

10

Circe

Book Ten

The road home grows darker. A bag of winds squandered in sight of Ithaca, a harbour of giant cannibals, and then the island of Circe, where men become swine and a year slips away in feasting. Odysseus alone, armed with a god's herb, breaks the enchantment – only to learn that his next voyage must be to the land of the dead.

NAME

SET

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BOOK TEN

Circe

The wanderings continue: the wind-god Aeolus, the cannibal Laestrygonians who destroy the fleet, and the witch-goddess Circe, who turns men to swine and sets Odysseus on the road to the dead.

WHAT HAPPENS

- Aeolus gives Odysseus a bag of winds; within sight of Ithaca his crew open it, and the storm blows them all the way back.
- The Laestrygonians, giant cannibals, wreck eleven of his twelve ships; only Odysseus' own vessel escapes.
- On Aeaea the witch Circe turns a scouting party into pigs; protected by Hermes' herb moly, Odysseus resists her and frees his men.
- The crew feast on Circe's island for a whole year before begging Odysseus to move on.
- Circe tells him he must first sail to the underworld to consult the ghost of the prophet Teiresias; Elpenor dies on the eve of departure.

WHO WE MEET

Odysseus

the leader who resists Circe's magic and endures loss after loss

Circe

the witch-goddess of Aeaea, foe turned guide

Aeolus

keeper of the winds, whose gift his crew squander

Eurylochus

the fearful lieutenant who first suspects Circe

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Book 10 is a book of temptation and delay: the crew's folly with the winds, the year lost on Aeaea, and Circe as both danger and helper. Note the pattern of leadership and mistrust between Odysseus and his men, and how the book turns at its end toward the underworld. **Prescribed:** examined in context – know it closely.

Circe

— THE ISLAND OF AEOLUS

‘We next came to the floating island of Aeolia, the home of **Aeolus son of Hippotas**, who is a favourite of the immortal gods. All round this isle there runs an unbroken wall of bronze, and below it the cliffs rise sheer from the sea. Aeolus shares his house with his family of
 5 twelve, six daughters and six grown-up sons; and he has given his daughters to his sons in marriage. With their father and their estimable mother they are always feasting. Countless delicacies are laid before them, and all day long the house is filled with the savoury smell of roasting meat, and the courtyard echoes to the sounds of
 10 banqueting within. At night they sleep, each with his loving wife, on ornate beds, with plenty of rugs.

— THE BAG OF WINDS

‘To this domain of theirs and this magnificent palace we now came. For a whole month Aeolus entertained me and questioned me on everything – Troy, the Achaean navy and our return – and I told him
 15 everything, exactly as it was. When it came to my turn and I asked him whether I might now continue my journey and count on his help, he gave it willingly. He made arrangements for my journey and presented me with a leather bag, made from the flayed skin of a full-grown ox, in which he had imprisoned **the boisterous energies of all
 20 the winds**. Zeus had put him in charge of the winds, with power to lay or rouse them each at will. This bag he stowed in the hold of my ship, securing it tightly with a burnished silver wire to prevent the slightest leakage. Then he called up a breeze from the West to blow my ships and their crews across the sea. But his measures were
 25 doomed to failure, for we came to grief, through our own senseless stupidity.

‘For nine days and nights we sailed on; and on the tenth we were already in sight of our homeland, and had even come near enough to see people tending their fires, when I fell fast asleep. I was utterly
 30 exhausted, for in my anxiety to speed our journey home I handled the sheet of my ship myself without a break, giving it to no one else.

— THE CREW’S FOLLY

‘The crew began to discuss matters among themselves, and word went round that I was bringing home a fortune in gold and silver which the great-hearted Aeolus son of Hippotas had given me. And
 35 this is what they said as they exchanged glances: “It’s not fair! What a captain we have, valued wherever he goes and welcomed in every port! Back he comes from Troy with a splendid haul of plunder,

LINES 1–2

Aeolus son of Hippotas Aeolus is the warden of the winds. Zeus has given him power to raise or calm any wind, and he lives on a floating island ringed with a wall of bronze.

