

## A Long Journey Home HOMER, The Odyssey: Odysseus and the Sirens ca.800 B.C.E.

*Homer's Odyssey, a masterwork of Western literature and an important cultural, religious, and social record of Greek civilization, is one of the few historical documents that survive from the early period of Greek history. Composed in dactylic hexameter, a form of verse that is usually sung, the Odyssey was probably passed down orally. It tells the story of hero Odysseus's ten-year journey home to Ithaca after his victory in the Trojan War (possibly 1200 or 1100B.u.). The Odyssey begins in the middle of this journey, and Homer uses flashbacks to supply background information as his protagonist's struggles unfold. In the following passage, Odysseus tells his men how the goddess warned him about the dangers they will encounter on their journey.*

At last, and sore at heart, I told my shipmates, 'Friends... it's wrong for only one or two to know the revelations that lovely Circe made to me alone. I'll tell you all so we can die with our eyes wide open now or escape our fate and certain death together. First, she warns that we must steer clear of the Sirens, their enchanting song and their meadow starred with flowers. I alone was to hear their voices, so she said, but you must bind me with tight chafing ropes so I cannot move a muscle, bound to the spot, erect at the mast block, lashed by ropes to the mast. And if I plead, commanding you to set me free, then lash me faster, rope pressing on the rope.' So, I informed my shipmates point by point; all the while, our trim ship was speeding toward the Sirens' island, driven by the brisk wind.

But then the wind fell in an instant, all glazed to a dead calm... a mysterious power hushed the heaving swells. The oarsmen leaped to their feet, struck the sail, stowed it deep in the hold, and sat to the oarlock, thrashing with polished oars, frothing the water white. Now, with a sharp sword, I sliced an ample wheel of beeswax down into pieces and kneaded them in my two strong hands, and the wax grew soft, worked by my strength and Helios's<sup>1</sup> burning rays, the sun at high noon, and I stopped the ears of my comrades one by one.

They bound me hand and foot in the tight ship erect at the mast block, lashed by ropes to the mast, and rowed and churned the whitecaps stroke on stroke. We were just offshore, as far as a man's shout can carry, scudding close, when the Sirens sensed at once a ship/ was racing past and burst in their high, thrilling song: "Come closer, famous Odysseus-Achaea's<sup>2</sup> pride and glory moor your ship on our coast so you can hear our song!

Never has any sailor passed our shores in his black craft until he has heard the honeyed voices pouring from our lips, and once he hears to his heart's content, he sails on, a wiser man. We know all the pains that the Greeks and Trojans once endured on the spreading plain of Troy when the gods willed it, so all that comes to pass on the fertile earth, we know it all!" So, they sent their ravishing voices out across the air, and the heart inside me throbbed to listen longer.

I signaled the crew with frowns to set me free. They flung themselves at the oars and rowed harder, Perimedes and Eurylochus springing up at once to bind me faster with rope chafing on the rope. But once we'd left the Sirens fading in our wake, once we could hear their song no more, their urgent call, my steadfast crew was quick to remove the wax I'd used to seal their ears and loose the bonds that lashed me. [Now Odysseus must decide how to navigate his ship past two monsters: Scylla, who is close to the rocks, and Charybdis, who creates a whirlpool. Circe warned him that if he avoided one, he would come too close to the other. She suggested sailing past Scylla as quickly as possible, instructing Odysseus not to waste time putting on armor.]

We'd scarcely put that island astern when suddenly I saw smoke and heavy breakers and heard their booming thunder. The men were terrified-oar blades flew from their grip, 'clattering down to splash in

the vessel's wash. She lay there, dead in the water ... no hands to tug the blades that drove her on. But I strode down the decks to rouse my crewmen, halting beside each one with a bracing, winning word: "Friends, we're hardly strangers at meeting danger, and this is no worse than what we faced when Cyclops penned us up in his vaulted cave with crushing force! But even from there, my courage, my presence of mind, and my tactics saved us all, and we will live to remember this someday, I have no doubt. Up now, follow my orders; all of our work as one...

You, helmsman, here's your order in your mind; the steering oar of our rolling ship is in your hands.

Keep her clear of that smoke and surging breaker, head for those crags, or she'll catch you off guard, she'll yaw over there, and you'll plunge us all in ruin!" So, I shouted. They snapped to each command. No mention of Scylla -how to fight that nightmare? - for fear, the men would panic, desert their oars, and huddle down and stow themselves away. But now I cleared my mind of Circe's orders, cramping my style, urging me not to arm at all.

I donned my heroic armor, seized long spears in both my hands, and marched out on the half-deck, forward, hoping from there to catch the first glimpse of Scylla, ghoul of the cliffs, swooping to kill my men. But nowhere could I make her out. My eyes ached, scanning that mist-bound rock face top to bottom. Now wailing in fear, we rowed on up those straits, Scylla to starboard, dreaded. Charybdis off to port- her horrible whirlpool gulping the sea surge down, down, but when she spewed it up like a cauldron over a raging fire, all her churning depths would seethe. Heave-exploding spray showering down to splatter the peaks of both crags at once!

But when she swallowed the sea surge down her gaping maw, the whole abyss lay bare, and the rocks around her roared. Terrifying, deafening bedrock showed down deep, boiling black with sand, and ashen terror gripped the men. But now, fearing death, all eyes were fixed on Charybdis. Scylla snatched six men from our hollow ship, the toughest, strongest hands I had, and glancing backward over the decks, she searched for my crew.

I could see their hands and feet already hoisted, flailing, high, higher, over my head, look-wailing down at me, comrades riven in agony, shrieking out my name for one last time! ... so now they writhed, gasping as Scylla swung them up her cliff. There at her cavern's mouth, she bolted them down raw-screaming out, flinging their arms toward me, lost in that mortal struggle...Of all the pitiful things I've had to witness, suffering and searching out the pathways of the sea, this wrenched my heart the most.

## READING QUESTIONS

1. What kind of a leader is Odysseus? How do his decisions affect his men? How does he balance their needs with his own plans?
2. Why does Odysseus ignore Circe's advice about Scylla and Charybdis, even though her plan for escaping the Sirens worked?
3. Of all the Greek heroes, Odysseus is described as the most resourceful. In what ways does this passage support that assessment?
4. Why might Homer have composed this story? Is it meant to be a history lesson, or is it for instruction, entertainment, or some other purpose?