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Menelaus and Helen

Book Four

From Pylos Telemachus rides on to Sparta, to the golden palace of Menelaus and the famous Helen. Amid feasting and shared grief they tell tales of his father's cunning and endurance at Troy – and Menelaus reveals what a shape-shifting sea-god once told him: that Odysseus lives, held far off on an island. But back in Ithaca, the Suitors are laying an ambush to kill the son.

NAME

SET

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BOOK FOUR

Menelaus and Helen

Sparta, the glittering palace of Menelaus and Helen, reached to find a double wedding-feast in progress.

WHAT HAPPENS

- Telemachus and Peisistratus arrive at the wealthy court of Menelaus, who welcomes them before even knowing who they are.
- Menelaus grieves aloud for Odysseus; Telemachus weeps, and Helen recognises him by his likeness to his father.
- Helen drugs the wine, and she and Menelaus tell rival stories of Odysseus' daring and endurance at Troy.
- Menelaus recounts how he wrestled the truth from Proteus, the shape-shifting Old Man of the Sea, in Egypt.
- Proteus reveals Odysseus is alive on Calypso's island; meanwhile the Suitors set an ambush to kill Telemachus on his way home.

WHO WE MEET

Menelaus

the grander model host, rich and generous

Helen

famous, self-aware, complex

Proteus

the shape-shifting Old Man of the Sea

The Suitors

now turning murderous back in Ithaca

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Sparta is the second, grander model household and the richest source of character material in these books. The rival Helen and Menelaus stories show Odysseus' cunning and endurance from the outside, and Proteus' news is the plot hinge that ties the journey back to Book 5. **Unprescribed:** read for the story and its essay background, not examined in context.

Menelaus And Helen

— ARRIVAL AT SPARTA

And so they came to the rolling lands of Lacedaemon, deep in the hills, and drove up to [the palace of the illustrious Menelaus](#). They found him entertaining a large company of relatives in his house to celebrate the impending weddings of his son and of his lovely daughter. He was sending the princess as a bride to the son of Achilles, that breaker of the battle-line, as he had promised long ago in Troy. So now by the gods' will the marriage was soon to take place, and Menelaus was sending her with chariot and horses to the capital of the Myrmidons, of whom her bridegroom was the King. As bride for his beloved son, the gallant Megapenthes, he was bringing Alector's daughter from Sparta. A slave had borne this son to Menelaus, for the gods had given no other child to Helen after Hermione, that lovely girl with golden Aphrodite's beauty. They were banqueting then under the high roof of the great hall, these relatives and friends of the illustrious Menelaus, in festive mood, while a minstrel in the company sang divinely to the lyre, and two acrobats danced in time to his tune, and whirled in and out among the guests.

The two travellers, brave Telemachus and Nestor's noble son, brought their chariot to a halt at the courtyard gate. The lord Eteoneus, energetic squire of the great Menelaus, came out and saw them there, and set off at once through the palace to inform the King. He stood near him and said urgently, 'Menelaus, favourite of Zeus, we have some strangers here at the gates – men whom I take by their looks to be of divine descent. Tell me whether we should unharness their horses for them or send them on to find someone else to entertain them.'

— MENELAUS WELCOMES THEM

Auburn-haired Menelaus answered him indignantly. 'Eteoneus, son of Boethus, you have not always been a fool; but at the moment you are talking nonsense like a child. [You and I enjoyed much hospitality from strangers](#) before we reached our homes and could expect that Zeus might grant us a life without suffering in time to come. Unyoke their horses at once, and bring our visitors to join us at the feast.' Eteoneus ran off through the hall, shouting to his assistants to hurry up and follow him. They led the sweating horses from under the yoke and tied them up at the mangers in the stable, throwing down beside them a feed of grain mixed with white barley. Then they tilted the chariot against the burnished wall by the gate and ushered the newcomers into the royal buildings.

Telemachus and his friend opened their eyes in wonder at all they

LINE 2

[the palace of the illustrious Menelaus](#)

Telemachus has reached Sparta and the court of **Menelaus** – the brother of Agamemnon, and the husband of Helen. It was Helen running off to Troy that started the whole Trojan War.

LINES 29–30

[You and I enjoyed much hospitality from strangers](#)

This is the idea behind *xenia*, the hospitality code: you look after strangers because one day you might be the stranger needing help – and the gods are watching to make sure everyone plays their part.

40 saw as they passed through the King's palace. It seemed to them that this lofty hall of illustrious Menelaus was lit by something of the sun's or the moon's splendour. When they had feasted their eyes on the sight, they went and **bathed in polished baths**, and after the maids had washed them, rubbed them with oil and dressed them in thick
45 cloaks and tunics, they took their places on chairs at the side of noble Menelaus, son of Atreus. A maid came with water in a beautiful golden ewer and poured it out over a silver basin for them to rinse their hands. She then drew a polished table to their side, and the faithful housekeeper brought some bread and set it by them with a
50 choice of delicacies, helping them liberally to all she could offer. Meanwhile a carver served them with plates of various meats he had selected from his board, and put gold cups beside them.

Auburn-haired Menelaus now greeted them, saying, 'Welcome. Do begin your meal. **After you've dined we shall inquire who you may**
55 **be**. Your lineage has left a stamp upon your looks; you are the sons of kings, those sceptred favourites of Zeus, for inferior parents could not breed such men as you.' As he spoke, with his own hands he passed them the rich piece of roast that had been given him as the portion of honour, and they helped themselves to the good things
60 spread before them. When they had satisfied their appetite and thirst, Telemachus spoke to Nestor's son, leaning close so that the rest might not hear him:

— THE SPLENDOUR OF THE HALL

'Look round this echoing hall, son of Nestor, friend of my heart. The whole place gleams with bronze and gold, amber and silver and ivory.
65 What an amazing quantity of treasures! The court of Zeus on Olympus must be like this inside. The sight fills me with awe.'

