

ODYSSEY 9

And Odysseus, his great mind teeming:

“My Lord Alcinous, what could be finer
Than listening to a singer of tales
Such as Demodocus, with a voice like a god’s?
Nothing we do is sweeter than this— 5
A cheerful gathering of all the people
Sitting side by side throughout the halls,
Feasting and listening to a singer of tales,
The tables filled with food and drink,
The server drawing wine from the bowl 10
And bringing it around to fill our cups.
For me, this is the finest thing in the world.
But you have a mind to draw out of me
My pain and sorrow, and make me feel it again.
Where should I begin, where end my story? 15
Heaven has sent me many tribulations.
I will tell you my name first, so that you, too,
Will know who I am, and when I escape
The day of my doom, I will always be
Your friend and host, though my home is far. 20
I am Odysseus, great Laertes’ son,
Known for my cunning throughout the world,
And my fame reaches even to heaven.
My native land is Ithaca, a sunlit island
With a forested peak called Neriton, 25
Visible for miles. Many other islands
Lie close around her—Doullichion, Samê,
And wooded Zacynthus—off toward the sunrise,

But Ithaca lies low on the evening horizon,
A rugged place, a good nurse of men.
No sight is sweeter to me than Ithaca. Yes,
Calypso, the beautiful goddess, kept me
In her caverns, yearning to possess me;
And Circe, the witch of Aeaea, held me
In her halls and yearned to possess me;
But they could not persuade me or touch my heart.
Nothing is sweeter than your own country
And your own parents, not even living in a rich house—
Not if it's far from family and home.
But let me tell you of the hard journey homeward
Zeus sent me on when I sailed from Troy.

From Ilion the wind took me to the Cicones
In Ismaros. I pillaged the town and killed the men.
The women and treasure that we took out
I divided as fairly as I could among all hands
And then gave the command to pull out fast.
That was my order, but the fools wouldn't listen.
They drank a lot of wine and slaughtered
A lot of sheep and cattle on the shore.
Some of the town's survivors got away inland
And called their kinsmen. There were more of them,
And they were braver, too, men who knew how to fight
From chariots and on foot. They came on as thick
As leaves and flowers in spring, attacking
At dawn. We were out of luck, cursed by Zeus
To suffer heavy losses. The battle-lines formed
Along our beached ships, and bronze spears
Sliced through the air. As long as the day's heat
Climbed toward noon, we held our ground
Against superior numbers. But when the sun
Dipped down, the Cicones beat us down, too.
We lost six fighting men from each of our ships.
The rest of us cheated destiny and death.

We sailed on in shock, glad to get out alive
But grieving for our lost comrades.
I wouldn't let the ships get under way

Until someone had called out three times
 For each mate who had fallen on the battlefield.
 And then Zeus hit us with a norther,
 A freak hurricane. The clouds blotted out
 Land and sea, and night climbed up the sky.
 The ships pitched ahead. When their sails
 Began to shred in the gale-force winds,
 We lowered them and stowed them aboard,
 Fearing the worst, and rowed hard for the mainland.
 We lay offshore two miserable days and nights.
 When Dawn combed her hair in the third day's light,
 We set up the masts, hoisted the white sails,
 And took our seats. The wind and the helmsmen
 Steered the ships, and I would have made it home
 Unscathed, but as I was rounding Cape Malea
 The waves, the current, and wind from the North
 Drove me off course past Cythera Island.

Nine days of bad winds blew us across
 The teeming seas. On the tenth day we came
 To the land of the Lotus-Eaters.

We went ashore,
 And the crews lost no time in drawing water
 And preparing a meal beside their ships.
 After they had filled up on food and drink,
 I sent out a team—two picked men and a herald—
 To reconnoiter and sound out the locals.
 They headed out and made contact with the Lotus-Eaters,
 Who meant no harm but did give my men
 Some lotus to eat. Whoever ate that sweet fruit
 Lost the will to report back, preferring instead
 To stay there, munching lotus, oblivious of home.
 I hauled them back wailing to the ships,
 Bound them under the benches, then ordered
 All hands to board their ships on the double
 Before anyone else tasted the lotus.
 They were aboard in no time and at their benches,
 Churning the sea white with their oars.

