

11

The Book of the Dead

Book Eleven

At the world's edge Odysseus digs a trench, pours the blood, and the dead come crowding up: a drowned comrade begging for burial, the blind prophet with his warning, and the mother he never knew was gone.

Heroines and heroes of legend file past – Agamemnon cut down at his own feast, Achilles who would sooner be a living slave than a king among the dead, Ajax who will not speak – until horror sends him fleeing back to the light.

NAME

SET

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BOOK ELEVEN

The Book of the Dead

Odysseus sails to the edge of the world and calls up the ghosts of the dead: the prophet Teiresias, his own mother, the great women and heroes of myth, and the damned.

WHAT HAPPENS

- Following Circe's instructions, Odysseus reaches the land of the dead and summons the ghosts with blood-offerings.
- The unburied Elpenor begs for burial; Teiresias foretells the cattle of the Sun, the suitors, and a gentle death far off in old age.
- He speaks with his mother Anticleia and three times fails to embrace her shade; a catalogue of famous heroines passes before him.
- Among the dead of Troy he meets murdered Agamemnon, despairing Achilles, and silent, unforgiving Ajax.
- He sees the judge Minos and the great sinners – Tityus, Tantalus, Sisyphus – and the phantom of Heracles, before fear drives him back to his ship.

WHO WE MEET

Odysseus

the living man among the dead, seeking his way home

Teiresias

the blind prophet whose word shapes the rest of the journey

Anticleia

his mother, whose death he learns of only here

Agamemnon · Achilles · Ajax

the fallen heroes of Troy

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Book 11, the *Nekyia*, is the centre of the poem and a favourite exam topic. It gathers the great themes: death and the afterlife, homecoming and its dangers (Agamemnon as the anti-Odysseus), memory and fame. Note the vision of the shadowy dead, the pathos of Anticleia, and Achilles' verdict on glory. **Prescribed:** examined in context – know it closely.

The Book Of The Dead

— DOWN TO THE DEAD

‘Our first task, when we came down to the sea and reached our ship, was to run her into the bright salt water and put the mast and sails on to the black ship. We then picked up the sheep and goats and put them on board, after which we ourselves embarked, heavy-hearted
5 and weeping bitterly. However, Circe of the lovely tresses, the powerful goddess with a human voice, sent us the friendly escort of a favourable breeze, which sprang up from astern and filled the sail of our blue-prowed ship. So, after putting the tackle in order fore and aft, we sat down, while the wind and the helmsman kept her straight.
10 With a taut sail she sped across the sea all day, till the Sun went down and all the ways grew dark.

‘so she reached the furthest parts of the deep-flowing River of Ocean where the Cimmerians live, wrapped in mist and fog. The bright Sun cannot look down on them with his rays, either when he climbs the
15 starry heavens or when he turns back from heaven to earth again. Dreadful Night spreads her mantle over that unhappy people. ‘Here we beached our ship and, after putting our flocks ashore, made our way along the banks of the River of Ocean till we reached the place that Circe had described. There, while Perimedes and Eurylochus
20 kept hold of the sacrificial victims, I drew my sharp sword from my side and dug a trench as long and as wide as a man’s forearm. There I poured libations 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 I sprinkled some white barley, and then began my prayers to the
25 insubstantial presences of the dead, promising them that directly I got back to Ithaca I would sacrifice a barren heifer in my palace, the best I had, and heap the pyre with treasures, and make Teiresias a separate offering of the finest jet-black sheep in my flocks.

‘When I had finished my prayers and invocations to the communities
30 of the dead, I took the sheep and cut their throats over the trench so that the dark blood poured in. And now the souls of the dead came swarming up from Erebus – brides, unmarried youths, old men who had suffered greatly, once-happy girls with grief still fresh in their hearts, and a great throng of warriors killed in battle, their spear-
35 wounds gaping and all their armour stained with blood. From this multitude of souls, as they fluttered to and fro by the trench, there came an eerie clamour. Panic drained the blood from my cheeks. I turned to my comrades and told them quickly to flay the sheep I had slaughtered with my sword and burn them, and to pray to the gods,
40 to mighty Hades and august Persephone. But I myself sat on guard, bare sword in hand, and prevented any of the insubstantial

presences from approaching the blood before I questioned Teiresias.

— ELPENOR

‘The first spirit that came up was that of **my own comrade Elpenor**, for he had not yet been buried in the wide bosom of Earth. So urgent
45 had our other task been that we had left his corpse unburied and unwept in Circe’s palace. Now, when I saw him, tears started to my eyes and I was stirred with pity for him.

‘I called across to him with winged words: “Elpenor! How did you come here, to the land of shadows? You have been quicker on foot
50 than I in my black ship.”

