

HOMER
the ODYSSEY



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BOOK I

A man, resourceful but forced into so many wanderings from the time he sacked the sacred stronghold of Troy—sing me his story, Muse. There were many people whose towns he saw, whose minds he took the measure of, and many miseries he suffered at sea, sick at heart, while trying to earn his own life and a way home for his shipmates. But there was no saving those shipmates, determined as he was; they were undone by their own reckless acts. With no more sense than infants they fell on the cattle of the sun god Hyperion and ate them. The god robbed *them* of the *day*—their day of homecoming. Start anywhere, goddess, daughter of Zeus, and tell the story again for us. When all the rest who had escaped utter destruction were home, survivors of the war and also of the sea, he alone was still yearning for his homecoming and his wife, kept in the cavernous lair of the queenly nymph Calypso, a goddess among goddesses, who wanted him for a husband. Time sailed its monotonous circuit, but when the year came round in which the gods had spun his destiny to return to Ithaca, he was not home free even there; his struggles continued, even among his own loved ones. All the gods took pity on him, apart from Poseidon; he went on with his raging fury at godlike Odysseus to the moment of his arrival in his own land.

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But Poseidon was far from home, gone off to the Ethiopians—the Ethiopians who are the most remote of men in either direction; they live where Hyperion sets and also where he rises. He went to receive their sacrifice of a hundred bulls and rams, and he was right there for the feast, partaking with gusto. The rest of the gods were gathered in the palace of Olympian Zeus, and the first to speak among them was the father of men and gods. His heart was mindful of Aegisthus, a man not to be trifled with, yet Agamemnon’s far-famed son Orestes had killed him. With him in mind, he spoke among the immortal ones, saying:

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“Incredible how quick mortals are to blame the gods!
They claim all their evils come from us, when their own

reckless acts get them sufferings outstripping what's fated;
and now Aegisthus oversteps fate and marries Agamemnon's
lawful wedded wife, then kills him when he comes home,
knowing it would be utter destruction; we told him so beforehand!
We sent Hermes, who sees far and appears in a flash,
to warn him not to kill the man or seduce the wife,
40 since there would be vengeance from the line of Atreus, from Orestes
when the time came that he grew up and yearned for his own land.
That's what Hermes told him, but he couldn't get that into the stubborn heart
of Aegisthus, even for his own good, and now he's paid the price in one lump sum."

Then Athena, the goddess with flashing eyes, answered him:
"Our father, son of Cronos, highest of the mighty,
all too fitting is the destruction by which that man was brought down.
May anyone else who does such things be destroyed as well!
But my heart breaks in two for ill-fated Odysseus, who for all his agile wits
has been enduring sufferings so long, far from friends
50 on a surf-encircled island at the very navel of the sea.
On this wooded island a goddess makes her home,
a daughter of malevolent Atlas who knows
the deeps of every sea and holds up by himself the great
pillars that prop the land and heavens apart.
His daughter holds back the wretched, mournful man,
and applies her charms incessantly with soft, wheedling
words to make him forget Ithaca. But Odysseus,
longing for the sight even of the smoke rising
from his own land, yearns to die. But for *you* now,
60 Olympian, none of this touches your heart. Didn't Odysseus
willingly perform sacrifices beside the Argive ships
on the wide shores of Troy? Why do you hate him so much now, Zeus?"

And Zeus who gathers the stormclouds answered her, saying,
"My child, you should have clamped down your teeth on that speech!
How could I ever forget godlike Odysseus?
He is beyond mortals in intelligence and has made sacrifices beyond
the call of duty to the immortal gods who inhabit wide heaven.
But Poseidon, who holds the earth, the relentlessly stubborn one,
has been enraged over the Cyclops whose eye he blinded,
70 the godlike Polyphemus, whose might is greatest
in all the Cyclopean race. The nymph Thoösa gave him birth,
the daughter of Phorcys, who holds lordship over the barren salt sea,
when she consorted with Poseidon in her cavernous lair.
From then on Poseidon, who makes the earth quake, has stopped short of

killing Odysseus, but has kept him constantly wandering far from his fatherland. But come now, let all of us here put our minds to his return, so that he might come home. Poseidon will give up his bitterness, for he'll be utterly helpless alone in the face of all the rest to put up a fight against the will of the immortal gods."