LINES 19–20

the boisterous energies of all the winds Aeolus’ parting-gift is an ox-hide bag holding every wind except the gentle West Wind, which he leaves free to blow Odysseus straight home. As long as the bag stays shut, the voyage is safe.

though we who have gone every bit as far come home with empty hands – and now Aeolus has given him all this into the bargain, as a
 40 favour for friendship's sake! Come on; let's find out and see how much gold and silver is hidden in that bag."

'After talk like this evil counsels prevailed. They undid the bag, the winds all rushed out, and in an instant the tempest was upon them, carrying them headlong out to sea, in tears, away from their native
 45 land. When I awoke my spirit failed me. I debated within myself whether to jump overboard and drown or stay among the living and quietly endure. I stayed and endured. Covering my head with my cloak, I lay where I was in the ship. So all my ships, with their distraught crews, were driven back to the island of Aeolus.

50 'We disembarked and collected water, and the men straightaway had a quick meal by the ships. But as soon as we had had something to eat and drink I took a messenger and one of my comrades to accompany me and set out for the palace of Aeolus, whom we found at dinner with his wife and family. We went in and sat down on the
 55 threshold by the door-posts.

'They were astounded at the sight of us. "Odysseus?" they exclaimed. "How do you, come to be here? What evil power has dealt you this blow? We did our best to help you on your way home to Ithaca or any port you might choose."

60 'I replied sorrowfully, "An untrustworthy crew and a fatal sleep were my downfall. Put things right for me, my friends. You easily could." It was with these placatory words that I appealed to them.

— CAST OUT

'They remained silent. Then the father answered. "Get off this island instantly! The world holds no one more damnable than you, and it is
 65 not right for me to entertain and equip a man detested by the blessed gods. Your returning like this shows, they detest you. Get out!"

'Thus he dismissed me from his palace, causing me deep distress. We left the island and resumed our journey in a state of gloom; and the
 70 heart was taken out of my men by the wearisome rowing. But it was our own stupidity that had deprived us of the wind.

— THE LAESTRYGONIANS

'For six days and six nights we sailed on, and on the seventh we came to Telepylus, Lamus' stronghold in [the Laestrygonian land](#), where herdsmen bringing in their flocks at night exchange
 75 greetings with other herdsmen driving out at dawn. For in this land nightfall and morning tread so closely on each other's heels that a

LINE 73

[the Laestrygonian land](#) The Laestrygonians are a race of giant cannibals. Their country lies so far north that day and night almost meet – a herdsman driving his flock out at dawn passes another bringing his in at dusk.

man who could do without sleep might earn two wages, one for herding cattle and the other for shepherding flocks of white sheep. Here we found an excellent harbour, closed in on all sides by an
 80 unbroken ring of precipitous cliffs, with two jutting headlands facing each other at the mouth so as to leave only a narrow channel in between.

‘The captains of my squadron all steered their curved craft straight into the harbour and tied up in the sheltered waters within. They
 85 remained close together, for it was obvious that there was never any swell there, slight or strong, but always a flat calm. But I did not follow them. Instead I brought my black ship to rest outside the harbour and made her fast with a cable to a rock at the end of the point. I then climbed the headland to get a view from the top. But no
 90 cultivated fields or herds of cattle were visible; all we saw was a wisp of smoke rising up from the countryside. So I sent a party inland to find out what sort of people the inhabitants were, two of my men, together with a messenger.

‘When they had left the ships they found a well-worn track used by
 95 waggons bringing timber down from the high mountains to the town. Presently they came across a strong girl drawing water outside the town, the daughter of Antiphates, the Laestrygonian chief. She had come down to a bubbling spring called Artacie, from which the townspeople drew their water. When they went up and
 100 asked her who the ruler of the country was and what his people were called, she pointed at once to the high roof of her father’s dwelling. When they entered his palace they were confronted by Antiphates’ wife, a woman of mountainous proportions; the sight of her appalled them. She called her husband, the famous Antiphates, from the
 105 assembly-place, who promptly made his murderous intentions clear, pouncing on one of my men to eat him for supper. The other two sprang back and fled, and managed to make their way back to the ships.