‘I heard him groan, and then his answer came: “Son of Laertes, favourite of Zeus, Odysseus of the nimble wits, the malicious decree of some god and too much wine were my undoing. I had lain down to sleep on the roof of Circe’s palace, and forgot to go to the long ladder
55 and take the right way down, and so fell headlong from the roof. My neck was broken and my soul came down to Hades. And now, I beseech you, by all the absent friends we left behind, by your wife, by the father who looked after you as a child, and by Telemachus, your only son, whom you left at home – since I know for certain that
60 when you leave this kingdom of the dead you will put in with your good ship at the Isle of Aea, Circe’s isle – I beg you, master, to remember me then and not to sail away and forsake me utterly nor leave me there unburied and unwept, in case I bring down the gods’ curse on you. So burn my body there with all the arms I possess, and
65 raise a mound for me on the shore of the grey sea, in memory of an unlucky man, so that men yet unborn may learn my story. Do this for me, and on my barrow plant the oar I used to pull when I was alive and with my comrades.” To which I answered: “All this, my poor Elpenor, I will do. Nothing shall be forgotten.”

70 ‘Thus we sat facing each other across the trench exchanging joyless words, I on the one side, with my sword stretched out above the blood, and on the other the ghost of my comrade pouring out his tale.

— TEIRESIAS

‘Next came the soul of **my dead mother, Anticleia**, the daughter of the great Autolycus, who had still been alive when I left her and sailed
75 for sacred Ilium. My eyes filled with tears when I saw her there, and I was stirred to compassion. Yet, deeply moved though I was, I would not allow her to approach the blood first, before I had questioned Teiresias. And **the spirit of the Theban prophet** now came up, with a gold sceptre in his hand, saw who I was, and addressed me.

80 ‘ “Favourite of Zeus, son of Laertes, Odysseus of the nimble wits, what has brought you, the man of misfortune, to forsake the sunlight

LINE 43

my own comrade Elpenor Elpenor is the crewman who fell from Circe’s roof last book. His ghost reaches Odysseus first because he lies unburied: the Greeks held that the unburied dead couldn’t rest, so he begs for a proper funeral before anything else.

LINE 73

my dead mother, Anticleia Anticleia is Odysseus’ mother. She was alive when he left for Troy, so finding her here among the dead comes as a real shock – he had no idea she had died.

LINE 78

the spirit of the Theban prophet Teiresias, the blind seer of Thebes, is the ghost Odysseus made this whole journey to consult. Alone among the dead he keeps his prophetic wits, so his word can be trusted.

and to visit the dead in this joyless place? Step back now from the trench and hold your keen sword aside, so that I can drink the blood and prophesy the truth to you.”

— THE PROPHECY

85 ‘I drew back, sheathing my silver-studded sword in its scabbard. And when the illustrious prophet had drunk the dark blood he uttered these words: “My Lord Odysseus, you seek a happy way home. But a god is going to make your journey hard. For I cannot think that you will escape the attention of the Earthshaker, who still nurses
90 resentment against you in his heart, enraged that you blinded his beloved son. Even so, you and your friends may yet reach Ithaca, though not without suffering, if only you have the strength of will to control your men’s appetites and your own from the moment when your good ship leaves the deep blue sea and approaches **the isle of**
95 **Thrinacie**. There you will find at their pasture the cattle and the fat flocks of the Sun-god, whose eyes and ears miss nothing in the world. If you leave them untouched and fix your mind on no returning home, there is some chance that all of you may yet reach Ithaca, though not without suffering. But if you hurt them, then I
100 predict that your ship and company will be destroyed, and if you yourself contrive to escape, you will reach home late, in a wretched state, upon a foreign ship, having lost all your comrades. You will find trouble too in your house – insolent men eating up your livelihood, courting your royal wife and offering wedding gifts. It is true that
105 you will take revenge on these men for their misdeeds when you reach home.

‘ “But when you have killed these Suitors in your palace, by stratagem or in a straight fight with the naked sword, you must set out once more. Take a well-cut oar and go on till you reach **a people who know**
110 **nothing of the sea** and never use salt with their food; crimson-painted ships and the long oars that serve those ships as wings are quite beyond their experience. And this will be your sign – a very clear one, which you cannot miss. When you fall in with some other traveller who refers to the object you are carrying on your shoulder
115 as a ‘winnowing-fan’, then plant your shapely oar in the earth and offer Lord Poseidon the rich sacrifice of a ram, a bull and a breeding-boar. Then go back home and make ceremonial offerings to the immortal gods who live in the broad heavens, to all of them this time, in due precedence.

120 ‘ “As for your own end, Death will come to you far away from the sea, **a gentle Death**. When he takes you, you will die peacefully of old age, surrounded by a prosperous people. This is the truth that I have told you.”

LINES 94–95

the isle of Thrinacie The heart of the prophecy: on the island of **Thrinacie** graze the cattle of the **Sun-god** Helios. Leave them be and the crew may still get home; harm them and the ship is doomed. This warning sets up the disaster of Book 12.