— MENELAUS MOURNS ODYSSEUS

Auburn-haired Menelaus caught what he was saying and spoke words that flew. 'No mortal can compete with Zeus, dear boys. His house and all his possessions are everlasting. But when it comes to
70 men, I feel that few or none can rival me in wealth, for **it took me seven years and great hardship** to amass this fortune and bring it home in my ships. My travels took me to Cyprus, to Phoenicia, and to Egypt. Ethiopians, Sidonians, Eretrians, I visited them all; and I saw Libya too, where the lambs grow horns almost immediately and their
75 ewes lamb three times in the course of the year; where nobody from king to shepherd need go without cheese or meat, or fresh milk either, since the ewes provide milk all the year round. But while I was wandering in those parts, making my fortune, an enemy of our house
struck down my unsuspecting brother, caught off his guard through
80 the treachery of his accursed wife. So it gives me little pleasure to

LINE 43

bathed in polished baths The full hospitality routine: a guest was bathed, rubbed with oil and given clean clothes before anyone even asked who they were.

LINES 54–55

After you've dined we shall inquire who you may be The polite order was always food first, questions later. You fed your guest before asking who he was or what he wanted.

LINES 70–71

it took me seven years and great hardship Menelaus took seven years to get home after Troy – his own long *nostos*, or homecoming. (Odysseus' is taking even longer.)

LINE 79

struck down my unsuspecting brother Agamemnon, Menelaus' brother, was the leader of the whole Greek army at Troy. He got home safely and was then murdered – the full story comes later in this book.

call myself the lord of all this wealth, since, as you must have heard from your fathers, whoever they may be, I have had much sorrow in my life and have already lost one lovely dwelling full of precious things. How happy I could be, here in my house, with even a third of
 85 my former estate, if those friends of mine were still alive who died long ago on the broad plains of Troy, so far from Argos where the horses graze!

And yet, though I miss them all and often grieve for them as I sit here in our halls till sorrow finds relief in tears and the tears cease to fall
 90 (for mourning is bleak and one soon tires of it), I do not mourn for that whole company, disconsolate as I am, so much as for one man among them, whose loss when I brood over it makes sleep and eating hateful to me. For of all the Achaeans who strove at Troy it was Odysseus who strove the hardest and achieved the most. Yet all that
 95 labour was to end in misery for him, and in a haunting sense of loss for me, so long has he been gone, leaving us in ignorance of whether he is dead or not; though I suppose his people are already mourning for him as dead – the old man Laertes, loyal Penelope, and Telemachus, whom he left a new-born baby in his home.'

— TELEMACHUS WEEPS

100 Menelaus' words stirred in Telemachus an overwhelming desire to weep, and when he heard about his father he let the tears roll down his cheeks to the ground and with both hands held up his purple cloak in front of his eyes. Menelaus recognized him and deliberated for a while within himself whether to wait for the young man to
 105 mention his father, or to put searching questions to him straight away.

— HELEN ENTERS

In the midst of his perplexity, **Helen came down** from her lofty perfumed room, **looking like Artemis with her golden distaff**. Adreste drew up for her an elegant chair; Alcippe brought a rug of the
 110 softest wool; and Phylo carried her silver work-basket, a gift from Alcandre, wife of Polybus, who lived in Egyptian Thebes, where the houses are furnished in more sumptuous style than anywhere else in the world. This man had given Menelaus two silver baths, a pair of three-legged cauldrons, and ten talents in gold; in addition his wife
 115 gave Helen beautiful gifts for herself, including a golden spindle and a basket that ran on wheels that were made of silver finished with a rim of gold. This was the basket that her lady, Phylo, brought in and put beside her. It was full of fine-spun yarn, and the spindle with its dark wool was laid across it. Helen sat down on the chair, with a
 120 footstool for her feet, and at once asked her husband about everything.

LINE 107

Helen came down Here comes **Helen** – the most beautiful woman in the world, and Menelaus' wife. The Trojan prince Paris carried her off to Troy (with the help of Aphrodite, goddess of love), and the Greek kings raised a huge army and sailed to get her back. That's what the ten-year Trojan War was fought over.

LINE 108

looking like Artemis with her golden distaff Helen is compared to the goddess Artemis. A *distaff*, mentioned here, is the stick that holds a bundle of wool ready for spinning.

‘Menelaus, favourite of Heaven, have we been told the names of these men who have come to our house? Shall I withhold the truth, or speak the truth? I feel that I must speak. For never in man or woman
 125 have I seen such a likeness before – I am lost in admiration. Surely this must be great-hearted Odysseus’ son Telemachus, whom his father left as a new-born baby in his home, when you Achaeans came to Troy with war in your hearts for my sake, shameless creature that I was!’

130 ‘Lady,’ replied the auburn-haired Menelaus, ‘you point out a resemblance I can see too. Odysseus’ feet were just the same, and so were his hands, the movement of his eyes, the shape of his head and the way his hair grew. Only a moment ago when I was talking of Odysseus as I remembered him, and saying how much he had done
 135 and suffered for my sake, the tears came streaming down his cheeks and he covered his face with his purple cloak.’

— PEISISTRATUS EXPLAINS

Nestor’s son Peisistratus now said, ‘Menelaus, son of Atreus, favourite of Heaven, leader of your people, you are right in supposing that my friend here is Odysseus’ son. But he is modest, and on a first
 140 visit like this he is too bashful to speak uninvited in front of you, whose conversation gives us as much pleasure as we would get from listening to a god. So **Nestor of Gerenia sent me with him for escort**, as Telemachus was anxious to see you, in case you might help with advice or suggest some line of action. For a son, when his
 145 father is gone, has many difficulties to cope with at home, especially if there is nobody to help him, as is the case with Telemachus, whose father is abroad and who has no other friends at home to protect him from injustice.’

‘Who would have thought it!’ exclaimed the auburn-haired Menelaus.
 150 ‘He was indeed a well-loved friend, the friend who undertook all those heroic tasks for my sake: and **now his son has come to my house!** I had meant to favour him above all others of our race when he came back, if an all-seeing Zeus had allowed the two of us to bring our good ships safely home across the sea. I’d have built him a house
 155 and transplanted him from Ithaca with all his possessions and his son and his people too. Yes, I’d have emptied one of the towns round here in my own dominions and given him a town in Argos to live in. We would have lived in the same country and met continually. Nor could anything have intervened to spoil our pleasure in each other’s
 160 company, till the darkness of death had swallowed us up. But **a jealous god must have thought otherwise**, and so ensured that that unhappy man was the only one who never reached his home.’

