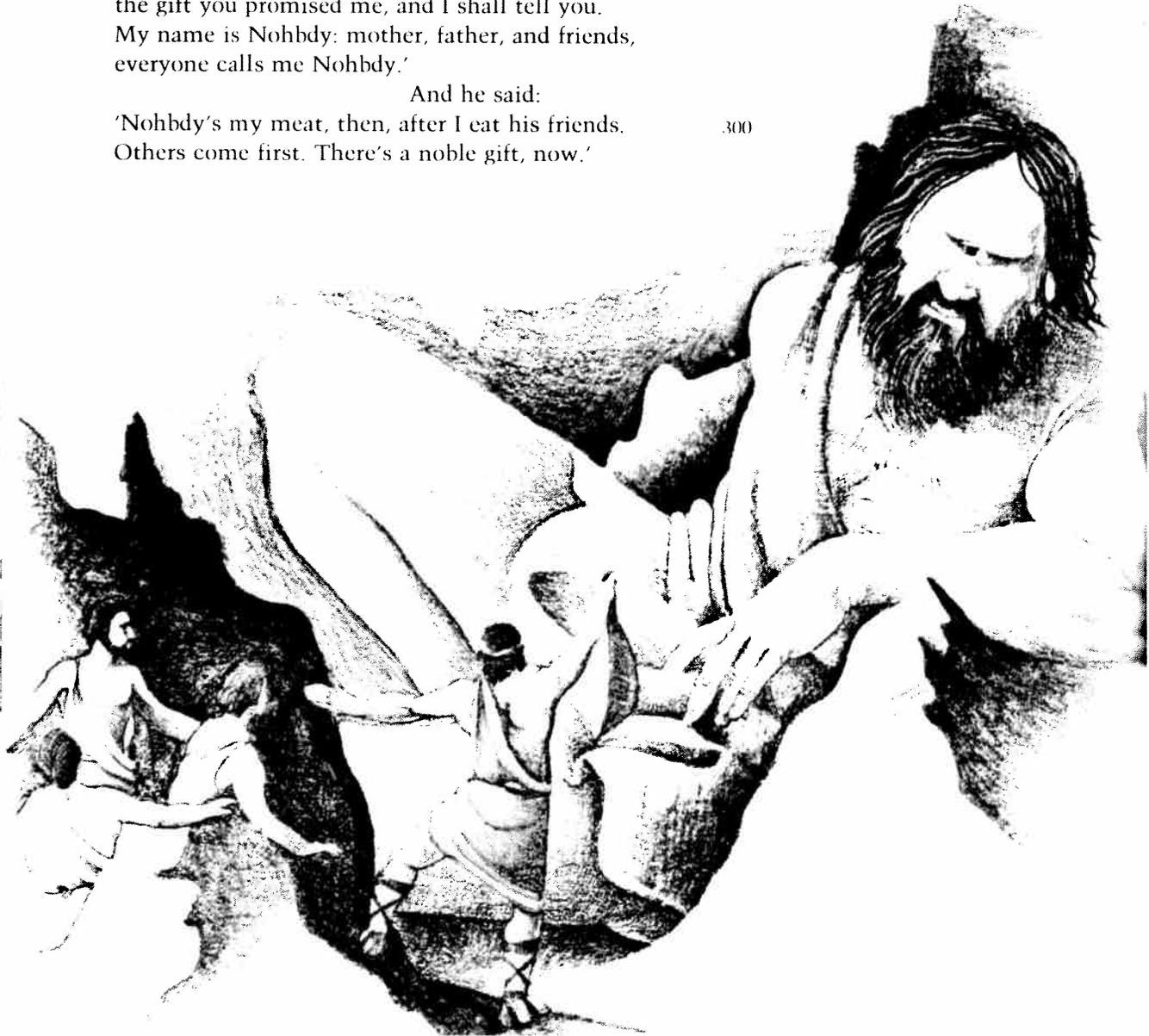
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you ask my honorable name? Remember
the gift you promised me, and I shall tell you.
My name is Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends,
everyone calls me Nohbdy.'

And he said:

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

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Even as he spoke, he reeled and tumbled backward,
his great head lolling to one side; and sleep
took him like any creature. Drunk, hiccuping,
he dribbled streams of liquor and bits of men. 305

Now, by the gods, I drove my big hand spike
deep in the embers, charring it again,
and cheered my men along with battle talk
to keep their courage up: no quitting now.
The pike of olive, green though it had been, 310
reddened and glowed as if about to catch.
I drew it from the coals and my four fellows
gave me a hand, lugging it near the Cyclops
as more than natural force nerved them; straight
forward they sprinted, lifted it, and rammed it 315
deep in his crater eye, and I leaned on it
turning it as a shipwright turns a drill
in planking, having men below to swing
the two-handled strap that spins it in the groove.
So with our brand we bored that great eye socket 320
while blood ran out around the red-hot bar.
Eyelid and lash were seared; the pierced ball
hissed broiling, and the roots popped.

In a smithy
one sees a white-hot axhead or an adz
plunged and wrung in a cold tub, screeching steam – 325
the way they make soft iron hale and hard:
just so that eyeball hissed around the spike.
The Cyclops bellowed and the rock roared round him,
and we fell back in fear. Clawing his face
he tugged the bloody spike out of his eye, 330
threw it away, and his wild hands went groping;
then he set up a howl for Cyclopes
who lived in caves on windy peaks nearby.
Some heard him; and they came by divers³³⁴ ways
to clump around outside and call:

‘What ails you, 335
Polyphemus?’ Why do you cry so sore
in the starry night? You will not let us sleep.
Sure no man’s driving off your flock? No man
has tricked you, ruined you?’

Out of the cave
the mammoth Polyphemus roared in answer: 340

334 **divers** (dɪˈvɜːz): various.

336. **Polyphemus** (pɒlɪˈfɛməs).

'Nohbdy, Nohbdy's tricked me, Nohbdy's ruined me!'

To this rough shout they made a sage reply:

'Ah well, if nobody has played you foul
there in your lonely bed, we are no use in pain
given by great Zeus. Let it be your father, 345
Poseidon Lord, to whom you pray.'

So saying
they trailed away. And I was filled with laughter
to see how like a charm the name deceived them.
Now Cyclops, wheezing as the pain came on him,
fumbled to wrench away the great doorstone 350
and squatted in the breach with arms thrown wide
for any silly beast or man who bolted –
hoping somehow I might be such a fool.
But I kept thinking how to win the game:
death sat there huge; how could we slip away? 355
I drew on all my wits, and ran through tactics,
reasoning as a man will for dear life,
until a trick came – and it pleased me well.
The Cyclops' rams were handsome, fat, with heavy
fleeces, a dark violet.

Three abreast 360
I tied them silently together, twining
cords of willow from the ogre's bed;
then slung a man under each middle one
to ride there safely, shielded left and right.
So three sheep could convey each man. I took 365
the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,
and hung myself under his kinky belly,
pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep
in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.
So, breathing hard, we waited until morning. 370

When Dawn spread out her fingertips of rose
the rams began to stir, moving for pasture,
and peals of bleating echoed round the pens
where dams with udders full called for a milking.
Blinded, and sick with pain from his head wound, 375
the master stroked each ram, then let it pass,
but my men riding on the pectoral^o fleece
the giant's blind hands blundering never found.



377. **pectoral** (pek'tar-əl): on the chest.

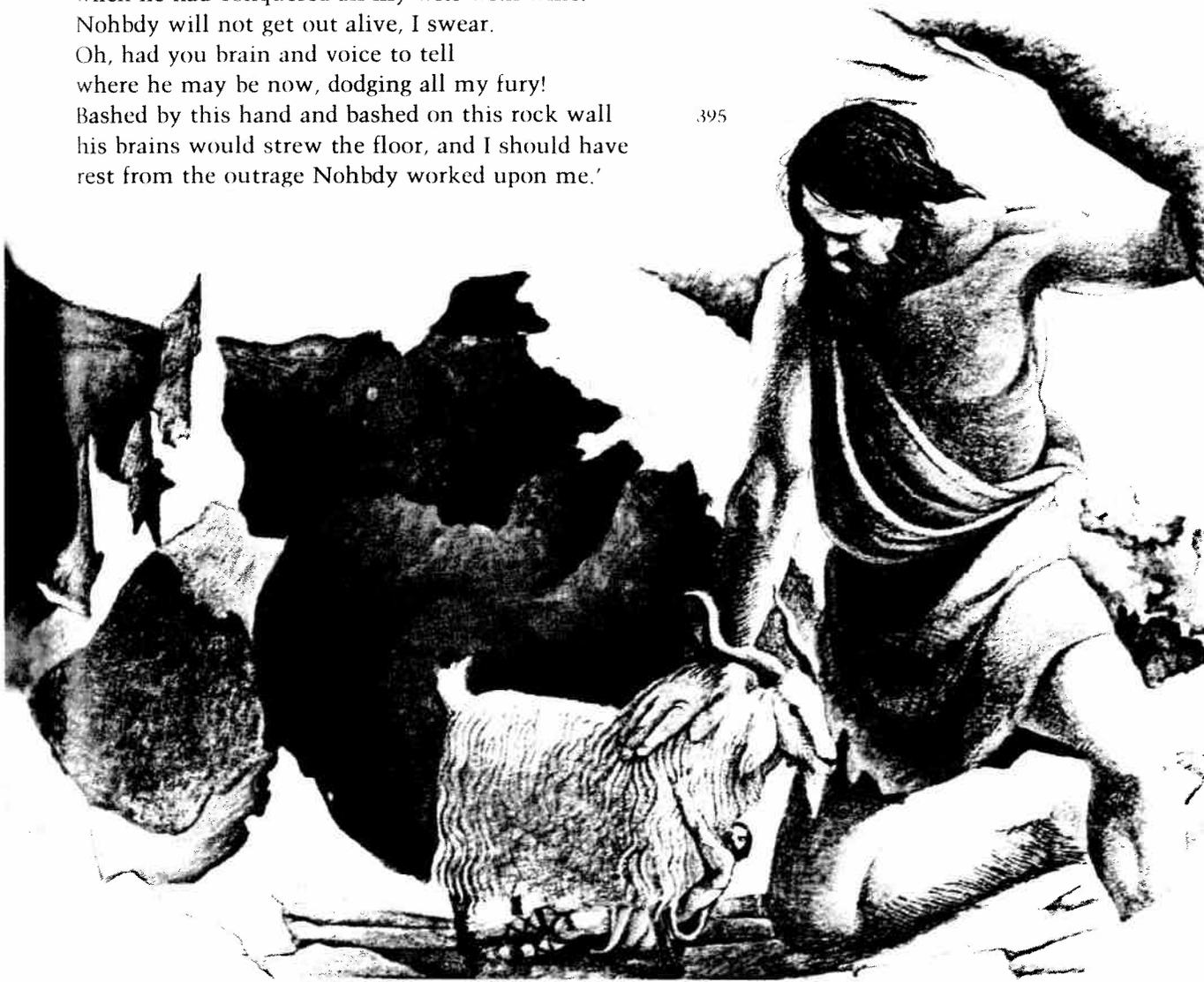
Last of them all my ram, the leader, came,
weighted by wool and me with my meditations. 380
The Cyclops patted him, and then he said:

'Sweet cousin ram, why lag behind the rest
in the night cave? You never linger so,
but graze before them all, and go afar
to crop sweet grass, and take your stately way 385
leading along the streams. until at evening
you run to be the first one in the fold.