LINES 109–110

a people who know nothing of the sea A famous, strange prophecy. After his homecoming Odysseus must carry an oar inland until he meets people so far from the sea that they mistake it for a *winnowing-fan* (a farm tool). There he must make his peace with **Poseidon** before he can finally rest.

LINE 121

a gentle Death Teiresias promises Odysseus a gentle end – not a warrior’s death in battle but a peaceful old age, with death coming quietly, far from the sea, among a prosperous people.

‘ “Teiresias,” I answered him, “no doubt these are the threads of
 125 destiny which the gods themselves have spun. But tell me this, and
 tell me truthfully. I see the spirit of my dead mother. She sits in
 silence by the blood and cannot bring herself to look her own son in
 the face or say a single word to him. Tell me, my lord, how can I make
 her recognize who I am?”

130 ‘ “There is a simple rule,” said Teiresias, “which I will explain. Any
 ghost to whom you give access to the blood will speak the truth; any
 to whom you deny it will withdraw.” “The spirit of Lord Teiresias had
 spoken his prophecies and now withdrew into the Halls of Hades.
 But I kept steady at my post and waited till my mother came up and
 135 drank the dark blood. She recognized me at once; she gave a cry of
 grief and her words winged their way to me.

— HIS MOTHER

‘ “My child, how did you come here to this murky realm, you who are
 still alive? This is no easy place for living eyes to find. For between
 you and us flow wide rivers and fearful waters, first of all Oceanus,
 140 whose stream a man could never cross on foot, but only in a well-
 found ship. Have you come here now from Troy and been wandering
 over the seas in your ship with your comrades ever since you left?
 Have you not been to Ithaca yet, nor seen your wife in your palace?”

‘ “Mother,” I answered her, “I had to come down to Hades and consult
 145 the soul of Theban Teiresias. For I have not yet been near to Achaea,
 nor set foot on our own land, but have been a wretched wanderer
 from the very day when I sailed with King Agamemnon for Ilium, the
 city of fine horses, to fight the Trojans. But tell me what happened to
 you. What death overtook you? Did you have some lingering illness?
 150 Or did Artemis the Archeress visit and kill you with her gentle darts?
 And tell me of my father and the son I left behind. Is my kingdom safe
 in their hands, or was it taken by some other man when it was
 assumed that I would never return? And what of my good wife? How
 does she feel and what does she intend to do? Is she still living with
 155 her son and keeping our estate safe? Or has the best of her
 countrymen already married her?” ‘ “Of course she is still living in
 your home,” my royal mother replied.

“She has schooled her heart to patience, though her eyes are never
 free from tears as the slow nights and days pass sorrowfully by. Your
 160 fine kingdom has not yet passed into other hands. Telemachus is in
 peaceful possession of the royal lands and attends all public banquets
 such as justices are expected to give, for every one of them invites
 him. But your father lives alone on his farm and never goes down to
 the city now. He has no proper bed with laundered sheets and
 165 blankets to sleep on. Instead, he lies down in the winter-time with

the labourers at the farm in the ashes by the fire, and goes about in rags. But when the summer and the mellow autumn days come round, he makes himself a humble bed of fallen leaves anywhere on the high ground of his vineyard. There he lies in his misery, with old
 170 age pressing hard upon him, and nursing his grief and yearning for you to come back. That was my undoing too; it was that that brought me to the grave. It was not that the keen-eyed Archeress sought me out in our home and killed me with her gentle darts. Nor was I
 175 attacked by any of the malignant diseases that so often make the body waste away and die. No, it was my heartache for you, my glorious Odysseus, and for your wise and gentle ways, that brought my life with all its sweetness to an end.”

— THE VAIN EMBRACE

‘These were my mother’s words. Without knowing whether I could, I yearned to embrace her spirit, dead though she was. Three times, in
 180 my eagerness to clasp her to me, I started forward. **Three times, like a shadow or a dream**, she slipped through my hands and left me pierced by an even sharper pain. ’ “Mother!” I cried with words that winged their way to her. “Why do you not wait for me? I long to reach you, so that even in Hell we may throw our loving arms round each
 185 other and draw cold comfort from our tears. Or is this a mere phantom that august Persephone has sent me to increase my grief?”

‘ “Alas, my child,” came my revered mother’s reply, “ill-fated above all men! This is no trick played on you by Persephone, Daughter of Zeus. It is the law of our mortal nature, when we come to die. We no
 190 longer have sinews keeping the bones and flesh together; once life has departed from our white bones, all is consumed by the fierce heat of the blazing fire, and the soul slips away like a dream and goes fluttering on its ways. But now quickly make for the light! And bear in mind all you have learnt here, so that one day you can tell your
 195 wife.”

‘such was the talk that we two had together. And now, impelled by august Persephone, there came up all the women who had been the wives or the daughters of the great, and gathered round the black blood in a throng. I considered how to question each in turn, and in
 200 the end decided that the best plan was to draw my long sword from my strong thigh and prevent them from drinking the dark blood all at the same time. So they came forward and announced their lineage one by one, and I was able to question them all.

