

THE SIRENS; SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

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

“Listen with care

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

Steer wide;

670 keep well to seaward; plug your oarsmen's ears
with beeswax kneaded soft; none of the rest
should hear that song.

But if you wish to listen,

675 let the men tie you in the lugger, hand
and foot, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,
so you may hear those Harpies^o thrilling voices;
shout as you will, begging to be untied,
your crew must only twist more line around you
and keep their stroke up, till the singers fade. . . .”

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

680 “. . . That is the den of Scylla, where she yaps
abominably, a newborn whelp's^o cry,
though she is huge and monstrous. God or man,
no one could look on her in joy. Her legs—
and there are twelve—are like great tentacles,
unjointed, and upon her serpent necks
685 are borne six heads like nightmares of ferocity,
with triple serried^o rows of fangs and deep
gullets of black death. Half her length, she sways
her heads in air, outside her horrid cleft,

Vocabulary

abominably (ə·bām'ə·nə·blē) adv.: in an extremely unpleasant or disgusting manner.

675. **Harpies** (hār'pēz): monsters, half bird and half woman, who are greedy for victims.

680. **whelp's** (hwelpz) *n.*: puppy's.

686. **serried** (ser'ēd) *adj.*: crowded together; densely packed.

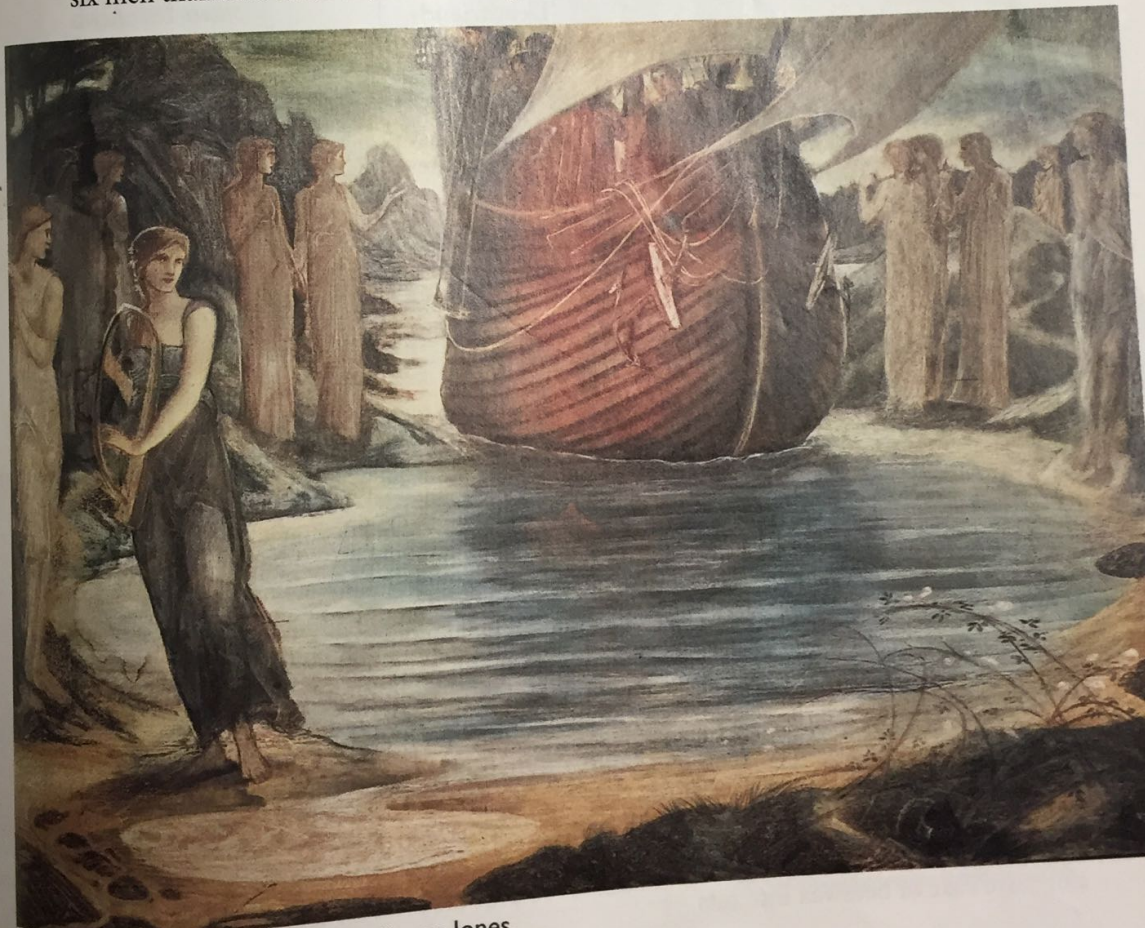
690 hunting the sea around that promontory^o
for dolphins, dogfish, or what bigger game
thundering Amphitrite^o feeds in thousands.
And no ship's company can claim
to have passed her without loss and grief; she takes,
from every ship, one man for every gullet.

