

Odyssey

BOOK 1

Tell how he wandered, Muse, time and again
confounded, after he sacked Troy's citadel,
how many towns he saw and learned their ways,
how many trials the man endured at sea
to save his comrades' lives, return them home.
Hard though he tried, he failed to save those men
whose recklessness secured their own demise.
Like fools they ate the sun god Helios' cows,
and he made certain they would not survive.
Choose where to start your story, Zeus's daughter!

So many other men eluded ruin,
survived both war and sea to reach their lands,
but nymph Calypso - regal, divine - kept him,
longing for hearth and wife, in vaulted caves,
where she entreated him to marry her.
Season on season passed until the year
arrived that gods ordained for his return
to Ithaca, but he had trials to come —
even when home. The deathless gods took pity,
except Poseidon, who remained enraged
until Odysseus reached his fathers' isle.

Poseidon went to visit Ethiopians,
the most remote of men. They live divided,
some where the sun comes up, some where it sinks.
They sacrificed a mass of lambs and bulls
to please the god, while fellow deities
assembled in Olympian Zeus's halls,
where he, father of gods and men, spoke first,
his mind consumed with thoughts of bold Aegisthus,
whom Agamemnon's son Orestes killed.
Zeus spoke of him when he addressed the gods:
"Curious it is how mortals blame immortals,
and say their troubles stem from us, when they
invite their own ordeals through foolish acts,
just as Aegisthus did when, after he
wooed Agamemnon's wife, he killed the king,
aware that ruin would follow. We warned him —
sending our courier, Argus-slayer Hermes —
neither to kill the man nor court his wife,
because his son Orestes would take vengeance
when he became a man and journeyed home.
So Hermes warned. Aegisthus did not take
our sound advice and now has paid full measure."

Athena, bright-eyed goddess, answered Zeus:
"Our father, Cronus' son, exalted lord,
it is entirely fit that he lies dead,
as any mortal should who acts like him.
But my heart opens wide for shrewd Odysseus,
away from home and suffering for years
on seagirt land at midpoint of the seas,
a wooded isle on which a goddess dwells.
She is a daughter to foul-tempered Atlas,
who knows the utmost depths and holds the posts
that separate the earth from skies above.
His daughter trapped the wretched sorrowing mortal.
She tells him stories, yarns that soothe, enchant,
and hold him in her spell, until the warrior –
pining to see the wisps of smoke that drift
above his land-now wants to die. Yet you,
Olympian, have no heart. Did not the man
delight you with the offerings he gave at
Ilium? Why do you detest him, Zeus?"

The cloud-amasser Zeus replied to her:
"My child, what sort of words escaped your mouth!
How could I possibly forget Odysseus –
the wildest man-forget the hecatombs
he offered us who hold the boundless skies?
The earth-shaker, Poseidon, though, remains
enraged because the man struck blind a Cyclops,
the half-god Polyphemus, mightiest
of Cyclops' kind. (The nymph Thoösa bore him –
daughter of Phorcys, lord of restless seas –
after Poseidon wooed her in a cave.)
Enraged by that, Poseidon keeps the man
away from home but spares his life—so far.
Now is the time for us to set the stage
for his return. Poseidon will suppress
his rage because he lacks ability
to fight alone against the will of heaven."

Athena, bright-eyed goddess, answered Zeus:
"Our father, Cronus' son, exalted lord,
since all the gathered deathless gods desire
that shrewd Odysseus reach his home again,
Hermes, the Argus-slaying messenger,
should speed to isle Ogygia so that he
can tell the fair-haired nymph of our resolve
to see unshakable Odysseus leave.
I will approach his son on Ithaca,
ignite his spirit, plant in him the heart
to call together local long-haired Greeks,
and castigate the men among them who
slaughter Odysseus' goats and swaying oxen.
The youth will go to Pylos, later Sparta,
to see what he can learn about his father,

and meantime build himself a good repute."

That said, beneath her feet she tied her sandals,
immortal gold, which sped her over seas
and boundless lands, as swift as breaths of wind.
She chose a spear whose tip was sharpened bronze,
a sturdy spear with which she could down ranks
should they provoke her mighty father's daughter.
Athena darted down Olympus' peaks
and stood at Ithacan Odysseus' halls,
his courtyard's threshold, bronze-tipped spear in hand,
disguised to look like Taphian leader Mentos.
She saw the haughty suitors there, as they
amused themselves at draughts outside the gates,
seated on skins of oxen they had killed.
The suitors' minion heralds - willing lackeys -
were either tempering wine in mixing bowls
or wiping down the tables, using sponges,
or portioning out the choicest cuts of meat.