— THE CATALOGUE OF HEROINES

‘The first I saw was **highborn Tyro**, who told me she was the
 205 daughter of the noble Salmoneus, and had married Cretheus, Aeolus’ son. She fell in love with the god of the River Enipeus, the loveliest

LINES 180–181

Three times, like a shadow or a dream A famous **simile**: three times Odysseus tries to embrace his mother, and three times she slips through his arms ‘like a shadow or a dream’. This is Homer’s picture of the dead – real voices and memories, but no body left to hold.

LINE 204

highborn Tyro Here begins a **catalogue of heroines**: a parade of the famous women of myth, each the mother or wife of a legend. First is **Tyro**, ancestress of many heroes – **Poseidon** disguised himself as the river Enipeus to father her twin sons.

river that flows on earth, and often wandered on the banks of this beautiful stream. One day the Lord of the Earthquake, the Sustainer of the Earth, disguised himself as the river-god and made love to her at the mouth of the eddying river. A dark wave gathered mountain-high, curled over them, and hid the woman and the god. He then unclasped her virgin girdle and sealed her eyes in sleep.

‘And when the god had made love to her, he took her hand in his, and said:

“Lady, be happy in this love of ours. When the year completes its course – a god’s embrace is never fruitless – you will give birth to beautiful children, whom you must nurse and rear with care. But now go home, and guard your tongue. Tell no one; but the truth is I am Poseidon, the Shaker of the Earth.” The god then plunged under the heaving sea. Tyro conceived, and gave birth to Pelias and Neleus, who both became powerful servants of mighty Zeus. Pelias lived in the spacious lands of Iolcus, and his wealth lay in his flocks; Neleus’ home was in sandy Pylos. This illustrious Queen had other sons by Cretheus – Aeson and Phereas and Amythaon, the dashing charioteer.

‘The next I saw was Antiope, the daughter of Asopus, who claimed to have slept in the arms of Zeus. She had two sons, Amphion and Zethus. They founded Thebes, the city of Seven Gates, and walled it round, since for all their prowess they were unable to inhabit so vast a city unfortified. After Antiope I saw Alcmena, Amphitryon’s wife, who lay in the loving arms of mighty Zeus and brought the all-daring, lion-hearted Heracles into the world. Megare I also saw, proud Creon’s daughter, who married the indomitable Heracles, Amphitryon’s son.

‘Then I saw Oedipus’ mother, **the lovely Epicaste**. She in her ignorance did a terrible thing; she married her son. For Oedipus killed his father and took his mother to wife. But the gods soon let the truth come out. They devised a cruel plan: Oedipus remained to suffer the tortures of remorse as King of the Cadmeians in the lovely city of Thebes; but Epicaste, tormented by anguish, hanged herself with a long rope she made fast to the roof-beam overhead, and so came down to the House whose gates the mighty Hades guards, leaving Oedipus to suffer all the horrors that the Avenging Furies of a mother can inflict.

‘Next came the great beauty Chloris, the youngest daughter of Amphion son of Iasus, the powerful Minyan King of Orchomenus. Neleus married her for her beauty and paid a fortune for her hand. So she was Queen in Pylos, and bore Neleus glorious children, Nestor and Chromius and princely Periclymenus as well as the beautiful Pero, the wonder of her age, whom all the young men of the neighbourhood wished to marry. But Neleus announced that he

LINE 234

the lovely Epicaste Epicaste is better known by her later name, **Jocasta**. Without knowing it she married her own son, **Oedipus**, who had killed his father; when the truth came out she hanged herself. This is Homer’s brief early version of the Oedipus story.

would give her hand to no one but the man who succeeded in driving away the cattle of the mighty Iphiclus from Phylace. It was a dangerous task to round zo up these shambling broad-browed cattle. A certain gifted seer, Melampus, was the only man who undertook
 255 the venture. But because of the cruel decree of a god he ended up in chains as a prisoner of the savage herdsmen. The days passed and mounted up to months. But it was not until a year had run its course and the seasons came round once more, that the mighty Iphiclus set him free in return for divulging all that the gods had decreed. In this
 260 way the will of Zeus was accomplished.

‘Then I saw **Leda, wife of Tyndareus**, who bore him those stout-hearted twins, Castor trainer of horses, and Polydeuces the great boxer, both of whom are still alive, though the fruitful Earth has received them in her lap. For even in the world below they have been
 265 singled out by Zeus; each is a living and a dead man on alternate days, and they are honoured like the gods.