We sailed on, our morale sinking,

And we came to the land of the Cyclopes,
Lawless savages who leave everything 105
Up to the gods. These people neither plow nor plant,
But everything grows for them unsown:
Wheat, barley, and vines that bear
Clusters of grapes, watered by rain from Zeus.
They have no assemblies or laws but live 110
In high mountain caves, ruling their own
Children and wives and ignoring each other.

A fertile island slants across the harbor's mouth,
Neither very close nor far from the Cyclopes' shore.
It's well-wooded and populated with innumerable 115
Wild goats, uninhibited by human traffic.
Not even hunters go there, tramping through the woods
And roughing it on the mountainsides.
It pastures no flocks, has no tilled fields—
Unplowed, unsown, virgin forever, bereft 120
Of men, all it does is support those bleating goats.
The Cyclopes do not sail and have no craftsmen
To build them benched, red-prowed ships
That could supply all their wants, crossing the sea
To other cities, visiting each other as other men do. 125
These same craftsmen would have made this island
Into a good settlement. It's not a bad place at all
And would bear everything in season. Meadows
Lie by the seashore, lush and soft,
Where vines would thrive. It has level plowland 130
With deep, rich soil that would produce bumper crops
Season after season. The harbor's good, too,
No need for moorings, anchor-stones, or tying up.
Just beach your ship until the wind is right
And you're ready to sail. At the harbor's head 135
A spring flows clear and bright from a cave
Surrounded by poplars.

There we sailed in,
Some god guiding us through the murky night.
We couldn't see a thing. A thick fog
Enveloped the ships, and the moon 140
Wasn't shining in the cloud-covered sky.

None of us could see the island, or the long waves
Rolling toward the shore, until we ran our ships
Onto the sandy beach. Then we lowered sail,
Disembarked, and fell asleep on the sand. 145

Dawn came early, with palmettoes of rose,
And we explored the island, marveling at it.
The spirit-women, daughters of Zeus,
Roused the mountain goats so that my men
Could have a meal. We ran to the ships, 150
Got our javelins and bows, formed three groups
And started to shoot. The god let us bag our game,
Nine goats for each of the twelve ships,
Except for my ship, which got ten.

So all day long until the sun went down 155
We feasted on meat and sweet wine.
The ships had not yet run out of the dark red
Each crew had taken aboard in large jars
When we ransacked the Cicones' sacred city.
And we looked across at the Cyclopes' land. 160
We could see the smoke from their fires
And hear their voices, and their sheep and goats.
When the sun set, and darkness came on
We went to sleep on the shore of the sea.
As soon as dawn brightened in the rosy sky, 165
I assembled all the crews and spoke to them:

'The rest of you will stay here while I go
With my ship and crew on reconnaissance.
I want to find out what those men are like,
Wild savages with no sense of right or wrong 170
Or hospitable folk who fear the gods.'

With that, I boarded ship and ordered my crew
To get on deck and cast off. They took their places
And were soon whitening the sea with their oars.
As we pulled in over the short stretch of water, 175
There on the shoreline we saw a high cave
Overhung with laurels. It was a place

Where many sheep and goats were penned at night.
Around it was a yard fenced in by stones
Set deep in the earth, and by tall pines and crowned oaks. 180
This was the lair of a huge creature, a man
Who pastured his flocks off by himself,
And lived apart from others and knew no law.
He was a freak of nature, not like men who eat bread,
But like a lone wooded crag high in the mountains. 185

I ordered part of my crew to stay with the ship
And counted off the twelve best to go with me.
I took along a goatskin filled with red wine,
A sweet vintage I had gotten from Maron,
Apollo's priest on Ismaros, when I spared both him 190
And his wife and child out of respect for the god.
He lived in a grove of Phoebus Apollo
And gave me splendid gifts: seven bars of gold,
A solid-silver bowl, and twelve jars of wine,
Sweet and pure, a drink for the gods. 195
Hardly anyone in his house, none of the servants,
Knew about this wine—just Maron, his wife,
And a single housekeeper. Whenever he drank
This sweet dark red wine, he would fill one goblet
And pour it into twenty parts of water, 200
And the bouquet that spread from the mixing bowl
Was so fragrant no one could hold back from drinking.
I had a large skin of this wine, a sack
Of provisions—and a strong premonition
That we had a rendezvous with a man of great might, 205
A savage with no notion of right and wrong.