‘Meanwhile Antiphates raised a hue and cry through the town, which
 110 brought countless numbers of powerful Laestrygonians running up from every side, **more like Giants than men**. Standing at the top of the cliffs they began pelting my flotilla with lumps of rock such as an ordinary man could barely lift; and the din that now rose from the ships, where the groans of dying men could be heard above the
 115 splintering of timbers, was appalling. They carried them off like fishes on a spear to make their loathsome meal. But while this massacre was still going on in the deep harbour, I drew my sword from my hip, slashed through the hawser of my blue-prowed vessel, and shouted to the crew to bend to their oars if they wished to save
 120 their lives. With the fear of death upon them they struck the water

LINE 111

more like Giants than men This is a catastrophe. The Laestrygonians smash and sink every ship but Odysseus’ own; from here on he has just one ship and one crew left out of the twelve that set out from Troy.

like one man, and to our relief and joy we shot out to sea and left those frowning cliffs behind. My ship was safe. But that was the end of all the rest.

— THE ISLAND OF CIRCE

‘We travelled on with heavy hearts, grieving for the loss of our dear
 125 friends though rejoicing at our own escape. In due course we came to the island of Aeaëa, **the home of the beautiful Circe**, a formidable goddess, with a mortal woman’s voice. She is the sister of the baleful Aetetes, both being children of the Sun who lights the world, by the same mother, Perse the Daughter of Ocean. We brought our ship into
 130 the shelter of the harbour without making a sound. Some god guided us in. And when we had disembarked, we lay on the beach for two days and nights, utterly exhausted and eating our hearts out with grief.

‘When Dawn with her beautiful tresses ushered in the third day, I
 135 took my spear and sword, left the ship, and struck inland, making for a vantage-point from which I might see signs of cultivation or hear men’s voices. I climbed a rocky height, and on reaching the top I was able to see the smoke rising from the distant place where Circe’s house lay in a clearing among the dense oak-scrub and forest trees.
 140 That glimpse I had of reddish smoke left me in two minds whether or not to press forward and reconnoitre. After some thought I decided the better course would be to return first to my ship on the beach, give my men a meal, and send out an exploring party.

— THE STAG

‘And then some god was moved to pity by my forlorn condition. For
 145 when I had almost reached the ship, he sent a great antlered stag right across my path. The fierce heat of the sun had driven him down from the forest pastures to drink at a stream, and as he came up from the water I struck him on the spine half-way down his back. My bronze spear went right through him, and with a bellow he fell in the
 150 dust and was dead. With one foot on his carcass I dragged the bronze spear out of the wound, laid it on the ground, and left it there while I broke off creepers and shoots from undergrowth and willows, which I twisted into a fathom’s length of rope carefully plaited from end to end. With this I tied the monster’s feet together, and, slinging him
 155 round my neck, I made for the ship, using my spear as a staff. I could not possibly have balanced him on one shoulder with my free hand – he was a massive brute. When I reached the ship, I threw the stag down in front of it, and going up to each man in turn heartened them with a cheerful word.

160 “My friends,” I said, “we may be miserable, but we are not going down to the house of Hades yet, not till our time has come. Get up,

LINE 126

the home of the beautiful Circe Circe is a witch-goddess living alone on the island of Aeaëa. She’s a daughter of **Helios** the Sun-god and sister of Aetetes (the king who later guards the Golden Fleece), and she works her magic through drugs and potions.

and while there's food and drink on board, let us have something to eat instead of dying here of starvation."

"This was advice they took readily enough. They at once flung off
 165 their rugs, and there on the desolate sea-shore they gazed open-mouthed at the stag; he really was a monster. When they had feasted their eyes on the sight they washed their hands and prepared a glorious meal. So the whole day long till sundown we sat down to a feast of unlimited meat and mellow wine. When the sun set and
 170 darkness fell, we lay down to sleep on the sea-shore. As soon as Dawn appeared, fresh and rosy-fingered, I gathered my men round me and addressed them.