‘My eyes fell next on Iphimedeia, the consort of Aloeus. She told me that she had slept with Poseidon, and was the mother of those short-lived twins, **the godlike Otus and Ephialtes** famed in story, the
 270 largest men Earth ever nourished, and finer by far than all but the glorious Orion. In their ninth year they were nine cubits across the shoulders and nine fathoms tall. It was this pair that threatened to go to war with the very gods on Olympus in the din and turmoil of battle. It was their ambition to pile Mount Ossa on Olympus, and
 275 wooded Pelion on Ossa, to make a stairway up to heaven. And this they would have accomplished had they reached their youthful prime. But Apollo, the son whom Leto of the lovely tresses bore to Zeus, destroyed them both before their beards had begun to grow and cover their cheeks with the soft down of youth.

‘Phaedra I also saw, and Procris, and **the lovely Ariadne**, that daughter of baleful Minos whom Theseus once attempted to carry off from Crete to the hill of sacred Athens. But he had no joy of her, for before their journey’s end Dionysus brought word to Artemis, who killed her in sea-girt Dia. Maera too, and Clymene I saw, and the
 285 hateful Eriphyle, who bartered her own husband’s life for gold. Indeed I could not tell you the tales, not give you the names, of all the great men’s wives and daughters whom I saw, for before I could finish, the ambrosial night would have slipped away.

— THE TALE PAUSES

‘But now the time has come for me to go and sleep, whether I join
 290 the crew on board or remain in your palace. My journey home is in the gods’ hands and yours.’ Odysseus stopped speaking. Held by the spell of his words they all remained silent and still throughout the

LINE 261

Leda, wife of Tyndareus Leda is the mother of the twins **Castor and Polydeuces** (the Dioscuri), and of Helen and Clytemnestra. Zeus gave the twins a strange half-life: they take turns being alive and dead on alternate days.

LINE 269

the godlike Otus and Ephialtes Otus and Ephialtes, giant sons of Poseidon, grew monstrously fast and tried to storm heaven by piling mountains one on another – Ossa on Olympus, Pelion on Ossa – until the gods struck them down. A textbook case of **hubris** against the gods.

LINE 280

the lovely Ariadne Ariadne, daughter of King **Minos** of Crete, helped Theseus escape the Labyrinth and fled with him, but never reached Athens – here Artemis kills her on the island of Dia.

shadowy hall. At last white-armed Arete broke the silence.

295 ‘Phaeacians,’ she said, ‘what do you think of this man, his looks, his presence and the quality of his mind? He is my guest, but each of you shares that honour with me. So do not send him on his way with undue haste, nor stint your generosity to one who stands in such need. For the gods have filled your homes with riches.’ The venerable lord Echeneus, the oldest man among the Phaeacians, now spoke.

300 ‘My friends, our wise Queen’s words are most apt and are just what we might have expected. Do as she says, though of course it is for Alcinous here to say the word and act on it.’ Alcinous replied: ‘As I live and rule this nation of sailors, it shall be so. But our guest, though longing to return home, must make up his mind to stay till tomorrow,
305 to give me time to add to my gifts. Meanwhile his passage home shall be the concern of all the people, and my own in particular, since I am sovereign in this land.’

‘Alcinous, my most worshipful prince,’ replied Odysseus, the master-schemer, ‘I would be happy if you pressed me to stay among you even
310 for a year, as long as you saw me safely back and loaded me with your splendid gifts. It would be a great advantage to me to arrive in my own dear country with more possessions. For thus enriched I would win a warmer welcome and greater respect from everyone who saw me on my return to Ithaca.’

315 ‘Odysseus,’ said Alcinous, ‘we are far from regarding you as one of those impostors and cheats whom this dark world brings forth in such profusion to spin their lying yarns which nobody can test. On the contrary, you have eloquence and sound judgement too, and you have told us the story of your own and all your companions’ terrible
320 misfortunes with all the artistry of a bard. But now continue and tell us truly; did you see any of those heroic comrades of yours who joined you on the expedition to Ilium and met their death there? We have endless time ahead of us tonight; it’s too early for us to go to our beds. Tell me more of your marvellous adventures. I could stay here
325 till the blessed dawn, if only you could bring yourself to remain in this hall and continue the tale of your misfortunes.’ In response to this the resourceful Odysseus went on with his story. ‘Lord Alcinous, my most worshipful prince,’ he began, ‘there is a time for long tales, but there is also a time for sleep. However, if you really wish to hear
330 me further, I will not refuse to tell you an even more tragic tale than you have heard already. I will tell you the sad fate of my comrades-in-arms who perished after the sack of Troy and escaped from the perils and turmoil of the Trojan War only to be slaughtered on reaching home, through the will of a wicked woman.

