

BOOK 12:

The Sirens; Scylla and Charybdis

Odysseus and his men return to Circe's island. While the men sleep, Circe takes Odysseus aside to hear about the underworld and to offer advice.

“Then said the Lady Circe:

‘So: all those trials are over.

Listen with care

to this, now, and a god will arm your mind.

Square in your ship's path are Sirens, crying

5 beauty to bewitch men coasting by;

woe to the innocent who hears that sound!

He will not see his lady nor his children

in joy, crowding about him, home from sea;

the Sirens will sing his mind away

10 on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones

of dead men rotting in a pile beside them

and flayed skins shrivel around the spot.

Steer wide;

keep well to seaward; plug your oarsmen's ears

with beeswax kneaded soft; none of the rest

15 should hear that song.

But if you wish to listen,

let the men tie you in the lugger, hand

and foot, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,

so you may hear those harpies' thrilling voices;
shout as you will, begging to be untied,

20 your crew must only twist more line around you
and keep their stroke up, till the singers fade.

What then? One of two courses you may take,

and you yourself must weigh them. I shall not

plan the whole action for you now, but only

25 tell you of both.

ANALYZE VISUALS

This detail from a 19th-century painting shows Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship to protect him from the Sirens' tempting song. Notice that his men have all covered their ears. How does the artist's depiction of the Sirens affect your understanding of the story? Explain.

2–3 In *Circe*, Odysseus has found a valuable ally. In the next hundred lines, she describes in detail each danger that he and his men will meet on their way home.

14 kneaded (nē'dīd): squeezed and pressed.

18 those harpies' thrilling voices: the delightful voices of those horrible female creatures.

Detail of *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891), John William Waterhouse. Oil on canvas, 100 cm × 201.7 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia. Photo © Bridgeman Art Library.

Ahead are beetling rocks
and dark blue glancing Amphitrite, surging,
roars around them. Prowling Rocks, or Drifters,
the gods in bliss have named them—named them well.
Not even birds can pass them by. . . .

30 A second course

lies between headlands. One is a sharp mountain
piercing the sky, with stormcloud round the peak
dissolving never, not in the brightest summer,
to show heaven's azure there, nor in the fall.
35 No mortal man could scale it, nor so much
as land there, not with twenty hands and feet,
so sheer the cliffs are—as of polished stone.
Midway that height, a cavern full of mist
opens toward Erebus and evening. Skirting
40 this in the lugger, great Odysseus,
your master Bowman, shooting from the deck,
would come short of the cavemouth with his shaft;
but that is the den of Scylla, where she yaps
abominably, a newborn whelp's cry,
45 though she is huge and monstrous. God or man,
no one could look on her in joy. Her legs—
and there are twelve—are like great tentacles,
unjointed, and upon her serpent necks
are borne six heads like nightmares of ferocity,
50 with triple serried rows of fangs and deep
gullets of black death. Half her length, she sways
her heads in air, outside her horrid cleft,
hunting the sea around that promontory
for dolphins, dogfish, or what bigger game
55 thundering Amphitrite feeds in thousands.
And no ship's company can claim
to have passed her without loss and grief; she takes,
from every ship, one man for every gullet.

The opposite point seems more a tongue of land
60 you'd touch with a good bowshot, at the narrows.
A great wild fig, a shaggy mass of leaves,
grows on it, and Charybdis lurks below
to swallow down the dark sea tide. Three times
from dawn to dusk she spews it up
65 and sucks it down again three times, a whirling
maelstrom; if you come upon her then
the god who makes earth tremble could not save you.

25 beetling: jutting or overhanging.

26 glancing Amphitrite (ăm'fī-trī'tē): sparkling seawater. (Amphitrite is the goddess of the sea and the wife of Poseidon. Here, Circe uses the name to refer to the sea itself.)

31 headlands: points of land jutting out into the sea; promontories.