Then Athena, the goddess with flashing eyes, answered him: 80
"Our father, son of Cronos, highest of the mighty,
if this is now what pleases the blessed gods,
that Odysseus, the deeply thoughtful one, should return to his own house,
then let us rouse up Hermes, who appears in a flash, as a messenger
to the island of Ogygia, so that with all possible speed
he may state our incontestable will to the nymph with the lovely hair:
that Odysseus, with his long-suffering heart, should leave and have
his return. For my part, I'm going to Ithaca, the better to stir up
his son, and I'll instill in his heart a confident resolve
to call the flowing-haired Achaeans into assembly 90
so he can speak out to all the suitors who are constantly
slaughtering his huddling sheep and bandy-legged round-bellied cattle.
And I'll send him to Sparta and to the sandy beaches of Pylos
to get news of his father's return in person wherever he might hear any,
so that a good report of him as well may begin to spread among men."

With these words she strapped on her feet those beautiful sandals,
golden and ambrosial, that carried her over water
as easily as over the boundless land on gusts of wind.
And she took her stout spear, edged with sharp bronze,
big, heavy, and strong; with it she mows down ranks of men, 100
warriors who incur the wrath of one with so mighty a father.
Darting down, she flashed from the peaks of Olympus
to stand in the countryside of Ithaca at Odysseus' front gate,
at the threshold of the courtyard; in her hand she held the bronze spear,
in the guise of a foreigner, the Taphian leader Mentès.
Right away she found the arrogant suitors: there in front of
the doors they were amusing themselves playing checkers,
lounging on the hides of the bulls they themselves had slaughtered.
And they had attendants and squires bustling around—
some were mixing wine and water in big bowls 110
while others were washing down the tables with porous sponges
and setting them, and still others were cutting up piles of meat.

The first by far who noticed her was godlike Telemachus
as he sat among the suitors with his heart full of sorrow,

daydreaming about his brave father, picturing him coming from . . . someplace,
making a rout of the suitors, scattering them from the house,
and picturing himself getting honor and being master of his own property.
As he sat musing on these things amid the suitors, he caught sight of Athena
and went straight to the front gate, offended at heart that a stranger
120 had been left standing so long at the door. He stood beside her,
clasped her right hand, took the bronze spear, and spoke up,
and the words he addressed to her went straight as winged shafts:

“Welcome, stranger! You’ll find a friendly reception with me; then,
after you’ve eaten dinner, you’ll tell me what you could use.”

With these words, he led the way, and Pallas Athena followed.
And when they were indoors in the high-vaulted hall,
he set the spear he carried beside a tall pillar,
inside a polished rack where many other spears
were standing, stored there by Odysseus of the long-suffering heart.
130 Leading her to a beautifully wrought chair, he seated her, after first
spreading out a linen cloth, and there was a footstool under her feet.
He pulled up an embroidered hassock for himself. They sat far from the others,
those suitors, so the stranger wouldn’t be annoyed by the hubbub
and be fed up with a meal served in the midst of such obnoxious men;
also, he wanted to ask about his missing father.
A serving girl carrying a beautiful golden pitcher
poured water into a silver handbasin
so they could wash, and she laid a polished table beside them.
A venerable housekeeper brought bread and set it out,
140 serving up many delicacies with it, giving freely of whatever was on hand.
A carver hoisting platters loaded with meat set them out,
meats of every kind, and set golden chalices beside them.
And an attendant went constantly back and forth pouring them wine.