We got to the cave quickly. He was out,
Tending his flocks in the rich pastureland.
We went inside and had a good look around.
There were crates stuffed with cheese, and pens 210
Crammed with lambs and kids—firstlings,
Middlings, and newborns in separate sections.
The vessels he used for milking—pails and bowls
Of good workmanship—were brimming with whey.
My men thought we should make off with some cheese 215

And then come back for the lambs and kids,
Load them on board, and sail away on the sea.
But I wouldn't listen. It would have been far better
If I had! But I wanted to see him, and see
If he would give me a gift of hospitality.
When he did come he was not a welcome sight.

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We lit a fire and offered sacrifice
And helped ourselves to some of the cheese.
Then we sat and waited in the cave
Until he came back, herding his flocks.
He carried a huge load of dry wood
To make a fire for his supper and heaved it down
With a crash inside the cave. We were terrified
And scurried back into a corner.
He drove his fat flocks into the wide cavern,
At least those that he milked, leaving the males—
The rams and the goats—outside in the yard.
Then he lifted up a great doorstone,
A huge slab of rock, and set it in place.
Two sturdy wagons—twenty sturdy wagons—
Couldn't pry it from the ground—that's how big
The stone was he set in the doorway. Then,
He sat down and milked the ewes and bleating goats,
All in good order, and put the sucklings
Beneath their mothers. Half of the white milk
He curdled and scooped into wicker baskets,
The other half he let stand in the pails
So he could drink it later for his supper.
He worked quickly to finish his chores,
And as he was lighting the fire he saw us and said:

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'Who are you strangers? Sailing the seas, huh?
Where from, and what for? Pirates, probably,
Roaming around causing people trouble.'

He spoke, and it hit us like a punch in the gut—
His booming voice and the sheer size of the monster—
But even so I found the words to answer him:

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'We are Greeks, blown off course by every wind
In the world on our way home from Troy, traveling
Sea routes we never meant to, by Zeus' will no doubt.
We are proud to be the men of Agamemnon, 255
Son of Atreus, the greatest name under heaven,
Conquerer of Troy, destroyer of armies.
Now we are here, suppliants at your knees,
Hoping you will be generous to us
And give us the gifts that are due to strangers. 260
Respect the gods, sir. We are your suppliants,
And Zeus avenges strangers and suppliants,
Zeus, god of strangers, who walks at their side.'

He answered me from his pitiless heart:

'You're dumb, stranger, or from far away, 265
If you ask me to fear the gods. Cyclopes
Don't care about Zeus or his aegis
Or the blessed gods, since we are much stronger.
I wouldn't spare you or your men
Out of fear of Zeus. I would spare them only 270
If I myself wanted to. But tell me,
Where did you leave your ship? Far
Down the coast, or close? I'd like to know.'

Nice try, but I knew all the tricks and said:

'My ship? Poseidon smashed it to pieces 275
Against the rocks at the border of your land.
He pushed her in close and the wind did the rest.
These men and I escaped by the skin of our teeth.'

This brought no response from his pitiless heart
But a sudden assault upon my men. His hands 280
Reached out, seized two of them, and smashed them
To the ground like puppies. Their brains spattered out
And oozed into the dirt. He tore them limb from limb
To make his supper, gulping them down
Like a mountain lion, leaving nothing behind— 285
Guts, flesh, or marrowy bones.

Crying out, we lifted our hands to Zeus
At this outrage, bewildered and helpless.
When the Cyclops had filled his huge belly
With human flesh, he washed it down with milk, 290
Then stretched out in his cave among his flocks.
I crept up close and was thinking about
Drawing my sharp sword and driving it home
Into his chest where the lungs hide the liver.
I was feeling for the spot when another thought 295
Checked my hand: we would die to a man in that cave,
Unable to budge the enormous stone
He had set in place to block the entrance. And so,
Groaning through the night, we waited for dawn.

As soon as dawn came, streaking the sky red, 300
He rekindled the fire and milked his flocks,
All in good order, placing the sucklings
Beneath their mothers. His chores done,
He seized two of my men and made his meal.
After he had fed he drove his flocks out, 305
Easily lifting the great stone, which he then set
Back in place as lightly as if he were setting
A lid upon a quiver. And then, with loud whistling,
The Cyclops turned his fat flocks toward the mountain,
And I was left there, brooding on how 310
I might make him pay and win glory from Athena.

