

12

Scylla and Charybdis

Book Twelve

Circe sends Odysseus off armed with warnings, and one by one they come true: the Sirens' song heard from the mast, the six men snatched by Scylla, the whirlpool of Charybdis. Then, on the Sun-god's island, his starving crew break their oath and kill the sacred cattle – and Zeus's thunderbolt leaves Odysseus alone on the open sea, adrift towards the island where his story first began.

NAME

SET

Translation by E. V. Rieu, revised by D. C. H. Rieu.

BOOK TWELVE

Scylla and Charybdis

The last of Odysseus' wanderings: the Sirens, the monsters Scylla and Charybdis, and the fatal cattle of the Sun, after which he loses ship and crew and drifts alone to Calypso.

WHAT HAPPENS

- Back on Aeaea the crew bury Elpenor, and Circe warns Odysseus of every danger ahead.
- Odysseus alone hears the Sirens' song, lashed to the mast while his crew row with wax-stopped ears.
- Steering between Scylla and Charybdis, he loses six men to Scylla's heads.
- On Thrinacie, trapped by storms and starving, his crew slaughter the Sun-god's sacred cattle despite their oath.
- Zeus wrecks the ship with a thunderbolt; Odysseus alone survives, drifts past Charybdis, and is washed up on Calypso's isle – where his tale began.

WHO WE MEET

Odysseus

the lone survivor, who ends his tale where the poem opened

Circe

who arms him with warnings for the road ahead

Eurylochus

whose counsel leads the crew to their doom

Helios

the Sun-god whose cattle seal the crew's fate

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Book 12 completes Odysseus' narration and the theme of temptation and self-control: the Sirens, and above all the cattle of the Sun, where the crew's appetite destroys them while Odysseus' restraint saves him. Note the responsibility of leader versus men, divine justice, and the ring back to Calypso. **Prescribed:** examined in context – know it closely.

Scylla And Charybdis

— BACK TO AEAEA

‘From the flowing waters of the River of Ocean my ship passed into the wide spaces of the open sea; and so reached the island of Aeaea, where, ever-fresh, Dawn has her home and her dancing-lawns, and where the Sun rises. Here we beached the ship on the sands and
5 climbed out on to the shore, where we fell into a sound sleep, awaiting the coming of ethereal Dawn.

— ELPENOR BURIED

‘As soon as she appeared, fresh and rosy-fingered, I sent off a party to Circe’s house to fetch [the dead body of Elpenor](#). We quickly chopped some logs, and then, with the tears streaming down our cheeks,
10 performed the funeral rites on the summit of the boldest headland of the coast. When the corpse was burnt, and with it the dead man’s armour, we built him a barrow, hauled up a stone for monument, and planted his shapely oar on the top of the mound.

‘When we had completed each of these rites, Circe became aware of
15 our return from Hades, adorned herself, and came hurrying up with handmaidens laden with bread, a plentiful supply of meat and sparkling red wine.

‘ “What audacity,” said the glorious goddess, as we gathered round her, “to descend alive into the House of Hades! Other men die once;
20 you will now die twice. But come, spend the rest of the day here, enjoying this food and wine, and at daybreak tomorrow you shall sail. I myself will give you your route and make everything clear, to save you from the disasters you may suffer as a result of evil scheming on land or sea.”

25 ‘We were not difficult to persuade. So the whole day long till sunset we sat and feasted on our rich supply of meat and mellow wine. When the sun sank and darkness fell, my men settled down for the night by the ships; but Circe took me by the hand, led me away from my good comrades, and made me sit down and tell her everything as
30 she lay beside me. When I had given her the whole tale from first to last the lady Circe said:

— CIRCE’S WARNINGS

‘ “Very well; all that is done with now. But listen to my words – and some god will recall them to your mind. Your next encounter will be with [the Sirens](#), who bewitch everybody who approaches them.
35 There is no homecoming for the man who draws near them unawares and hears the Sirens’ voices; no welcome from his wife, no

LINE 8

[the dead body of Elpenor](#) As his ghost begged in the last book, the crew go back to give **Elpenor** a proper funeral – a burial-mound with his own oar planted on top. This ties off the promise Odysseus made him in Hades.