Menelaus’ words stirred in them all a longing for tears. Helen of

LINES 142–143

Nestor of Gerenia sent me with him for escort

Notice how a guest gets passed carefully from one household to the next – Nestor at Pylos has sent the boys on to Menelaus at Sparta. That’s hospitality (*xenia*) working as it should.

LINES 151–152

now his son has come to my house! A bond of guest-friendship (*xenia*) didn’t just last a lifetime – it got passed down the family. Because Menelaus and Odysseus were friends, Menelaus welcomes Odysseus’ son like one of his own.

LINES 160–161

a jealous god must have thought otherwise

People in Homer are quick to blame a ‘jealous god’ for their bad luck. They assumed the gods’ hand lay behind pretty much every misfortune.

Argos, child of Zeus, **broke down and wept**. Telemachus and
 165 Menelaus, son of Atreus, did the same. Nor could Nestor's son keep
 his eyes dry when he thought of his brother, the handsome
 Antilochus, whom the splendid son of the bright Dawn had killed.
 Remembering him he turned to Menelaus now.

'Menelaus, son of Atreus,' he said, 'whenever we talked of you at
 170 home and asked one another about you, Nestor my old father used
 always to speak of you as the wisest of men. Please be persuaded
 now by me, and contain your grief, if you possibly can, since I for
 one take no delight in weeping as I dine – and besides, it's almost
 dawn. Not that I think it wrong to shed a tear for any man who meets
 175 his fate and dies. Indeed, what other tribute can one pay to poor
 mortality than **a lock of hair from the head and a tear on the cheek**?
 I have my own dead too, a brother, not by any means the worst
 soldier in the Argive camp. You must have met Antilochus, though I
 never knew him myself, nor even saw him. They say he excelled
 180 above all others, a superb runner and a great fighter.'

'My friend,' replied the auburn-haired Menelaus, 'in saying all you
 said just now, you spoke and acted with the discretion of a much
 older man. You talk such good sense, you're the true son of your
 father. Good breeding cannot be hidden when a man's father has
 185 himself been blessed by Zeus at his birth and at his marriage, like
 Nestor. He was lucky from first to last through all his life, and is now
 serenely ageing in his home, with sons about him who combine good
 spearmanship and intelligence. Well, let us forget the tearful mood
 that we had fallen into, and turn our thoughts once more to supper,
 190 when they have poured some water on our hands. In the morning
 Telemachus and I shall have many important matters to discuss with
 each other.'

— HELEN'S DRUG

Asphalion, one of noble Menelaus' busy squires, poured water on
 their hands, and they helped themselves to the good food that was
 195 spread before them. **Helen, meanwhile, the child of Zeus, had had
 an idea**. Into the bowl in which their wine was mixed, she slipped **a
 drug that had the power of robbing grief** and anger of their sting
 and banishing all painful memories. No one that swallowed this,
 dissolved in wine, could shed a single tear that day, even for the
 200 death of his mother and father, or if they put his brother or his own
 son to the sword and he were there to see it done. It was one of
 many drugs which had been **given to the daughter of Zeus by an
 Egyptian woman**, Polydamna, the wife of Thon. The fertile soil of
 Egypt is very rich in herbs, many of which are beneficial in solution,
 205 though many are poisonous. And in medical knowledge Egyptians
 are supreme among men.

LINE 164

broke down and wept Everyone bursts into tears together for friends who died at Troy. Weeping openly, as a group, at a feast was a normal and accepted way of honouring the dead.

LINE 176

a lock of hair from the head and a tear on the cheek Cutting off a lock of hair and shedding tears were the proper way to mourn the dead. Peisistratus is grieving his own brother, **Antilochus**, who was killed at Troy.

LINES 195–196

Helen, meanwhile, the child of Zeus, had had an idea Helen was actually a daughter of Zeus – her mother was a mortal woman, Leda – which is why Homer calls her 'child of Zeus'.

LINES 196–197

a drug that had the power of robbing grief Helen slips a grief-numbing **drug** into the wine – later writers call it *nepenthe* – so the group can tell painful stories without breaking down.

LINES 202–203

given to the daughter of Zeus by an Egyptian woman The drug came from **Egypt**, 'very rich in herbs'. In the poem, Egypt is the far-off land of wonders and secret knowledge.

When Helen had dropped the drug into the wine and seen that their cups were filled, she turned to the company once more and said: ‘Menelaus, son of Atreus, favourite of the gods, and my young and noble guests, each of us has his good times, and each his bad times – Zeus in his omnipotence sees to that. Then let us sit at dinner in this hall and enjoy ourselves listening to each other’s stories. I have just the one for the occasion. It is, of course, beyond me to describe or even number all the daring feats of dauntless Odysseus. But here is **one marvellous exploit** which he had the nerve to conceive and carry through in Troy when you Achaeans were hard pressed.

— HELEN’S TALE OF ODYSSEUS

He disfigured himself with appalling lacerations and then, with dirty rags on his back, looking like a slave, he slunk into the broad streets of the enemy city. Disguised as a beggar he looked utterly different from the Odysseus of the camp by the ship. He made his way like this into the Trojan city, and was not detected by anyone. I was the only one who penetrated his disguise, but whenever I questioned him he was clever enough to evade me. However, when I bathed and anointed him, gave him some clothes to wear and solemnly swore that I would not disclose his name to the Trojans before he returned to the huts by the ships, he gave me full details of the Achaeans’ plans. And after killing a number of Trojans with his long sword, he got back to the Argive camp with a great deal of information.

The other women of Troy were loud in their lamentations, but I rejoiced, for I was already longing to go home again. I had suffered a change of heart, repenting **the blindness which Aphrodite sent me** when she brought me to Troy from my own dear country and made me forsake my daughter, my bridal chamber, and a husband who lacked nothing in intelligence and looks.’