Then in came the arrogant suitors, and went straight
to seat themselves on rows of couches and chairs.
Their attendants poured water over their hands,
slave girls piled bread beside them in wicker baskets,
boys filled their bowls to the brim with drink,
and they grabbed up the good things spread in front of them in their hands.
150 But when all their craving for food and drink had been satisfied,
the hearts within the suitors began to care about other things,
about the singing and dancing that are the highlights of a feast.
An attendant now placed a surpassingly beautiful lyre in the hands
of Phemius; he did the singing for the suitors, though not of his own accord.

Now he struck up the opening notes, and lifted his beautiful voice in song, but Telemachus spoke to Athena of the flashing eyes, holding his head close so the others would not overhear:

“Dear guest, will you be offended if I speak?

These men care about these things, the lyre and the song,
at their ease while they eat up another man’s livelihood with impunity. 160

That man’s white bones lie rotting in the rain on some
shore, or maybe the waves are rolling them around in the sea.

If they were to see that man returning to Ithaca
they’d all be praying they were faster on their feet
instead of richer in gold and apparel.

But now he’s fallen victim to some evil doom and there is no
consolation for us, no hope that any human being anywhere on earth
will claim he’s coming back. His day of homecoming is dead and gone.

But come, tell me this, and tell me straight and true: Who of all men
are you? Where are you from? Where are your city and your parents? 170

What sort of ship did you get here on? How did the sailors get you
to Ithaca? Who do they proclaim themselves to be?

I don’t imagine you managed to get here on foot.

And declare this to me as well, the truth now, so I can know for sure,
whether you are a newcomer here or a hereditary friend
of the family, for there used to be many different men at our house,
since *he* too was one who made the rounds among his fellow men.”

Then the flashing-eyed goddess Athena replied to him:

“Rest assured I will declare these things to you straight and true.

I proclaim that I am Mentès, son of agile-witted Anchialus,
and I am lord of the Taphians, whose delight is in plying the oars. 180

And now with ship and shipmates I have put in here
while sailing the wine-dark sea to people who speak a strange tongue,
headed for Temese in quest of copper, and I carry gleaming iron.

My ship stands by a field over there, far from the city,
in Rheithron harbor, below the wooded slope of Mount Neion.

And let us affirm our title to be hereditary friends of one another,
from earliest times; go and ask the aged warrior Laertes,
if you want, though they say he no longer comes to town,
but endures his woes far off, out in the countryside, 190

with an elderly serving woman who brings him food and drink
when exhaustion grips the limbs, worn down by toil,
that he drags up and down the slopes of his vine-growing gardens.

I came here now because people claimed *he* was back home—
your father! It must be the gods, then, who are blocking his way.

He's not dead yet, not on this earth, not godlike Odysseus;
he's still alive but being held captive somewhere on the wide sea
on a surf-encircled island. Rough men are holding him,
savages who keep him confined somewhere against his will.

200 But here and now I'll make you a prophecy, just the way the immortals
inspire my heart and the way I believe it's going to turn out,
not that I'm any soothsayer—I don't know the messages in bird omens.
But I'm sure he won't be away long now from this beloved land
of his fathers, not even if men are holding him in shackles of iron.
He'll figure out a way to come back—he's full of cunning tricks.
But come, tell me this, and tell me straight and true:
you're so tall, are you really Odysseus' very own child?
It's scary how much that head and those eyes of yours—beauties—are like
210 *his*; we used to spend a lot of time in one another's company,
before he sailed off to Troy, that is, where others went as well,
the best of the Argives, in their hollow ships.
From then on I haven't set eyes on Odysseus, or he on me."

Then levelheaded Telemachus spoke to her in reply:

"Rest assured, stranger, that I will declare this to you straight and true.
My mother says I'm his child, but *I* don't know that.
No one ever knows his own parentage of his own knowledge.
How grateful I'd be now if I were the son of some man blessed
enough for old age to catch up with him among his own belongings.
As it is, though, he whose lot has been the worst among mortal men
220 is the one they say begat me, since that's what you're asking."