LINE 34

[the Sirens](#) The **Sirens** are enchantresses whose irresistible song lures passing sailors onto the rocks to their death. What they offer is *knowledge* – they claim to know everything that happens on earth.

little children brightening at their father's return. For with their high clear song the Sirens bewitch him, as they sit there in a meadow piled high with the mouldering skeletons of men, whose withered
 40 skin still hangs upon their bones. Drive your ship past the spot, and to prevent any of your crew from hearing, soften some beeswax and plug their ears with it. But if you wish to listen yourself, make them bind you hand and foot on board and place you upright by the housing of the mast, with the rope's ends lashed to the mast itself. This will
 45 allow you to listen with enjoyment to the Sirens' voices. But if you beg and command your men to release you, they must add to the bonds that already hold you fast.

‘ “When your crew have carried you past the Sirens, two routes will be open to you. Though I cannot give you precise advice – you must
 50 choose for yourself – I will tell you about both. One leads to those sheer cliffs which the blessed gods know as [the Wandering Rocks](#). Here blue-eyed Amphitrite sends her great breakers thundering in, and the very birds cannot fly by in safety, even the shy doves that bring ambrosia to Father Zeus; even of them the smooth rock always
 55 takes one, and the Father has to send one more to make their number up. For any sailors who bring their ship to the spot, there is no escape whatever. They end as flotsam on the sea, timbers and corpses tossed in confusion by the waves or licked up by tempestuous and destroying flames. Of all ships that go down to the
 60 sea one only has made the passage, and that was the celebrated Argo, homeward bound from Aeetes' coast. And the waves would soon have dashed her upon those mighty crags, if Hera, for love of Jason, had not helped her past.

‘ “In the other direction lie two rocks, one of which rears its sharp
 65 peak up to the very sky and is capped by black clouds that never stream away nor leave clear weather round the top, even in summer or at harvest-time. No man on earth could climb to the top of it or even get a foothold on it, not even if he had twenty hands and feet to help him, because the rock is as smooth as if it had been polished.
 70 But half-way up the crag there is a murky cavern, facing the West and running down to Erebus, past which, illustrious Odysseus, you will probably steer your ship. Even a strong young bowman could not reach the gaping mouth of the cave with an arrow shot from a ship below.

— SCYLLA

75 ‘ “It is [the home of Scylla](#), the creature with the dreadful bark. It is true that her yelp is no louder than a new-born pup's, but she is a repulsive monster nevertheless. Nobody could look at her with delight, not even a god if he passed that way. She has twelve feet, all dangling in the air, and six long scrawny necks, each ending in a

LINE 51

[the Wandering Rocks](#) The **Wandering Rocks** are clashing cliffs that crush anything passing between them – even doves. The only ship ever to get through was the **Argo** of Jason and the Argonauts. Circe steers Odysseus toward the other route instead.

LINE 75

[the home of Scylla](#) **Scylla** is a six-headed monster lodged in a cliff-cave; each head snatches and eats a passing sailor. There's no fighting her – Circe says Odysseus must simply accept losing six men rather than risk the whole ship.

80 grisly head with triple rows of fangs, set thick and close, and darkly menacing death. Up to her waist she is sunk in the depths of the cave, but her heads protrude from the fearful abyss, and thus she fishes from her own abode, groping greedily around the rock for any dolphins or seals or any of the larger monsters which Amphitrite
85 breeds in the roaring seas. No crew can boast that they ever sailed their ship past Scylla unscathed, for from every blue-prowed vessel she snatches and carries off a man with each of her heads.

— CHARYBDIS

‘“The other of the two rocks, Odysseus, is lower, as you will see, and the distance between them is no more than a bowshot. A great fig-
90 tree with luxuriant foliage grows upon the crag, and it is below this that **dread Charybdis** sucks the dark waters down. Three times a day she spews them up, and three times she swallows them down once more in her horrible way. Heaven keep you from the spot when she does this because not even the Earthshaker could save you from
95 destruction then. No, you must hug Scylla’s rock and with all speed drive your ship through, since it is far better to lose six of your company than your whole crew.”