Telemachus was first to see Athena.
Troubled at heart, he sat among the suitors,
imagining his father nearing home
to oust the men who occupied his house,
restore to halls and lands their rightful honor.
So dreamed the youth, until he saw Athena.
He rushed straight through the entranceway, ashamed
a guest should be ignored. He stood near her,
he took her hand, her heavy bronze-tipped spear,
and as he did, he cheerfully announced:
"Guest, greetings! You are welcome here! Now first
you will taste food, then tell why you have come!"

He led the way, Athena right behind.
After they came inside the vaulted halls,
he stood the spear beside a soaring column,
within a crowded rack of many spears —
weapons his bold, lost father once acquired.
He showed his guest a linen-covered chair,
embroidered, set a stool beneath her feet,
and sat himself. He chose a place far from
the suitors' tables, lest they drive the guest
to leave her dinner rather than endure them.
He sought to ask about his absent father.
A maid poured hand-rinse water from a vase
of purest gold above a silver basin,
and when the two had washed, she brought a table.
The head housekeeper set before them bread,
then proudly served a rich array of foods.
A carver came with trays of sumptuous meats,
then stood a golden goblet near each diner.
A pourer kept both goblets filled with wine.

In time the brazen suitors strode inside
and lounged about on couches or soft chairs.
To wash their hands, their lackeys brought clear water,

while female servants loaded bread in baskets
and young men poured till wine bowls overflowed.
The suitors took the pleasures that were offered,
and soon dispatched desire for food or drink.
Their interest turned to different kinds of pleasure –
the song and dance that are a banquet's glories.
A herald put a lyre into the hands of
Phemius, reluctant minstrel for the suitors.
He plucked the lyre and sang melodiously.

Telemachus addressed the bright-eyed goddess,
speaking head by head in confidence:
"Dear guest, bear with me as I speak my mind.
They care for nothing but the lyre and song.
At ease, they eat what is another man's,
a man whose bones now likely rot in rain,
stretched out atop the earth or tossed in waves.
If they should see him back in Ithaca,
each one would pray to have fast-running feet
instead of riches, gold, or fancy clothes.
But he has met a wretched fate, left us
forlorn. Though every now and then someone
predicts he will return, his time has passed.
Now speak to me and tell me only truth.
What are your origins, your kin, your city?
What sort of ship brought you? How did your crew
steer you to Ithaca, and who are they?
I do not think you could have come on foot.
Reply with honesty and tell me if
you have been here before, perhaps my sire's
warm guest in days this house was host to men
that he encountered traveling near and far?"

Athena, bright-eyed goddess, answered him:
"Yes, I will give your questions truthful answers.
Mentes, Anchialus' son, is who I am.
I rule the Taphians, men who love to row.
My ship and trusty oarsmen rest at anchor
from sailing toward the men of foreign tongue
in Temese, to trade our iron for bronze.
My ship lies far from any town, near wilds,
in Rheithron bay by Neium's hillside woods.
I was your father's guest and he was mine
in bygone years. The old man would confirm it,
Laertes, never in town these days, I hear.
He pines away in rugged countryside,
with but one handmaid serving food and drink
when weariness has sapped his limbs, the toil
of clambering up and down his hilly vineyards.
I came because I heard your sire was home,
but now I see that gods still thwart his journey.
Odysseus has not likely perished yet.
Perhaps he lives detained across the seas
where wicked men confine him on an isle,
wild men who keep him there against his will.
I offer you a vision from my mind

where gods instilled it. I believe it true,
though I am not a prophet or bird-reader.
Your father will not stay away much longer,
not even if they shackle him in iron.

His cunning will contrive a means to come.
Now you in turn tell me the honest truth:
are you indeed a son sprung from Odysseus?
Your head and handsome face look very much
as his did when we met so many times
before he left for Troy, where he and all
the finest Argives sailed in hollow ships.
I have not seen Odysseus since, nor he me."

Telemachus stood facing her and said:
"I shall give you a truthful answer, guest.
My mother says I am indeed his son,
but no one knows for sure who fathered him.
Would I were son of one more fortunate –
whose latter years would find him prosperous –
instead of that most star-crossed mortal man
they say to be my father. That I swear."

