



Athena Inspires the Prince

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
driven time and again off course, once he had plundered
the hallowed heights of Troy.
Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,
fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.
But he could not save them from disaster, hard as he strove—
the recklessness of their own ways destroyed them all,
the blind fools, they devoured the cattle of the Sun
and the Sungod blotted out the day of their return.
Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus,
start from where you will—sing for our time too.

By now,
all the survivors, all who avoided headlong death
were safe at home, escaped the wars and waves.

But one man alone . . .
 his heart set on his wife and his return—Calypso,
 the bewitching nymph, the lustrous goddess, held him back,
 deep in her arching caverns, craving him for a husband.
 But then, when the wheeling seasons brought the year around,
 that year spun out by the gods when he should reach his home,
 Ithaca—though not even there would he be free of trials,
 even among his loved ones—then every god took pity,
 all except Poseidon. He raged on, seething against
 the great Odysseus till he reached his native land.

But now
 Poseidon had gone to visit the Ethiopians worlds away,
 Ethiopians off at the farthest limits of mankind,
 a people split in two, one part where the Sungod sets
 and part where the Sungod rises. There Poseidon went
 to receive an offering, bulls and rams by the hundred—
 far away at the feast the Sea-lord sat and took his pleasure.
 But the other gods, at home in Olympian Zeus's halls,
 met for full assembly there, and among them now
 the father of men and gods was first to speak,
 sorely troubled, remembering handsome Aegisthus,
 the man Agamemnon's son, renowned Orestes, killed.
 Recalling Aegisthus, Zeus harangued the immortal powers:
 "Ah how shameless—the way these mortals blame the gods.
 From us alone, they say, come all their miseries, yes,
 but they themselves, with their own reckless ways,
 compound their pains beyond their proper share.

Look at Aegisthus now . . .
 above and beyond *his* share he stole Atreides' wife,
 he murdered the warlord coming home from Troy
 though he knew it meant his own total ruin.
 Far in advance we told him so ourselves,
 dispatching the guide, the giant-killer Hermes.
 'Don't murder the man,' he said, 'don't court his wife.
 Beware, revenge will come from Orestes, Agamemnon's son,
 that day he comes of age and longs for his native land.'
 So Hermes warned, with all the good will in the world,

but would Aegisthus' hardened heart give way?
 Now he pays the price—all at a single stroke."

And sparkling-eyed Athena drove the matter home:
 "Father, son of Cronus, our high and mighty king,
 surely he goes down to a death he earned in full!
 Let them all die so, all who do such things.
 But my heart breaks for Odysseus,
 that seasoned veteran cursed by fate so long—
 far from his loved ones still, he suffers torments
 off on a wave-washed island rising at the center of the seas.
 A dark wooded island, and there a goddess makes her home,
 a daughter of Atlas, wicked Titan who sounds the deep
 in all its depths, whose shoulders lift on high
 the colossal pillars thrusting earth and sky apart.
 Atlas' daughter it is who holds Odysseus captive,
 luckless man—despite his tears, forever trying
 to spellbind his heart with suave, seductive words
 and wipe all thought of Ithaca from his mind.
 But he, straining for no more than a glimpse
 of hearth-smoke drifting up from his own land,
 Odysseus longs to die . . .

Olympian Zeus,
 have you no care for *him* in your lofty heart?
 Did he never win your favor with sacrifices
 burned beside the ships on the broad plain of Troy?
 Why, Zeus, why so dead set against Odysseus?"

"My child," Zeus who marshals the thunderheads replied,
 "what nonsense you let slip through your teeth. Now,
 how on earth could I forget Odysseus? Great Odysseus
 who excels all men in wisdom, excels in offerings too
 he gives the immortal gods who rule the vaulting skies?
 No, it's the Earth-Shaker, Poseidon, unappeased,
 forever fuming against him for the Cyclops
 whose giant eye he blinded: godlike Polyphemus,
 towering over all the Cyclops' clans in power.

the threshold of his court. Gripping her bronze spear, she looked for all the world like a stranger now, like Mentes, lord of the Taphians. There she found the swaggering suitors, just then amusing themselves with rolling dice before the doors, lounging on hides of oxen they had killed themselves. While heralds and brisk attendants bustled round them, some at the mixing-bowls, mulling wine and water, others wiping the tables down with sopping sponges, setting them out in place, still other servants jointed and carved the great sides of meat.