— THE HEROES OF TROY

335 ‘In the end, holy Persephone drove off the women’s ghosts. They scattered in all directions, and I was approached by the soul of Agamemnon, son of Atreus. He came in sorrow, and round about him were gathered the souls of all those who had met their doom and died with him in Aegisthus’ palace. As soon as he had drunk the dark
340 blood, he recognized me, uttered a loud cry and burst into tears, stretching his arms out in my direction in his eagerness to reach me. But this he could not do, for all the strength and vigour had gone for ever from those once supple limbs. Moved to compassion at the sight, I too gave way to tears and spoke to him with winged words:

— AGAMEMNON

345 ‘ “Illustrious son of Atreus, Agamemnon, King of men, what mortal stroke of fate laid you low? Did Poseidon rouse fearful squalls and tempestuous winds and overwhelm your ships? Or did you fall to some hostile tribe on land as you were driving off their cattle and their flocks or fighting with them for their town and women?”

350 ‘ “Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus of the nimble wits,” he answered me at once,

“Poseidon did not wreck my ships with fearful squalls and tempestuous winds, nor did I fall to any hostile tribe on land. **It was Aegisthus who plotted my destruction** and with my accursed wife
355 put me to death. He invited me to the palace, he feasted me, and he killed me as a man fells an ox at its manger. That was my most pitiful end. And all around me my companions were cut down in ruthless succession, like white-tusked swine slaughtered in the mansion of some rich and powerful lord, for a wedding, or a banquet, or a
360 sumptuous private feast. You, Odysseus, have witnessed the deaths of many men in single combat or in the thick of battle, but none with such horror as you would have felt had you seen us lying there by the wine-bowl and the laden tables in the hall, while the whole floor swam with our blood.

365 ‘ “Yet the most pitiable thing of all was the cry I heard from **Cassandra, daughter of Priam**, whom that treacherous schemer Clytaemnestra murdered at my side. I raised my hands, but then beat them on the ground, dying, thrust through by a sword. The bitch turned her face aside, and could not even bring herself, though I was
370 on my way to Hades, to shut my eyes with her hands or to close my mouth. There is nothing more degraded or shameful than a woman who can contemplate and carry out deeds like the hideous crime of murdering the husband of her youth. I had certainly expected a joyful welcome from my children and my servants when I reached my
375 home. But now, in the depth of her villainy, she has branded with

LINES 353–354

It was Aegisthus who plotted my destruction

Agamemnon, commander of the Greeks at Troy, was murdered at his homecoming feast by his wife’s lover **Aegisthus** and by **Clytemnestra** herself (his men cut down beside him ‘like swine slaughtered’ for a feast – a grim **simile**).

LINE 366

Cassandra, daughter of Priam **Cassandra**, a princess of Troy and daughter of King **Priam**, was taken by Agamemnon as a war-prize and killed at his side by Clytemnestra.

infamy not herself alone but the whole of her sex, even the virtuous ones, for all time to come.”

“Alas!” I exclaimed. “All-seeing Zeus has indeed proved himself a relentless foe to the House of Atreus from the beginning, working
 380 his will through women’s crooked ways. It was for Helen’s sake that so many of us met our deaths, and it was Clytaemnestra who hatched the plot against her absent lord.” “Yes,” replied Agamemnon. “Never be too trustful even of your wife, nor show her all that is in your mind. Reveal a little of your plans to her, but keep the rest to yourself.
 385 Not that your, wife, Odysseus, will ever murder you. Icarus’ daughter is far too loyal in her thoughts and feelings. The wise Penelope! She was a young woman when we said goodbye to her on our way to the war. She had a baby son at her breast. And now, I suppose, he has begun to take his seat among the men. Fortunate young man! His
 390 loving father will come home and see him, and he will kiss his father. That is how things should be. Whereas that wife of mine refused me even the satisfaction of setting eyes on my son – she killed me before I could. And now I will give you a piece of advice; take it to heart. Do not sail openly into port when you reach your home-
 395 country. Make a secret approach. Women, I tell you, are no longer to be trusted. But can you give me the truth about my son? Have you and your friends heard of him as still alive, in Orchomenus possibly, or sandy Pylos, or maybe with Menelaus in the plains of Sparta? For my good Orestes has not yet died and come below.”

400 “Son of Atreus,” I answered him, “why ask me that? I have no idea whether he is alive or dead. It does no good to utter empty words.”

‘so we stood there grieving, exchanging joyless words as the tears rolled down our cheeks. And now there came the soul of Peleus’ son Achilles, of Patroclus, of the handsome Antilochus, and of Ajax, who
 405 in stature and in manly grace was second to none of the Danaans except the handsome son of Peleus. The soul of Achilles, the great runner, recognized me. “Favourite of Zeus, son of Laertes, Odysseus, master of stratagems,” he said in mournful tones, “what next, dauntless man? What greater exploit can you plan to surpass your
 410 voyage here? How did you dare to come below to Hades’ realm, where the dead live on as mindless disembodied ghosts?”

— ACHILLES

“Achilles,” I answered him, “son of Peleus, far the strongest of the Achaeans, I came to consult with Teiresias in the hope of finding out from him how I could reach rocky Ithaca. For I have not managed to
 415 come near Achaea yet, nor set foot on my own island, but have been dogged by misfortune. But you, Achilles, are the most fortunate man that ever was or will be! For in the old days when you were on Earth,

we Argives honoured you as though you were a god; and now, down here, you have great power among the dead. Do not grieve at your death, Achilles.”

