

8

The Phaeacian Games

Book Eight

The morning after his supplication, Odysseus is feasted, honoured and set to compete among the Phaeacians. Three times the blind bard Demodocus sings, and three times the songs cut close to the bone – until the hero who has hidden his name can hide his tears no longer, and the king asks him at last to say who he is.

NAME

SET

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BOOK EIGHT

The Phaeacian Games

Still among the Phaeacians: the assembly, the games and the feast where Demodocus sings, and Odysseus, moved to tears, comes at last to the brink of revealing himself.

WHAT HAPPENS

- Alcinous calls an assembly, orders a ship made ready, and summons the blind bard Demodocus to entertain his guest.
- Demodocus sings of the quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles at Troy; Odysseus weeps and hides his tears, noticed only by the king.
- The Phaeacians hold athletic games; stung by Euryalus' taunt, Odysseus makes a huge throw of the discus and challenges them all.
- Demodocus sings the comic tale of how Hephaestus trapped the lovers Ares and Aphrodite; the young princes dance.
- Loaded with parting gifts and bathed, Odysseus thanks Nausicaa, asks for the song of the Wooden Horse, weeps again, and Alcinous asks him at last to tell his name and his story.

WHO WE MEET

Odysseus

the weeping guest who shows his quality but not yet his name

Alcinous

the king who reads his guest's grief and draws out his tale

Demodocus

the blind bard whose songs move Odysseus to tears

Euryalus

the young Phaeacian whose taunt provokes the great throw

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Book 8 is the poem's great meditation on song and the poet: Demodocus' three lays, and Odysseus weeping at his own story, ask what poetry does to those who hear it. Note too the display of Phaeacian xenia and luxury, the comic tale of Ares and Aphrodite, and the way Odysseus reveals his quality while still concealing his name. **Prescribed:** examined in context – know it closely.

The Phaeacian Games

— THE ASSEMBLY GATHERS

As soon as Dawn appeared, fresh and rosy-fingered, the mighty Alcinous left his bed and conducted Odysseus, favourite of Zeus, **sacker of cities**, who had risen at the same time, to the place by the ships where the Phaeacians held their assemblies; and there they sat
 5 down side by side on seats of polished marble. In the meantime Pallas Athene, pursuing her plans for the greathearted Odysseus' return, went through the town disguised as a herald from wise Alcinous. She went up to each of the citizens and gave them this message:

10 'Captains and Counsellors of the Phaeacians, follow me to the assembly, where you will hear about the stranger who has just arrived at our wise King's palace after being driven to wander over the seas; he looks like an immortal god.'

These words acted as inspiration and encouragement to them all. In
 15 a short time not only the seats but all parts of the meeting-place were filled by the throng that crowded in; and many eyes were fixed in admiration on Laertes' keen-witted son. Athene invested his head and shoulders with a divine beauty, and made him seem taller and broader, so that he would inspire the whole Phaeacian people not
 20 only with affection but with fear and respect, and might emerge successfully from the many tests they later subjected him to. When they had all assembled, Alcinous rose to address them:

'Captains and Counsellors of the Phaeacians, listen while I tell you what is in my mind. The stranger at my side – I do not know his
 25 name, nor whether he has come from Eastern or from Western lands – has in the course of his travels come to my palace. He asks for his passage home and begs us to assure him this favour. In accordance with our custom, let us make immediate arrangements to escort him. For there has never been a time when anyone who has come to
 30 my house has had to complain of being kept here for lack of escort. So let us run a black ship down into the friendly sea for her maiden voyage, and from the town pick fifty-two young oarsmen who have proved their excellence. This crew, when they have all fixed their oars in place, may leave the ship and come on to my house, where
 35 they can quickly share a meal: I will make ample provision for all. These are my orders for the ship's company.

'As for the rest, I invite you who are sceptred princes to my palace to entertain our visitor indoors. Let no one refuse. And summon our divine bard, Demodocus; a god has given him the special gift of
 40 delighting our ears with his song, at whatever point he chooses to

LINE 3

sacker of cities 'Sacker of cities' is one of Odysseus' stock nicknames (an **epithet**) – a nod to his part in the fall of Troy.

begin.'