— THE WOODEN HORSE

‘My dear,’ said the auburn-haired Menelaus, ‘your tale was well and truly told. I have wandered far in this world, I have looked into many hearts and heard the counsels of the great, but never have I set eyes on a man of such endurance as the indomitable Odysseus. **What he did inside the Wooden Horse** is another example of the man’s steadfastness and iron resolution. We sat inside it with the pick of the Argive army, waiting to bring havoc and slaughter on the Trojans, when you came up, prompted, I can only suppose, by some god who wished to give victory to Troy, for Prince Deiphobus came with you.

Three times you circled round our hollow lair, feeling the outside with your hands, and you called out the name of all the Argive captains in turn, altering your voice to mimic each man’s wife. Diomedes and I, who were sitting right in the middle with the good

LINE 215

one marvellous exploit Helen’s story is about Odysseus sneaking into enemy Troy dressed as a battered beggar. It shows off his trademark skill – the cunning and love of disguise the Greeks called *metis*.

LINE 231

the blindness which Aphrodite sent me Helen blames **Aphrodite**, the goddess of love, for the sudden madness that made her run off with Paris in the first place.

LINES 238–239

What he did inside the Wooden Horse This is the famous trick that finally won the war: the Greeks built a giant hollow wooden horse, hid their best fighters inside, and left it outside Troy as a fake ‘gift’. The Trojans dragged it inside their own walls – and that night the hidden Greeks climbed out.

Odysseus, heard you calling and were both tempted to jump up and come out or give an instant answer from within. But Odysseus held
250 us back and checked our impetuosity. The rest of the warriors stayed absolutely still, though Anticlus still wanted to give you some reply. But Odysseus clapped his great hands relentlessly on the man's mouth and so saved the whole army, holding him tight till Pallas Athene had induced you to go away.'

255 Here the thoughtful Telemachus addressed the King: 'Menelaus, son of Atreus, favourite of the gods, leader of the people, it only makes things worse to think that such qualities as these could not shield Odysseus from disaster. Even a heart of iron could not have saved him. But come, let us retire for the night to find pleasure in sweet
260 sleep.'

— NIGHTFALL AT SPARTA

At this Helen of Argos instructed her maids to put two bedsteads in the portico and to lay fine purple fleeces on them, and spread rugs over these, and some thick coverlets on top. Torch in hand, the maids went out of the hall and made the beds, to which a squire then
265 conducted the guests. And so the heroic Telemachus and Nestor's royal son spent the night in the forecourt of the palace, while Menelaus slept in his room at the back of the high buildings and the lady Helen of the long robes lay by his side.

As soon as Dawn appeared, fresh and rosy-fingered, Menelaus of the
270 loud war-cry rose from his bed and put on his clothes. He slung a sharp sword from his shoulder, bound a fine pair of sandals on his glistening feet and strode from his bedroom looking like a god. He went to Telemachus and, with a word of greeting, took a seat beside him. 'Telemachus,' he asked, 'what brought you here over the wide
275 seas to our pleasant land of Lacedaemon? Was it public business or private affairs? Tell me the truth.'

— MENELAUS QUESTIONS HIM

'Menelaus, son of Atreus, favourite of the gods, leader of your people,' the thoughtful Telemachus replied, 'I came to find out whether you could give me any news of my father. I am eaten out of house and
280 home, my rich estate has gone to ruin, and my palace is packed with a set of implacable enemies, who spend their days in the wholesale slaughter of my jostling sheep and shambling cattle with their twisted horns; and in competing for my mother's hand in all their brutal pride. I am here to plead with you in the hope that you will tell
285 me the truth about my father's unhappy end, if by any chance you witnessed it yourself or heard the story from some other wanderer like him. For if ever a man was born to suffer it was he. Do not soften your account out of pity or concern for my feelings, but faithfully

describe the scene that met your eyes. I beseech you, if ever my
 290 good father Odysseus, in the hard years of war at Troy, gave you his
 word and kept it, remember what he did, and tell me all you know.'

Auburn-haired Menelaus was hot with indignation. 'How disgraceful!' he cried. 'So the cowards want to creep into the brave man's bed? It's just **as if a deer had put her two little unweaned fawns to sleep in a**
 295 **mighty lion's den** and gone to range the high ridges and the grassy dales for pasture. Back comes the lion to his lair, and the fawns meet a grisly fate – as will the Suitors at Odysseus' hand. Once, in the pleasant isle of Lesbos I saw him stand up to Philomeleides in a wrestling-match and bring him down with a mighty throw which
 300 delighted all the Achaeans. By Father Zeus, Athene, and Apollo, that's the Odysseus I should like to see these Suitors meet. A swift death and a sorry wedding there would be for all!

— THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA

But to answer your appeal and the questions you asked me – I have no wish to deceive you or to put you off with evasive answers. On
 305 the contrary, I shall pass on to you without concealment or reserve every word that I heard myself from the infallible lips of **the Old Man of the Sea**. It happened in Egypt. I had been anxious for some time to get home, but **the gods delayed me there**, for I had omitted to make them the correct offerings, and they never allow one to forget their
 310 commandments. There is an island called Pharos in the rolling seas off the mouth of the Nile, a day's sailing for a ship with a roaring wind astern. In this island is a sheltered cove where sailors put in to draw their water from a well and afterwards launch their trim ships into the deep sea. It was here that the gods kept me for twenty days; and
 315 all that time there was never a sign of the off-shore breezes that speed ships out and into the open sea. All our supplies would have disappeared and the men's strength been exhausted, if one of the gods had not taken pity on me.

— EIDOTHEE'S PLAN

It was **Eidothee, the daughter of the mighty Proteus**, the Old Man of
 320 the Sea, who came to my rescue. The sight of me touched her heart deeply when she met me walking by myself, away from my men, whom the pangs of hunger scattered every day round the coast to angle with barbed hooks for fish. She approached me and said, 'Sir, are you an utter fool? Are you completely stupid? Or have you simply
 325 given up, and enjoy suffering so much that you allow yourself to be imprisoned all this time in the island and can find no means of escape though your men are growing weaker day by day?' To which I replied, 'I do not know what goddess you may be, but I assure you that I have no wish to linger here. I must have offended the immortals

LINES 294–295

as if a deer had put her two little unweaned fawns to sleep in a mighty lion's den A **simile** (an extended 'like...' comparison): the Suitors are like little fawns a deer has foolishly left asleep in a lion's den, with the lion – Odysseus – about to come home.