Why, now, so far behind? Can you be grieving
over your Master's eye? That carrion rogue^o
and his accurst companions burnt it out 390
when he had conquered all my wits with wine.
Nohbdy will not get out alive, I swear.

Oh, had you brain and voice to tell
where he may be now, dodging all my fury!
Bashed by this hand and bashed on this rock wall 395
his brains would strew the floor, and I should have
rest from the outrage Nohbdy worked upon me.'

389. **carrion** (kär'ē-ən) **rogue**: rotten scoundrel.



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. 400
With many glances back, we rounded up
his fat, stiff-legged sheep to take aboard,
and drove them down to where the good ship lay.
We saw, as we came near, our fellows' faces
shining; then we saw them turn to grief 405
tallying those who had not fled from death.
I hushed them, jerking head and eyebrows up,
and in a low voice told them: 'Load this herd;
move fast, and put the ship's head toward the breakers.'
They all pitched in at loading, then embarked 410
and struck their oars into the sea. Far out,
as far offshore as shouted words would carry,
I sent a few back to the adversary:

'O Cyclops! Would you feast on my companions?
Puny, am I, in a cave man's hands? 415
How do you like the beating that we gave you,
you damned cannibal? Eater of guests
under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!'

The blind thing in his doubled fury broke
a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us. 420
Ahead of our black prow it struck and sank
whelmed in a spuming geyser, a giant wave
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 425
to put their backs into a racing stroke—
row, row, or perish. So the long oars bent
kicking the foam sternward, making head
until we drew away, and twice as far.
Now when I cupped my hands I heard the crew 430
in low voices protesting:

'Godsake, Captain!
Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!'

'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.' 435

'Aye!
He'll smash our timbers and our heads together!'

I would not heed them in my glorying spirit,
but let my anger flare and yelled:

'Cyclops,
if ever mortal man inquire 440
how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him
Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye:
Laertes' son, whose home's on Ithaca!'

At this he gave a mighty sob and rumbled:

'Now comes the weird^o upon me, spoken of old. 445
A wizard, grand and wondrous, lived here – Telemus,
a son of Eurymus; great length of days
he had in wizardry among the Cyclopes,
and these things he foretold for time to come:
my great eye lost, and at Odysseus' hands. 450

Always I had in mind some giant, armed
in giant force, would come against me here.
but this, but you – small, pitiful and twiggy –
you put me down with wine, you blinded me.
Come back, Odysseus, and I'll treat you well, 455
praying the god of earthquake^o to befriend you –
his son I am, for he by his avowal
fathered me, and, if he will, he may
heal me of this black wound – he and no other
of all the happy gods or mortal men.' 460

Few words I shouted in reply to him:

'If I could take your life I would and take
your time away, and hurl you down to hell!
The god of earthquake could not heal you there!'

At this he stretched his hands out in his darkness 465
toward the sky of stars, and prayed Poseidon:

'O hear me, lord, blue girdler of the islands,
if I am thine indeed, and thou art father:

445. **weird:** fate or destiny.

456. **god of earthquake:** Poseidon.

grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, never
see his home: Laertes' son, I mean, 470
who kept his hall on Ithaca. Should destiny
intend that he shall see his roof again
among his family in his fatherland,
far be that day, and dark the years between.
Let him lose all companions, and return 475
under strange sail to bitter days at home.'

In these words he prayed, and the god heard him.
Now he laid hands upon a bigger stone
and wheeled around, titanic for the cast,
to let it fly in the black-prowed vessel's track. 480
But it fell short, just aft the steering oar,
and whelming seas rose giant above the stone
to bear us onward toward the island.

There
as we ran in we saw the squadron waiting,
the trim ships drawn up side by side, and all 485
our troubled friends who waited, looking seaward.
We beached her, grinding keel in the soft sand,
and waded in, ourselves, on the sandy beach.
Then we unloaded all the Cyclops' flock
to make division, share and share alike, 490
only my fighters voted that my ram,
the prize of all, should go to me. I slew him
by the seaside and burnt his long thighbones
to Zeus beyond the stormcloud, Cronus' son,
who rules the world. But Zeus disdained my offering: 495
destruction for my ships he had in store
and death for those who sailed them, my companions.
Now all day long until the sun went down
we made our feast on mutton and sweet wine,
till after sunset in the gathering dark 500
we went to sleep above the wash of ripples.

When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose
touched the world, I roused the men, gave orders
to man the ships, cast off the mooring lines;
and filing in to sit beside the rowlocks 505
oarsmen in line dipped oars in the gray sea.
So we moved out, sad in the vast offing,
having our precious lives, but not our friends.



FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Odysseus begins his narrative when he and his men set sail from Troy. What does the episode of the Cicones reveal about Odysseus and his men?

2. Almost all of the adventures in the *Odyssey* illustrate some aspect of Odysseus' character. What specific characteristics are revealed in the episode of the Lotus-Eaters?

3. The land of the Lotus-Eaters has been said to symbolize *escapism*—that is, withdrawal from reality into a dream world. Do you agree? If you do, point out lines that support your view. If you do not, give reasons for your opinion.

4. Why does Odysseus consider the Cyclopes barbarians?

5. Hospitality to strangers is a theme that recurs throughout the *Odyssey*. The ancient Greeks believed that the gods themselves sometimes came to earth disguised as humble strangers. How does the Cyclops respond to Odysseus' plea for hospitality?

6. Twice in the Cyclops episode Odysseus brings misfortune upon himself and his men by ignoring their good advice. Identify both instances and tell why Odysseus acts as he does.

7. Odysseus devises a plan that enables him and his men to escape from the Cyclops' cave and to prevent anyone coming to the Cyclops' aid. What is each stage of the plan?

8. What aspects of Odysseus' character are revealed in the incident with the Cyclops?

9. Reread the Cyclops' prayer to Poseidon (lines 467–476). What lines suggest that Odysseus will have to face other trials? How does this foreshadowing add to the suspense of the poem?



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 530
you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,
erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,
and if I shout and beg to be untied,
take more turns of the rope to muffle me.' 535

I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast
while our good ship made time, bound outward down
the wind for the strange island of Sirens.
Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm
came over all the sea, as though some power 540
lulled the swell.

The crew were on their feet
briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,
each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades
and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved
a massive cake of beeswax into bits 545
and rolled them in my hands until they softened—
no long task, for a burning heat came down
from Helios,^o 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 550
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: 555

548. **Helios** (hē'fē-ōs'): the sun god.

'This way, oh turn your bows,
Achaea's glory,
As all the world allows—
Moor and be merry.

Sweet coupled airs we sing. 560
No lonely seafarer
Holds clear of entering
Our green mirror.

Pleased by each purling note
Like honey twining 565
From her throat and my throat,
Who lies a-pining?

Sea rovers here take joy
Voyaging onward,
As from our song of Troy
Graybeard and rower-boy
Goeth more learnèd. 570

All feats on that great field
In the long warfare,
Dark days the bright gods willed,
Wounds you bore there, 575

Argos' old soldiery°
On Troy beach teeming,
Charmed out of time we see.
No life on earth can be
Hid from our dreaming.' 580

577. **Argos' old soldiery:** the soldiers from Argos, a city in ancient Greece, who fought in the Trojan War.



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.

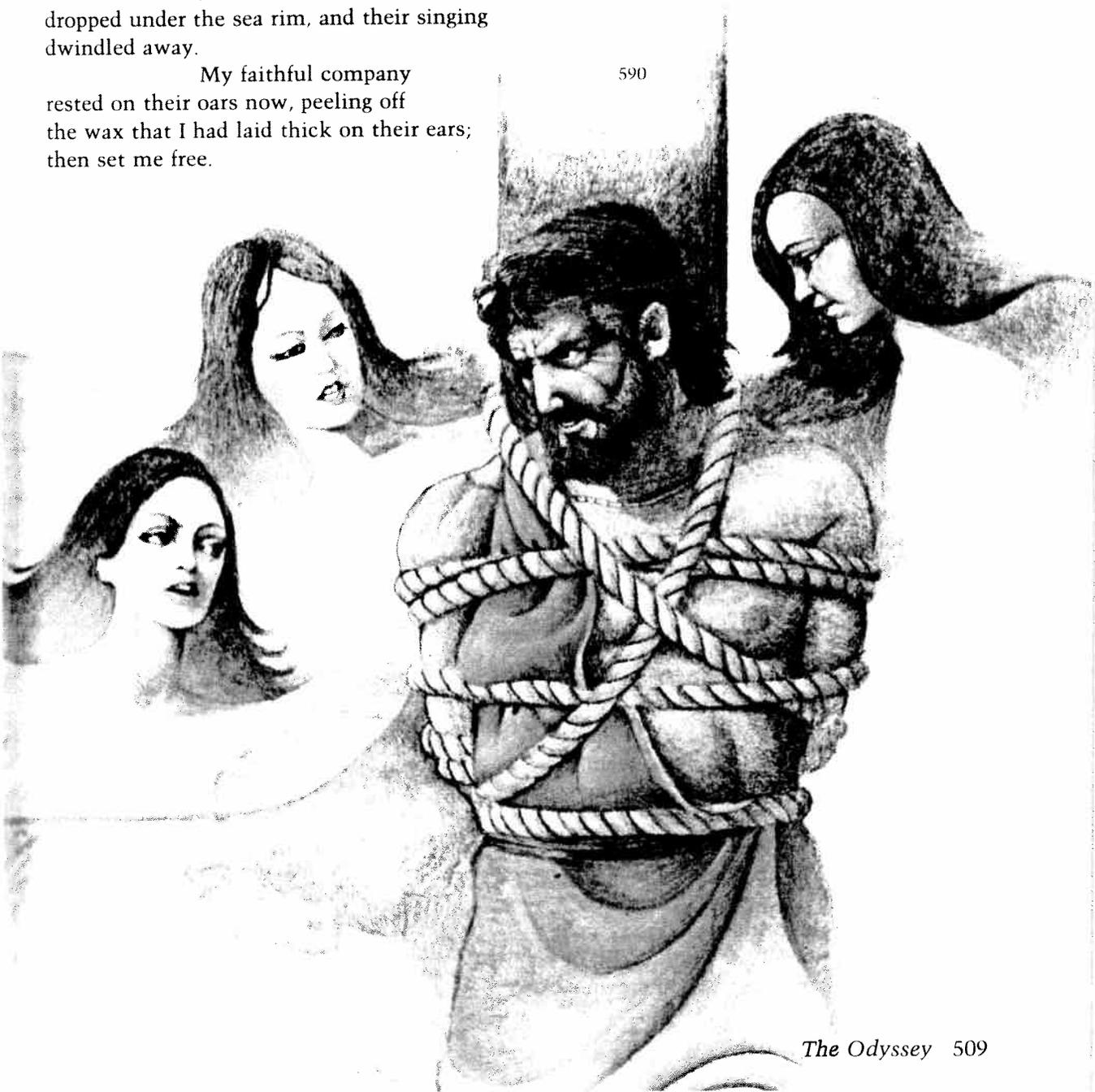
585

585. **Perimedes** (pēr'ə-mē'dēz).