"Comrades in suffering, friends, listen to me. We are utterly lost. We do not know where East or West is; where the light-giving Sun rises
 175 or where he sets. So the sooner we decide on a sensible plan the better – if one can still be found, which I doubt. For when I climbed the crag I found that this is an island, and low-lying; all round it in a ring the sea stretches away to the horizon. But what I did see, right in the middle, through dense oak-scrub and forest, was a wisp of
 180 smoke."

"When they heard my report they broke down completely. They could not help remembering what Antiphates the Laestrygonian had done, and the unbridled savagery of the man-eating Cyclops. They burst into loud sobs and the tears streamed down their cheeks. But
 185 they might have spared themselves their lamentations for all the good they did.

— TWO SEARCH PARTIES

"In the end I divided my well-armed crew into two parties with a leader for each. Of one party I myself took charge; the other I gave to
 190 the noble Eurylochus. Then we shook lots in a bronze helmet and out jumped the lot of the great-hearted Eurylochus, so he went off with his twenty-two men, a tearful company, leaving us, who stayed behind, weeping too. In a clearing in a glade they came upon Circe's house, built of polished stone. Prowling about the place were mountain wolves and lions that Circe had bewitched with her magic
 195 drugs. They did not attack my men, but rose on their hind legs to fawn on them, with much wagging of their long tails, like dogs fawning on their master as he comes from table for the tasty bits he always brings. In the same way these wolves and lions with great claws fawned round my men. Terrified at the sight of the formidable
 200 beasts, they stood in the palace porch of the goddess with the lovely tresses. They could hear Circe within, singing in her beautiful voice as she went to and fro at her great and everlasting loom, on which she was weaving one of those delicate, graceful and dazzling fabrics

LINE 189

the noble Eurylochus Eurylochus is Odysseus' second-in-command and a kinsman by marriage – the cautious, fearful voice among the crew, who causes real trouble again later in the wanderings.

that goddesses make.

205 Polites, an authoritative man and the one in my party whom I liked and trusted most, now took the lead. “Friends,” he said, “there is someone in the castle working at a loom. The whole place echoes to that lovely voice. It’s either a goddess or a woman. Let us call to her immediately.”

— TURNED TO SWINE

210 ‘So they called and Circe came out at once, opened the polished doors, and invited them to enter. In their innocence, the whole party followed her in. But Eurylochus suspected a trap and stayed outside. Circe ushered the rest into her hall, gave them seats and chairs to sit on, and then prepared them a mixture of cheese, barley-meal, and
215 yellow honey flavoured with **Pramnian wine**. But into this dish **she introduced a noxious drug**, to make them lose all memory of their native land. And when they had emptied the bowls which she had handed them, she drove them with blows of a stick into the pigsties. Now they had pigs’ heads and bristles, and they grunted like pigs; but
220 their minds were as human as they had been before. So, weeping, they were penned in their sties. Then Circe flung them some forest nuts, acorns and cornel-berries – the usual food of pigs that wallow in the mud.

— EURYLOCHUS RETURNS

225 ‘Meanwhile Eurylochus came back to the swift black ship to report the catastrophe his party had met with. He was in such anguish that he could not utter a single word; his eyes were filled with tears, and he felt on the verge of breaking down. Exasperated, we all bombarded him with questions, till at length he came out with the story of his comrades’ fate.

230 “We went – as you ordered – through the woods – noble Odysseus. In a clearing, in a glade, we came to a well-built house of polished stone. Someone inside was singing in a clear voice as she went to and fro at her great web – either a goddess or a woman. My men called and she came out, immediately opened the polished doors, and
235 invited us to enter. In their innocence, the whole party followed her in. But I suspected a trap and stayed outside. And now the whole party has been wiped out. Not a single man reappeared, though I sat there a long time, watching.”

240 ‘When I heard this story I slung my big bronze silver-studded sword in its silver scabbard over my shoulder, then my bow, and I told Eurylochus to take me back with him by the way he had come. But he threw his arms round my knees in supplication and broke into a pitiful appeal.

LINES 215–216

she introduced a noxious drug Circe’s method is *pharmaka* – magic drugs slipped into food or drink. Her victims take on animal bodies but keep their human minds.