LINES 306–307

the Old Man of the Sea Proteus, the 'Old Man of the Sea', is a minor sea-god who knows everything and can't tell a lie – but he changes shape to get out of answering, so you have to catch him and hang on.

LINE 308

the gods delayed me there Menelaus got stranded in Egypt because he'd forgotten to make the proper offerings to the gods. It's a rule that runs through the poem: skip what you owe the gods, and your journey home grinds to a halt.

LINE 319

Eidothee, the daughter of the mighty Proteus **Eidothee** is a sea-nymph, Proteus' own daughter, who feels sorry for the stranded Menelaus and tells him the secret of how to trap her father.

330 who live in the wide heavens. You gods know everything; so tell me which of you it is that has confined me here and cut my voyage short; and tell me also how I can return home across the teeming seas.”

The fair goddess answered me at once: “Sir, I will tell you all you need
335 to know. This island is the haunt of that immortal seer, Proteus of Egypt, the Old Man of the Sea, who owes allegiance to Poseidon and knows the depth of all the seas. He is my father too, so people say. If you could contrive somehow to lie in wait and catch him, he would tell you about your journey and the distances to be covered, and
340 direct you home across the teeming seas. Not only that, favourite of Zeus, he will tell you, if you want to know, all that has happened in your palace, good or bad, while you have been away on your long weary travels.” “Will you,” I replied, “suggest a way by which we can waylay this ancient god? I am afraid that he might see me first, or
345 hear of my plans in advance and keep away. A god is not easily defeated by a mortal.” “I will tell you the plan in detail,” she replied. “When the sun has climbed to its highest point the sage old sea-god emerges from his native salt, hidden by the dark ripples stirred by the West Wind. Once out, he makes for his sleeping-place in the
350 shelter of a cave, and the seals, the children of the sea-nymphs, heave themselves up from the grey surf and go to sleep in herds around him, exhaling the pungent smell of the salt sea depths. Pick three men from your crew with care, the best you have on board, and at daybreak I will lead you to the spot and find you each a place to lie
355 in. But I must tell you how the old sorcerer proceeds. First he will go his round and count the seals; then, when he has counted them and seen that all are there, he will lie down among them like a shepherd with his flocks of sheep. Directly you see him settled, summon all your strength and courage and hold him down, however hard he
360 strains and struggles to escape. He will try all kinds of transformations, and **change himself into every sort of beast** on earth, and into water and blazing fire. But hold him fast and grip him all the tighter. And when he speaks at last and asks you questions in his natural shape, just as he was when you saw him lie down to rest,
365 relax your pressure, let the old man go, and ask him which god is making difficulties for you and how to reach your home along the teeming sea-ways.” After giving me this advice she disappeared into the billowing waves, and I went to where my ships were resting on the sand. My heart was dark and troubled as I walked back. When I
370 had reached the sea and found my ship, we prepared our supper. The solemn night descended on us and we lay down to sleep at the water’s edge.

As soon as Dawn appeared, fresh and rosy-fingered, I set out, with many prayers to heaven, along the shore of the far-flung sea,

LINE 361

change himself into every sort of beast

Proteus turns himself into a lion, a snake, a leopard, running water, blazing fire – anything to break free. This is where we get the word ‘protean’, meaning constantly changing.

375 accompanied by the three men from my crews whom I could most
 rely on in any emergency. Eidothee had vanished under the wide
 waters of the sea, but she now returned carrying the skins of four
 seals, all freshly flayed, as part of the plan to deceive her father. She
 scooped out lairs for us in the sandy beach and sat down to await our
 380 arrival. When we came up to her, she ensconced us in our places and
 covered each man with a skin. Our vigil might have been
 insupportable, because the vile smell of the fish-fed seals was
 peculiarly trying. Who would choose a monster of the deep for bed-
 fellow? However, the goddess herself thought of a miraculous remedy
 385 and came to our rescue with **some ambrosia, which she applied to
 each man's nostrils**. It was sweet-smelling stuff and killed the
 stench of the seals.

— CATCHING PROTEUS

So there we waited patiently right through the morning. Then
 multitudes of seals came up from the sea and lay down in rows along
 390 the beach to sleep. At midday the old man himself emerged, found his
 sleek seals already there, and went the rounds to make his count.
 Entirely unsuspecting of the fraud, he included us as the first four in
 his flock. Then he too lay down to sleep. With a shout, we charged
 and grabbed hold of him. But the old man's skill and cunning had not
 395 deserted him. He began by turning into a bearded lion and then into
 a snake, and after that a panther and a giant bear. He changed into
 running water too and a great tree in leaf. But we set our teeth and
 clung on grimly.

When at last the old man who knew so many tricks grew weary, he
 400 broke into speech and began asking me questions. "Tell me now,
 Menelaus," he said, "which of the gods conspired with you to waylay
 and capture me? And why did you need to do it?" "Old man," I
 answered, "why are you prevaricating? You know as well as I do how
 long I have been a prisoner on this island, unable to escape and
 405 growing weaker every day. So tell me now, in your divine
 omniscience, which god it is that has confined me here and
 interrupted my journey; and tell me also how I can reach my home
 across the teeming deep." "Before embarking," said the old man in
 reply, "you should have offered rich sacrifice to Zeus and all the other
 410 gods, if you wished to get home fast across the wine-dark sea. It is
 not your fate to reach your own country and see your friends and
 fine house again until you have sailed the heaven-fed waters of the
 Nile once more and made ceremonial offerings to the everlasting
 gods who live in the broad sky. When that is done, the gods will let
 415 you start this voyage that you have set your heart on." Now when I
 heard him tell me to make the long and weary trip over the misty
 seas to Egypt once again, my heart sank. Nevertheless I found my

LINES 385–386

**some ambrosia, which she applied to each
 man's nostrils** Ambrosia is the gods' own
 food, and it smells wonderful – here Eidothee
 dabs some under the men's noses to cover
 the reek of the seal-skins they're hiding in.

voice and made him this reply: “Old man, I shall do exactly what you advise. But there is something else I wish you to tell me. Did all of my countrymen whom Nestor and I left behind when we sailed from Troy reach home in safety with their ships, or were there any who came to grief in some accident at sea, or died in their friends’ arms though the fighting was over?” “Son of Atreus,” he replied, “why do you question me on these matters? You have no need to know or to probe my understanding. I warn you that your tears will flow soon enough when you have listened to my tale. For many were killed, though many too were spared. Yet only two of the commanders of your armies lost their lives when homeward bound – I need not speak of the fighting, since you took part in that yourself – but there is a third who, though still alive, is a prisoner somewhere in the vastness of the seas.