586. **Eurylochus** (yōō-ril'ə-kəs).

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

590



Scylla and Charybdis

Circe has warned Odysseus of another sea peril. He and his crew must pass between Scylla (sīl'ə) and Charybdis (kə-rib'dis). Scylla is a terrifying monster with six heads. She dwells in a high rocky cave, devouring sailors in ships that pass close by. Charybdis is a whirlpool. Three times a day she swallows the sea, then vomits it up fiery hot. Circe has advised Odysseus to sail toward Scylla's crag, for it is better to lose six of his men—one to each of her heads—than for all to perish in the whirlpool.

But scarcely had that island
faded in blue air than I saw smoke
and white water, with sound of waves in tumult— 595
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 oarblades to drive her through the water.

Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern, 600
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! 605
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, 610
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; 615
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^o 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.

620

625

625. **cuirass** [kwī-rās^o]: armor for the chest and back.

630



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^o 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.

635 635. **gorge:** devouring mouth.

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,^o 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.

640 641. **maelstrom** (mäl'ström) violent
whirlpool.

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.

650

A man surf-casting on a point of rock
for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod
to drop the sinker and the bait far out,
will hook a fish and rip it from the surface
to dangle wriggling through the air:

655

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.

660

We rowed on.
The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too,
and Scylla dropped astern. . . .

The Cattle of the Sun God

Odysseus urges his exhausted crew to bypass Thrinacia (thrin-ā'shə), the island of the sun god. The men, however, insist on landing. Odysseus makes them swear not to touch the god's cattle, for both Circe and Tiresias have warned him of disaster if the cattle are harmed.

In the small hours of the third watch, when stars 665
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 670
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; 675
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 680
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, 685
when all the barley in the ship was gone,
hunger drove them to scour the wild shore
with angling hooks, for fishes and seafowl,
whatever fell into their hands; and lean days
wore their bellies thin.

The storms continued. 690
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. 695

I washed my hands there, and made supplication
to the gods who own Olympus,^o all the gods –
but they, for answer, only closed my eyes
under slow drops of sleep.

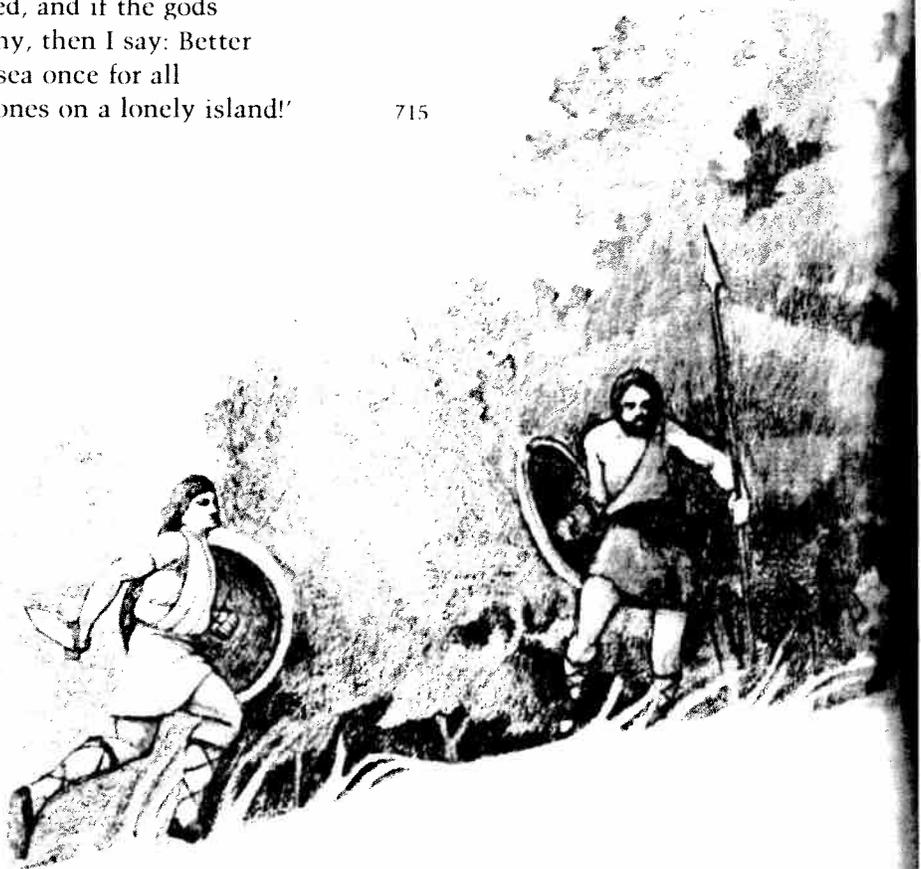
697. **Olympus** (ō-lim'pəs): Mount Olympus, believed to be the home of the gods.

Now on the shore Eurylochus
made his insidious plea:

'Comrades,' he said, 700
'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 705
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.^o 710
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!' 715

710. **Lord of Noon:** Helios.



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. 720

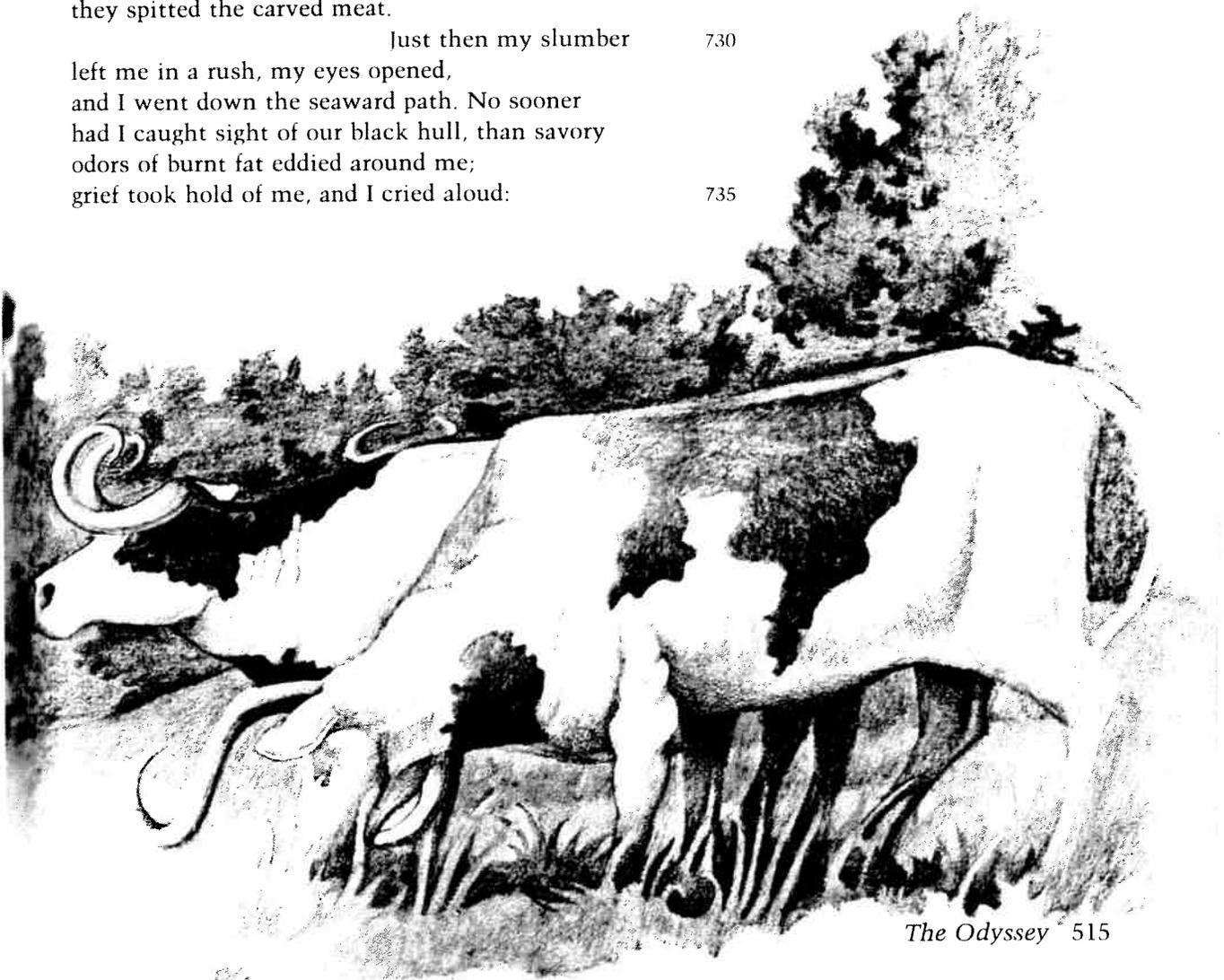
They plucked the leaves that shone on a tall oak –
having no barley meal – to strew the victims,
performed the prayers and ritual, knifed the kine^o
and flayed each carcass, cutting thighbones free
to wrap in double folds of fat. These offerings,
with strips of meat, were laid upon the fire. 725

Then, as they had no wine, they made libation^o
with clear spring water, broiling the entrails first;
and when the bones were burnt and tripes shared,
they spitted the carved meat.

Just then my slumber 730
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: 735

723. **kine:** cattle.

727. **libation:** ritual pouring of
wine or other liquid.



The Odyssey 515

'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^o in her long gown meanwhile
had borne swift word to the Overlord of Noon:
'They have killed your kine.'

740

740. **Lampetia** (lām-pe'shə): a nymph.

And the Lord Helios
burst into angry speech amid the immortals:

'O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,
punish Odysseus' men! So overweening,
now they have killed my peaceful kine, my joy
at morning when I climbed the sky of stars,
and evening, when I bore westward from heaven.
Restitution or penalty they shall pay –
and pay in full – or I go down forever
to light the dead men in the underworld.'

745

750

Then Zeus who drives the stormcloud made reply:

'Peace, Helios: shine on among the gods,
shine over mortals in the fields of grain.
Let me throw down one white-hot bolt, and make
splinters of their ship in the winedark sea.'

755

– Calypso later told me of this exchange,
as she declared that Hermes^o had told her.

758. **Hermes** (hūr'mez'): the messenger of the gods.