This was the best plan I could come up with:
Beside one of the sheep pens lay a huge pole
Of green olive which the Cyclops had cut
To use as a walking stick when dry. Looking at it 315
We guessed it was about as large as the mast
Of a black ship, a twenty-oared, broad-beamed
Freighter that crosses the wide gulfs.
That's how long and thick it looked. I cut off
About a fathom's length from this pole 320
And handed it over to my men. They scraped it
And made it smooth, and I sharpened the tip
And took it over to the fire and hardened it.
Then I hid it, setting it carefully in the dung

That lay in piles all around the cave. 325
And I told my men to draw straws to decide
Which of them would have to share the risk with me—
Lift that stake and grind it in his eye
While he was asleep. They drew straws and came up with
The very men I myself would have chosen. 330
There were four of them, and I made five.

At evening he came, herding his fleecy sheep.
He drove them straight into the cave, drove in
All his flocks in fact. Maybe he had some
Foreboding, or maybe some god told him to. 335
Then he lifted the doorstone and set it in place,
And sat down to milk the goats and bleating ewes,
All in good order, setting the sucklings
Beneath their mothers. His chores done,
Again he seized two of my men and made his meal. 340
Then I went up to the Cyclops and spoke to him,
Holding an ivy-wood bowl filled with dark wine.

‘Cyclops, have some wine, now that you have eaten
Your human flesh, so you can see what kind of drink
Was in our ship’s hold. I was bringing it to you 345
As an offering, hoping you would pity me
And help me get home. But you are a raving
Maniac! How do you expect any other man
Ever to visit you after acting like this?’

He took the bowl and drank it off, relishing 350
Every last, sweet drop. And he asked me for more:

‘Be a pal and give me another drink. And tell me
Your name, so I can give you a gift you’ll like.
Wine grapes grow in the Cyclopes’ land, too.
Rain from the sky makes them grow from the earth. 355
But this—this is straight ambrosia and nectar.’

So I gave him some more of the ruby-red wine.
Three times the fool drained the bowl dry,
And when the wine had begun to work on his mind,

We shrank back in terror while he wrenched 395
The blood-grimed stake from his eye and flung it
Away from him, blundering about and shouting
To the other Cyclopes, who lived around him
In caverns among the windswept crags.
They heard his cry and gathered from all sides 400
Around his cave and asked him what ailed him:

'Polyphemus, why are you hollering so much
And keeping us up the whole blessed night ?
Is some man stealing your flocks from you,
Or killing you, maybe, by some kind of trick?' 405

And Polyphemus shouted out to them:

'Noman is killing me by some kind of trick!'

They sent their words winging back to him:

'If no man is hurting you, then your sickness
Comes from Zeus and can't be helped. 410
You should pray to your father, Lord Poseidon.'

They left then, and I laughed in my heart
At how my phony name had fooled them so well.
Cyclops meanwhile was groaning in agony.
Groping around, he removed the doorstone 415
And sat in the entrance with his hands spread out
To catch anyone who went out with the sheep—
As if I could be so stupid. I thought it over,
Trying to come up with the best plan I could
To get us all out from the jaws of death. 420
I wove all sorts of wiles, as a man will
When his life is on the line. My best idea
Had to do with the sheep that were there, big,
Thick-fleeced beauties with wool dark as violets.
Working silently, I bound them together 425
With willow branches the Cyclops slept on.
I bound them in threes. Each middle sheep
Carried a man underneath, protected by

The two on either side: three sheep to a man.
As for me, there was a ram, the best in the flock.
I grabbed his back and curled up beneath
His shaggy belly. There I lay, hands twined
Into the marvelous wool, hanging on for dear life.
And so, muffling our groans, we waited for dawn.

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When the first streaks of red appeared in the sky,
The rams started to bolt toward the pasture.
The un milked females were bleating in the pens,
Their udders bursting. Their master,
Worn out with pain, felt along the backs
Of all of the sheep as they walked by, the fool,
Unaware of the men under their fleecy chests.
The great ram headed for the entrance last,
Heavy with wool—and with me thinking hard.
Running his hands over the ram, Polyphemus said:

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‘My poor ram, why are you leaving the cave
Last of all? You’ve never lagged behind before.
You were always the first to reach the soft grass
With your big steps, first to reach the river,
First to want to go back to the yard
At evening. Now you’re last of all. Are you sad
About your master’s eye? A bad man blinded me,
Him and his nasty friends, getting me drunk,
Noman—but he’s not out of trouble yet!
If only you understood and could talk,
You could tell me where he’s hiding. I would
Smash him to bits and spatter his brains
All over the cave. Then I would find some relief
From the pain this no-good Noman has caused me.’