The goddess, gleaming-eyed Athena, hushed him:
"The gods did not give you inferior lineage,
for as you know, Penelope bore you.
Now tell me more, and answer truthfully.
Why hold this feast? And who makes up this throng?
A wedding? No, the guests did not bring food.
To me they seem presumptuous, arrogant,
how they carouse. A man might take offense –
an upright man — on seeing this disgrace."

Telemachus was stirred and answered her:
"Guest, since you undertake to question me,
this house was surely once a place of honor –
while it was home to him we spoke about –
but such no longer is the gods' desire;
they caused the man to disappear from sight.
My sorrow would be less if he were dead,
fallen on Trojan soil among his comrades,
or perished in their arms when war was done.
The Argives would have built a monument,
ensuring long-lived fame for him - and me –
but as if fierce whirlwinds swept him away,
he dropped from view, unheard from, leaving tears
behind. But loss of him is less hardship
than is the vermin plague the gods have sent:
the highest lords of every neighboring isle,
Dulichion, Same, forest-cloaked Zacynthus,
and every chief in rocky Ithaca.
They court my mother, they consume our stores.
She does not rule out marriage, nor can she
cut short their courting. They are eating up
my home's provisions and soon may kill me."

Pallas Athena, now impatient, spoke:
"A shame! Odysseus, your departed sire,
is needed here to crush the shameless courtiers.
If only he would walk to those front gates,
holding his helmet, shield, and pair of spears,
the way he was when I first saw him come
to our abode, where he relaxed and drank
after he met with Ilus at Ephyra.
(Odysseus traveled there aboard a ship
in quest of deadly poison he could use
to tip his arrows. Ilus gave him none
for fear that might provoke the deathless gods.
My father gave him venom, sealing friendship.)
So armed Odysseus could take on the suitors,
who soon would be bridegrooms of wretched death.
But such a happening rests in heaven's lap –
whether or not he comes to take revenge
here in his halls — so I urge you to think
of how to drive the suitors out yourself,
and here is counsel you should take to heart:
call all nearby Achaean men to meet.
Stand up and speak. The gods will be your witness.
First bid the suitors go to their own homes,
and if your mother's heart desires to wed,
let her return within her father's halls,
where he will make a wedding feast with gifts
in numbers fit to laud a treasured daughter.
Next, here is what I think you ought to do:
choose twenty men and one of your best ships,
then sail to seek some word about your father.
A man you meet may know, or you may hear
a rumor sent from Zeus to transmit news.
Go first to Pylos, question godlike Nestor.
Then visit Sparta, ruddy Menelaus,
who was the last Achaean back from Troy.
If you should learn your father travels home,
bear up for one more year, though you are worn,
but if you learn that he no longer lives,
return here to the isle your father loved,
erect a monument, hold funeral rites,
and give your mother to another man.
When you have done the tasks that I propose,
next redirect your heart, your mind, devise
the means to kill these men who haunt your halls –
by stealth or openly. You have no need
to play the child, since you are past that age.
Did you not hear about Orestes' fame,
won when he slew his father's murderer,
crafty Aegisthus, who killed Agamemnon?
You, too, my friend — who look both tall and strong –
be brave so future men speak well of you.
I must return to my fast-traveling ship,
where restless sailors are awaiting me.
Remain on guard, and keep my words in mind!"

Telemachus absorbed her words and said:
"Guest, you have given kind advice to me,
as might a father; I will not forget.
But stay awhile before you journey on.
Enjoy a bath, which will refresh your spirits.
Accept a pleasing gift before you sail,
a handsome object for your treasure stores,
the sort that friendly guests and hosts exchange.'

Athena, bright-eyed goddess, answered him:
"Do not detain me; I intend to sail.
Whatever gift you have in mind for me,
save it until the next time I arrive,
and I will match your gift with one as fine!"

With that, the bright-eyed goddess disappeared,
flew like a hawk, and left Telemachus
a bolder, stronger man, his father's son
more than before. He recognized the change,
awestruck, and knew the guest to be a god.
Inspired, the young man headed toward the suitors.