Well, when I reached the sea cave and the ship,
I faced each man, and had it out; but where
could any remedy be found? There was none.
The silken beeves of Helios were dead.
The gods, moreover, made queer signs appear:
cowhides began to crawl, and beef, both raw
and roasted, lowed like kine upon the spits.

760

765

Now six full days my gallant crew could feast
upon the prime beef they had marked for slaughter
from Helios' herd; and Zeus, the son of Cronus,^o
added one fine morning.

768. **Cronus** (krō'nəs): a Titan who ruled the universe before Zeus.

All the gales
had ceased, blown out, and with an offshore breeze 770
we launched again, stepping the mast and sail,
to make for the open sea. Astern of us
the island coastline faded, and no land
showed anywhere, but only sea and heaven,
when Zeus Cronion piled a thunderhead 775
above the ship, while gloom spread on the ocean.
We held our course, but briefly. Then the squall
struck whining from the west, with gale force, breaking
both forestays, and the mast came toppling aft
along the ship's length, so the running rigging 780
showered into the bilge.

On the afterdeck
the mast had hit the steersman a slant blow
bashing the skull in, knocking him overside,
as the brave soul fled the body, like a diver.
With crack on crack of thunder, Zeus let fly 785
a bolt against the ship, a direct hit,
so that she bucked, in reeking fumes of sulfur,
and all the men were flung into the sea.
They came up round the wreck, bobbing awhile
like petrels^o on the waves.

No more seafaring 790
homeward for these, no sweet day of return;
the god had turned his face from them.

I clambered
fore and aft my hulk until a comber
split her, keel from ribs, and the big timber
floated free; the mast, too, broke away. 795
A backstay floated dangling from it, stout
rawhide rope, and I used this for lashing
mast and keel together. These I straddled,
riding the frightful storm.

Nor had I yet 800
seen the worst of it: for now the west wind
dropped, and a southeast gale came on — one more
twist of the knife — taking me north again,
straight for Charybdis. All that night I drifted,
and in the sunrise, sure enough, I lay 805
off Scylla mountain and Charybdis deep.
There, as the whirlpool drank the tide, a billow
tossed me, and I sprang for the great fig tree,

790. **petrels** (pēt'ṛəlz): small sea birds.

catching on like a bat under a bough.

Nowhere had I to stand, no way of climbing,
the root and bole° being far below, and far
above my head the branches and their leaves,
massed, overshadowing Charybdis pool.

810 810. **bole:** tree trunk.

But I clung grimly, thinking my mast and keel
would come back to the surface when she spouted.

And ah! how long, with what desire, I waited!
till, at the twilight hour, when one who hears
and judges pleas in the marketplace all day
between contentious men, goes home to supper,
the long poles at last reared from the sea.

815

Now I let go with hands and feet, plunging
straight into the foam beside the timbers,
pulled astride, and rowed hard with my hands
to pass by Scylla. Never could I have passed her
had not the Father of gods and men,° this time,
kept me from her eyes. Once through the strait,
nine days I drifted in the open sea
before I made shore, buoyed up by the gods,
upon Ogygia° Isle. The dangerous nymph
Calypso lives and sings there, in her beauty,
and she received me, loved me.

820

824. **Father of gods and men:** Zeus.

825

828. **Ogygia** (ō-jīj'ē-s).

But why tell
the same tale that I told last night in hall
to you and to your lady? Those adventures
made a long evening, and I do not hold
with tiresome repetition of a story."

830

FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Odysseus maneuvers his men safely past the Sirens while he alone listens to their song. How do the Sirens tempt him?

2. Faced with a choice between Scylla and Charybdis, Odysseus does as Circe advises and chooses Scylla. He knows that six of his men will die, yet he withholds this information from his crew. Is this a strength or weakness in his character? Explain.

3. Consider each of the episodes you have read so far. How well does Odysseus control his men in each episode? How effective and responsible is he as a leader? Cite specific lines to support your answer.

4. Before Odysseus' men feast on the cattle of the sun god, they perform a ritual of sacrifice to the gods. Why does the ritual fail to please the gods? How are the men punished?

5. Odysseus alone survives. How is he aided by Zeus?

PART 2 ODYSSEUS IN ITHACA

Father and Son

After hearing the story of Odysseus' wanderings, the king of Phaeacia offers him a boat and crew to take him home to Ithaca. Thus Odysseus returns to his own land after an absence of twenty years.

The goddess Athena appears to Odysseus and tells him to proceed cautiously. Believing that he is dead, many suitors have besieged his palace, eager to marry his beautiful wife, Penelope. Penelope does not believe that Odysseus is dead, but she is unable to make the suitors leave. They remain in Ithaca, eating and drinking at her expense. They are even plotting to murder her son, Telemachus (tə-lēm'ə-kəs), before he is old enough to inherit his father's lands. Telemachus, who hopes for his father's return, has gone to Sparta to ask for news of him.

Athena disguises Odysseus as a ragged old beggar and sends him to the hut of Eumaeus (yūō-mē'əs), an old and loyal swineherd. She then directs Telemachus to return to Ithaca and tells Odysseus that it is time to reveal his identity to his son.

... From the air 835
she walked, taking the form of a tall woman,
handsome and clever at her craft, and stood
beyond the gate in plain sight of Odysseus,
unseen, though, by Telemachus, unguessed,
for not to everyone will gods appear. 840
Odysseus noticed her; so did the dogs,
who cowered whimpering away from her. She only
nodded, signing to him with her brows,
a sign he recognized. Crossing the yard,
he passed out through the gate in the stockade 845
to face the goddess. There she said to him:

"Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master of landways and seaways,
dissemble to your son no longer now.
The time has come: tell him how you together 850
will bring doom on the suitors in the town.

I shall not be far distant then, for I
myself desire battle."

Saying no more,
she tipped her golden wand upon the man,
making his cloak pure white, and the knit tunic 855
fresh around him. Lithe and young she made him,
ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard
no longer gray upon his chin. And she
withdrew when she had done.

Then Lord Odysseus
reappeared—and his son was thunderstruck. 860
Fear in his eyes, he looked down and away
as though it were a god, and whispered:

"Stranger,
you are no longer what you were just now!
Your cloak is new; even your skin! You are
one of the gods who rule the sweep of heaven! 865
Be kind to us, we'll make you fair oblation^o
and gifts of hammered gold. Have mercy on us!"

866. **oblation:** an offering to a god.



as those of the great taloned hawk,
whose nestlings farmers take before they fly.
So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears,
and might have gone on weeping so till sundown, 905
had not Telemachus said:

“Dear father! Tell me
what kind of vessel put you here ashore
on Ithaca? Your sailors, who were they?
I doubt you made it, walking on the sea!”

Then said Odysseus, who had borne the barren sea: 910

“Only plain truth shall I tell you, child.
Great seafarers, the Phaeacians, gave me passage
as they give other wanderers. By night
over the open ocean, while I slept,
they brought me in their cutter, set me down 915
on Ithaca, with gifts of bronze and gold
and stores of woven things. By the gods’ will
these lie all hidden in a cave. I came
to this wild place, directed by Athena,
so that we might lay plans to kill our enemies. 920
Count up the suitors for me, let me know
what men at arms are there, how many men.
I must put all my mind to it, to see
if we two by ourselves can take them on
or if we should look round for help.”

Telemachus 925
replied:

“O Father, all my life your fame
as a fighting man has echoed in my ears—
your skill with weapons and the tricks of war—
but what you speak of is a staggering thing,
beyond imagining, for me. How can two men 930
do battle with a houseful in their prime?
For I must tell you this is no affair
of ten or even twice ten men, but scores,
thronges of them. You shall see, here and now.
The number from Dulichium alone 935
is fifty-two, picked men, with armorers,
a half-dozen; twenty-four came from Same,
twenty from Zacynthus; our own island
accounts for twelve, high-ranked, and their retainers,

Medon the crier, and the Master Harper,
besides a pair of handymen at feasts.
If we go in against all these
I fear we pay in salt blood for your vengeance.
You must think hard if you would conjure up
the fighting strength to take us through."

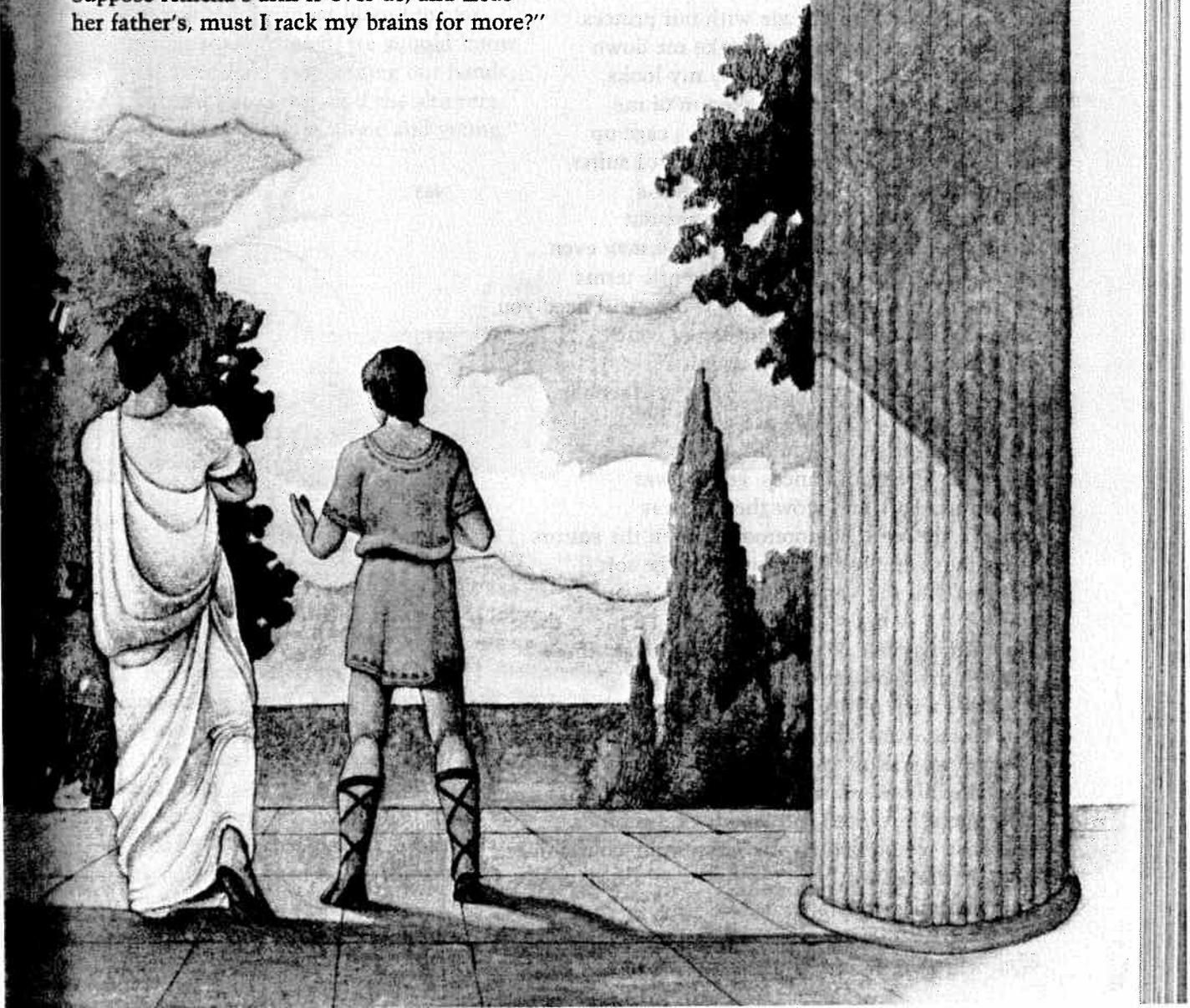
940

Odysseus 945

who had endured the long war and the sea
answered:

"I'll tell you now.