— THE FATES OF THE GREEKS

Ajax, to take him first, was wrecked in his long-oared ships by Poseidon, who drove him on to the great cliff of Gyrae and then rescued him from the surf. In fact, he would have evaded his doom, in spite of Athene’s enmity, if in his blind folly he had not talked so arrogantly, boasting that he had escaped from the hungry jaws of the sea in defiance of the gods. His loud-voiced blasphemy came to the ears of Poseidon, who seized his trident in his powerful hands, struck the Gyraean rock and split it into two. One half stood firm, but the fragment he had severed, where Ajax had been resting when the blind impulse took him, crashed into the sea and carried him with it into the vast and rolling depths, where he drank the salt water and drowned.

— THE MURDER OF AGAMEMNON

But your brother Agamemnon contrived somehow to circumvent his fate, and slipped away in his great ships with the goddess Hera’s help. Yet when he had nearly reached the heights of Cape Malea, a hurricane caught him, and with heavy groans he found himself driven over the teeming seas towards the borders of the land where Thyestes in the old days and now his son Aegisthus had their home. But in due course there came the chance of a safe return even from there. The gods turned the winds round and home they came. **Agamemnon set foot on the land of his fathers** with a happy heart, and as he touched it kissed his native earth. The warm tears rolled down his cheeks, he was so glad to see his country again. But his arrival was observed by a spy in a watch-tower, whom the cunning Aegisthus had posted there with the promise of two talents of gold for his services. This man had been on the lookout for a year in case the King should land unannounced, slip by, and himself launch an attack. He went straight to the palace and informed the usurper.

LINE 432

Ajax This is the ‘lesser’ **Ajax** (not the famous huge warrior of the *Iliad*). He drowned on the way home because he boasted he’d survived without the gods’ help – the sort of over-the-top arrogance the Greeks called **hubris**, which the gods always punish.

LINE 452

Agamemnon set foot on the land of his fathers Here’s the full story of **Agamemnon**: the leader of the Greek army sailed home safely from Troy, only to be murdered at a welcome-home feast by **Aegisthus**, the man who’d moved in with his wife Clytemnestra while he was away. This grim homecoming is the dark shadow hanging over the whole poem.

460 Then Aegisthus devised a clever trap. He selected twenty of the best soldiers from the town, left them in ambush in one part of the palace and, after ordering a banquet to be prepared in another part, set out in a chariot to bring home the King, with his heart full of ugly thoughts. Agamemnon, never guessing that he was going to his
 465 doom, came up with him from the coast, and Aegisthus feasted him, then killed him as a man might fell an ox at its manger. Not a single one of the King's following was left, nor of Aegisthus' company either. They were killed in the palace, to a man."

— NEWS OF ODYSSEUS

This was his story, and it broke my heart. I sat down on the sands and
 470 wept. I had no further use for life, no wish to see the sunshine any more. But when I had had enough of tears and writhing on the sands, the old Sea Prophet spoke to me again. "Menelaus," he said, "you have wept too long. Enough of this incontinent grief, which gains us nothing. Better make every effort to get back to your own land as
 475 quickly as you can. For either you will find Aegisthus still alive or **Orestes will have forestalled you by killing him**, and you may be in time for the funeral feast." At these words, in spite of my distress, my heart and spirits were cheered. "You have accounted for two," I said. "But who is the third, the one who is still alive but a prisoner
 480 somewhere in the vastness of the seas? Or is he dead by now? I wish to hear, whatever sorrow it may cause me." "The third," said Proteus, "**is Odysseus, Laertes' son**, whose home is in Ithaca. I caught a glimpse of him on an island, in the Nymph Calypso's home, with tears streaming down his cheeks. She keeps him captive there, for without
 485 a ship and crew to carry him so far across the sea it is impossible for him to reach his home. And now, Menelaus, favourite of Zeus, hear your own destiny. It is not your fate to die in Argos where the horses graze. Instead, the immortals will send you to **the Elysian Fields** at the world's end, to join auburn-haired Rhadamanthus in the land
 490 where living is made easy for mankind, where no snow falls, no strong winds blow and there is never any rain, but day after day the West Wind's tuneful breeze comes in from the Ocean to refresh its people. This is because you are the husband of Helen and, in the eyes of the gods, son-in-law to Zeus."

495 The old man finished, and sank into the heaving waters of the sea, while I went off towards the ships with my heroic comrades, my heart in a turmoil. When I had reached the sea and found my ship we prepared our supper. The solemn night descended on us and we lay down to sleep on the surf-beaten shore. As soon as Dawn appeared,
 500 fresh and rosy-fingered, we first of all ran our fleet down into the good salt water and put the masts and sails on board our trim ships. The crews then climbed in, found their places at the oars, and struck

LINE 476

Orestes will have forestalled you by killing him **Orestes** is Agamemnon's son. He grew up and killed Aegisthus to avenge his

murdered father – the classic example of a son doing his duty.

LINE 482

is Odysseus, Laertes' son This is the answer Telemachus' whole journey was for: Proteus reveals that Odysseus is still alive, stuck on the island of the nymph Calypso. The very next book, Book 5, picks the story up right there.