695 The opposite point seems more a tongue of land
you'd touch with a good bowshot, at the narrows.
A great wild fig, a shaggy mass of leaves,
grows on it, and Charybdis lurks below
to swallow down the dark sea tide. Three times
700 from dawn to dusk she spews it up
and sucks it down again three times, a whirling
maelstrom;^o if you come upon her then
the god who makes earth tremble could not save you.
No, hug the cliff of Scylla, take your ship
705 through on a racing stroke. Better to mourn
six men than lose them all, and the ship, too. . . .

689. **promontory** (prām'ən·tôr'ē)
n.: high area of land that juts out
into a body of water.

691. **Amphitrite** (am'fi·trīt'ē):
goddess of the sea and wife of
Poseidon.

702. **maelstrom** (māl'strəm) *n.*:
large, violent whirlpool.



National Gallery of South Africa, Cape Town.

The Sirens (c. 1875) by Sir Edward Burne-Jones.

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

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No lambs are dropped,
or calves, and these fat cattle never die. . . .

Now give those kine a wide berth, keep your thoughts
intent upon your course for home,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.

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But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction
for ship and crew. . . .”

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

“The crew being now silent before me, I
addressed them, sore at heart:

‘Dear friends,

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more than one man, or two, should know those things
Circe foresaw for us and shared with me,
so let me tell her forecast: then we die
with our eyes open, if we are going to die,
or know what death we baffle if we can. Sirens

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weaving a haunting song over the sea
we are to shun, she said, and their green shore
all sweet with clover; yet she urged that I
alone should listen to their song. Therefore
you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,
erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,
and if I shout and beg to be untied,
take more turns of the rope to muffle me.’

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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.

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Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm
came over all the sea, as though some power
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

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 659–716. According to Circe, what dangers lie ahead for Odysseus and his crew? List the dangers in order from least severe to most severe, and give your reasons for placing the threats in this order.



Circe Pouring Poison into a Vase and Awaiting the Arrival of Ulysses (19th century) by Sir Edward Burne-Jones.

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and rolled them in my hands until they softened—
no long task, for a burning heat came down
from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward
I carried wax along the line, and laid it
745 thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb°
amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,
and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,
as we came smartly within hailing distance,
750 the two Sirens, noting our fast ship
off their point, made ready, and they sang. . . .

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

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

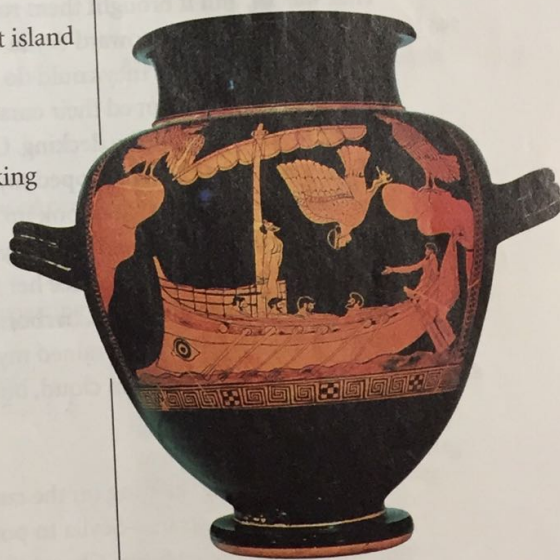
765 But scarcely had that island
faded in blue air when I saw smoke
and white water, with sound of waves in tumult—
a sound the men heard, and it terrified them.
Oars flew from their hands; the blades went knocking
wild alongside till the ship lost way,
with no oar blades to drive her through the water.

Vocabulary

ardor (är'där) *n.*: passion; enthusiasm.
tumult (tōō'mult) *n.*: commotion; uproar; confusion.

746. **plumb** (plum) *adv.*: vertically.

755. **Perimedes** (per·i·mē'dēz').



Odysseus and the Sirens, Athenian red-figure stamnos vase by the Siren Painter, late Archaic, c. 490 B.C. (earthenware).
British Museum, London, UK.

770 Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern,
trying to put heart into them, standing over
every oarsman, saying gently,

‘Friends,

775 have we never been in danger before this?
More fearsome, is it now, than when the Cyclops
penned us in his cave? What power he had!
Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits
to find a way out for us?

Now I say

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

Heads up, lads!

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

785 You at the tiller, listen, and take in
all that I say—the rudders are your duty;
keep her out of the combers° and the smoke;
steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we
fetch up in the smother,° and you drown us.’

790 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,
795 so I tied on my cuirass° and took up
two heavy spears, then made my way along
to the foredeck—thinking to see her first from there,
the monster of the gray rock, harboring
torment for my friends. I strained my eyes
800 upon that cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere
could I catch sight of her.

And all this time,

in travail,° sobbing, gaining on the current,
we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port
and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire
805 gorge° of the salt sea tide. By heaven! when she
vomited, all the sea was like a caldron
seething over intense fire, when the mixture
suddenly heaves and rises.




Scylla. Greek bronze.
National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

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783. **founder** (foun'dər) *v.*: sink.

786. **combers** (kōm'ərz) *n.*: large waves.