When Alcinous had finished speaking he led the way, and the princes followed him. His squire set out in search of the divine minstrel, and meanwhile fifty-two young men were chosen and made their way, as

45 he had directed, to the shore of the barren sea. When they reached the ship at the edge of the sea, they dragged the black vessel into deep water, put the mast and sails on board, fixed the oars in their leather loops, all shipshape, and hauled up the white sail. Then they moored her well out in the water, and proceeded to the great palace
50 of their wise King, where the galleries and the courts, as well as the apartments themselves, were filled with a throng of people, both young and old. Alcinous sacrificed for them a dozen sheep, eight white-tusked boars, and two shambling oxen. These they flayed and made ready for the table, and so prepared a heart-warming feast.

— THE BARD DEMODOCUS

55 The squire now came, leading their favourite bard, **whom the Muse loved above all others**, though she had mingled good and evil in her gifts, robbing him of his eyes but granting him the gift of sweet song. Pontonous placed a silver-studded chair for him in the centre of the company, with its back to one of the great pillars, and the
60 squire hung his tuneful lyre on a peg just above his head and showed him how to lay his hand upon it. At his side he put a handsome table, with a bowl of bread and a cup of wine to drink when the spirit moved him. Then they all helped themselves to the delicious food that was spread before them.

65 When they had satisfied their appetite and thirst, the Muse set the bard to sing the famous deeds of heroes, that part of a lay well known by then throughout the world, **the Quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles** son of Peleus. It told how these two had clashed in a violent altercation at a festival of the gods, though Agamemnon King of men
70 was secretly delighted to see the Achaean leaders at loggerheads, because their quarrel fulfilled the prophecy that Phoebus Apollo had made to him in **sacred Pytho** when he crossed the marble threshold to consult the oracle. Those events were the beginning of the great wave of disasters that was rolling towards Trojan and Danaans alike,
75 by the will of mighty Zeus.

— ODYSSEUS WEEPS

This was the theme of the famous minstrel's lay, but Odysseus with his sturdy hands drew his purple cloak over his head and hid his handsome face, as he was ashamed to be seen weeping by the Phaeacians. Whenever the glorious minstrel paused in his song, he
80 wiped the tears away and, removing the cloak from his head, reached for his two-handled cup and made libations to the gods. But

LINES 55–56

whom the Muse loved above all others

Demodocus is the Phaeacians' *bard* – a professional singer of tales. He's blind, and Homer says the **Muse** (the goddess of poetry) gave him the gift of song in exchange for his sight. Singers like this performed from memory, exactly the way Homer's own poems were first performed.

LINE 67

the Quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles Bards sang episodes from the huge store of Trojan War tales. This one – a bitter row between Odysseus and **Achilles** (the mightiest Greek warrior) – comes from that wider saga, not from the *Iliad* we have.

LINE 72

sacred Pytho **Pytho** is the old name for **Delphi**, the most famous oracle in Greece, where **Apollo** gave out prophecies through his priestess.

whenever Demodocus started singing again, encouraged by the Phaeacian lords, who were enjoying the tale, Odysseus once more hid his face and sobbed. He managed to conceal his tears from everyone except Alcinous. But the King, sitting next to Odysseus, felt and noticed his distress and heard his heavy sighs. He spoke up before long and said to the sea-loving Phaeacians:

— ON TO THE GAMES

‘Captains and Counsellors of the Phaeacians, listen to me. We have eaten together and listened to the lyre, that goes with good food, to our heart’s content. Let us go outside now and try skills at various sports, so that when our guest has reached his home he can tell his friends that at boxing, wrestling, jumping and running there is no one who can beat us.’

With these words he led the way and was followed by the others. The squire hung Demodocus’ tuneful lyre on its peg, took the bard’s hand and guided him out of the palace, in the wake of the Phaeacian nobility as they set out to see the games. They all made for the place of assembly and were followed there by a vast crowd.

There was no lack of fine young men to compete – Acroneos, no Ocyalus, Elatreus, Nauteus, Prymneus, Anchialus, Eretmeus, Ponteus, Proreus, Thoon, and Anabesineos, Amphialus son of Polyneus and grandson of Tecton, and Euryalus too, the son of Naubolus, who looked a match for Ares the man-killing War-god and was the most handsome and strongest of all the Phaeacians next to the peerless Laodamas. Alcinous’ three sons, Laodamas, Halius and godlike Clytoneus, also took part.