LINE 488

the Elysian Fields Proteus promises Menelaus a special fate: instead of dying, he'll be taken to the **Elysian Fields**, a kind of paradise at the edge of the world kept for a lucky few – his reward for being married to Helen, a daughter of Zeus.

the grey surf rhythmically with their blades. And so I returned to the heaven-fed waters of the Nile, where I moored, made the proper ritual offerings, and after appeasing the deathless gods **built a mound of earth so that the glory of Agamemnon would last for ever**. When all this was done I set out for home, and the immortals sent me a favourable wind and brought me quickly back to my own beloved land. And now, my friend, do stay on in my palace. Stay for twelve days or so, and then I'll send you off in style. You shall have glorious gifts from me – three horses and a splendid chariot. I'll give you a lovely cup as well to remind you of me all your life when you make drink-offerings to the immortal gods.'

— THE PARTING GIFT

'Son of Atreus,' the thoughtful Telemachus replied, 'do not keep me here on a lengthy visit. It is true that your tales and talk so delight me that I could easily stop with you for a year and never feel homesick for Ithaca or my parents. But my friends must already be tired of waiting for me in sacred Pylos; and now you prolong my stay. As for the gift you offer me, please make it a keepsake I can carry. Horses I will not take to Ithaca. I'd rather leave them here to grace your own stables. For your kingdom is a broad plain, where clover and galingale grow in plenty, with wheat and rye and broad-eared white barley; whereas in Ithaca there is no room for horses to run, nor any meadows at all. It is a pasture-land for goats and more attractive to my eyes than the sort of land where horses thrive. None of the islands that slope down to the sea is rich in meadows or suitable for chariots, Ithaca least of all.'

These remarks made Menelaus of the loud war-cry smile. He patted Telemachus with his hand and replied: 'I like the way you talk, dear boy: one can see that you have the right blood in your veins. Very well, I will change my gift – it is easily done. You shall have the loveliest and most precious of the treasures that my palace holds. I'll give you a mixing-bowl of wrought metal. It is solid silver with a rim of gold round the top, and was **made by Hephaestus himself**. I had it from Phaedimus, the heroic King of Sidon, when I stayed at his palace on my journey home. That is the present I should like you to take.'

— BACK IN ITHACA

During their talk, the guests began to arrive at the great King's palace. They drove up their own sheep and brought heart-warming wine; their bread was sent in for them by their elegantly dressed wives. This was how they prepared for their banquet in Menelaus' hall. In front of Odysseus' palace, the Suitors in their usual high and mighty way were once again amusing themselves with throwing the

LINES 505–506

built a mound of earth so that the glory of Agamemnon would last for ever Menelaus

builds a burial mound for his murdered brother so his fame (*kleos*) will live on. Honouring the dead and keeping their name alive was a sacred duty.

LINE 534

made by Hephaestus himself Menelaus' parting present is a silver bowl made by **Hephaestus**, the blacksmith god – so it's a treasure of divine craftsmanship. Giving a departing guest a fine gift sealed the friendship between two households.

discus and the javelin on the levelled ground. Antinous and the
545 handsome Eurymachus, the boldest spirits in the gang and its
acknowledged leaders, were sitting by, when Phronius' son Noemon
came up to them with a question for Antinous. 'Have we any idea,' he
asked him, 'when Telemachus comes back from sandy Pylos, or don't
we know? He has gone off with my ship; and I happen to need it, to
550 cross over to Elis, where the fields are big and I keep twelve brood
mares, with their sturdy mules, not yet weaned or broken in. I want
to drive one off and train him.'

His news filled them with consternation, for they had no idea that
Telemachus had gone to Pylos, but thought he was somewhere in the
555 neighbourhood on the farm, among the flocks perhaps, or with the
swineherd. Antinous, Eupheithes' son, turned to him and said, 'I want
the truth. When did he leave and what young men went with him?
Did he take men from the town or did he make up a crew from his
own serfs and servants, as he easily might? And tell me this too, so
560 that I can be quite clear. Did he use force and go off with your ship
against your wishes? Or did you give it willingly when he asked?'

'I gave it to him,' said Noemon, 'of my own accord. What would
anyone do when asked a favour by a man of his standing with so
much trouble on his mind? It would be very hard to refuse him. As for
565 the young men who went with him, they're the best in the land next
to ourselves. For captain, they had Mentor. I saw him embark – him or
some god. Anyhow it was exactly like him. And that's what puzzles
me. I saw the good Mentor here, only yesterday at dawn. Yet he
certainly boarded my ship for Pylos that night.'

— THE AMBUSH PLOTTED

570 With this, Noemon went back to his father's house, leaving the two
proud lords appalled and furious. They made the rest leave their
games and sit down together, while Antinous, Eupheithes' son, held
forth and gave vent to his fury. His heart was seething with black
passion, and his eyes were like points of flame. 'Damnation take it!'
575 he cried out. 'What a coup Telemachus has had the audacity to bring
off – this expedition that we swore would come to nothing. With all
of us against him, the young puppy calmly sets out, after picking the
best men in the place and getting them to launch a ship for him! He
is going to give us still more trouble. I hope Zeus clips his wings
580 before he reaches manhood! However, give me a fast ship and a crew
of twenty, and I'll lie up for him in the straits between Ithaca and the
bluffs of Samos, and catch him on his way. And a grim ending there'll
be to this sea-trip of his in search of his father!'

The others welcomed the scheme and told him to carry it out. They
585 then got up and moved off to the palace. Before long Penelope heard

about the plot that her Suitors were hatching. It was Medon, the herald, who let her know. For while they were working out the plot in the courtyard, he had been eavesdropping outside and heard all they said. He set off straight away through the palace to tell Penelope.

590 Immediately he crossed the threshold of her room she said: 'Herald, what errand have the young lords given you? Is it to tell King Odysseus' maids to drop their work and prepare them a feast? I wish they would give up their courtship and never gather here again! Oh how I hate their pursuit of me and the way they swarm around!'

— PENELOPE WARNED

595 'My Queen,' replied the fair-minded Medon, 'I only wish that this were the worst of your troubles. Your Suitors are planning a far greater and more shocking crime. Zeus grant that they may not succeed! They are all set now on assassinating Telemachus with their sharp swords as he comes home – he has gone to holy Pylos and
600 Lacedaemon to seek news of his father.'