LINE 215

Pramnian wine **Pramnian wine** was a famous strong, dark Greek wine – just the thing to mask the drug Circe stirs into the men’s food.

“Favourite of Zeus,” he said, “leave me behind; don’t force me to go
 245 with you there. You will never come back yourself and you won’t
 rescue a single man of your crew. I am certain of it. Let us get away
 quickly with those that are left here. We might still escape the evil
 day.”

“Very well, Eurylochus,” I replied; “stay where you are, and eat and
 250 drink by the black ship’s hull. But I shall go. I have absolutely no
 choice.”

— HERMES AND THE MOLY

‘With this, I turned my back on the ship and the sea, and struck
 inland. But, threading my way through the enchanted glades, I was
 nearing the sorceress’s palace when I met Hermes, god of the golden
 255 wand, looking like a young man at that most charming age when the
 beard first starts to grow. He took my hand in his and greeted me
 amiably.

“Where are you off to now, my poor fellow,” he said, “wandering alone
 through the wilds in unknown country, with your friends in Circe’s
 260 house penned like pigs in their crowded sties? Have you come here
 to free them? I think you are more likely to stay with them yourself
 and never see your home. However, I will save you and deliver you
 from your trouble. Look: here is a drug of real virtue that you must
 take with you into Circe’s palace; it will make you immune from evil.
 265 I will tell you how she works her black magic. She will begin by
 preparing you a mixture, into which she will put her drug. But even
 with its help she will be unable to enchant you, for this antidote that
 I am going to give you will rob it of its power. I will tell you exactly
 what to do. When Circe strikes you with her long stick, you must
 270 draw your sword from your side and rush at her as though you mean
 to kill her. She will shrink from you in terror and invite you to her
 bed. You must not refuse the goddess’s favours, if you want her to
 free your men and look after you. But make her swear a solemn oath
 by the blessed gods not to try any more of her tricks on you, or when
 275 she has you stripped naked she may rob you of your courage and your
 manhood.”

“Then the Giant-killer handed me a herb he had plucked from the
 ground, and showed me what it was like. It had a black root and a
 milk-white flower. **The gods call it moly**, and it is a dangerous plant
 280 for mortal men to dig up. But the gods, after all, can do anything.

‘Hermes went off through the island forest, making for high
 Olympus, while I with a heart oppressed by many dark forebodings
 pursued my way to Circe’s home. I stood at the doors of the lovely
 goddess’s palace and called out. Circe heard me, came out
 285 immediately, and, opening the polished doors, invited me in. Filled

LINE 279

The gods call it moly Hermes, the messenger-god, meets Odysseus and gives him *moly*: a magic herb with a black root and a milk-white flower that no mortal can safely dig up. It makes him immune to Circe’s drugs.

with misgivings, I followed her indoors and she offered me a beautiful silver-studded chair with a stool for my feet. She prepared a brew in a golden bowl for me to drink and with evil in her heart dropped in the drug. She gave me the bowl and I drained it, but without suffering
 290 any magic effects. She struck me with her stick and shouted, “Off to the pigsty, and lie down with your friends.” Whereupon I snatched my keen sword from my hip and rushed at Circe as though I meant to kill her. But with a shriek she slipped below my blade, clasped my knees and burst into tears.

— FACING CIRCE

295 “Who are you and where do you come from?” she asked, and her words had wings. “Where is your native town? Who are your parents? I am amazed to see you take my drug and suffer no magic change. For never before have I known a man who could resist that drug once he had taken it and swallowed it down. You must have a
 300 heart in your breast that is proof against all enchantment. I am sure you are Odysseus, that resourceful man; the man whom the Giant-killer with the golden wand always told me to expect here on his way back from Troy in his swift black ship. But now put up your sword and come with me to my bed, so that in making love we may learn to
 305 trust one another.”

“Circe,” I answered her, “how can you order me to be gentle with you, you who have turned my friends into pigs here in your house, and now that you have me too in your clutches are inveigling me to your bedroom and inviting me into your bed, to strip me naked and
 310 rob me of my courage and manhood? Nothing, goddess, would induce me to come into your bed unless you can bring yourself to swear a solemn oath that you have no other mischief in store for me.”