788. **smother** (smuθ'ər) *n.*: commotion; violent action or disorder.

 770–793. Think about what kind of leader Odysseus is. What does he tell his men, to reassure them? What does he decide not to tell them? Why?

795. **cuirass** (kwi'ras') *n.*: armor for the breast and back.

802. **travail** (trə'vāl') *n.*: hard, exhausting work or effort; tiring labor.

805. **gorge** (gōrj) *n.*: throat and jaws of a greedy, all-devouring being.

soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain. The shot spume

810 But when she swallowed the sea water down
we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard
the rock bellowing all around, and dark
sand raged on the bottom far below.
815 My men all blanched^o against the gloom, our eyes
were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear
of being devoured.

Then Scylla made her strike,
whisking six of my best men from the ship.

820 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.

825 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.

830 She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den,
in the dire grapple,^o reaching still for me—
and deathly pity ran me through
at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered
questing the passes of the strange sea.


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

835 Then we were coasting
the noble island of the god, where grazed
those cattle with wide brows, and bounteous flocks
of Helios, lord of noon, who rides high heaven.
840 From the black ship, far still at sea, I heard
the lowing of the cattle winding home
and sheep bleating; and heard, too, in my heart
the words of blind Teiresias of Thebes
and Circe of Aea: both forbade me
the island of the world's delight, the Sun. . . .”

(from Book 12)

814. **blanched** (blandht) v.: grew pale.

829. **dire grapple**: terrible struggle.

 843. Suppose you wanted to write a **screenplay** dramatizing this famous part of the *Odyssey*—the crew's struggle against the Sirens and against Scylla and Charybdis. Who would be your main characters? How would you use music and visuals—especially in the Sirens scene? Write down your ideas about filming the epic.

whatever fell into their hands; and lean days
wore their bellies thin.

870 So one day I withdrew to the interior
to pray the gods in solitude, for hope
that one might show me some way of salvation.
Slipping away, I struck across the island
to a sheltered spot, out of the driving gale.

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

Now on the shore Eurylochus
made his insidious^o plea:

880 ‘Comrades,’ he said,
‘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?
885 Come, we’ll cut out the noblest of these cattle
for sacrifice to the gods who own the sky;
and once at home, in the old country of Ithaca,
if ever that day comes—


890 we’ll build a costly temple and adorn it
with every beauty for the Lord of Noon.
But if he flares up over his heifers lost,
wishing our ship destroyed, and if the gods
make cause with him, why, then I say: Better
open your lungs to a big sea once for all
than waste to skin and bones on a lonely island!’

895 Thus Eurylochus; and they murmured ‘Aye!’
trooping away at once to round up heifers.
Now, that day tranquil cattle with broad brows
were grazing near, and soon the men drew up
around their chosen beasts in ceremony.

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

875. **supplication** (sup'lə·kā'shən)
n.: humble requests; prayers.

879. **insidious** (in·sid'ē·əs) *adj.*:
treacherous; more dangerous than
is apparent.

 878–894. What is Eurylochus's “insidious plea”? If you were a member of the crew, would you be swayed by this argument, or would you heed Odysseus's warning? Do you think murdering the cattle is justified, or is it an offense against the god Helios?

901. **strew** (strōō) v.: scatter about.

906. **libation** (lī·bā'shən) n.:
offering of wine or oil to the gods.

with clear spring water, broiling the entrails^o first;
and when the bones were burnt and tripes^o shared,
they spitted the carved meat.

Just then my slumber

910 left me in a rush, my eyes opened,
and I went down the seaward path. No sooner
had I caught sight of our black hull, than savory
odors of burnt fat eddied around me;
grief took hold of me, and I cried aloud:

915 'O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,
you made me sleep away this day of mischief!
O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour!
Here they sat, and a great work they contrived.'

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

And the Lord Helios

burst into angry speech amid the immortals:

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

(from Book 12)

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

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

At this moment of suspense, Homer might have put aside his harp until the next night.

Vocabulary


restitution (res'tə·tōō'shən) *n.*: compensation; repayment.

907. **entrails** (en'trālz) *n.*: intestines; guts.

908. **tripes** (trīps) *n.*: stomach parts.

919. **Lampetia** (lam·pē'shē·ə): daughter of Helios. Lampetia guarded her father's herds of cattle.

924. **overweening** (o'vər·wēn'īŋ) *adj.*: excessively proud.

 921–930. What exactly has happened to cause the god's fury?



Zeus seated on his throne, holding thunderbolts. Bronze statuette found on Mount Lyceum (6th century B.C.).

Response

from the O

Reading Check

1. In a chart like the one below, summarize the conflict and the episode.

Adventure
Calypso
Lotus Eaters
Cyclops
Circe
Sirens; Scylla and Charybdis
Cattle of the Sun God

2. What does the future from the Land of the

Thinking

3. "Nobody's home" sounds like a problem with the Cyclops. How does Odysseus get through a cave? What culture foretold this? **Connect** Calypso's island. Summarize the story? What does her culture have to do with—O