Suppose Athena's arm is over us, and Zeus
her father's, must I rack my brains for more?"



Clearheaded Telemachus looked hard and said: 950
"Those two are great defenders, no one doubts it,
but throned in the serene clouds overhead;
other affairs of men and gods they have
to rule over."

And the hero answered:

"Before long they will stand to right and left of us 955
in combat, in the shouting, when the test comes—
our nerve against the suitors' in my hall.
Here is your part: At break of day tomorrow
home with you, go mingle with our princes.
The swineherd later on will take me down 960
the port-side trail—a beggar, by my looks,
hangdog and old. If they make fun of me
in my own courtyard, let your ribs cage up
your springing heart, no matter what I suffer,
no matter if they pull me by the heels 965
or practice shots at me, to drive me out.
Look on, hold down your anger. You may even
plead with them, by heaven! in gentle terms
to quit their horseplay—not that they will heed you,
rash as they are, facing their day of wrath. 970
Now fix the next step in your mind.

Athena,
counseling me, will give me word, and I
shall signal to you, nodding: at that point
round up all armor, lances, gear of war
left in our hall, and stow the lot away 975
back in the vaulted storeroom. When the suitors
miss those arms and question you, be soft
in what you say—answer:

'I thought I'd move them
out of the smoke. They seemed no longer those 980
bright arms Odysseus left us years ago
when he went off to Troy. Here where the fire's
hot breath came, they had grown black and drear.
One better reason, too, I had from Zeus:
Suppose a brawl starts up when you are drunk,
you might be crazed and bloody one another, 985
and that would stain your feast, your courtship.

Tempered
iron can magnetize a man.



Say that.

But put aside two broadswords and two spears
for our own use, two oxhide shields nearby
when we go into action. Pallas Athena
and Zeus All-Provident will see you through,
bemusing our young friends.

990

Now one thing more.

If son of mine you are and blood of mine,
let no one hear Odysseus is about.
Neither Laertes, nor the swineherd here,
nor any slave, nor even Penelope.
But you and I alone must learn how far
the women are corrupted; we should know
how to locate good men among our hands,
the loyal and respectful, and the shirkers
who take you lightly, as alone and young."

995

1000



FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What makes Telemachus think that Odysseus must be a god? How does Odysseus convince Telemachus that he is his father?
2. Telemachus warns Odysseus that there are far too many suitors for the two of them to fight. How does Odysseus persuade Telemachus that they can win?
3. Odysseus outlines his plan in lines 958–990. What is Telemachus' part in the plan?
4. Why does Odysseus want to keep his return a secret?

The Suitors

The next day, disguised once more as a beggar, Odysseus enters the hall of his home and passes among the suitors to beg. Antinous (ān-tīn'ō-əs), the most arrogant and outspoken of the suitors, breaks into a rage.

But here Antinous broke in, shouting:

“God!

What evil wind blew in this pest?

Get over,

stand in the passage! Nudge my table, will you?

Egyptian whips are sweet

1005

to what you'll come to here, you nosing rat,
making your pitch to everyone!

These men have bread to throw away on you
because it is not theirs. Who cares? Who spares
another's food, when he has more than plenty?”

1010

With guile Odysseus drew away, then said:

“A pity that you have more looks than heart.

You'd grudge a pinch of salt from your own larder
to your own handyman. You sit here, fat
on others' meat, and cannot bring yourself
to rummage out a crust of bread for me!”

1015

Then anger made Antinous' heart beat hard,
and, glowering under his brows, he answered:

“Now!

You think you'll shuffle off and get away
after that impudence? Oh, no you don't!”

1020

The stool he let fly hit the man's right shoulder
on the packed muscle under the shoulder blade—
like solid rock, for all the effect one saw.
Odysseus only shook his head, containing
thoughts of bloody work, as he walked on,
then sat, and dropped his loaded bag again
upon the doorsill. Facing the whole crowd
he said, and eyed them all:

1025

“One word only,
my lords, and suitors of the famous queen.



One thing I have to say. 1030

There is no pain, no burden for the heart
when blows come to a man, and he defending
his own cattle—his own cows and lambs.

Here it was otherwise. Antinous
hit me for being driven on by hunger— 1035

how many bitter seas men cross for hunger!
If beggars interest the gods, if there are Furies^o
pent in the dark to avenge a poor man's wrong, then
may

Antinous meet his death before his wedding day!"

Then said Eupheithes' son, Antinous:

"Enough. 1040

Eat and be quiet where you are, or shamle elsewhere,
unless you want these lads to stop your mouth
pulling you by the heels, or hands and feet,
over the whole floor, till your back is peeled!"

1037. **Furies:** three goddesses who punished those crimes that went unavenged.



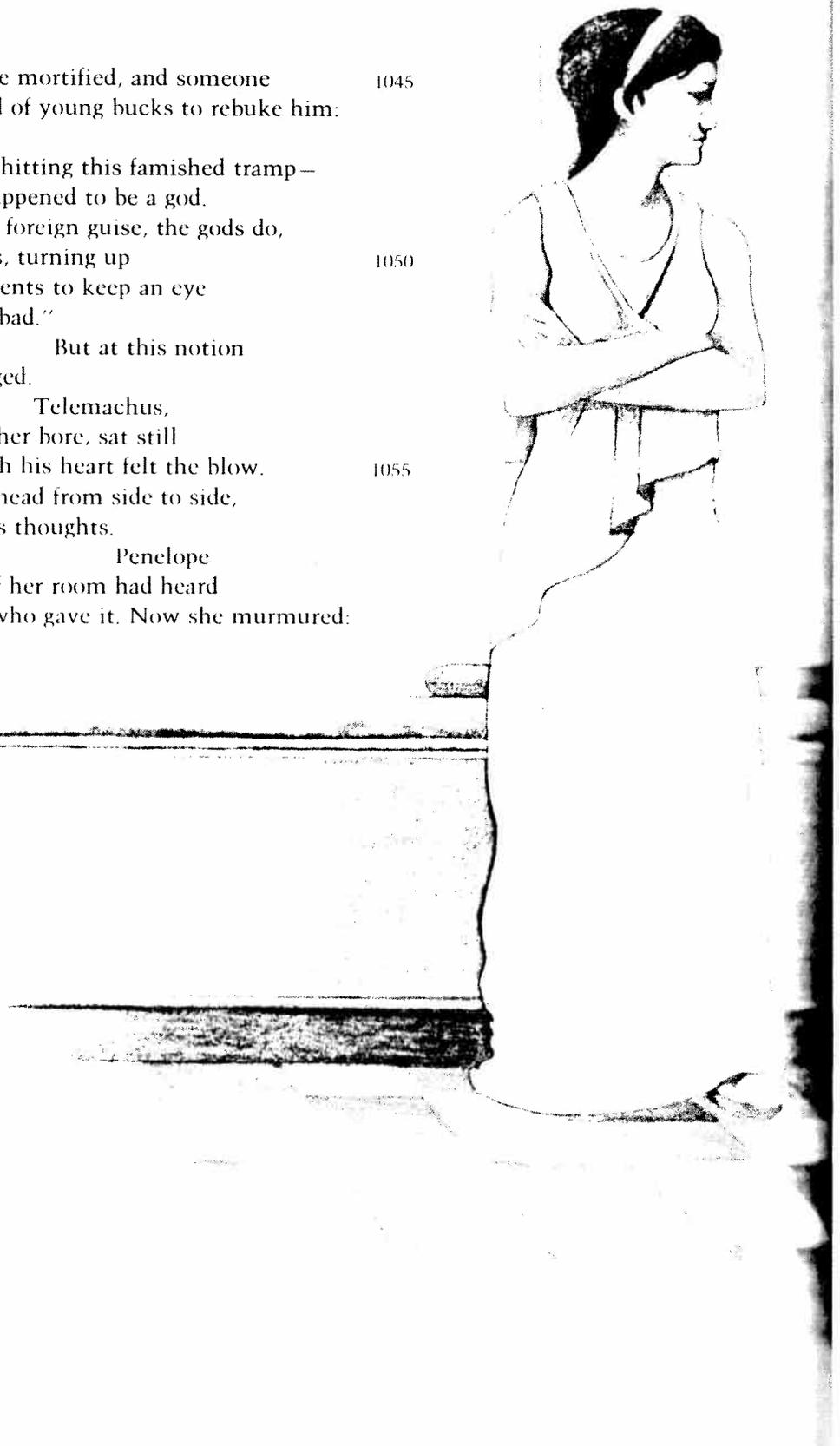
But now the rest were mortified, and someone
spoke from the crowd of young bucks to rebuke him: 1045

“A poor show, that—hitting this famished tramp—
bad business, if he happened to be a god.
You know they go in foreign guise, the gods do,
looking like strangers, turning up 1050
in towns and settlements to keep an eye
on manners, good or bad.”

But at this notion
Antinous only shrugged.

Telemachus,
after the blow his father bore, sat still
without a tear, though his heart felt the blow. 1055
Slowly he shook his head from side to side,
containing murderous thoughts.

Penelope
on the higher level of her room had heard
the blow, and knew who gave it. Now she murmured:



"Would god you could be hit yourself, Antinous—
hit by Apollo's bowshot!" 1060

And Eurynome,^o
her housekeeper, put in:

"He and no other?
If all we pray for came to pass, not one
would live till dawn!"