‘Circe at once swore as I ordered her. So when she had duly sworn the oath, I went with the goddess to her beautiful bed.

315 ‘Meanwhile the four maids who do the housework for Circe were busying themselves in the palace. They are the **daughters of Springs and Groves and sacred Rivers** that flow out into the sea. One of them threw linen covers over the chairs and spread fine purple rugs on top. Another drew silver tables up to the chairs and placed golden
 320 dishes upon them; the third mixed the sweet and mellow wine in a silver bowl and set out the golden cups; and the fourth fetched water and lit a fire under the big cauldron, and the water grew warm.

‘When the shining bronze vessel was boiling, she sat me in a bath and washed me with water from the great cauldron mixed with cold
 325 to a comfortable heat, sluicing my head and shoulders till all the painful weariness was gone from my limbs. My bath done, she rubbed me with olive-oil, clothed me in a tunic and a splendid cloak, and

LINES 316–317

daughters of Springs and Groves and sacred Rivers These maids are **nymphs** – minor nature-goddesses of springs, woodland and rivers – here serving in Circe’s house.

seated me on a beautiful silver-studded chair with a foot-stool beneath. Next came another maid with water in a splendid golden
 330 ewer. She poured it out over a silver basin so that I could rinse my hands, and then drew up a polished table to my side. A trusty housekeeper brought some bread, which she put by me with a variety of delicacies; and after helping me liberally to all she could offer she invited me to eat. But I had no heart for eating. As I sat there my
 335 thoughts were elsewhere and my mind was full of forebodings.

‘When Circe saw me sitting so quiet and not helping myself to the food, she knew that I was in deep anguish. So she came and stood by me and said with words that flew:

“Odysseus, why are you sitting like this as though you were dumb,
 340 and feeding on your own thoughts instead of helping yourself to meat and wine? Do you suspect another trap? You need have no fears: I have given you a solemn oath to do you no harm.”

“Circe,” I answered her, “could any honourable man bear to taste food and drink before he had freed his men and seen them face to face? If
 345 you are sincere in asking me to eat and drink, give them their liberty and let me set eyes on my loyal followers.”

— THE MEN RESTORED

‘Stick in hand, Circe went straight out of the hall, threw open the pigsty gate, and drove them out, looking exactly like full-grown swine. When they were all in front of her she went in among them
 350 and smeared them each in turn with some new ointment. Then the bristles which her first deadly potion had caused to sprout dropped off their limbs, and they became men again and looked younger and much more handsome and taller than before. They recognized me now, and one after the other seized my hand. We were so moved that
 355 we all wept tears of happiness, till the walls echoed with the mournful sound. Even the goddess felt pity, and came to me and said: “Favourite of Zeus, son of Laertes, Odysseus of the many devices, go down now to your ship by the sea-shore, drag her straight away on to dry land, stow your possessions and all the ship’s tackle in a cave, and
 360 then come back yourself with the rest of your loyal company.”

‘At this my proud heart was convinced. I went to the ship and the sea-shore. I found my good companions by the ship, lamenting pitifully, with the tears streaming down their cheeks. But as soon as they caught sight of me they were all round me in a weeping throng.
 365 It was like the scene at a farm when **cows in a drove come home** full-fed from the pastures to the yard and are welcomed by all their frisking calves, who burst out from the pens to gambol round their mothers, lowing excitedly. My men were as deeply moved as if they had reached their homeland and were standing in their own town in

LINE 365

cows in a drove come home The men’s joy is caught in a homely **simile**: they crowd round Odysseus like farmyard calves mobbing the cows coming home full-fed.

370 rugged Ithaca, where they were born and bred.

“Favourite of Zeus,” they said between their sobs, “we are as happy to see you back as we would be to set foot on our own island of Ithaca. But tell us how our comrades met their end.”

375 ‘I gave them a soothing reply. “Our first business,” I said, “is to drag up the ship on to dry land and stow our possessions and the tackle in a cave. Then you must get ready and all come with me and see your friends eating and drinking in Circe’s enchanted palace, where they have enough to last them for ever.”