Then the flashing-eyed goddess Athena replied to him:

"It's surely not a lineage the gods have destined to obscurity
in time to come, since Penelope bore such a son as you.
But come, tell me this, and tell me straight and true:
What sort of feast is going on here? What do you want with this crowd?
Is this some celebration, or a wedding? It's clearly not a collaborative effort—
not with the obnoxious and outrageous way they seem to me to be carrying on
in your house. Why, any man would take offense who came among them
and saw so much shameful behavior, anyone with his head on straight."

230 Then levelheaded Telemachus spoke to her in reply:

"Stranger, since you bring up these questions and ask me about them,
this house once promised to be prosperous and above reproach,
as long as *that* man was still among his people.
But now the gods have willed otherwise and thought up evils
surpassing those of all humankind; they made *him*

just disappear. If he were dead, I wouldn't grieve for him as much, not if he had been overpowered among his fellow warriors in the Trojans' land, or died in his loved ones' arms after he had wound up the war.

The whole host of Achaeans would have made him a burial mound, and the great glory he won would have come to his son too in time to come.

As it is, though, he's been ignominiously snatched away by the winds.

He's just gone, unseen, unheard of, while I'm left with grief and lamentation. But my groans and wailing are not for *him*

alone, since the gods have now come up with other evils to plague me.

For all the most powerful lords of these islands—

of Dulichium and Samè and the wooded isle of Zacynthus,

and all the ones who rule on the rocky isle of Ithaca as well—they're all seeking a marriage with my mother while eating us out of house and home.

She doesn't refuse the hateful marriage outright, but she doesn't have the power to put an end to the proposals. So they keep wasting away my household with their eating, and before long they'll be leaving me in wreckage myself."

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Unable to contain her indignation, Pallas Athena spoke out to him:

"Insufferable! You'd have plenty of use for the one who's not here;

Odysseus would lay hands on these shameless suitors!

Oh, if he were already back, and standing at the front door

of the house, wearing his helmet and holding his shield and two spears,

and still the sort of man he was the first time I saw him—

in our house, drinking and having a good time—he was

on his way back from Ephyre, from the home of Mermerus' son Ilus.

Odysseus had gone out there too in a sleek-hulled ship,

seeking out a man-killing poison that he could have on hand

to anoint his bronze-tipped arrows; but Ilus wouldn't give it

to him, since he feared offending the gods who live forever.

My father did give him some, though; it was a wonder how fond of him he was.

Oh, if Odysseus, still the man he was then, came calling on the suitors!

They'd all come to quick dooms and taste the bitterness of their courtship.

But these things lie in the lap of the gods.

It may be that he'll return and take vengeance in his own house,

or it may not. My advice to you is to concentrate on

what *you* could do to get the suitors out of the house.

Come now, and pay close attention, so you'll understand what I'm saying.

Call the Achaean warriors into assembly tomorrow,

make your word known to them all, and let the gods be witnesses to it.

Order the suitors to disperse to their own places

and your mother, if her heart prompts her to accept a marriage,

to go back to the palace of her powerful father,

where they'll arrange her wedding and get the wedding gifts ready,

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a great many gifts, in numbers suitable to accompany a beloved daughter.
To you yourself, I have a strong suggestion to make, if you will trust me:
280 fit out a ship, your best one, with twenty oarsmen, and
go in search of news of your father who's been gone so long.
Someone among mortals might tell you something, or you might hear
a rumor sent by Zeus, his favorite means of bearing tidings to humans.
Go first to Pylos and ask questions of godlike Nestor,
and go on from there to Sparta to visit golden-haired Menelaus;
he was last of all the bronze-armored Achaeans to come back.
If you hear word that your father is alive and on his way home,
then even with your household wasting away you could hang on
another year, and if you hear he has perished and is no longer,
290 then return home to the beloved land of your fathers,
raise up a burial mound for him, and conduct funeral rites, lavish ones
as would befit him; then give your mother in marriage to another man.
And when you have fulfilled and carried out these obligations,
that will be the time to devote your heart and mind to thoughts
of how best to put to death the suitors in your house,
by trickery or out in the open. But you need to let go of
the life of a child, because you're not the age for it any more.
Haven't you heard how much fame godlike Orestes obtained
among all mankind when he killed his father's murderer, Aegisthus,
300 that sneaky schemer who brought down his glorious father? You could
be another Orestes, my friend—I see how tall and well built you are;
be brave as well, and for generations to come everyone will speak well
of you too. I'll be going straight back now to my sleek-hulled ship and to my
shipmates, who are no doubt greatly annoyed at waiting for me.
You have a lot of careful thinking to do; take what I've said to heart."