‘“Yes, goddess,” I replied, “but tell me this. I must be quite clear about it. Could I not somehow steer clear of the deadly Charybdis, yet ward
100 off Scylla when she attacks my crew?”

‘“Obstinate fool,” the beautiful goddess replied. “Again you are spoiling for a fight and looking for trouble! Are you not prepared to give in to immortal gods? I tell you, Scylla was not born for death: she is an undying fiend. She is a thing of terror, intractable, ferocious
105 and impossible to fight. No, against her there is no defence, and the best course of action is flight. For if you waste time by the rock in putting on your armour, I am afraid she may dart out once more, make a grab with all six heads and snatch another six of your crew. So drive your ship past with all your might, and call on Cratais, Scylla’s
110 mother, who whelped her into the world to be the bane of mankind. She will prevent her from pouncing out again.

— THE CATTLE OF THE SUN

‘“Next you will reach **the island of Thrinacie**, where many of the Sun-god’s cattle and plump sheep graze. There are seven herds of cattle and as many flocks of beautiful sheep, with fifty head in each.
115 No births increase or deaths decrease their numbers. And to shepherd them they have goddesses with braided hair, the Nymphs, Phaethusa and Lampetie, children of Hyperion the Sun-god by the resplendent Neaera, whom their mother, when she had brought them up, took away to this new and distant home in Thrinacie to watch
120 over their father’s sheep and crooked-horned cattle. Now if you leave

LINE 91

dread Charybdis Charybdis is a monstrous whirlpool that swallows the sea three times a day and spews it back. To be caught is certain death – hence the phrase ‘between Scylla and Charybdis’ for a choice between two evils.

LINE 112

the island of Thrinacie Thrinacie is the island of the **Sun-god’s** cattle, tended by his daughters, the nymphs Phaethusa and Lampetie. These are the sacred herds Teiresias warned about: touch them and the crew are doomed.

them untouched and fix your mind on getting home, there is some chance that all of you may yet reach Ithaca, though not without suffering. But if you hurt them, then I predict the destruction of your ship and your company. And if you yourself contrive to escape, you
 125 will reach home late, in a wretched state, having lost all your comrades.”

‘As Circe came to an end, Dawn mounted her golden throne. The glorious goddess left me and made her way inland, while I went to my ship and ordered my men to embark and untie the hawsers. They
 130 did so promptly, went to the oars, sat down in their places and all together struck the grey surf with their blades. Then Circe, that formidable goddess with the beautiful hair and a woman’s voice, sent us the friendly escort of a favourable wind, which sprang up from astern and filled the sail of our blue-painted ship. We set the tackle
 135 in order fore and aft, then sat down, and the wind and the helmsman kept her on her course.

— PAST THE SIRENS

‘Then, perturbed in spirit, I addressed my men. “My friends,” I said, “it is not right that only one or two of us should know the prophecies that divine Circe has made to me, and I am going to pass them on to
 140 you, so that we may all be forewarned, whether we die, or escape the worst and save our lives. Her first warning concerned the Sirens with their divine song. We must beware of them and give their flowery meadow a wide berth, but she instructed me alone to hear their voices. You must bind me very tight, standing me up against
 145 the step of the mast and lashed to the mast itself so that I cannot stir from the spot. And if I beg and command you to release me, you must tighten and add to my bonds.”

‘In this way I explained every detail to my men. In the meantime our good ship, with that friendly breeze to drive her, fast approached the
 150 Sirens’ isle. But now the wind dropped, some power lulled the waves, and a breathless calm set in. Rising from their seats my men drew in the sail and threw it into the hold, then sat down at the oars and churned the water white with their blades of polished pine. Meanwhile I took a large round of wax, cut it up small with my sharp
 155 sword, and worked the pieces with all the strength of my fingers. The wax soon grew warm with my vigorous kneading and with the rays of the Sun-god, Hyperion’s son. I took all my men in turn and plugged their ears with it. They then bound me hand and foot, standing me up by the step of the ship’s mast and then lashing me to
 160 the mast itself. This done, they sat down once more and struck the grey water with their oars.