34 heaven's azure (ăzh'ər): the blue sky.

abominably (ə-bŏm'ə-nə-blē) *adv.* in a hateful way; horribly

43–55 Circe presents a very unpleasant image of Scylla. *To get a better idea of what Odysseus and his crew will be up against, try using this detailed description to either visualize or draw a picture of Scylla.*

66 maelstrom (māl'strəm): a large, violent whirlpool.

No, hug the cliff of Scylla, take your ship
through on a racing stroke. Better to mourn
70 six men than lose them all, and the ship, too.’

So her advice ran; but I faced her, saying:

‘Only instruct me, goddess, if you will,
how, if possible, can I pass Charybdis,
or fight off Scylla when she raids my crew?’

75 Swiftly that loveliest goddess answered me:

‘Must you have battle in your heart forever?
The bloody toil of combat? Old contender,
will you not yield to the immortal gods?
That nightmare cannot die, being eternal
80 evil itself—horror, and pain, and chaos;
there is no fighting her, no power can fight her,
all that avails is flight.

Lose headway there

along that rockface while you break out arms,
and she’ll swoop over you, I fear, once more,
85 taking one man again for every gullet. **T**
No, no, put all your backs into it, row on;
invoke Blind Force, that bore this scourge of men,
to keep her from a second strike against you.

Then you will coast Thrinacia, the island
90 where Helios’ cattle graze, fine herds, and flocks
of goodly sheep. The herds and flocks are seven,
with fifty beasts in each.

No lambs are dropped,

or calves, and these fat cattle never die.
Immortal, too, their cowherds are—their shepherds—
95 Phaethusa and Lampetia, sweetly braided
nymphs that divine Neaera bore
to the overlord of high noon, Helios.
These nymphs their gentle mother bred and placed
upon Thrinacia, the distant land,
100 in care of flocks and cattle for their father.

Now give those kine a wide berth, keep your thoughts
intent upon your course for home,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.
But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction
105 for ship and crew.

82 all . . . flight: all you can do is flee.

T EPIC HERO

Summarize the exchange between Odysseus and Circe in lines 68–85. What is Circe’s advice to Odysseus? Do you think he will follow her advice? Explain.

87 invoke . . . men: pray to the goddess Blind Force, who gave birth to Scylla.

89 coast: sail along the coast of.

95–96 Phaethusa (fā’ē-thōō’sə);
Lampetia (läm-pē’shə); **Neaera** (nē-ē’rə).

101–105 Circe warns Odysseus not to steal Helios’ fine cattle because Helios will take revenge.

Rough years then lie between
you and your homecoming, alone and old,
the one survivor, all companions lost.’ . . .” U

At dawn, Odysseus and his men continue their journey. Odysseus decides to tell the men only of Circe’s warnings about the Sirens, whom they will soon encounter. He is fairly sure that they can survive this peril if he keeps their spirits up. Suddenly, the wind stops.

“The crew were on their feet
briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,
110 each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades
and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved
a massive cake of beeswax into bits
and rolled them in my hands until they softened—
no long task, for a burning heat came down
115 from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward
I carried wax along the line, and laid it
thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb
amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,
and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,
120 as we came smartly within hailing distance,
the two Sirens, noting our fast ship
off their point, made ready, and they sang. . . .

The lovely voices in **ardor** appealing over the water
made me crave to listen, and I tried to say
125 ‘Untie me!’ to the crew, jerking my brows;
but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes
got to his feet, he and Eurylochus,
and passed more line about, to hold me still.
So all rowed on, until the Sirens
130 dropped under the sea rim, and their singing
dwindled away.

My faithful company
rested on their oars now, peeling off
the wax that I had laid thick on their ears;
then set me free.

But scarcely had that island
135 faded in blue air than I saw smoke
and white water, with sound of waves in tumult—
a sound the men heard, and it terrified them.
Oars flew from their hands; the blades went knocking
wild alongside till the ship lost way,
140 with no oarblades to drive her through the water.