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First by far to see her was Prince Telemachus, sitting among the suitors, heart obsessed with grief. He could almost see his magnificent father, here . . . in the mind's eye—if only *he* might drop from the clouds and drive these suitors all in a rout throughout the halls and regain his pride of place and rule his own domains! Daydreaming so as he sat among the suitors, he glimpsed Athena now and straight to the porch he went, mortified that a guest might still be standing at the doors. Pausing beside her there, he clasped her right hand and relieving her at once of her long bronze spear, met her with winged words: "Greetings, stranger! Here in our house you'll find a royal welcome. Have supper first, then tell us what you need."

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He led the way and Pallas Athena followed. Once in the high-roofed hall, he took her lance and fixed it firm in a burnished rack against a sturdy pillar, there where row on row of spears, embattled Odysseus' spears, stood stacked and waiting. Then he escorted her to a high, elaborate chair of honor, over it draped a cloth, and here he placed his guest with a stool to rest her feet. But for himself he drew up a low reclining chair beside her, richly painted, clear of the press of suitors.

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The nymph Thoosa bore him, daughter of Phorcys, lord of the barren salt sea—she met Poseidon once in his vaulted caves and they made love. And now for his blinded son the earthquake god—though he won't quite kill Odysseus—drives him far off course from native land. But come, all of us here put heads together now, work out his journey home so Odysseus can return. Lord Poseidon, I trust, will let his anger go. How can he stand his ground against the will of all the gods at once—one god alone?"

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Athena, her eyes flashing bright, exulted, "Father, son of Cronus, our high and mighty king! If now it really pleases the blissful gods that wise Odysseus shall return—home at last—let us dispatch the guide and giant-killer Hermes down to Ogygia Island, down to announce at once to the nymph with lovely braids our fixed decree: Odysseus journeys home—the exile must return! While I myself go down to Ithaca, rouse his son to a braver pitch, inspire his heart with courage to summon the flowing-haired Achaeans to full assembly, speak his mind to all those suitors, slaughtering on and on his droves of sheep and shambling longhorn cattle. Next I will send him off to Sparta and sandy Pylos, there to learn of his dear father's journey home. Perhaps he will hear some news and make his name throughout the mortal world."

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So Athena vowed and under her feet she fastened the supple sandals, ever-glowing gold, that wing her over the waves and boundless earth with the rush of gusting winds. She seized the rugged spear tipped with a bronze point—weighted, heavy, the massive shaft she wields to break the lines of heroes the mighty Father's daughter storms against. And down she swept from Olympus' craggy peaks and lit on Ithaca, standing tall at Odysseus' gates,

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concerned his guest, offended by their uproar,
 might shrink from food in the midst of such a mob.
 He hoped, what's more, to ask him about his long-lost father.
 A maid brought water soon in a graceful golden pitcher
 and over a silver basin tipped it out
 so they might rinse their hands,
 then pulled a gleaming table to their side.
 A staid housekeeper brought on bread to serve them,
 appetizers aplenty too, lavish with her bounty.
 A carver lifted platters of meat toward them,
 meats of every sort, and set beside them golden cups
 and time and again a page came round and poured them wine.

But now the suitors trooped in with all their swagger
 and took their seats on low and high-backed chairs.
 Heralds poured water over their hands for rinsing,
 serving maids brought bread heaped high in trays
 and the young men brimmed the mixing-bowls with wine.
 They reached out for the good things that lay at hand,
 and when they'd put aside desire for food and drink
 the suitors set their minds on other pleasures,
 song and dancing, all that crowns a feast.
 A herald placed an ornate lyre in Phemius' hands,
 the bard who always performed among them there;
 they forced the man to sing.

A rippling prelude—
 and no sooner had he struck up his rousing song
 than Telemachus, head close to Athena's sparkling eyes,
 spoke low to his guest so no one else could hear:
 "Dear stranger, would you be shocked by what I say?
 Look at them over there. Not a care in the world,
 just lyres and tunes! It's easy for them, all right,
 they feed on another's goods and go scot-free—
 a man whose white bones lie strewn in the rain somewhere,
 rotting away on land or rolling down the ocean's salty swells.
 But that man—if they caught sight of him home in Ithaca,
 by god, they'd all pray to be faster on their feet
 than richer in bars of gold and heavy robes.

But now, no use, he's died a wretched death.
 No comfort's left for us . . . not even if
 someone, somewhere, says he's coming home.
 The day of his return will never dawn.

Enough.

Tell me about yourself now, clearly, point by point.
 Who are you? where are you from? your city? your parents?
 What sort of vessel brought you? Why did the sailors
 land you here in Ithaca? Who did they say they are?
 I hardly think you came this way on foot!
 And tell me this for a fact—I need to know—
 is this your first time here? Or are you a friend of father's,
 a guest from the old days? Once, crowds of other men
 would come to our house on visits—visitor that he was,
 when he walked among the living."