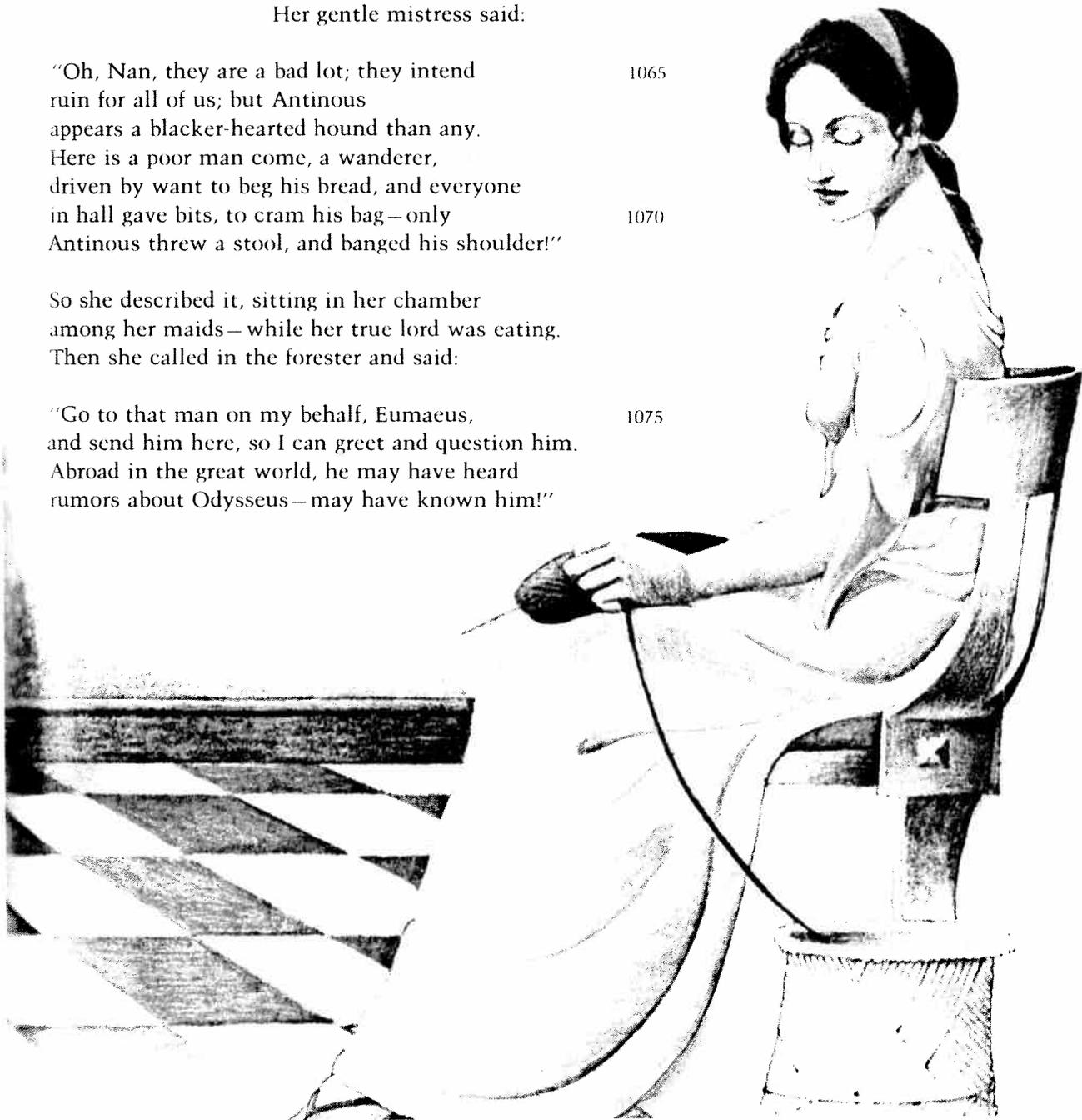
Her gentle mistress said:

"Oh, Nan, they are a bad lot; they intend 1065
ruin for all of us; but Antinous
appears a blacker-hearted hound than any.
Here is a poor man come, a wanderer,
driven by want to beg his bread, and everyone
in hall gave bits, to cram his bag— only 1070
Antinous threw a stool, and banged his shoulder!"

So she described it, sitting in her chamber
among her maids— while her true lord was eating.
Then she called in the forester and said:

"Go to that man on my behalf, Eumaeus, 1075
and send him here, so I can greet and question him.
Abroad in the great world, he may have heard
rumors about Odysseus— may have known him!"

1061. **Eurynome** [yōō-rīn'a-mē].



Penelope

Later that night Penelope meets secretly with the old beggar.
She asks him if he has heard any news of her husband.

“Friend, let me ask you first of all:
who are you, where do you come from, of what nation 1080
and parents were you born?”

And he replied:

“My lady, never a man in the wide world
should have a fault to find with you. Your name
has gone out under heaven like the sweet
honor of some god-fearing king, who rules
in equity over the strong: his back lands bear
both wheat and barley, fruit trees laden bright,
new lambs at lambing time—and the deep sea
gives great hauls of fish by his good strategy,
so that his folk fare well.

1085





O my dear lady, 1090
this being so, let it suffice to ask me
of other matters—not my blood, my homeland.
Do not enforce me to recall my pain.
My heart is sore; but I must not be found
sitting in tears here, in another's house: 1095
it is not well forever to be grieving.
One of the maids might say—or you might think—
I had got maudlin over cups of wine.”

And Penelope replied:

“Stranger, my looks,
my face, my carriage, were soon lost or faded 1100
when the Achaeans crossed the sea to Troy,
Odysseus my lord among the rest.
If he returned, if he were here to care for me,
I might be happily renowned!
But grief instead heaven sent me—years of pain. 1105
Sons of the noblest families on the islands,
Dulichium, Same, wooded Zacynthus,
with native Ithacans, are here to court me,
against my wish; and they consume this house.
Can I give proper heed to guest or suppliant 1110
or herald on the realm's affairs?

How could I?
wasted with longing for Odysseus, while here
they press for marriage.

Ruses served my turn
to draw the time out—first a close-grained web
I had the happy thought to set up weaving 1115
on my big loom in hall. I said, that day:
‘Young men—my suitors, now my lord is dead,
let me finish my weaving before I marry,
or else my thread will have been spun in vain.
It is a shroud I weave for Lord Laertes 1120
when cold Death comes to lay him on his bier.
The country wives would hold me in dishonor
if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.’
I reached their hearts that way, and they agreed.
So every day I wove on the great loom, 1125
but every night by torchlight I unwove it;
and so for three years I deceived the Achaeans.
But when the seasons brought a fourth year on,

as long months waned, and the long days were spent,
 through imprudent folly in the slinking maids 1130
 they caught me—clamored up to me at night;
 I had no choice then but to finish it.
 And now, as matters stand at last,
 I have no strength left to evade a marriage,
 cannot find any further way; my parents 1135
 urge it upon me, and my son
 will not stand by while they eat up his property.
 He comprehends it, being a man full-grown,
 able to oversee the kind of house
 Zeus would endow with honor.
 But you too 1140
 confide in me, tell me your ancestry.
 You were not born of mythic oak or stone.”

The beggar invents a tale of how he had seen Odysseus twenty years ago in Crete, when Odysseus was bound for Troy. He convinces Penelope that the story is true by describing Odysseus' clothes in detail. Then he tells her he has heard that Odysseus is about to set sail for Ithaca.

“You see, then, he is alive and well, and headed
 homeward now, no more to be abroad
 far from his island, his dear wife and son. 1145
 Here is my sworn word for it. Witness this,
 god of the zenith,” noblest of the gods, 1147. *god of the zenith*: Zeus.
 and Lord Odysseus' hearthfire, now before me:
 I swear these things shall turn out as I say.
 Between this present dark and one day's ebb, 1150
 after the wane, before the crescent moon,
 Odysseus will come.”

FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. A number of years have passed since Odysseus' adventure with the Cyclops. How has Odysseus changed?
2. Penelope represents characteristics that the Greeks admired in women. What qualities does she reveal about herself in her discussion with her housekeeper (lines 1065–

- 1071)? In her interview with the beggar? How was she able to trick the suitors for three years? What does this ruse show about her?
3. The scene in which Penelope meets her husband Odysseus disguised as a beggar is an example of *dramatic irony*, for the reader knows something that Penelope does not know. Why do you think Odysseus keeps his identity a secret from his wife?

The Challenge

The suitors summon Penelope to the hall and demand that she choose one of them at once. Penelope announces a challenge: she will marry whoever can string Odysseus' great bow and shoot an arrow through a row of twelve ax-handle sockets, as Odysseus used to do. One by one the suitors try but fail to even bend the bow. The old beggar then asks for a turn. The suitors protest until both Penelope and Telemachus insist that he be given the bow.

... And Odysseus took his time,
turning the bow, tapping it, every inch,
for borings that termites might have made
while the master of the weapon was abroad.
The suitors were now watching him, and some
jested among themselves:

1155

"A bow lover!"



"Dealer in old bows!"

at home!" "Maybe he has one like it

"Or has an itch to make one for himself." 1160

"See how he handles it, the sly old buzzard!"

And one disdainful suitor added this:

"May his fortune grow an inch for every inch he
bends it!"

But the man skilled in all ways of contending,
satisfied by the great bow's look and heft, 1165
like a musician, like a harper, when
with quiet hand upon his instrument
he draws between his thumb and forefinger
a sweet new string upon a peg: so effortlessly
Odysseus in one motion strung the bow. 1170
Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it,
so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang
a swallow's note.

In the hushed hall it smote the suitors
and all their faces changed. Then Zeus thundered
overhead, one loud crack for a sign. 1175
And Odysseus laughed within him that the son
of crooked-minded Cronus had flung that omen down.
He picked one ready arrow from his table
where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still
in the quiver for the young men's turn to come. 1180
He nocked^o it, let it rest across the handgrip,
and drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow,
aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

Now flashed
arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle
through every socket ring, and grazed not one, 1185
to thud with heavy brazen head beyond.