‘We made good progress and had just come within call of the shore

LINE 154

a large round of wax The famous trick: Odysseus stops the crew’s ears with kneaded **wax** so they can’t hear the Sirens, then has himself lashed to the mast so that he alone can listen and live – the one man ever to hear the Sirens and survive.

when the Sirens became aware that a ship was bearing down upon them, and broke into their high, clear song.

165 ‘ “Draw near, illustrious Odysseus, man of many tales, **great glory of the Achaeans**, and bring your ship to rest so that you may hear our voices. No seaman ever sailed his black ship past this spot without listening to the honey-sweet tones that flow from our lips and no one who has listened has not been delighted and gone on his way a
170 wiser man. For we know all that the Argives and Trojans suffered on the broad plain of Troy by the will of the gods, and we know whatever happens on this fruitful earth.”

‘This was the sweet song the Sirens sang, and my heart was filled with such a longing to listen that I ordered my men to set me free,
175 gesturing with my eyebrows. But they swung forward over their oars and rowed ahead, while Perimedes and Eury-lochus jumped up, tightened my ropes and added more. However, when they had rowed past the Sirens and we could no longer hear the sound and the words of their song, my good companions were quick to clear their ears of
180 the wax I had used to stop them, and to free me from the ropes that bound me.

— THROUGH THE STRAIT

‘We had no sooner put this island behind us than I saw a cloud of spume ahead and a raging surf, and heard the thunder of the breakers. My men were so terrified that the oars all dropped from
185 their grasp and fell with a splash on to the sea; and the ship herself, now that the hands that had pulled the smooth blades were idle, was brought to a standstill. I went up and down the ship, stood by each man and encouraged them with soothing words.

‘ “My friends,” I said, “we are men who have met trouble before. And
190 this trouble is no worse than when the Cyclops used his brutal strength to imprison us in his cave. Yet my courage, strategy and intelligence found a way out for us even from there; and I am sure that this too will be a memory for us one day. So now let us all agree to do exactly as I say. Oarsmen, stay at your oars, striking hard with
195 your blades through the deep swell, in the hope that Zeus allows us to escape disaster and come out of this alive. Helmsman, your orders are these. Fix them in your mind, for the good ship’s steering-oar is in your control. Give a wide berth to that foaming surf, and hug these cliffs, or before you can stop her the ship may take us over there and
200 we’ll be wrecked.”

‘The crew obeyed me immediately. I did not mention the inescapable horror of Scylla, fearing that in their panic my men might stop rowing and huddle below decks. But now I allowed myself to forget Circe’s irksome instruction not to arm myself in any way. I

LINES 165–166

great glory of the Achaeans The Sirens’ lure is flattery and **knowledge**: they offer to sing of everything the Greeks and Trojans suffered at Troy, and all that happens on earth.

205 put my famous armour on, seized a couple of long spears, and took
my stand on the forecastle deck, hoping from there to get the first
view of Scylla, the monster of the rocks, who was preparing disaster
for my crew. But I could not catch a glimpse of her anywhere, though
I searched the sombre face of the cliff in every part till my eyes were
210 tired.

‘Thus we sailed up the straits, wailing in terror, for on the one side
we had Scylla, and on the other the awesome Charybdis sucked down
the salt water in her dreadful way. When she vomited it up, she was
stirred to her depths and **seethed over like a cauldron on a blazing**
215 **fire**; and the spray she flung up rained down on the tops of the crags
at either side. But when she swallowed the salt water down, the
whole interior of her vortex was exposed, the rocks re-echoed to her
fearful roar, and the dark blue sands of the sea-bed were exposed.