The first event was a race. They ran at full speed from the start, raising a cloud of dust on the track as they flew along. By far the quickest was the excellent Clytoneus, who shot ahead, and when he reached the crowd at the post he had left the rest behind by as much as the width of a fallow field that mules can plough in a day. Next came the painful sport of wrestling; and here it was Euryalus’ turn to beat all the champions. Amphialus won the jump; at throwing the discus, Elatreus was by far the best; and at boxing, Laodamas, Alcinous’ handsome son. When they had all enjoyed the games, it was Laodamas who made a suggestion to the rest:

— A CHALLENGE

‘Come, friends, and let us ask our visitor here if he’s an expert in any form of sport. He is well enough built: look at his thighs and legs, look at his hands, and that great neck – all that great strength, and he’s not so old, either, just broken down by hardships. I tell you, there’s nothing like the sea to break a man, however strong.’

LINE 111

a fallow field that mules can plough in a day

Homer often measures distance in a rough, farmer’s way like this – by how far a team of mules could plough in a day – rather than in exact units.

‘Laodamas,’ said Euryalus, ‘I like your idea. Go and have a word with the man yourself and challenge him.’

When he heard this Alcinous’ handsome son made his way to the
 125 centre and addressed Odysseus: ‘Come, sir, won’t you take part in our games, if you’re good at any sport? It is only right that you should be an athlete, for nothing makes a man so famous during his lifetime as what he can achieve with his hands and feet. Come along and have a try, casting your cares aside; for it won’t be long before you are off
 130 on your journey. Your ship is launched already and the crew are standing by.’

‘Laodamas,’ the nimble-witted Odysseus answered him, ‘why are you trying to provoke me with your challenges, you and your friends? I am too sick at heart to think of games. I have been through many
 135 bitter and exhausting experiences, and all I seek now is my passage home, which is why I am sitting here in your assembly to plead help from your King and your whole nation.’

— EURYALUS’ TAUNT

Euryalus now interposed and insulted him to his face: ‘You are quite right, sir. I should never have taken you for an athlete, good at any of
 140 the games men play. You are more like a skipper of a merchant crew, who spends his life on a hulking tramp, worrying about his outward freight, or keeping a sharp eye on the cargo when he comes home with his extortionate profits. No: one can see you are no athlete.’

With a black look the nimble-witted Odysseus retorted: ‘That, sir,
 145 was an unbecoming speech; you strike me as a presumptuous fool. And it shows that the gods do not grace men equally with the attributes of good looks, brains and eloquence. A man may be quite insignificant to look at but the gods can grace his words with charm: people watch him with delight as he speaks unfalteringly with
 150 winning modesty. He stands out in the gathering and is stared at like a god when he passes through the town. Another may be as handsome as an immortal, yet quite deficient in the graceful art of speech. Now you, sir, are distinguished in appearance – the gods themselves could not improve it – but you are short of brains.

155 ‘You have stirred me to anger with your inept remarks. I am no novice at sport, as you suggest, but consider myself to have been in the first rank so long as I was able to rely on the strength of my youth. But as things are, all the misfortunes and hardships I have endured in warfare and in fighting my way through hostile seas
 160 weigh heavily upon me. All the same, and in spite of what I have gone through, I’ll try my hand at the sports. For your words have stung me and put me on my mettle.’

LINE 140

a skipper of a merchant crew This is meant as a jibe. To a nobleman, being called a common trader – someone who sails about chasing profits – was an insult; aristocrats looked down on trade and prized skill in sport and war instead.

— THE GREAT THROW

With this he leapt to his feet and, not even troubling to remove his cloak, picked up the biggest discus of all, a huge weight, more
 165 massive by far than the Phaeacians normally used. With one swing he launched it from his mighty hand, and the stone hummed on its course. The Phaeacians, lords of the sea and champions of the long oar, cowered down as it hurtled through the air; and flying smoothly from his hand it overshot the marks of all the other throws. Athene,
 170 pretending to be one of the crowd, marked the distance, and spoke out.

‘Look, sir,’ she called, ‘even a blind man could pick out your peg, by feeling with his hands. The others are all in a bunch, but yours stands right out in the front. In this event at any rate you have nothing to fear.
 175 None of the Phaeacians will make as good a throw, let alone a better.’

Her words delighted the much-enduring Odysseus, who was happy to find a real friend in the arena and now addressed the Phaeacians with a lighter heart: ‘Now beat that, you young men! But presently I
 180 expect to send along another just as far or even further. And since you have thoroughly provoked me, come out, if any of you like the idea and have the spirit, come out and take me on – at boxing, wrestling, or even running, I don’t care which. Laodamas, whose guest I am, is the only one among you all whom I except, for who
 185 would fight his host? Only a fool or a nonentity would challenge the friend who is entertaining him in a strange country. That would be to spite himself. But of the rest of you, there is no one I’ll back away from and no one I’ll consider beneath me. I’m ready to meet and match myself against all comers.