“And do not you make light of death, illustrious Odysseus,” he replied. “I would rather work the soil as a serf on hire to some landless impoverished peasant **than be King of all these lifeless dead**. Come, give me news of that fine son of mine. Did he follow me to the war to play a leading part or not? And tell me anything you have heard of the noble Peleus. Does the Myrmidon nation still do him homage, or do they dishonour him in Hellas and Phthie because old age has made a cripple of him? For I am not up there in the sunlight to protect him as I once protected the Argives and laid the champions of the enemy low on the broad plains of Troy. If I could return for a single moment to my father’s house as I then was I would make those who forcibly rob him of his position of honour cringe before the might of my unconquerable hands.”

“Of the handsome Peleus,” I answered Achilles, “I have heard nothing. But of your dear son Neoptolemus I will tell you the whole truth, as you ask, since it was I who brought him from Scyros in my own fine ship to join the Achaean army. And there in front of the city of Troy, when we used to discuss our plans, he was always the first to speak and always spoke to the point. Godlike Nestor and I were his only betters in debate. And when we Achaeans gave battle on the Trojan plain, he was never content to hang back in the ranks or with the crowd. That spirit of his gave place to none, and he would run far ahead of the others. Many were the men he brought down in mortal combat. I could not tell you of all those he killed in battle for the Argives, nor give you their names; but well I remember how the heroic Eurypylus son of Telephus fell to his sword, and how many of his Hittite men-at-arms were slaughtered at his side, all on account of a bribe that a woman had taken. He was the handsomest man I ever saw, next to the godlike Memnon.

“Then again, when we Argive captains took our places in the Wooden Horse that Epeius had constructed and it rested with me to throw the door of our ambush open or to keep it shut, all the other Danaan chieftains and officers were wiping the tears from their eyes and every man’s legs were trembling beneath him. But not once did I see your son’s handsome face turn pale or catch him brushing a tear from his cheek. On the contrary he begged me time and time again to let him jump out from the Horse, and kept handling his sword-hilt and his heavy bronze spear in his eagerness to inflict disaster on the Trojans. And when we had brought Priam’s city tumbling down in ruins, he took his share of the spoils and his special prize, and embarked safe and sound on his ship without a single wound either

LINES 423–424

than be King of all these lifeless dead

Achilles, the greatest Greek warrior, gives a bleak verdict on death: he’d rather be a poor man’s hired labourer among the living than king over all the dead. He then asks eagerly after his son, glad to hear the boy proved fearless at Troy.

from a flying spear or from a sword at close quarters. Such wounds are common in battle: the War-god in his fury is no respecter of persons.”

465 ‘When I had done, the soul of swift-footed Achilles passed with great strides down the meadow of asphodel, rejoicing in the news I had given him of his son’s renown.

‘The mourning ghosts of all the other dead and departed pressed round me now, each with some question for me on matters that
470 concerned him. The only soul that stood aloof was that of Ajax son of Telamon. He was still embittered by the defeat I had inflicted on him at the ships in the contest for the arms of Achilles, whose divine mother had offered them as a prize, with the Trojan captives and Pallas Athene for judges. I wish I had never won such a prize – the
475 arms that brought Ajax to his grave, the heroic Ajax, who in looks and valour surpassed all the Danaans except the handsome son of Peleus. I called to him now, and sought to placate him:

— AJAX’S SILENCE

‘ “Ajax, son of the noble Telamon; could not even death itself make you forget your anger with me on account of **those fatal arms**? It was
480 the gods that made them a curse to us Argives. What a tower of strength we lost when you fell! We have never ceased to mourn your death as truly as we lament Achilles, Peleus’ son. No one else is to blame but Zeus, that bitter foe of the Danaan army. He it was who brought you to your doom. Draw near, my lord, and hear what I have
485 to say. Curb your anger and conquer your obstinate pride.”

‘so I spoke. He made no reply but went away into Erebus to join the souls of the other dead. There, for all his bitterness, he might yet have spoken to me, or I to him, had not the wish to see the souls of other dead men filled my heart.

— SINNERS AND JUDGES

490 ‘And indeed I saw **King Minos there**, glorious son of Zeus, sitting, gold sceptre in hand, and delivering judgement to the dead, who sat or stood all around, putting their cases to him for decision within the House of Hades, to which the gate is wide. My eyes fell next on **the
495 giant hunter Orion**, who was rounding up the game on the meadow of asphodel, the very beasts his living hands had killed among the lonely hills, armed with a club of solid indestructible bronze.