The minstrel sang while captivated suitors
sat listening to his songs of voyages home
from Ilium, travels that Athena plagued.
His song reached upper rooms and touched a heart –
that of Penelope, Icarus' daughter.
The lyrics moved her; she walked down the stairs,
but not alone, two handmaids close behind,
and when she - like a goddess — neared her wooers,
she stopped beside a roof-supporting pillar.
She drew a satin veil across her cheeks,
a trusty handmaid stationed at each side,
and, tearful, she addressed the godlike bard:
"Phemius, you know many pleasing lays
that minstrels sing about gods' deeds and men's.
By all means serenade those silent courtiers
while they carouse, but do not sing that song,
the sorrowful song that always leaves my heart
in tatters, stirring deep, unfading sadness.
Daily I long to see a certain face,
my husband's, famed throughout Achaean realms."

Telemachus addressed Penelope:
"My mother, why would you forbid the bard
to sing what song his heart desires? Not he,
but Zeus is guilty; Zeus is who doles out
whatever he may choose to hapless mortals.
The bard is not to blame for Argives' fates,
and men more willingly applaud the song
that is the latest one to reach their ears.
So you should steel your heart and soul to listen.
Besides Odysseus, more have not returned
from Troy, where countless valiant warriors fell.
Go to your quarters now, address your tasks –

see to the loom and shuttle; bid your maids perform their work. But leave discourse to men, especially me, the master of this house."

Penelope retraced her steps, agape, and took to heart the words her son had spoken. Her servant women followed her upstairs, where she bemoaned Odysseus until sleep, Athena's gift, fell gently on her eyes.

The suitors howled throughout the shadowy hall – each yearned to take Penelope to bed – until Telemachus began to speak:

"My mother's proud and overstaying suitors! Let us enjoy the feast, but stop this yelling, so we can hear the minstrel's well-wrought song. The singer's voice is almost like a god's. Come morning, let us gather in assembly, a public meeting where I will demand that you depart my halls, hold future feasts in your own homes and eat your own livestock. If after that demand you still prefer to steal and waste another's livelihood, I will beseech the everlasting gods that Zeus ordain you get what you deserve and perish to a man here in this hall!"

Those stinging words took every wooer aback – amazed Telemachus had spoken boldly – till one, Eupheithes' son Antinous, said:

"Telemachus, it seems the gods taught you to give a rude, intemperate public speech. May Cronus' son choose not to make you king in Ithaca, despite your right by birth."

Telemachus confronted him and said:

"Whether it angers you or not, I say that if Zeus grants the scepter, I will hold it. Is reign the worst thing that befalls a man? A king has little to regret. His home acquires respect, and wealth accumulates. Besides me, though, any Achaean lord on island Ithaca, one young or old, might someday take Odysseus' place as king, but I will always claim to rule this house and servants that Odysseus took as plunder."

Polybus' son Eurymachus spoke next:

"Telemachus, immortals will decide who shall be king of island Ithaca. Meantime you rule this house and keep its chattels. Let no man come against you forcefully and take them, not while Ithacans live here. Now I would like to ask about your guest: Where did he come from? Where did he declare

his family and his family's lands to be?
Did he say that your father will come home?
Or had he business matters to attend?
He left abruptly, did not stay for us
to meet what looked to be a high-born man."

Telemachus responded to the queries:
"My father's chance of reaching home is lost.
I would not trust a claim that he is coming,
nor do I trust the auguries my mother
draws from the prophets summoned to these halls.
The stranger was my father's friend from Taphus,
named Mentès, masterful Anchialus' son,
now lord of oar-devoted Taphian men."

He said this knowing his guest to be a god.
The suitors now became immersed in revels.
They sang and danced until the eventide,
whose darkness fell while they indulged themselves.
Then each set out for home in need of sleep.
Telemachus' bedroom was by the courtyard –
a room built high so he could view the grounds.
The youth prepared for bed with troubled mind.
Beside him, torch in hand, stood tried and true
old Eurycleia. She was Ops's daughter.
Long years ago, Laertes purchased her –
a budding maid - and paid with twenty oxen.
He honored her as if she were his wife,
but never did he sleep with Eurycleia.
She held the glowing torch for one whom she
had loved and helped to rear when he was small.
Telemachus swung wide his chamber door,
sat on his bed, removed his supple tunic,
and laid it in the prudent woman's hands.
Her willing, skillful fingers smoothed it out,
then hung it on a peg above the bed.
Outside, she pulled the door shut by its ring
of silver, yanked the thong to set the bolt.
All night Telemachus lay wrapped in fleece
and dreamed about the voyage Athena planned.