U EPIC HERO

Reread lines 104–107, and reconsider your thoughts about Tiresias’ prophecy. Do you think Odysseus has the power to steer his fate? Explain.

117–118 plumb amidships: exactly in the center of the ship.

ardor (är’dər) *n.* passion

126 Perimedes (pěr’ĭ-mē’dēz).

134–139 The men panic when they hear the thundering surf.

Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern,
trying to put heart into them, standing over
every oarsman, saying gently,

‘Friends,

have we never been in danger before this?
145 More fearsome, is it now, than when the Cyclops
penned us in his cave? What power he had!
Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits
to find a way out for us?

Now I say

by hook or crook this peril too shall be
150 something that we remember.

Heads up, lads!

We must obey the orders as I give them.
Get the oarshafts in your hands, and lay back
hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.
Zeus help us pull away before we founder.
155 You at the tiller, listen, and take in
all that I say—the rudders are your duty;
keep her out of the combers and the smoke;
steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we
fetch up in the smother, and you drown us.’

154 **founder**: sink.

157 **combers**: breaking waves.

158–159 **watch . . . smother**: keep the
ship on course, or it will be crushed in
the rough water.

160 That was all, and it brought them round to action.
But as I sent them on toward Scylla, I
told them nothing, as they could do nothing.
They would have dropped their oars again, in panic,
to roll for cover under the decking. Circe’s
165 bidding against arms had slipped my mind,
so I tied on my cuirass and took up
two heavy spears, then made my way along
to the foredeck—thinking to see her first from there,
the monster of the gray rock, harboring
170 torment for my friends. I strained my eyes
upon that cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere
could I catch sight of her.

And all this time,

in **travail**, sobbing, gaining on the current,
we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port
175 and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire
gorge of the salt sea tide. By heaven! when she
vomited, all the sea was like a cauldron
seething over intense fire, when the mixture
suddenly heaves and rises. **V**

travail (trə-vāl') *n.* painful effort

176 **gorge**: throat; gullet.

V EPIC HERO

Consider Odysseus’ behavior in lines
108–179. Do you think he is a good
leader? Explain your opinion.

The shot spume
180 soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain.

179 shot spume: flying foam.

But when she swallowed the sea water down
we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard
the rock bellowing all around, and dark
sand raged on the bottom far below.
185 My men all blanched against the gloom, our eyes
were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear
of being devoured.

185 blanched: became pale.

Then Scylla made her strike,
whisking six of my best men from the ship.
I happened to glance aft at ship and oarsmen
190 and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling
high overhead. Voices came down to me
in anguish, calling my name for the last time.

189 aft: toward the rear of the ship.

A man surfcasting on a point of rock
for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod
195 to drop the sinker and the bait far out,
will hook a fish and rip it from the surface
to dangle wriggling through the air:

so these

were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.

198 borne aloft in spasms: lifted high while struggling violently.

She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den,
200 in the dire grapple, reaching still for me—
and deathly pity ran me through
at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered,
questing the passes of the strange sea.

200 grapple: grasp.

We rowed on.

The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too,
205 and Scylla dropped astern. . . .”

ANALYZE VISUALS

Apart from depicting a different narrative moment, how does this 16th-century painting differ from the one on page 1131? Be specific in describing the differences in style and mood.

Odysseus tries to persuade his men to bypass Thrinacia, the island of the sun god, Helios, but they insist on landing. Driven by hunger, they ignore Odysseus' warning not to feast on Helios' cattle. This disobedience angers the sun god, who threatens to stop shining if payment is not made for the loss of his cattle. To appease Helios, Zeus sends down a thunderbolt to sink Odysseus' ship. Odysseus alone survives. He eventually drifts to Ogygia, the home of Calypso, who keeps him on her island for seven years. With this episode, Odysseus ends the telling of his tale to King Alcinous.