380 ‘They were quick to be convinced by my suggestion. Only Eurylochus was against me and did his best to keep the whole company back. “Where are we poor wretches off to now?” he cried with winged words. “Why are you looking for trouble – going to Circe’s palace, where she will turn you all into pigs or wolves or lions, and force you to keep watch over that great house of hers? We have
385 had all this before, with the Cyclops, when our friends found their way into his fold with this foolhardy Odysseus. It was this man’s reckless folly that cost them, their lives.”

‘Now when Eurylochus said that, I considered drawing the long sword from my sturdy side and lopping his head off to roll in the dust,
390 even though he was a close kinsman of mine. But my men held me back and calmed me down.

“Favourite of Zeus,” they said, “let’s leave this man here to guard the ship, if that is your order. But you lead us to Circe’s enchanted castle.”

395 ‘so they left the ship and the sea and struck inland. Eurylochus came with us after all. He was not going to be left by the ship; he was afraid of the stinging rebuke I might give him.

‘Circe meanwhile had graciously bathed the members of my party in her palace and rubbed them with olive-oil. She gave them all tunics and warm cloaks to wear, so that on our arrival we found them having
400 dinner together in the hall. When the two companies came face to face and they all recognized each other, they burst into tears and the whole house echoed to their sobs. But then the goddess approached me.

405 “Heaven-born son of Laertes,” she said, “resourceful Odysseus, check this immoderate grief. I know as well as you all you have gone through on the teeming seas and suffered at the hands of savages on land. But now eat your food and drink your wine, till you are once more the men you were when first you sailed from your homes in rugged Ithaca. You are worn out and dispirited, always brooding on
410 the hardships of your travels. Your sufferings have been so continuous that you have lost all pleasure in living.”

— A YEAR ON AEAEA

‘My gallant company were not difficult to persuade. We stayed on day after day for a whole year, feasting on lavish quantities of meat and mellow wine. But as the months went by and the seasons passed

415 and the long days returned, my loyal companions called me aside one day and said: “What possesses you to stay on here? It’s time you thought of Ithaca, if the gods mean you to escape and get back to your ancestral home in your own country.” This was enough: my proud heart was convinced.

420 ‘For the rest of that day till sunset we sat and feasted on lavish quantities of meat and mellow wine. When the sun sank and night fell, my men settled down for sleep in the darkened hall. But I went to Circe’s beautiful bed and there clasped the goddess’s knees in supplication, and she listened to my winged words:

425 “Circe,” I said, “keep that promise which you once made me, to send me home. I am eager now to be gone, and so are all my men. Whenever you are not present they stand around and exhaust me with their complaints.”

— THE ROAD TO HADES

“Heaven-born son of Laertes, resourceful Odysseus,” the goddess

430 answered me, “do not stay on unwillingly. But first you have to make another journey and find your way to the Halls of Hades and dread Persephone, to consult the soul of Teiresias, [the blind Theban prophet](#). His faculties are unimpaired, for dead though he is, Persephone has granted him, and him alone, continuing wisdom.

435 The others there are mere shadows flitting to and fro.”

“This news broke my heart. Sitting there on the bed I wept. I had no further use for life, no wish to see the sunshine any more. But when at last I had satisfied my need for tears and for tossing and turning on the bed, I began to question her: “Circe, who is to guide me on

440 the way? No one has ever sailed a black ship into Hell.”

“Heaven-born son of Laertes, resourceful Odysseus,” the goddess answered me, “do not think of lingering on shore for lack of a pilot. Set up your mast, spread the white sail and sit down in the ship. The North Wind will blow her on her way; and when she has brought you

445 across the River of Ocean, you will come to a wild coast and Persephone’s Grove, where the tall poplars grow, and the willows that so quickly shed their seeds. Beach your boat there by Ocean’s swirling stream and go on into Hades’ Kingdom of Decay. There, at a rocky pinnacle, [the River of Flaming Fire and the River of](#)

450 [Lamentation](#), which is a branch of the Waters of Styx, meet and pour their thundering streams into Acheron. When you reach this place,

LINES 432–433

[the blind Theban prophet](#) Before he can go home, Odysseus must sail to the **Halls of Hades** (the underworld, ruled by Hades and his queen **Persephone**) to consult the ghost of **Teiresias**, the great blind seer of Thebes. Alone among the dead he keeps his prophetic power – and this errand fills the whole of the next book.