Then levelheaded Telemachus spoke to her in reply:
"Stranger, I know you're speaking these words out of friendly concern,
as a father would speak to his child, and I'll never forget them.
But come now, stay a little longer, pressed as you are to be on your way,
310 so that, after being bathed and having your own heart refreshed,
you can go to your ship with a gift in hand, rejoicing in spirit,
something costly and very beautiful that will be a treasured heirloom
to remember me by, of the sort dear friends give their friends."

Then the flashing-eyed goddess Athena replied to him:
"Don't keep me any longer now, when I'm so anxious to be on my way.
Whatever gift your own heart moves you to give me
may be given when I come back, to take home with me; and pick
something very beautiful—you will have something worthy in return."

And with these words the flashing-eyed Athena went off,
and then flew upward like a bird. But in his heart she had instilled
strength and courage, and had made his thoughts dwell on his father
even more than before. And in his mind he grasped the meaning
of it, with heartfelt awe: he was convinced a god had been there.
He headed straight for the suitors, a man and the equal of a god.

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The widely renowned singer was singing to them, and they were
listening in silence; he sang of the homecoming of the Achaeans,
the sorrow-filled return from Troy that Pallas Athena decreed.
And his divinely inspired song was recognized from upstairs by
Icarius's thoughtful daughter Penelope, and it got under her skin.
She came down the lofty staircase from her rooms,
not alone but with two handmaids attending her.
And when she, godlike among women, came to where the suitors
were, she stopped beside the pillar of the solidly built roof,
wearing a lustrous veil in front of her face,
while a devoted handmaid stood by her on each side.
With tears falling, she spoke out to the godlike singer:

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“Phemius, you know lots of other stories to enchant mortals with,
deeds of men and gods that poets celebrate in song;
sing one of those to the men who are sitting here in silence
and drinking their wine. Stop this sorrow-filled song
that always oppresses the heart within my breast,
for an unbearable grief has come down on me most of all.
The dear head I yearn to caress is always in my thoughts, of a husband
famed from the heart of Argos up and down the length of Greece.”

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Then levelheaded Telemachus spoke to her in reply:
“My mother, why should you begrudge a pleasing singer the right
to give pleasure in whatever way his mind is moved? It's no fault
of the singers but Zeus's fault; he's the one who metes out
to men who earn their bread by toil what he wills for each. This man
deserves no resentment for singing of the Danaans' evil doom.
People always have a higher regard for the newest song
to make the rounds at the time they hear it, whatever it is.
Stiffen your heart and soul and put up with hearing it.
Odysseus was not the only one who lost his day of
homecoming in Troy; many other men died there.
Go to your rooms and tend to your own tasks
at the loom and the distaff, and tell your handmaids

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to do their work. Speech will be men's business—
all men's, but especially mine; I'm the master in this house."

360 Awestruck, she went back up to her rooms, treasuring up
in her heart the levelheaded speech of her son.
But once she had arrived upstairs with the women attending her,
she cried for Odysseus, her beloved husband, until
flashing-eyed Athena shed sweet sleep upon her eyelids.