‘My men turned pale with terror; and now, while all eyes were on
220 Charybdis as the quarter from which we looked for disaster, Scylla
snatched out of my ship the six strongest and ablest men. Glancing
towards my ship, looking for my comrades, I saw their arms and legs
dangling high in the air above my head. “Odysseus!” they called out to
me in their anguish. But it was the last time they used my name. For
225 like an angler on a jutting point, who casts his bait to lure the little
fishes below, dangles his long rod with its line protected by an ox-
horn pipe, gets a bite, and whips his struggling catch to land, Scylla
had whisked my comrades, struggling, up to the rocks. There she
devoured them at her own door, shrieking and stretching out their
230 hands to me in their last desperate throes. In all I have gone through
as I explored the pathways of the seas, I have never had to witness a
more pitiable sight than that. ‘When we had left the Rocks, Scylla,
and dread Charybdis behind, we soon reached the Sun-god’s lovely
isle, where Hyperion kept his splendid broad-browed cattle and his
235 flocks of sturdy sheep. From where I was on board, out at sea, I could
hear the lowing of cows as they were stalled for the night, and the
bleating of sheep. And there came into my mind the words of
Teiresias, the blind Theban prophet, and of Circe of Aeaea, who had
each been so insistent in warning me to avoid this Island of the Sun,
240 the comforter of mankind. So with an aching heart I addressed my
men.

— LANDFALL ON THRINACIE

‘ “Comrades in suffering,” I said, “listen to me while I tell you what
Teiresias and Circe of Aeaea predicted. They warned me insistently
to keep clear of the Island of the Sun, the comforter of mankind, for
245 there, they said, our deadliest peril lurks. So drive the ship past the
island.”

LINES 214–215

seethed over like a cauldron on a blazing fire

Charybdis in action, caught in a vivid **simile** –
boiling up ‘like a cauldron on a blazing fire’.

While every eye is on the whirlpool, Scylla
strikes from the other side and snatches six
men.

‘My men were heart-broken when they heard this, and Eurylochus spoke up at once in a hostile manner. “Odysseus, you are one of those hard men whose spirit never flags and whose body never tires.

250 You must be made of iron through and through to forbid your men, worn out by our efforts and lack of sleep, to set foot on dry land, with the chance of cooking ourselves a tasty supper on this sea-girt isle. Instead, you expect us, just as we are, with night coming on fast, to abandon this island and go wandering off over the foggy sea. It is at
255 night that high winds spring up and wreck ships. What port could we reach to save ourselves from going down if we were hit by a sudden squall from the South or the West? There’s nothing like the South Wind or the wicked West for smashing a ship to pieces. And they don’t ask leave of our lords the gods! No, let us give in to the evening
260 dusk, and cook our supper by the side of the ship. In the morning we can go on board and put out into the open sea.”

‘This speech of Eurylochus was greeted by applause from all the rest, and it was brought home to me that some god really had a calamity in store for us. I answered him with words on wings: “Eurylochus, I am
265 one against many, and you force my hand. Very well. But I call on every man of you to give his solemn promise that if we come across a herd of cattle or a large flock of sheep, he will not kill a single ox or sheep in a wanton fit of recklessness. Just sit peacefully and eat the food that the goddess Circe has provided.”

270 ‘The crew agreed and gave the promise I had asked for. Accordingly, when all had sworn and completed the oath, we brought the good ship to anchor in a sheltered cove, with fresh water at hand, and the men disembarked and proceeded efficiently to prepare their supper. When they had satisfied their hunger and thirst, their thoughts
275 returned to their dear comrades whom Scylla had snatched from the hollow ship and devoured; and they wept till soothing sleep overtook them.

— TRAPPED BY THE WIND

‘In the third watch of the night, when the stars had passed their zenith, Zeus the Cloud-gatherer whipped up a gale of incredible
280 violence. He covered land and sea with clouds, and down sped night from heaven. As soon as Dawn came, fresh and rosy-fingered, we beached our ship and dragged her up into a hollow cave, which the Nymphs used as a dancing-ground and meeting-place. I ordered all my men to gather round, and gave them a warning. “My friends,” I
285 said, “since we have plenty of food and drink on board, let us keep our hands off these cattle, or we shall come to grief. For the cows and the fine sheep you have seen belong to that formidable god, the Sun, whose eyes and ears miss nothing.”