LINES 449–450

[the River of Flaming Fire and the River of Lamentation](#) The Greeks pictured the land of the dead across the **River of Ocean** that encircles the world. Its rivers have grim names: the River of Flaming Fire (Pyriphlegethon), the River of Lamentation (Cocytus), and the dreaded **Styx**, all pouring into **Acheron**.

do as I tell you, my lord; dig a trench as long and as wide as a man's forearm. Go round this trench and pour offerings to all the dead, first with a mixture of honey and milk, then with sweet wine, and last of all with water. Over all this sprinkle white barley and then begin your prayers to the helpless ghosts of the dead. Promise them that once you are in Ithaca you will sacrifice a barren heifer in your palace, the best that you have, and will heap the pyre with treasures, and make Teiresias a separate offering of the finest jet-black sheep in your flock.

“When you have finished your invocations to the glorious company of the dead, sacrifice a ram and a black ewe, **holding their heads down towards Erebus** while you turn your own aside, to face the River of Ocean. The spirits of the dead and departed will come up in their multitudes. Then you must immediately order your men to flay the sheep that are lying there slaughtered by your pitiless blade, and burn them sacrificially, praying to the gods, to mighty Hades and august Persephone. Sit still yourself meanwhile, with your drawn sword in your hand, and do not let any of the helpless ghosts come near to the blood till you have questioned Teiresias. Presently the prophet himself will come to you, my Lord King. And he will prophesy your route, the stages of your journey and how you will reach home across the teeming seas.”

‘Circe finished, and soon after, Dawn rose from her throne of gold. The Nymph dressed me in my tunic and cloak and herself put on a long robe of silvery sheen, of a light fabric charming to the eye. Round her waist she fastened a splendid golden belt, and she put a veil over her head. Then I walked through the palace and made the

LINES 462–463

holding their heads down towards Erebus

Erebus is the deep darkness of the underworld. The dead are summoned by blood: Odysseus must dig a trench, pour offerings and sacrifice black sheep, then hold the crowding ghosts back with his sword until Teiresias has drunk and spoken.

round of my men, rousing them each with a cheerful word. “Wake up,”
 480 I said, “and bid your pleasant sleep farewell. It’s time to go. My lady
 Circe has made everything clear.”

— ELPENOR

‘My gallant band agreed gladly enough. But even this time I did not
 lead them all safely away. **There was one called Elpenor**, the
 youngest of the party, not much of a fighting man and not very
 485 clever. This young man had got drunk, and longing for fresh air had
 left his friends and gone to sleep on the roof of Circe’s enchanted
 palace. Roused in the morning by the bustle and din of the departure,
 he leapt up suddenly, and forgetting to go to the long ladder and take
 the proper way down, he toppled headlong from the roof. He broke
 490 his neck and his soul went to Hades.

‘When the rest of the party joined me I said to them: “You no doubt
 imagine that you are bound for home and our beloved Ithaca. But
 Circe has marked us out for a very different route – to the Halls of
 Hades and dread Persephone, where we must seek advice of the
 495 spirit of Theban Teiresias.”

‘When I told them this they were heart-broken. They sat down
 where they were and wept and tore their hair. But their lamentations
 achieved nothing.

‘We made our way to our ship and the beach with heavy hearts and
 500 with many tears. Meanwhile Circe had gone ahead and tethered a
 ram and a black ewe by the ship. She had slipped past us with ease;
 when a god wishes to remain unseen, what eye can observe his
 coming or going?’

LINE 483

There was one called Elpenor Remember
Elpenor: the youngest of the crew, who gets
 drunk, falls from Circe’s roof and breaks his
 neck. His is the first ghost Odysseus meets in
 the underworld, where he begs for a proper
 burial.