190 ‘I am not bad at any kind of manly sport. I can handle the polished bow well and I would be the first to pick off my man with an arrow in the enemy ranks, however many of my side might be standing by and shooting at the enemy. When we Achaeans had to use our bows in the fighting at Troy, **Philoctetes was the only archer better than**
 195 **me**. Of all the others now alive and eating their bread on the face of the earth, I claim to be by far the best, though I should not care to compete with the men of the past, with Heracles, for instance, or **Eurytus of Oechalia**, who as bowmen even challenged the gods. In fact that was why the great Eurytus came to a sudden end and never
 200 lived to see old age in his home, but was killed by Apollo, whom he had offended by challenging him to a match. As for the javelin, I can throw it further than anyone else can shoot an arrow. It is only in running that I am afraid some of you might outstrip me. I was too badly knocked about by the rough seas, for in my raft my stores gave
 205 out, and as a result my legs have lost their power.’

LINES 194–195

Philoctetes was the only archer better than me Philoctetes was the finest archer in the Greek army at Troy – he carried the great bow of Heracles.

LINE 198

Eurytus of Oechalia Heracles (the famous strongman) and **Eurytus** were legendary archers of an earlier age. Eurytus was so proud of his skill that he challenged Apollo himself to a shooting match – and the god killed him for it. Challenging a god like this is the kind of arrogance the Greeks called **hubris**.

— ALCINOUS REPLIES

Odysseus finished speaking, and they stood still and silent, leaving it to Alcinous to reply.

‘My friend,’ said the King, ‘we don’t resent what you say – you want to prove your natural prowess – you were angry at the way this man came up and insulted you in the competition. No one who knew how to talk sense would have belittled your prowess in this way. But listen now to what I have to say. When you are banqueting in your own home with your wife and your children beside you, and the talk turns to the Phaeacian prowess, I want you to be able to tell your noble friends that Zeus has given us too certain skills, which we have possessed from our forefathers’ time to the present day. Though our boxing and wrestling are not outstanding, we can run fast and we are first-rate seamen. But the things in which we take a perennial delight are **the feast, the lyre, the dance**, frequent changes of clothes, hot baths and our beds.’

‘So forward now, my champion dancers, and show us your steps, so that when he gets home our guest may be able to tell his friends how far we surpass all other people in seamanship, in speed of foot, in dancing and in song. And one of you run and fetch Demodocus his tuneful lyre. It is somewhere in my house.’

— THE DANCE

At the godlike Alcinous’ word, a squire set off to fetch the resonant lyre from the palace, and the nine official stewards took matters in hand. These were public servants who supervised all the details during such displays. They now swept the dancing-floor and cleared a ring wide enough for the performance. The squire came up to Demodocus and handed him his tuneful lyre. The minstrel then moved forward to the centre; a group of expert boy dancers, all in the first bloom of youth, took up their positions round him, and began the divine dance; their flashing feet filled Odysseus with admiration as he watched.

— ARES AND APHRODITE

Presently the bard struck up and lifted his fine voice in song. His theme was **the love of Ares and Aphrodite** of the beautiful diadem, how they first made love secretly in her husband Hephaestus’ palace; how Ares gave her many gifts and how he dishonoured the Lord Hephaestus’ marriage-bed. But the Sun had witnessed their loving embraces and came to inform Hephaestus, who, when he heard the bitter truth, went straight to his workshop with his heart full of evil plans, laid his great anvil on the block and forged a network of chains which could neither be broken nor undone, to bind them there. His

LINE 219

the feast, the lyre, the dance This sums up the **Phaeacians**. They’re not really a warlike people: they pride themselves on their sailing, and on the good things of life – feasting, music, dancing, warm baths and soft beds.

LINE 237

the love of Ares and Aphrodite The bard’s next song is a comic tale of the gods.

Aphrodite, goddess of love, is married to **Hephaestus**, the lame smith-god, but is having an affair with **Ares**, the god of war. What follows is how Hephaestus catches the pair of them.

245 fury with Ares inspired him as he worked, and when the snare was finished he went to the room where his marriage-bed stood and threw the netting right round the legs. A number of further lengths were attached to the rafter overhead and hung down like fine spiders' webs, quite invisible even to the blessed gods. It was a
250 masterpiece of cunning work.