‘My strong-willed company accepted this. And now for a whole
 290 month the South Wind blew without a pause, and after that we had
 nothing but the South and the West winds. The men, so long as their
 bread and red wine lasted, kept their hands off the cattle as they
 valued their lives. But when the provisions in the ship gave out and
 the pangs of hunger sent them wandering with barbed hooks in
 295 quest of any game, fishes or birds, which might come to hand, I went
 inland to pray to the gods in the hope that one of them might show
 me a way of escape. When I had gone far enough across the island to
 be clear of the rest, I found a place that was sheltered from the wind,
 washed my hands, and made my supplications to the whole company
 300 of gods on Olympus. They then cast me into a pleasant sleep. In the
 meantime Eurylochus was broaching a wicked scheme to his mates. ‘
 “My comrades in suffering,” he said, “listen to what I have to say. To
 us wretched men all forms of death are abominable, but death by
 starvation is the most miserable way to meet one’s doom. So come,
 305 let us round up the best of the Sun’s cows and sacrifice them in
 honour of the immortals who live in the broad sky. If ever we reach
 our homeland in Ithaca, our first act will be to build Hyperion the
 Sun-god a magnificent temple and fill it with precious offerings. But
 if in anger at the loss of his straight-horned herds he chooses to
 310 wreck our ship, with the support of the other gods, I would sooner
 drown instantly in a watery grave than waste away by slow degrees
 on a desert island.”

— THE CATTLE SLAUGHTERED

‘His ideas found favour with the rest, and they proceeded at once to
 round up the pick of the Sun-god’s cattle. They had not far to go, for
 315 the fine cows with their broad foreheads and twisted horns used to
 graze in the neighbourhood of our blue-prowed ship. The men
 gathered round the cattle and made their prayers to the gods, using
 for the ceremony some fresh leaves they stripped from a tall oak-
 tree, since they had no white barley on the ship. Their prayers done,
 320 they slit the cows’ throats and flayed them, then cut out slices from
 the thighs, wrapped them in folds of fat and laid raw meat above
 them. And since they had no wine to pour over the burning sacrifice,
 they made libations with water as they roasted all the entrails. When
 the thighs were burnt up and they had tasted the inner parts, they
 325 carved the rest into small pieces and spitted them on skewers.

“Then it was that I suddenly awoke from my deep sleep, and started
 on my way back to the vessel and the coast. Directly I came near my
 curved ship **the sweet smell of roasting meat** was wafted all about
 me. I exclaimed in horror and called out to the immortal gods. “Father
 330 Zeus and you other blessed gods who live for ever! So it was to ruin
 me that you lulled me into that cruel sleep, while left to themselves

LINE 328

the sweet smell of roasting meat Odysseus wakes to find the unthinkable done: his starving crew have slaughtered the Sun’s cattle. Uncanny omens follow – the flayed hides crawl and the meat lows on the spits – signs the gods’ vengeance is now certain.

my men planned this awful crime!”

— THE SUN’S VENGEANCE

‘A swift messenger, Lampetie herself, Lampetie of the trailing robes,
ran to **the Sun-god Hyperion** with news that we had killed his cattle;
335 and in a fury he cried out to the immortals: “Father Zeus and you
other blessed gods who live for ever, take vengeance on the followers
of Odysseus son of Laertes. They have criminally killed my cattle, the
cattle that gave me such joy every day as I climbed the starry sky and
as I dropped down from heaven and sank once more to earth. If they
340 do not repay me in full for my slaughtered cows, I will go down to the
realm of Hades and shine among the dead.”

‘ “Sun,” the Cloud-gatherer answered him, “shine on for the
immortals and for mortal men on the fruitful earth. As for the culprits,
I will soon strike their ship with a blinding bolt out on the wine-dark
345 sea and smash it to pieces.”

‘**This part of the tale I had from Calypso** of the beautiful hair, who
told me that she herself had heard it from Hermes the Messenger.

‘When I had come down to the sea and reached the ship, I confronted
my men one after the other and rebuked them. But we could find no
350 way of mending matters: the cows were dead. And the gods soon
began to show my crew ominous portents. The hides began to crawl
about; the meat, roast and raw, bellowed on the spits; and a sound as
of lowing cattle could be heard.