But the suitors were getting raucous down in the shadowy hall;
they were all praying they'd be lying beside her in bed.
But levelheaded Telemachus started to tell them off:

"For men who want to win my mother's hand, your disrespect
is outrageous; let's enjoy feasting, but stop making an uproar.
370 To listen to a singer like the one we have here, one
with a voice like that of the gods, is a beautiful thing.
In the morning, we'll all go take our seats at the assembly
ground, so I can speak plain words to you and tell you
to get out of my house. Set up feasts in other places;
eat up your own property, taking turns among your houses.
Or, if it seems to you that it's a better thing and more fun
to wipe out one man's livelihood like this with impunity,
go on wasting it; but I'll be calling on the gods who live forever
for Zeus to grant that deeds may be done to pay you back.
380 Then it would be *you* getting wiped out in my house with impunity."

He spoke these words, and they all reacted with a spontaneous curl of the lips
against their teeth, astonished that Telemachus had spoken out so boldly.

Then Antinous, son of Eupheithes, spoke to him in reply:
"Telemachus, the gods themselves may very well be
instructing you to be a big talker and bold speaker,
but that doesn't mean Cronos' son will ever make you king
on sea-encircled Ithaca, whatever your birthright may be."

Then levelheaded Telemachus spoke to him in reply:
"Antinous, even though you're going to resent my saying it,
390 I would take that willingly if Zeus were to grant it. Are you claiming
this would be the worst thing in the world to happen to someone?
There's nothing bad about being king. Immediately,
one's household becomes rich and oneself more honored.
But there are plenty of other Achaeans who hold kingships

on sea-encircled Ithaca, some young, some old, and any one of them might get this one too, since godlike Odysseus is dead. But I'm determined to be lord of our household, and of the slaves whom godlike Odysseus won for me."

Then Eurymachus, son of Polybus, spoke to him in reply:
"These things lie in the lap of the gods, of course; they'll decide
who'll be king over the Achaeans on sea-encircled Ithaca.

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But you yourself may keep your property and be lord in your own house. No man whatsoever is going to come and rob you of your property by force and against your will, not as long as there are people on Ithaca.

But listen; what I want to ask you about is that stranger.

Where did this man come from? What land does he proclaim as his? Where is his family and where are the fields of his fathers?

Did he bring any news that *your* father is coming?

Or did he put in here on some errand of his own?

He jumped up and left so quickly, he didn't even take the time to get acquainted; but to look at him, he didn't seem contemptible."

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Then levelheaded Telemachus spoke to him in reply:

"Eurymachus, my father's homecoming is dead and gone.

I don't believe any news anymore, no matter where it comes from, and I pay no attention to any sort of prophecy my mother might get by inquiring of a soothsayer she's summoned to the house.

This stranger is a friend of my family from Taphos,

and proclaims himself to be Mentès, son of agile-witted Anchialus, and lord of the Taphians who delight in plying the oars."

That's what Telemachus said, though in his heart he knew it had been the immortal goddess. So the crowd turned back to enjoying the dancing and the lovely song, staying until evening came.

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And were still taking their pleasure when the evening darkness fell.

Then they went home, each to his own house and his own bed.

And Telemachus went to the beautiful area within the grounds where his bedroom was built up high, on a spot with a view all around; and as he headed toward his bed he had many worries on his mind.

Along with him, carrying blazing torches, well skilled at her tasks, went Eurycleia, daughter of Ops, whose father was Peisenor;

Laertes had bought her with his own possessions at the time when

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she was still in the first bloom of youth, bartering twenty oxen for her, and in his house she was treated with honor equal to that of his dear wife.

But he never went to bed with her, unwilling to cause his wife distress.

She was carrying the blazing torches alongside the young man, and she,

of all the serving women, loved him most; she had raised him from a baby.
He opened the solidly built doors of his bedroom,
sat down on the bed, took off his soft tunic, and
placed it in the hands of the sharp-witted old woman.
She folded over the tunic, smoothed out the wrinkles, and hung it up
440 on one of the pegs set into holes at the side of the bedstead.
Then she left the bedroom, pulled the door shut by its
silver handle, and drew the leather strap that held it closed.
He lay there all night long, wrapped in a fleece of finest wool,
turning over in his mind the journey Athena had designed for him.