When he had surrounded the bed in this way and set his trap, he made a pretence of leaving for [the pleasant town of Lemnos](#), his favourite place on earth. Meanwhile Ares of the Golden Reins had not kept watch for nothing. Directly he saw Hephaestus, the illustrious
255 Master-craftsman, leave, he made his way to his house, filled with a passionate desire for Aphrodite of the lovely diadem. She had recently returned from seeing her mighty Father, Zeus, and had just sat down when Ares came in at the door, clasped her hand and greeted her fondly.

260 'Come, my beloved,' he said, 'let us go to bed and find pleasure in love, for Hephaestus is no longer around. He has gone to somewhere in Lemnos, to visit his barbarous Sintian friends.' Aphrodite desired nothing better than to sleep with him; so the two went to bed and lay down. Immediately the netting which Hephaestus' ingenuity had
265 contrived fell around them in such a way that they could not move or lift a limb. They found too late that there was no escape. And now the great lame god himself approached. For the Sun, acting as his spy, had given him word; and he hurried home in anguish. Standing there in the entrance, in the grip of fierce anger, he let out a terrible yell and
270 called aloud to all the gods.

'Father Zeus and you other blessed gods who live for ever, come here and see a comic and cruel thing. Zeus' Daughter Aphrodite has always despised me for my lameness, and now she has given her heart to this butcher Ares just because he is good-looking and sound
275 of limb, while I was born a weakling. And whom have I to blame for that, if not my father and my mother? I wish they had never begotten me! But see where these two have crept into my bed and are sleeping in each other's loving arms. The sight is like a sword in my heart. Yet I have an idea that they won't be eager to prolong that
280 embrace, no, not for a moment, not for all their love. Theirs is a sleep that both will soon be tired of. But my cunning meshes are going to keep them just where they are, till her Father hands me back every one of the gifts I made him to win this brazen bitch, who may be his daughter and a lovely creature but is the slave of her passions.'

285 At his words the gods came thronging to the house with the bronze floor. Up came Poseidon the Sustainer of the Earth; Hermes, the Swift Runner; and Apollo, Lord of the Bow; but the goddesses, out of modesty, all stayed at home. So there they stood in front of the doors,

LINE 252

[the pleasant town of Lemnos](#) Lemnos, an island in the northern Aegean, was the place most closely tied to **Hephaestus** – said to be where he landed when he was flung down from Olympus, and a centre of his worship.

the immortals who are the source of all our blessings; and when they
 290 caught sight of Hephaestus' clever device a fit of unquenchable
 laughter seized the blessed gods.

'Bad deeds don't prosper,' said one of them with a glance at his
 neighbour; 'the tortoise catches up the hare. See how our slow-
 moving Hephaestus has caught Ares, though no god on Olympus can
 295 run as fast. Hephaestus may be lame, but he has won the day by his
 cunning. And now Ares will have to pay him **an adulterer's fine**.'

This was the kind of comment made. The Lord Apollo, Son of Zeus,
 turned to Hermes and said: 'Hermes, Son of Zeus, Guide and Giver of
 good things, would you care, though tied down by those unyielding
 300 chains, to lie in bed by golden Aphrodite's side?'

To which the Guide, the Giant-slayer replied: 'Lord Apollo, royal
 Archer, I only wish I could. Though the chains that kept me prisoner
 were three times as many, and though all you gods and all the
 goddesses were looking on, yet would I gladly sleep by golden
 305 Aphrodite's side.'

At his words laughter arose among the immortal gods. But Poseidon
 did not laugh; he kept begging the great craftsman Hephaestus to
 free Ares from the net. 'Let him go,' he said, and his words flew, 'and I
 promise you that he shall make full and proper atonement, as
 310 required by you, in the presence of the immortal gods.'

'Poseidon, Girdler of the Earth,' replied the illustrious lame god, 'do
 not press me. Pledges for the worthless are worthless. How could I
 throw you, in chains while the immortal gods looked on if Ares were
 to wriggle out of his debt as well as out of his chains?'

315 'Hephaestus,' said Poseidon the Earthshaker, 'if Ares does repudiate
 his debt and abscond, I myself will pay you the fine.'

'To such an offer from you,' replied the great lame god, 'I cannot and I
 must not answer no.'

With that the mighty Hephaestus undid the chains, and the two of
 320 them, freed from the shackles that had proved so strong, leaped up
 and fled, Ares to Thrace, and laughter-loving Aphrodite to **Paphos in
 Cyprus**, where she has her sacred sanctuary and altar fragrant with
 incense. There the Graces bathed her and anointed her with the
 celestial oil that is like a bloom on the limbs of the immortal gods.
 325 And they dressed her in lovely clothes that were a marvel to behold.