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He spoke, and sent the ram off through the door.
When we had gone a little way from the cave,
I first untangled myself from the ram
And then untied my men. Then, moving quickly,
We drove those fat, long-shanked sheep
Down to the ship, keeping an eye on our rear.
We were a welcome sight to the rest of the crew,

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But when they started to mourn the men we had lost
I forbade it with an upward nod of my head,
Signaling each man like that and ordering them
To get those fleecy sheep aboard instead,
On the double, and get the ship out to sea.
Before you knew it they were on their benches
Beating the sea to white froth with their oars.
When we were offshore but still within earshot,
I called out to the Cyclops, just to rub it in:

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‘So, Cyclops, it turns out it wasn’t a coward
Whose men you murdered and ate in your cave,
You savage! But you got yours in the end,
Didn’t you? You had the gall to eat the guests
In your own house, and Zeus made you pay for it.’

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He was even angrier when he heard this.
Breaking off the peak of a huge crag
He threw it toward our ship, and it carried
To just in front of our dark prow. The sea
Billowed up where the rock came down,
And the backwash pushed us to the mainland again,
Like a flood tide setting us down at the shore.
I grabbed a long pole and shoved us off,
Nodding to the crew to fall on the oars
And get us out of there. They leaned into it,
And when we were twice as far out to sea as before
I called to the Cyclops again, with my men
Hanging all over me and begging me not to:

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‘Don’t do it, man! The rock that hit the water
Pushed us in and we thought we were done for.
If he hears any sound from us, he’ll heave
Half a cliff at us and crush the ship and our skulls
With one throw. You know he has the range.’

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They tried, but didn’t persuade my hero’s heart—
I was really angry—and I called back to him:

‘Cyclops, if anyone, any mortal man,

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Asks you how you got your eye put out,
Tell him that Odysseus the marauder did it,
Son of Laertes, whose home is on Ithaca.'

He groaned, and had this to say in response:

'Oh no! Now it's coming to me, the old prophecy. 505
There was a seer here once, a tall handsome man,
Telemos Eurymides. He prophesied well
All his life to the Cyclopes. He told me
That all this would happen some day,
That I would lose my sight at Odysseus' hands. 510
I always expected a great hero
Would come here, strong as can be.
Now this puny, little, good-for-nothing runt
Has put my eye out—because he got me drunk.
But come here, Odysseus, so I can give you a gift, 515
And ask Poseidon to help you on your way.
I'm his son, you know. He claims he's my father.
He will heal me, if he wants. But none
Of the other gods will, and no mortal man will.'

He spoke, and I shouted back to him: 520

'I wish I were as sure of ripping out your lungs
And sending you to Hell as I am dead certain
That not even the Earthshaker will heal your eye.'

I had my say, and he prayed to Poseidon,
Stretching his arms out to starry heaven: 525

'Hear me, Poseidon, blue-maned Earth-Holder,
If you are the father you claim to be.
Grant that Odysseus, son of Laertes,
May never reach his home on Ithaca.
But if he is fated to see his family again, 530
And return to his home and own native land,
May he come late, having lost all companions,
In another's ship, and find trouble at home.'

He prayed, and the blue-maned sea-god heard him.
Then he broke off an even larger chunk of rock, 535

Pivoted, and threw it with incredible force.
It came down just behind our dark-hulled ship,
Barely missing the end of the rudder. The sea
Billowed up where the rock hit the water,
And the wave pushed us forward all the way 540
To the island where our other ships waited
Clustered on the shore, ringed by our comrades
Sitting on the sand, anxious for our return.
We beached the ship and unloaded the Cyclops' sheep,
Which I divided up as fairly as I could 545
Among all hands. The veterans gave me the great ram,
And I sacrificed it on the shore of the sea
To Zeus in the dark clouds, who rules over all.
I burnt the thigh pieces, but the god did not accept
My sacrifice, brooding over how to destroy 550
All my benched ships and my trusty crews.

So all the long day until the sun went down
We sat feasting on meat and drinking sweet wine.
When the sun set and darkness came on 555
We lay down and slept on the shore of the sea.
Early in the morning, when the sky was streaked red,
I roused my men and ordered the crews
To get on deck and cast off. They took their places
And were soon whitening the sea with their oars.

We sailed on in shock, glad to get away alive 560
But grieving for the comrades we had lost."