Her eyes glinting,
 goddess Athena answered, "My whole story, of course,
 I'll tell it point by point. Wise old Anchialus
 was my father. My own name is Mentes,
 lord of the Taphian men who love their oars.
 And here I've come, just now, with ship and crew,
 sailing the wine-dark sea to foreign ports of call,
 to Temese, out for bronze—our cargo gleaming iron.
 Our ship lies moored off farmlands far from town,
 riding in Rithron Cove, beneath Mount Nion's woods.
 As for the ties between your father and myself,
 we've been friends forever, I'm proud to say,
 and he would bear me out

if you went and questioned old lord Laertes.

He, I gather, no longer ventures into town
 but lives a life of hardship, all to himself,
 off on his farmstead with an aged serving-woman
 who tends him well, who gives him food and drink
 when weariness has taken hold of his withered limbs
 from hauling himself along his vineyard's steep slopes.
 And now I've come—and why? I heard that he was back . . .
 your father, that is. But no, the gods thwart his passage.
 Yet I tell you great Odysseus is not dead. He's still alive,

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somewhere in this wide world, held captive, out at sea on a wave-washed island, and hard men, savages, somehow hold him back against his will.

Wait,
I'll make you a prophecy, one the immortal gods have planted in my mind—it will come true, I think, though I am hardly a seer or know the flights of birds. He won't be gone long from the native land he loves, not even if iron shackles bind your father down. He's plotting a way to journey home at last; he's never at a loss.

But come, please, tell me about yourself now, point by point. You're truly Odysseus' son? You've sprung up so! Uncanny resemblance . . . the head, and the fine eyes—I see him now. How often we used to meet in the old days before he embarked for Troy, where other Argive captains, all the best men, sailed in the long curved ships. From then to this very day I've not set eyes on Odysseus or he on me."

And young Telemachus cautiously replied,
"I'll try, my friend, to give you a frank answer. Mother has always told me I'm his son, it's true, but I am not so certain. Who, on his own, has ever really known who gave him life? Would to god I'd been the son of a happy man whom old age overtook in the midst of his possessions! Now, think of the most unlucky mortal ever born—since you ask me, yes, they say I am his son."

"Still," the clear-eyed goddess reassured him, "trust me, the gods have not marked out your house for such an unsung future, not if Penelope has borne a son like you. But tell me about all this and spare me nothing. What's this banqueting, this crowd carousing here? And what part do you play yourself? Some wedding-feast,

some festival? Hardly a potluck supper, I would say. How obscenely they lounge and swagger here, look, gorging in your house. Why, any man of sense who chanced among them would be outraged, seeing such behavior."

Ready Telemachus

took her up at once: "Well, my friend, seeing you want to probe and press the question, once this house was rich, no doubt, beyond reproach when the man you mentioned still lived here, at home. Now the gods have reversed our fortunes with a vengeance—wiped that man from the earth like no one else before. I would never have grieved so much about his death if he'd gone down with comrades off in Troy or died in the arms of loved ones, once he had wound down the long coil of war. Then all united Achaea would have raised his tomb and he'd have won his son great fame for years to come. But now the whirlwinds have ripped him away, no fame for him! He's lost and gone now—out of sight, out of mind—and I . . . he's left me tears and grief. Nor do I rack my heart and grieve for him alone. No longer. Now the gods have invented other miseries to plague me.

Listen.
All the nobles who rule the islands round about, Dulichion, and Same, and wooded Zacynthus too, and all who lord it in rocky Ithaca as well—down to the last man they court my mother, they lay waste my house! And mother . . . she neither rejects a marriage she despises nor can she bear to bring the courting to an end—while they continue to bleed my household white. Soon—you wait—they'll grind *me* down as well."

"Shameful!"—brimming with indignation, Pallas Athena broke out. "Oh how much you need Odysseus, gone so long—how *he'd* lay hands on all these brazen suitors! If only he would appear, now,

at his house's outer gates and take his stand,
 armed with his helmet, shield and pair of spears,
 as strong as the man I glimpsed that first time
 in our own house, drinking wine and reveling there . . .
 just come in from Ephyra, visiting Ilus, Mermerus' son.
 Odysseus sailed that way, you see, in his swift trim ship,
 hunting deadly poison to smear on his arrows' bronze heads.
 Ilus refused—he feared the wrath of the everlasting gods—
 but father, so fond of him, gave him all he wanted.
 If only *that* Odysseus sported with these suitors,
 a blood wedding, a quick death would take the lot!
 True, but all lies in the lap of the great gods,
 whether or not he'll come and pay them back,
 here, in his own house.