This was the song that the famous minstrel sang, to the delight of
 Odysseus and the rest of his audience, the Phaeacians, those famous
 and intrepid mariners.

After this Alcinous ordered Halius and Laodamas to dance by

LINE 296

an adulterer's fine Under Greek custom a man caught sleeping with another man's wife had to pay the wronged husband a penalty – an 'adulterer's fine'. Hephaestus wants his marriage-gifts paid back.

LINES 321–322

Paphos in Cyprus Paphos, on the island of **Cyprus**, was the most famous home of **Aphrodite's** worship, with a great temple to her. (**Ares**, meanwhile, flees to Thrace, the wild northern land linked with the war-god.)

330 themselves, since no one could compete with them. Polybus, a skilled craftsman, had made them a beautiful purple ball, which they took in their hands, and one of them, bending right back, would throw it up towards the shadowy clouds, and the other, leaping up from the ground, would catch it skilfully before his feet touched earth again. After showing their skill at this high play, they began tossing the ball quickly to and fro as they moved in their dance on the bountiful earth, while the other youths stood at the ringside beating time, till the air was filled with sound, and the noble Odysseus turned to his host and said: 'Lord Alcinous, most illustrious of all your people, 340 you claimed just now that your dancers are supreme. Your claim is made good. I marvel at the sight of them.'

— PARTING GIFTS

His praise delighted the great Alcinous, who turned at once to his sea-faring subjects and said: 'Listen, Captains and Counsellors of the Phaeacians, I find a nice discernment in this guest of ours. Let us 345 make him parting gifts, as is appropriate. Our people have for their chiefs and rulers twelve eminent princes – thirteen with myself. Let each one of us present him with a fresh cloak, a tunic and a talent of sterling gold. Let us quickly gather all our gifts together, so that the stranger can receive them and come to supper in a happy frame of mind. As for Euryalus, he must make amends to him by a personal 350 apology, and a present as well, for the incivility of his comments.'

They all approved his suggestions and gave their instruction. Each of the princes dispatched his squire to fetch the gifts, and Euryalus spoke up in answer: 'Lord Alcinous, most illustrious of your people, I 355 shall make atonement to the stranger, as you have ordered. I will give him this sword of bronze, which has a silver hilt and a sheath of newly carved ivory to hold it – it will be a very valuable possession.'

He then laid the sword with its silver mounting in Odysseus' hands, and addressed him with words that flew: 'Honoured guest, I salute 360 you. If some offensive words escaped my lips, let the storm-winds take and blow them away, and may the gods grant that you may reach home again and see your wife, since you have lived a hard life for so long away from your friends.'

'Friend,' said the nimble-witted Odysseus, 'I return your kindly 365 greeting. May the gods bless you! And I only hope you will not one day miss the sword you have given me here with words that make full amends.' And as he spoke he slung the silver-studded weapon from his shoulder.

By sunset he was in possession of all their splendid gifts, which were 370 then carried to Alcinous' palace by their well-born squires. There the good King's sons took charge of them and placed the magnificent

LINES 347–348

a talent of sterling gold A *talent* was a large standard weight of precious metal, so a talent of gold each, from thirteen princes, adds up to a small fortune. Sending a guest off with rich parting-gifts was part of the hospitality code (*xenia*).

collection at their honoured mother's feet. Meanwhile great Alcinous brought the rest of the company to his house, where they seated themselves on high-backed seats, and mighty Alcinous called to
 375 Arete.

— ARETE'S CHEST

'My dear,' he said, 'bring a really splendid coffer here, the best we have, and put a fresh cloak and a tunic in it as your own gift. Then heat a copper over the fire and warm some water for our guest, so that when he has had his bath and seen that all the gifts which the
 380 Phaeacian nobles have brought him here are properly packed, he can dine at his ease and enjoy the minstrel's lay. I shall give him this beautiful golden chalice of mine, so that he may have me in mind for the rest of his days when he makes drink-offerings in his house to Zeus and to the other gods.'

385 Arete told her maidservants to put a large three-legged cauldron on the fire at once. They set the cauldron for the bath-water on the glowing embers, filled it with water, and brought firewood which they kindled beneath it. The flames began to lick round the belly of the cauldron and the water was heated. Meanwhile Arete brought out
 390 from the inner chamber a fine chest for their guest, in which she packed the splendid gifts of clothing and of gold which the Phaeacians had made him. To these, on her own account, she added a cloak and a tunic of fine quality, and then addressed Odysseus with words that flew.