‘And **I saw Tityus**, son of the great goddess Earth, stretched on the ground and covering nine roods as he lay. A pair of vultures sat by him, one on either side, plucking at his liver, penetrating deep into
500 his body; and his hands were powerless to drive them off. This was his punishment for assaulting Leto, the glorious consort of Zeus, as

LINE 479

those fatal arms Ajax was the second-greatest Greek fighter. After Achilles died his armour was awarded to Odysseus, and Ajax, shamed and enraged, went mad and killed himself. His ghost still won’t forgive Odysseus and turns away without a single word.

LINE 490

King Minos there Minos, the legendary king of Crete, appears here as a judge of the dead, settling the ghosts’ disputes.

LINES 493–494

the giant hunter Orion Orion was a giant huntsman (later set among the stars as the famous constellation), shown here still chasing the ghosts of the beasts he killed in life.

LINE 497

I saw Tityus Tityus, a giant, is punished forever for assaulting **Leto** (mother of Apollo and Artemis): two vultures tear endlessly at his liver.

she made her way to Pytho across the pleasant plains of Panopeus.

‘I also saw the awful agonies **that Tantalus has to bear**. The old man was standing in a pool of water which nearly reached his chin, and
 505 his thirst drove him to unceasing efforts; but he could never reach the water to drink it. For whenever he stooped in his eagerness to drink, it disappeared. The pool was swallowed up, and all there was at his feet was the dark earth, which some mysterious power had drained dry. Trees spread their foliage high over the pool and dangled
 510 fruits above his head – pear-trees and pomegranates, apple-trees with their glossy burden, sweet figs and luxuriant olives. But whenever the old man made to grasp them in his hands, the wind would toss them up towards the shadowy clouds.

‘Then I witnessed **the torture of Sisyphus**, as he wrestled with a
 515 huge rock with both hands. Bracing himself and thrusting with hands and feet he pushed the boulder uphill to the top. But every time, as he was about to send it toppling over the crest, its sheer weight turned it back, and once again towards the plain the pitiless rock rolled down. So once more he had to wrestle with the thing and push it up,
 520 while the sweat poured from his limbs and the dust rose high above his head.

— HERACLES

‘Next after him I observed **the mighty Heracles** – his wraith, that is to say, since he himself banquets at ease with the immortal gods and has for wife Hebe of the slim ankles, the daughter of almighty Zeus
 525 and golden-sandalled Hera. From the dead around him there rose a clamour like the noise of wild fowl taking off in alarm. He looked like black night, and with his naked bow in hand and an arrow on the string he glanced ferociously this way and that as though about to shoot. Terrible too was the golden belt he wore as a baldric over his
 530 breast, depicting miraculous scenes – bears, wild boars and glaring lions, conflict and battle, bloodshed and the massacre of men. That baldric was a masterpiece that no one should have made. May the craftsman who conceived the work never make another!

‘One look was enough to tell Heracles who I was, and he greeted me
 535 with winged words. “Heaven-born son of Laertes, Odysseus, master of stratagems, unhappy man! So you too are working out some such miserable doom as I endured when I lived in the light of the sun. Though I was a son of Zeus, unending troubles came my way. For I was bound in service to a master far beneath my rank, who used to
 540 set me the most arduous labours. Once, thinking that no other task could be more difficult for me, he sent me down here to bring back the Hound of Hell. And under the guiding hands of Hermes and bright-eyed Athene, I did succeed in capturing him and leading him

LINE 503

that Tantalus has to bear Tantalus stands in water he can never drink, beneath fruit he can never reach – both shrink away the instant he grasps for them. This is the punishment that gives us the word ‘tantalise’.

LINE 514

the torture of Sisyphus Sisyphus is doomed to heave a boulder uphill forever, only to watch it roll back down each time. His name is now a byword for endless, futile labour.

LINE 522

the mighty Heracles Heracles (Hercules), the greatest hero of all, was made a god after death – so Homer shows only his *phantom* here in Hades while Heracles himself feasts on Olympus. He recalls his last labour: dragging up **Cerberus**, the Hound of Hell.

out of Hades' realm."

545 'Heracles said no more, but withdrew into the House of Hades, while
I lingered on there, in the hope that I might yet be visited by other
men of note who had perished long ago. And now I might have seen
men of still earlier times whom I so much wanted to see, Theseus
and Peirithous, those legendary children of the gods. But before that
550 could happen, the tribes of the dead came up and gathered round me
in their tens of thousands, making their eerie clamour. Sheer panic
turned me pale. I feared that dread Persephone might send up from
Hades' Halls **the gorgon head** of some ghastly monster. I hurried off
to my ship and told my men to embark and loose the hawsers. They
555 climbed in at once and took their seats by the oars, and the current
carried her down the River of Ocean, helped at first by our oars and
later by a friendly breeze.'

LINE 553

the gorgon head The **Gorgon** (the most famous is Medusa) was a monster whose face turned anyone who looked at it to stone. The fear that Persephone might send its severed head up out of Hades is what finally sends Odysseus racing back to his ship.