Then quietly
Odysseus said:

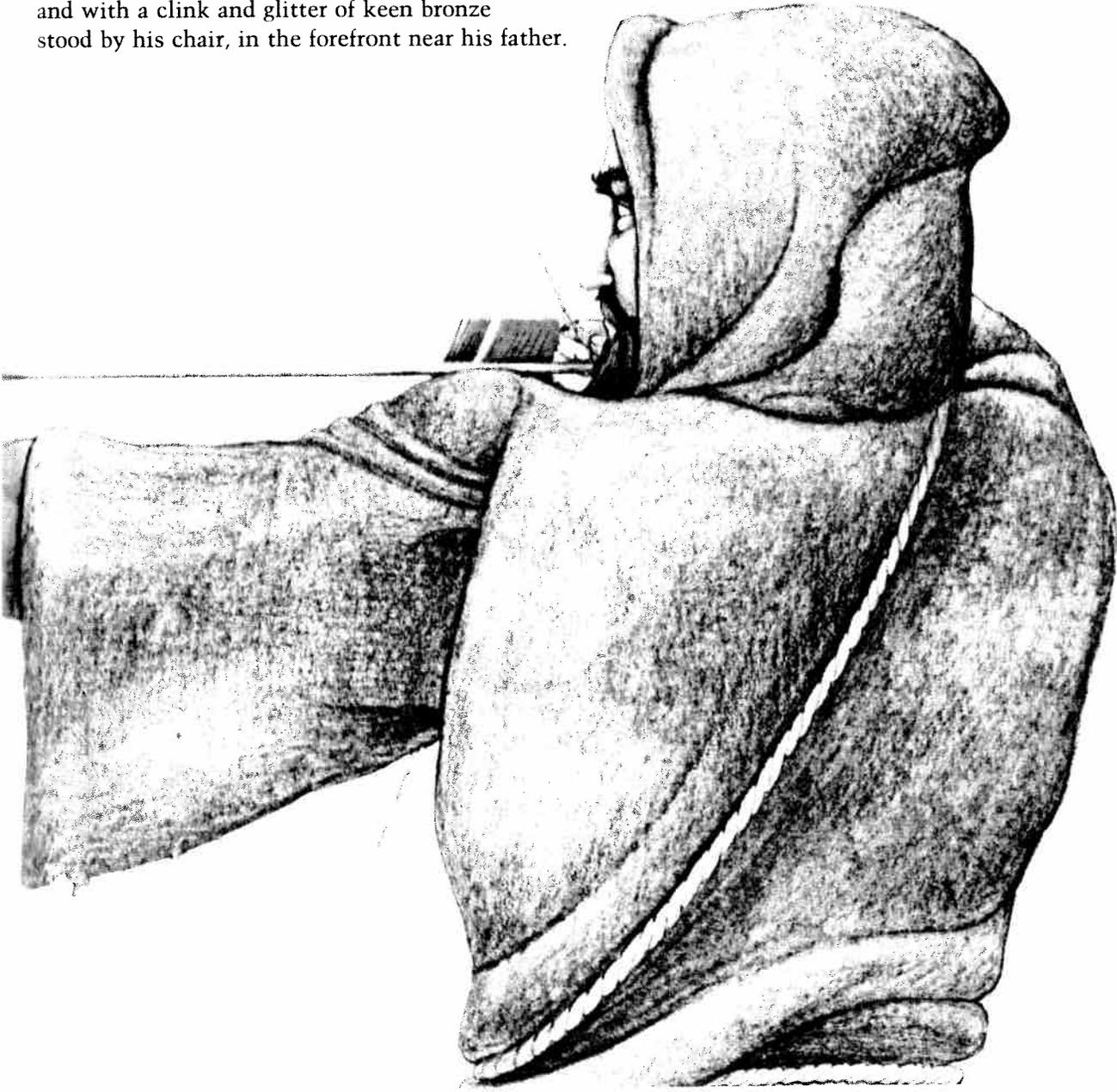
"Telemachus, the stranger
you welcomed in your hall has not disgraced you.
I did not miss, neither did I take all day



1181. **nocked:**
placed an
arrow against
the string of
the bow.

stringing the bow. My hand and eye are sound, 1190
not so contemptible as the young men say.
The hour has come to cook their lordships' mutton—
supper by daylight. Other amusements later,
with song and harping that adorn a feast."

He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince 1195
Telemachus, true son of King Odysseus,
belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear,
and with a clink and glitter of keen bronze
stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.



Odysseus' Revenge

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest fighter of the
islands 1200
leapt and stood on the broad doorsill, his own bow in
his hand.
He poured out at his feet a rain of arrows from the
quiver
and spoke to the crowd:
"So much for that. Your clean-cut game is over.
Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before,
if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo." 1205

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-handed, golden: the cup was in his
fingers:
the wine was even at his lips: and did he dream of
death?
How could he? In that revelry amid his throng of
friends 1210
who would imagine a single foe—though a strong foe
indeed—
could dare to bring death's pain on him and darkness
on his eyes?
Odysseus' arrow hit him under the chin
and punched up to the feathers through his throat.

Backward and down he went, letting the winecup fall 1215
from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted
crimson runnels, a river of mortal red,
and one last kick upset his table
knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood.
Now as they craned to see their champion where he lay 1220
the suitors jostled in uproar down the hall,
everyone on his feet. Wildly they turned and scanned
the walls in the long room for arms; but not a shield,
not a good ashen spear was there for a man to take
and throw.
All they could do was yell in outrage at Odysseus: 1225

"Foul! to shoot at a man! That was your last shot!"

"Your own throat will be slit for this!"

"Our finest lad is down!

You killed the best on Ithaca."

"Buzzards will tear your eyes out!"

For they imagined as they wished – that it was a
wild shot,
an unintended killing – fools, not to comprehend 1230
they were already in the grip of death.
But glaring under his brows Odysseus answered:

"You yellow dogs, you thought I'd never make it
home from the land of Troy. You took my house
to plunder.

... You dared
bid for my wife while I was still alive. 1235
Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule
wide heaven,
contempt for what men say of you hereafter.
Your last hour has come. You die in blood."

As they all took this in, sickly green fear
pulled at their entrails, and their eyes flickered 1240
looking for some hatch or hideaway from death.
Eurymachus^o alone could speak. He said:

1242. **Eurymachus** (yōō-rī'mā-kās).

"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. 1245
But here he lies, the man who caused them all.
Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on
to do these things. He cared less for a marriage
than for the power Cronion has denied him
as king of Ithaca. For that 1250
he tried to trap your son and would have killed him.
He is dead now and has his portion. Spare
your own people. As for ourselves, we'll make
restitution of wine and meat consumed,
and add, each one, a tithe of twenty oxen 1255
with gifts of bronze and gold to warm your heart.
Meanwhile we cannot blame you for your anger."

Odysseus glowered under his black brows
and said:

“Not for the whole treasure of your fathers,
all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold
put up by others, would I hold my hand.
There will be killing till the score is paid.
You forced yourselves upon this house. Fight your
way out,
or run for it, if you think you’ll escape death.
I doubt one man of you skins by.”

1260

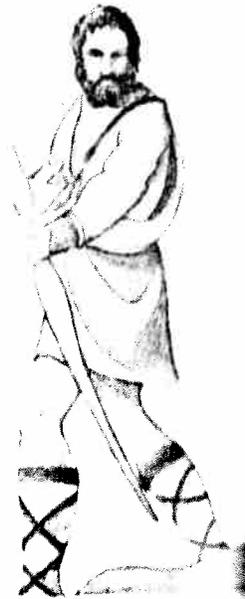
1265

They felt their knees fail, and their hearts—but heard
Eurymachus for the last time rallying them.

“Friends,” he said, “the man is implacable.
Now that he’s got his hands on bow and quiver
he’ll shoot from the big doorstone there
until he kills us to the last man.

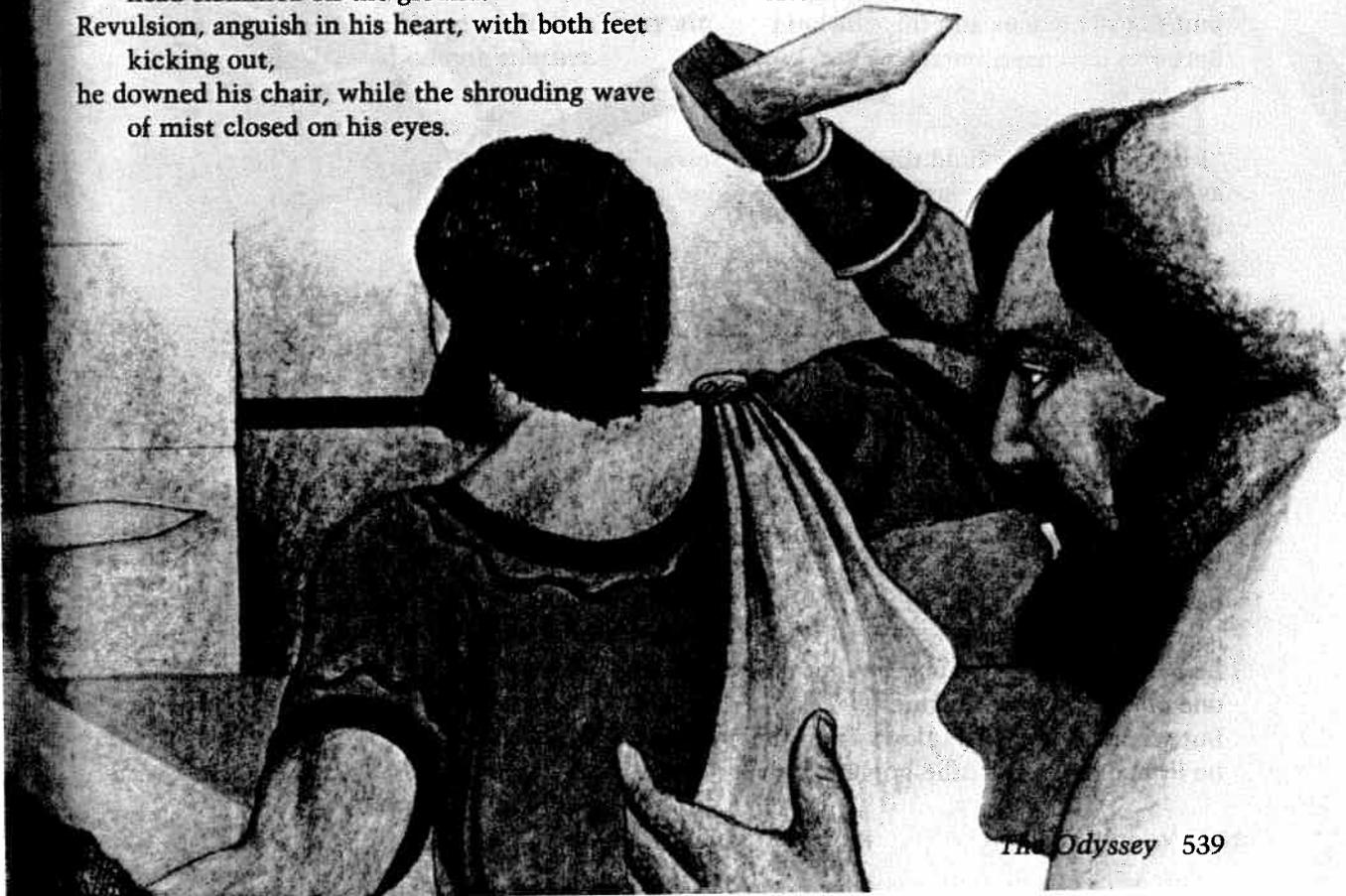
1270

Fight, I say,
let’s remember the joy of it. Swords out!
Hold up your tables to deflect his arrows.



After me, everyone: rush him where he stands.
If we can budge him from the door, if we can pass 1275
into the town, we'll call out men to chase him.
This fellow with his bow will shoot no more."

He drew his own sword as he spoke, a broadsword of
fine bronze,
honed like a razor on either edge. Then crying hoarse
and loud
he hurled himself at Odysseus. But the kingly man let
fly 1280
an arrow at that instant, and the quivering feathered
butt
sprang to the nipple of his breast as the barb stuck in
his liver.
The bright broadsword clanged down. He lurched and
fell aside,
pitching across his table. His cup, his bread and meat,
were spilt and scattered far and wide, and his
head slammed on the ground. 1285
Revulsion, anguish in his heart, with both feet
kicking out,
he downed his chair, while the shrouding wave
of mist closed on his eyes.