395 'See to the lid yourself, now, and tie the knot, so that you may not be robbed on your journey when you're enjoying a sweet sleep later on as the black ship carries you along.'

— THE BATH

Noble, much-enduring Odysseus took her advice and fixed the lid on at once, fastening it neatly with a complicated knot that [the Lady](#)
 400 [Circe](#) had once taught him. Immediately after that the housekeeper invited him to have a bath. It was a pleasure for him to see a hot bath again, for he had not been used to such comforts since leaving the home of Calypso of the lovely hair, where he had received constant attention like a god. When the maids had bathed and rubbed him
 405 with oil, and clothed him in a fine tunic and cloak, he left the bath to join the men at their wine.

— NAUSICAA'S FAREWELL

Now Nausicaa, in all her heaven-sent beauty, was standing by one of the pillars that supported the massive roof. She was filled with admiration when she saw him there before her eyes, and when she
 410 spoke it was with winged words:

LINES 399–400

[the Lady Circe](#) **Circe** is a powerful goddess–enchantress Odysseus stays with on his travels (her story comes later, in Book 10). Homer slips her name in here as the person who once taught Odysseus this clever knot.

‘Good luck be with you, my friend,’ she said, ‘so that when you are in your own country you will remember me sometimes, since it is chiefly to me that you owe your life.’

415 ‘Nausicaa, daughter of great-hearted Alcinous,’ answered the resourceful Odysseus, ‘I do indeed pray to Zeus the Thunderer, husband of Hera, to let me reach my home and see the day of my return. If he does, then I will pray to you as a divinity all the rest of my days. For it was you, lady, who gave me back my life.’

420 With this he took a chair by the side of King Alcinous, for they were already serving portions of food and mixing the wine. A squire now came in leading their beloved bard Demodocus, the people’s favourite. He seated him in the centre of the company with his back against one of the high columns, and at once the resourceful Odysseus, carving a portion from the chine of a white-tusked boar –
425 there was plenty left – with rich fat on either side, called to a squire and said:

‘Here, give this helping to Demodocus to eat, with kindly greetings from my unhappy self. **All men honour and respect bards**, for the Muse has taught them songs and she loves the minstrel fraternity.’

— THE WOODEN HORSE

430 The squire took the meat and handed it to the illustrious Demodocus, who accepted it with pleasure. The company now helped themselves to the delicious food that was spread before them, and when they had satisfied their thirst and hunger, the resourceful Odysseus said to the minstrel:

435 ‘Demodocus, I admire you above all men. Either Zeus’ Child, the Muse, or Apollo must have been your teacher. For it is remarkable how accurately you sing the tale of the Achaeans’ fate and of all their achievements, sufferings and struggles. It is almost as though you had been with them yourself or heard the story from one who was.
440 But now change your theme and sing to us of **the stratagem of the Wooden Horse**, which Epeius built with Athene’s help, and which the good Odysseus contrived to get taken one day into the citadel of Troy as an ambush, manned by the warriors who then sacked the town. If you can tell this story as it really happened I shall proclaim to
445 the world how generously the god has endowed you with the heavenly gift of song.’

Odysseus finished speaking, and the bard, beginning with an invocation to the gods, unfolded the tale. He took it up at the point where **the Argives** after setting fire to their huts had embarked on
450 their ships and were sailing away, while the renowned Odysseus and his party were already sitting in the assembly-place in Troy,

LINE 428

All men honour and respect bards Poets and singers were treated with real respect – given the best seat, the choicest food and a proper hearing – because their gift of song was believed to come straight from the **Muse**. Odysseus sends Demodocus a prime cut of meat as a mark of honour.

LINES 440–441

the stratagem of the Wooden Horse The **Wooden Horse** was the trick that finally took Troy: the Greeks hid warriors inside a giant hollow horse, which the Trojans then dragged into their own city. It was built by **Epeius** with Athene’s help, and it was Odysseus who thought of using it.

LINE 449

the Argives ‘Argives’ is simply another of Homer’s names for the Greeks – he uses ‘Argives’, ‘Danaans’ and ‘Achaeans’ more or less interchangeably.

concealed within the Horse, which the Trojans had themselves dragged into the citadel. There stood the Horse, with the Trojans sitting round it endlessly arguing. Three policies commended themselves. Some were for piercing the wooden frame with a pitiless bronze spear; others would have dragged it to the edge of the heights and hurled it down the rocks; others again wished to let it stand as a magnificent offering to appease the gods – and that was what happened in the end. For it was destiny that they should perish when Troy received within her walls that mighty Wooden Horse, laden with the flower of the Argive might bringing doom and slaughter to the Trojans.