But you, I urge you,
 think how to drive these suitors from your halls.
 Come now, listen closely. Take my words to heart.
 At daybreak summon the island's lords to full assembly,
 give your orders to all and call the gods to witness:
 tell the suitors to scatter, each to his own place.
 As for your mother, if the spirit moves her to marry,
 let her go back to her father's house, a man of power.
 Her kin will arrange the wedding, provide the gifts,
 the array that goes with a daughter dearly loved.

For you,
 I have some good advice, if only you will accept it.
 Fit out a ship with twenty oars, the best in sight,
 sail in quest of news of your long-lost father.
 Someone may tell you something
 or you may catch a rumor straight from Zeus,
 rumor that carries news to men like nothing else.
 First go down to Pylos, question old King Nestor,
 then cross over to Sparta, to red-haired Menelaus,
 of all the bronze-armored Achaeans the last man back.
 Now, if you hear your father's alive and heading home,
 hard-pressed as you are, brave out one more year.
 If you hear he's dead, no longer among the living,
 then back you come to the native land you love,

raise his grave-mound, build his honors high
 with the full funeral rites that he deserves—
 and give your mother to another husband.

Then,
 once you've sealed those matters, seen them through,
 think hard, reach down deep in your heart and soul
 for a way to kill these suitors in your house,
 by stealth or in open combat.

You must not cling to your boyhood any longer—
 it's time you were a man. Haven't you heard
 what glory Prince Orestes won throughout the world
 when he killed that cunning, murderous Aegisthus,
 who'd killed his famous father?

And you, my friend—
 how tall and handsome I see you now—be brave, you too,
 so men to come will sing your praises down the years.
 But now I must go back to my swift trim ship
 and all my shipmates, chafing there, I'm sure,
 waiting for my return. It all rests with you.
 Take my words to heart."

"Oh stranger,"
 heedful Telemachus replied, "indeed I will.
 You've counseled me with so much kindness now,
 like a father to a son. I won't forget a word.
 But come, stay longer, keen as you are to sail,
 so you can bathe and rest and lift your spirits,
 then go back to your ship, delighted with a gift,
 a prize of honor, something rare and fine
 as a keepsake from myself. The kind of gift
 a host will give a stranger, friend to friend."

Her eyes glinting, Pallas declined in haste:
 "Not now. Don't hold me here. I long to be on my way.
 As for the gift—whatever you'd give in kindness—
 save it for my return so I can take it home.
 Choose something rare and fine, and a good reward
 that gift is going to bring you."

With that promise,

off and away Athena the bright-eyed goddess flew
like a bird in soaring flight
but left his spirit filled with nerve and courage,
charged with his father's memory more than ever now.
He felt his senses quicken, overwhelmed with wonder—
this was a god, he knew it well and made at once
for the suitors, a man like a god himself.

Amidst them still
the famous bard sang on, and they sat in silence, listening
as he performed The Achaeans' Journey Home from Troy:
all the blows Athena doomed them to endure.

And now,
from high above in her room and deep in thought,
she caught his inspired strains . . .

Icarus' daughter Penelope, wary and reserved,
and down the steep stair from her chamber she descended,
not alone: two of her women followed close behind.
That radiant woman, once she reached her suitors,
drawing her glistening veil across her cheeks,
paused now where a column propped the sturdy roof,
with one of her loyal handmaids stationed either side.
Suddenly, dissolving in tears and bursting through
the bard's inspired voice, she cried out, "Phemius!
So many other songs you know to hold us spellbound,
works of the gods and men that singers celebrate.
Sing one of those as you sit beside them here
and they drink their wine in silence.

But break off this song—
the unendurable song that always rends the heart inside me . . .
the unforgettable grief, it wounds me most of all!
How I long for my husband—alive in memory, always,
that great man whose fame resounds through Hellas
right to the depths of Argos!"

"Why, mother,"
poised Telemachus put in sharply, "why deny
our devoted bard the chance to entertain us
any way the spirit stirs him on?
Bards are not to blame—

Zeus is to blame. He deals to each and every
laborer on this earth whatever doom he pleases.
Why fault the bard if he sings the Argives' harsh fate?
It's always the latest song, the one that echoes last
in the listeners' ears, that people praise the most.
Courage, mother. Harden your heart, and listen.
Odysseus was scarcely the only one, you know,
whose journey home was blotted out at Troy.
Others, so many others, died there too.

So, mother,
go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks,
the distaff and the loom, and keep the women
working hard as well. As for giving orders,
men will see to that, but I most of all:
I hold the reins of power in this house."