Amphinomus now came running at Odysseus,
broadsword naked in his hand. He thought to make
the great soldier give way at the door.
But with a spear throw from behind Telemachus hit
him

1290

between the shoulders, and the lancehead drove
clear through his chest. He left his feet and fell
forward, thudding, forehead against the ground.
Telemachus swerved around him, leaving the long
dark spear

1295

planted in Amphinomus. If he paused to yank it out
someone might jump him from behind or cut him
down with a sword
at the moment he bent over. So he ran—ran from the
tables
to his father's side and halted, panting, saying:

"Father let me bring you a shield and spear,
a pair of spears, a helmet.
I can arm on the run myself; I'll give
outfits to Eumaeus and this cowherd.
Better to have equipment."

1300

Said Odysseus:

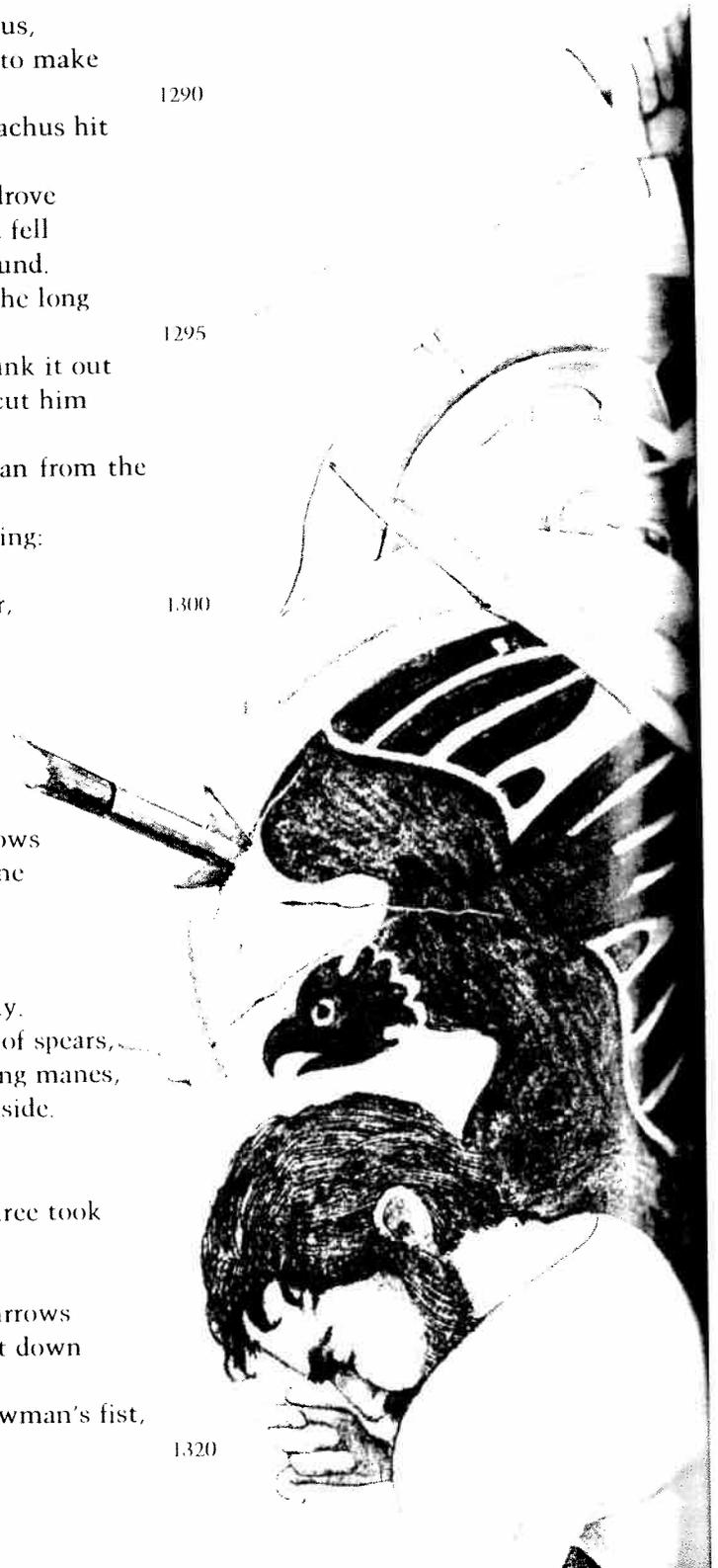
"Run then, while I hold them off with arrows
as long as the arrows last. When all are gone
if I'm alone they can dislodge me."

Quick

upon his father's word Telemachus
ran to the room where spears and armor lay.
He caught up four light shields, four pairs of spears,
four helms of war high-plumed with flowing manes,
and ran back, loaded down, to his father's side.
He was the first to pull a helmet on
and slide his bare arm in a buckler strap.
The servants armed themselves, and all three took
their stand
beside the master of battle.

While he had arrows
he aimed and shot, and every shot brought down
one of his huddling enemies.
But when all barbs had flown from the bowman's fist,
he leaned his bow in the bright entryway

1320



Penelope Tests Odysseus

After twenty years of waiting for Odysseus, Penelope hesitates to acknowledge the stranger as her husband. She tests him with a secret only Odysseus could know.

Greathearted Odysseus, home at last,
was being bathed now by Eurynome 1335
and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again
in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena
lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him
taller, and massive, too, with crimping hair
in curls like petals of wild hyacinth 1340
but all red-golden. Think of gold infused
on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art
Hephaestus^o taught him, or Athena— one
whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished
beauty over Odysseus' head and shoulders. 1345
He sat then in the same chair by the pillar,
facing his silent wife, and said:

1343. **Hephaestus** (hi-fēs'tās): god
of metalworking.

“Strange woman,
the immortals of Olympus made you hard,
harder than any. Who else in the world
would keep aloof as you do from her husband 1350
if he returned to her from years of trouble,
cast on his own land in the twentieth year?

Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.
Her heart is iron in her breast.”

Penelope
spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

“Strange man, 1355
if man you are . . . This is no pride on my part
nor scorn for you— not even wonder, merely.
I know so well how you—how he—appeared
boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same . . .

Make up his bed for him, Eurycleia. 1360
Place it outside the bedchamber my lord
built with his own hands. Pile the big bed
with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen.”

With this she tried him to the breaking point,
and he turned on her in a flash raging: 1365

“Woman, by heaven you’ve stung me now!
Who dared to move my bed?
No builder had the skill for that—unless
a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal
in his best days could budge it with a crowbar. 1370
There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign,
built into that bed—my handiwork
and no one else’s!

 An old trunk of olive
grew like a pillar on the building plot,
and I laid out our bedroom round that tree, 1375
lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof,
gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors.
Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,
hewed and shaped that stump from the roots up
into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve 1380
as model for the rest. I planed them all,
inlaid them all with silver, gold and ivory,
and stretched a bed between—a pliant web
of oxhide thongs dyed crimson.

 There’s our sign!
I know no more. Could someone else’s hand 1385
have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?”

Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees
grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.
With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,
throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him, 1390
murmuring:

 “Do not rage at me, Odysseus!
No one ever matched your caution! Think
what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us
life together in our prime and flowering years,
kept us from crossing into age together. 1395
Forgive me, don’t be angry. I could not
welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself
long ago against the frauds of men,
impostors who might come—and all those many
whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . . 1400

But here and now, what sign could be so clear
as this of our own bed?
No other man has ever laid eyes on it—
only my own slave, Actoris, that my father
sent with me as a gift—she kept our door. 1405
You make my stiff heart know that I am yours.”

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache
of longing mounted, and he wept at last,
his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,
longed for as the sunwarmed earth is longed for by
a swimmer 1410
spent in rough water where his ship went down
under Poseidon's blows, gale winds and tons of sea.
Few men can keep alive through a big surf
to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches
in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind: 1415
and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,
her white arms round him pressed as though forever.

Postscript

The following morning Odysseus and Telemachus set out for the country estate of Laertes, Odysseus' father. Their happy reunion is interrupted by the arrival of angry relatives of the slain suitors, armed for battle. Athena appears and commands them to make peace. So ends the *Odyssey*, with Odysseus restored to his family and to his kingdom.

FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What does Penelope imply by the phrase "if man you are" in line 1356?
2. What test does Penelope devise to tell whether the stranger is really Odysseus?
3. How does Penelope show that she and Odysseus are well-matched?

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EPIC

Homeric Simile

As you know, a simile is a comparison of two dissimilar actions or objects that are usually linked by *like*, *as*, or some other connecting word. A Homeric simile is an extended comparison of two actions or objects that develops

mounting excitement and usually ends in a climax. In this passage, Scylla seizing Odysseus' men is compared to a fisherman landing a fish:

A man surf-casting on a point of rock
for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod
to drop the sinker and the bait far out,
will hook a fish and rip it from the surface
to dangle wriggling through the air:
so these
were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.

Notice how the simile is extended by describing the actions of a fisherman and the parallel actions of the monster. How does Homer's choice of details make the action rise in excitement?

Look at the simile Homer uses to describe Odysseus' stringing of the bow (lines 1166-1170). Why is this simile strikingly effective?

Find other examples of Homeric similes and tell how the comparisons make the actions more vivid and gripping.

The Epithet

Like the extended simile, the epithet is a favorite device of the ancient epic poets. An epithet is a word or phrase used to characterize someone or something, as in "the wine-dark sea." Homer refers to Odysseus as "raider of cities," "the wiliest fighter of the islands," and "Laertes' son." The gods and goddesses are often identified by epithets. Zeus, for example, is called "Father of gods and men," "god of the zenith," "the lord of cloud," and "All Provident." Find other epithets Homer uses in the *Odyssey*.

FOR COMPOSITION

Analyzing Odysseus as Epic Hero

In the opening lines of this translation of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus describes himself as "formidable for guile in peace and war." Do you think Odysseus characterizes himself accurately? Why or why not?

The hero of an epic is generally larger than life. He is stronger, braver, and more clever than the other characters. Sometimes his powers are superhuman. Write a brief composition in which you analyze Odysseus as an epic hero. Use evidence from the poem to support your analysis.

Analyzing the Role of the Olympians

In Homer's epics the Olympian gods and goddesses frequently intervene in human affairs. In the *Iliad*, they join the battle of the Greeks and the Trojans on the plains outside Troy. They take sides: Athena and Hera fight for the Greeks, Apollo and Aphrodite for the Trojans. The gods intervene in several ways—by starting arguments, by shielding warriors, or by changing the course of an arrow.

How do the gods and goddesses affect the action of the *Odyssey*? Choose several episodes that illustrate *divine intervention* and tell in a brief composition the motives for these interventions and their consequences.