He went on to sing how the Achaean warriors, leaving their hollow ambush, poured out from the Horse to ravage Troy; how they scattered through the steep streets of the city leaving ruin in their wake; and how Odysseus, looking like Ares himself, went straight to Deiphobus' house with the gallant Menelaus. And there, sang the bard, he engaged in the most terrible of all his fights, which in the end he won with the help of the indomitable Athene.

— THE WEeping SIMILE

While the famous minstrel was singing, Odysseus' heart was melting with grief and his cheeks were wet with the tears that ran down from his eyes. **He wept as a woman weeps** when she throws her arms round the body of her beloved husband, fallen in battle in the defence of his city and his comrades, fighting to save his city and his children from the evil day. She has found him gasping in the throes of death; she clings to him wailing and lamenting. But the enemy come up and beat her back and shoulders with spears, as they lead her off into slavery and a life of miserable toil, with her cheeks wasted by her pitiful grief. Equally pitiful were the tears that now welled up in Odysseus' eyes, and though he succeeded in hiding them from everyone else, Alcinous could not help observing his condition; he was sitting next to him and heard his heavy groans. He spoke up at once and said to the Phaeacian sea-captains:

'Hear me, Captains and Counsellors of the Phaeacians. Let Demodocus stop playing his tuneful lyre; the theme of his song is not to everybody's liking. Since we began our meal and our divine minstrel struck up, our guest here has been weeping bitterly without a pause. Some poignant sorrow must have overwhelmed his feelings. Let the bard stop playing, so that we can all be merry, hosts and guest alike. How much pleasanter that is! For it was on account of our worthy guest that all this has been arranged, this farewell and these friendly gifts that we give as welcoming hosts. To any man with the slightest claim to common sense, a guest and suppliant is as close as a brother.

LINE 472

He wept as a woman weeps This begins one of the most developed **similes** in the whole poem (an extended 'like...' comparison), running over several lines to compare Odysseus' grief to a single, detailed picture.

— TELL US WHO YOU ARE

495 ‘And now, sir, do not, for some crafty reason, withhold the answers to the questions I may ask. Frankness is better. Tell me the name by which you were known at home to your mother and father and your friends in the town and country round. No one, after all, whether of low or high degree, goes nameless once he has come into the world;
 500 everybody is named by his parents when he is born. You must also tell me where you come from, to what people and to what city you belong, so that my sentient ships may plan the right course to convey you there. For the Phaeacian ships have no helmsmen or rudders such as other craft possess. Our ships know by instinct what
 505 their crews are thinking and propose to do. They know every city, every fertile land; and hidden in mist and cloud they make their swift passage over the sea’s immensities with no fear of damage and no thought of wreck.

‘At the same time, I must tell you of a warning I had from my father
 510 Nausithous, who used to say that **Poseidon grudged us our privilege** of giving safe-conduct to all comers without ourselves coming to any harm. He prophesied that some day the god would wreck one of our fine vessels on the misty sea as she came home from such a journey, and would surround our city with a wall of mountains. That
 515 is what the old King used to say; and the god may do it, or may let things be. It is for him to decide as he pleases.

‘And now, speak and tell us truly: where have you been driven in your wanderings? What parts of the inhabited world have you visited? What lovely cities did you see, what people in them? Did you meet
 520 hostile tribes with no sense of right and wrong, or did you fall in with hospitable and god-fearing people? Explain to us also what sorrow makes you weep as you listen to the tragic story of the Argives and the fall of Troy. The gods were responsible for that, weaving catastrophe into men’s lives to make a song for future generations.
 525 Perhaps one of your kinsmen by marriage fell before Ilium, a brave man, your son-in-law possibly or your father-in-law, who are nearest after one’s own flesh and blood? Or perhaps some true friend, a kindred spirit? For a friend with an understanding heart can be quite as dear as a brother.’

LINE 510

Poseidon grudged us our privilege Here’s a warning that pays off later. **Poseidon** resents the Phaeacians for giving everyone safe passage home, and it was prophesied that one day he’d wreck one of their ships and hem their city in with mountains. He does exactly that in Book 13, just after they deliver Odysseus home.