When Penelope heard this **her knees trembled and her heart grew faint**. For a long time she found it impossible to speak; her eyes filled with tears; the words stuck in her throat. At length she managed to say: 'Tell me, herald, why has my son gone? There was no call
605 whatever for him to venture on these fast ships that sailors use like chariots, to drive across the wide seas. Does he wish his very name to be forgotten in the world?' The astute Medon replied: 'I do not know whether some god urged him on or his own feelings suggested this journey to Pylos, but his purpose was to find out about his
610 father's return, or to learn what end he met.'

Medon went off through the palace. Penelope was overwhelmed by the anguish that racked her. She could not even bear to sit on one of the many chairs in her apartments, but sank down on the threshold of her lovely room, weeping bitterly, while all the maids of her
615 household, young and old, stood round her sobbing.

'Listen, my friends,' she said between her sobs. 'Is there a woman of my time whom Zeus has treated worse than me? I had a husband years ago, the best and bravest of the Danaans, a lion-hearted man, famous from Hellas to the heart of Argos. That husband I have lost.
620 And now the whirlwinds have snatched my darling son from the house without a word.'

'Dear lady,' said Eurycleia, the fond old nurse, 'whether you kill me with the cruel knife or let me live on in the palace, I cannot hold my tongue. I knew the whole thing; it was I who gave him bread and
625 wine and all he asked for. But he made me solemnly promise not to tell you for a dozen days or till you missed him yourself and found

LINES 601–602

her knees trembled and her heart grew faint

Fear striking someone in the knees is Homer's stock way of showing they're terrified – the Greeks imagined your strength and nerve as living in your limbs.

that he had started. He didn't want the tears to spoil your lovely cheeks. Come, go and wash and put on some fresh clothes. Then go to your room upstairs with your waiting-women and pray to Athene, Daughter of Zeus. She may still save him, even from the jaws of death.'

In this way Eurycleia hushed Penelope's sobs and cleared her eyes of tears. So the Queen Penelope, when she had washed and changed her clothes, went to her room upstairs with the waiting-women, filled a basket with sacrificial grains, and prayed to Athene: 'Hear me, Daughter of Zeus who bears the aegis! If ever Odysseus in his wisdom burnt the fat thighs of a heifer or sheep to honour you in his palace, **remember his offerings now**, save my dear son for me, and guard him from harm at the hands of these brutal Suitors.'

At the end of her prayer she uttered a great cry. The goddess heard her petition, but in the shadowy hall the Suitors broke into uproar. One of the callous youths called out, 'It sounds as if our much-courted Queen is going to give us a wedding. Little does she know that her son's death has been arranged.' This was their boastful way, though it was they who little guessed what had really been arranged.

Antinous, however, rose up and silenced them. 'Are you mad?' he cried. 'None of this boasting, or somebody may go inside and tell. Keep your mouths shut now and let us carry out the plan we all agreed on.' Without further ado he picked the twenty best men, and they left for their ship and the sea-shore, where they began by running the black vessel down into deep water, then put the mast and sail on board, fixed the oars in their leather slings, and spread the white sail out. Meanwhile their eager squires had brought down their armour. They moored the boat well out in the water and came on shore, where they had their supper and waited for evening to fall.

Wise Penelope, meanwhile, lay there in her upper room, without touching food or drink, wondering whether her innocent son would escape death or fall a victim to her brutal Suitors. But at last a comforting sense of drowsiness overcame her; she sank back, she fell asleep, and all her limbs relaxed.

— A DREAM OF COMFORT

Athene of the flashing eyes now had another idea. **She made a phantom**, in the likeness of a woman, Iphthime, another of the daughters of the great Icarius, who had married Eumelus and lived in Pherae. She sent it to the palace to save the unhappy and weeping Penelope from her grief and tears. The phantom came into her bedroom by the strap that worked the bolt, stood by her head and spoke to her: 'Are you asleep, Penelope, worn out with grief? The gods, who live such easy lives themselves, do not mean you to weep and be distressed, for it is settled that your son shall come home

LINE 637

remember his offerings now Penelope reminds Athene of all the sacrifices Odysseus once made to her. This is how prayer worked for the Greeks: you remind the god of your past gifts, so they owe you a favour now.

LINES 660–661

She made a phantom Athene sends a **phantom** – a ghostly dream-image – to comfort Penelope in her sleep. In Homer the gods often reach people through dreams like this.

safe. The boy has done no wrong in their eyes.'

- 670 'Sister, what brings you here?' Penelope replied **out of her sweet sleep at the Gate of Dreams**. 'You are not used to visiting us, living as you do so far away. And you tell me to forget my sorrows and all the anxieties that torment me. As though I had not already lost the best and bravest of our race, my noble lion-hearted husband, famous from
675 Hellas to the heart of Argos! And now my beloved son, for whom I grieve even more than for his father, has sailed away in a great ship – a child like him, untrained for action or debate. I tremble for him when I think what they may do to him where he has gone or what may happen to him on the sea. He has so many enemies plotting
680 against him and thirsting for his blood before he can reach home.'

'Be brave and conquer these wild fears,' said the shadowy wraith in reply. 'He has gone with such escort as any man might pray to have beside him – Pallas Athene in all her power. And it is she who in pity for your grief has sent me here to bring you this message.'

- 685 'If you are really divine,' the wise Penelope said in reply, 'and have heard the voice of a god, tell me about that other unfortunate one too. Is he alive somewhere and can he see the sunshine still; or is he dead by now and down in Hades' Halls?' 'Of Odysseus, whether alive or dead,' said the shadowy wraith, 'I will not give you any news at all.
690 It does no good to utter empty words.'

- With that, it slipped past the bolt by the door-post and into the breath of the wind. But Icarius' daughter, waking with a start, drew a warm sense of comfort from the vividness of this dream that had flown to her in the dark of the night. Meanwhile the Suitors had
695 embarked and were sailing the high seas with murder for Telemachus in their hearts. Out in the open strait, midway between Ithaca and the rugged coast of Samos, lies the rocky isle of Asteris, which, small as it is, can offer ships a harbour with two entrances. It was here that the Achaean lords set their ambush for Telemachus.

LINES 670–671

out of her sweet sleep at the Gate of Dreams

The 'Gate of Dreams' is Homer's image for the misty border between sleeping and waking, the place dreams come through when the gods send them.