‘For six days my men feasted on the pick of the Sun’s cattle they had
355 rounded up. But when Zeus brought the seventh day, the fury of the
gale abated, and we quickly embarked and put out into the open sea
after stepping the mast and hauling up the white sail.

— SHIPWRECK

‘When we had left the island astern and no other land, or anything
but sky and water, was to be seen, Zeus brought a sombre cloud to
360 rest above the hollow ship so that the sea was darkened by its
shadow. Before she had run very far, a howling wind suddenly sprang
up from the West and hit us with hurricane force. The squall snapped
both forestays simultaneously. As the mast toppled, all the rigging
tumbled into the hold, and the mast itself, reaching the stern, struck
365 the helmsman on the head and smashed in all the bones of his skull.
He plunged like a diver from the deck, and his brave soul left his
body. Then at one and the same moment Zeus thundered and struck
the vessel with lightning. The whole ship reeled from the blow of his
bolt and was filled with the smell of sulphur. My men were flung
370 overboard and round the black hull they floated like sea-gulls on the
waves. There was no homecoming for them: the god saw to that.

LINE 334

the Sun-god Hyperion The Sun-god **Helios** (Hyperion) demands justice from Zeus, threatening to take his light down and shine among the dead instead. Zeus agrees to smash Odysseus’ ship with a thunderbolt – the price of the crew’s sacrilege.

LINE 346

This part of the tale I had from Calypso Odysseus explains how he knows what the gods said while he slept: **Calypso** told him, and she had it from **Hermes**.

‘Meanwhile I kept shifting from one part of the ship to another, till a great wave tore her sides from her keel, which the sea then swept along denuded of its ribs. It snapped the mast off close to the keel, but as the backstay, which was a leather rope, had fallen across the mast, I used it to lash mast and keel together, and astride these two timbers I became the sport of the furious winds.

‘The storm that had blown up from the West subsided soon enough, but was quickly followed by more wind from the South, to my great distress, for this meant that I should have once more to retrace my course to the dread Charybdis. All through the night I was swept along, and at sunrise found myself back at Scylla’s rock and that appalling whirlpool. Charybdis was beginning to suck the salt water down. But as she did so, I swung myself up to the great fig-tree, on which I got a tight grip and **clung like a bat**. I could find no foothold to support me, or any means of climbing into the tree, for its roots were far away below, and the great long branches that overshadowed Charybdis stretched high above my head.

‘However, I clung grimly on until she spewed up my mast and keel once more. I longed for them to reappear, and in the end they did, at the time of day when **a judge with a long list of disputes** to settle between obstinate litigants rises from court for his evening meal. Then at last the timbers reappeared on the surface. I let go, and dropped with sprawling hands and feet, to splash into the water clear of the great logs. I clambered on to them, and paddled along with my hands. And thanks to the Father of men and gods Scylla did not catch sight of me. Otherwise nothing could have saved me from certain death.

— TO CALYPSO

‘Nine days of drifting followed; but in the night of the tenth the gods washed me up on **the island of Ogygia**, the home of Calypso of the braided tresses, that formidable goddess with a woman’s voice; and she received me kindly and looked after me. But why go again through all this? Only yesterday I told you and your noble wife the whole story here in your home, and it is tedious for me to repeat a tale already plainly told.’

LINE 385

clung like a bat Zeus’s thunderbolt has destroyed the ship and drowned the crew; Odysseus alone survives. Swept back to Charybdis, he saves himself by clinging to the overhanging fig-tree ‘like a bat’ (a **simile**) until the whirlpool spews his timbers up again.

LINE 391

a judge with a long list of disputes A homely **simile** marks the passing time: the timbers surface at the very hour a magistrate rises from a long day in court for his supper. Homer often measures time by such everyday routines.

LINE 400

the island of Ogygia This lands Odysseus where the whole poem began: **Ogygia**, the island of the nymph **Calypso**, who kept him seven years. His tale to the Phaeacians has caught up with the present, so he politely declines to repeat the rest.