Astonished,
she withdrew to her own room. She took to heart
the clear good sense in what her son had said.
Climbing up to the lofty chamber with her women,
she fell to weeping for Odysseus, her beloved husband,
till watchful Athena sealed her eyes with welcome sleep.

But the suitors broke into uproar through the shadowed halls,
all of them lifting prayers to lie beside her, share her bed,
until discreet Telemachus took command: "You suitors
who plague my mother, you, you insolent, overweening . . .
for this evening let us dine and take our pleasure,
no more shouting now. What a fine thing it is
to listen to such a bard as we have here—
the man sings like a god.

But at first light
we all march forth to assembly, take our seats
so I can give my orders and say to you straight out:
You must leave my palace! See to your feasting elsewhere,
devour your own possessions, house to house by turns.
But if you decide the fare is better, richer here,
destroying one man's goods and going scot-free,
all right then, carve away!

But I'll cry out to the everlasting gods in hopes that Zeus will pay you back with a vengeance—all of you destroyed in my house while I go scot-free myself!"

So Telemachus declared. And they all bit their lips, amazed the prince could speak with so much daring.

Eupithes' son Antinous broke their silence:

"Well, Telemachus, only the gods could teach you to sound so high and mighty! Such brave talk. I pray that Zeus will never make *you* king of Ithaca, though your father's crown is no doubt yours by birth."

But cool-headed Telemachus countered firmly:

"Antinous, even though my words may offend you, I'd be happy to take the crown if Zeus presents it. You think that nothing worse could befall a man? It's really not so bad to be a king. All at once your palace grows in wealth, your honors grow as well. But there are hosts of other Achaeans, princes, look—
young and old, crowds of them on our island here—and any one of the lot might hold the throne, now great Odysseus is dead . . .
But I'll be lord of my own house and servants, all that King Odysseus won for me by force."

And now Eurymachus, Polybus' son, stepped in: "Surely this must lie in the gods' lap, Telemachus—which Achaean will lord it over seagirt Ithaca. Do hold on to your own possessions, rule your house. God forbid that anyone tear your holdings from your hands while men still live in Ithaca.

But about your guest, dear boy, I have some questions. Where does he come from? Where's his country, his birth, his father's old estates? Did he bring some news of your father, his return? Or did he come on business of his own? How he leapt to his feet and off he went!

No waiting around for proper introductions. And no mean man, not by the looks of him, I'd say."

"Eurymachus," Telemachus answered shrewdly, "clearly my father's journey home is lost forever. I no longer trust in rumors—rumors from the blue—nor bother with any prophecy, when mother calls some wizard into the house to ask him questions. As for the stranger though, the man's an old family friend, from Taphos, wise Anchialus' son. He says his name is Mentes, lord of the Taphian men who love their oars."

So he said but deep in his mind he knew the immortal goddess.

Now the suitors turned to dance and song, to the lovely beat and sway, waiting for dusk to come upon them there . . . and the dark night came upon them, lost in pleasure. Finally, to bed. Each to his own house.

Telemachus,

off to his bedroom built in the fine courtyard—a commanding, lofty room set well apart—retired too, his spirit swarming with misgivings. His devoted nurse attended him, bearing a glowing torch, Eurycleia the daughter of Ops, Pisenor's son.

Laertes had paid a price for the woman years ago, still in the bloom of youth. He traded twenty oxen, honored her on a par with his own loyal wife at home but fearing the queen's anger, never shared her bed. She was his grandson's escort now and bore a torch, for she was the one of all the maids who loved the prince the most—she'd nursed him as a baby. He spread the doors of his snug, well-made room, sat down on the bed and pulled his soft shirt off, tossed it into the old woman's conscientious hands, and after folding it neatly, patting it smooth, she hung it up on a peg beside his corded bed, then padded from the bedroom,

drawing the door shut with the silver hook,
 sliding the doorbolt home with its rawhide strap.
 There all night long, wrapped in a sheep's warm fleece,
 he weighed in his mind the course Athena charted.

[441–44]



Telemachus Sets Sail

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
 the true son of Odysseus sprang from bed and dressed,
 over his shoulder he slung his well-honed sword,
 fastened rawhide sandals under his smooth feet
 and stepped from his bedroom, handsome as a god.
 At once he ordered heralds to cry out loud and clear
 and summon the flowing-haired Achaeans to full assembly.
 Their cries rang out. The people filed in quickly.
 When they'd grouped, crowding the meeting grounds,
 Telemachus strode in too, a bronze spear in his grip
 and not alone: two sleek hounds went trotting at his heels.
 And Athena lavished a marvelous splendor on the prince
 so the people all gazed in wonder as he came forward,
 the elders making way as he took his father's seat.
 The first to speak was an old lord, Aegyptius,

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