

The Sirens

Odysseus returns to Circe's island. The goddess reveals his course to him and gives advice on how to avoid the dangers he will face: the Sirens, who lure sailors to their destruction; the Wandering Rocks, sea rocks that destroy even birds in flight; the perils of the sea monster Scylla and, nearby, the whirlpool Charybdis;⁶² and the cattle of the sun god, which Tiresias has warned Odysseus not to harm.

As Circe spoke, Dawn mounted her golden throne,
and on the first rays Circe left me, taking
her way like a great goddess up the island.
675 I made straight for the ship, roused up the men
to get aboard and cast off at the stern.
They scrambled to their places by the rowlocks
and all in line dipped oars in the gray sea.
But soon an offshore breeze blew to our liking—
680 a canvas-bellying breeze, a lusty shipmate
sent by the singing nymph with sunbright hair.
So we made fast the braces, and we rested,
letting the wind and steersman work the ship.
The crew being now silent before me, I
685 addressed them, sore at heart:

‘Dear friends,
more than one man, or two, should know those things
Circe foresaw for us and shared with me,
so let me tell her forecast: then we die
with our eyes open, if we are going to die,
690 or know what death we baffle if we can. Sirens
weaving a haunting song over the sea
we are to shun, she said, and their green shore
all sweet with clover; yet she urged that I
alone should listen to their song. Therefore
695 you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,
erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,
and if I shout and beg to be untied,
take more turns of the rope to muffle me.’

I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast,
700 while our good ship made time, bound outward down
the wind for the strange island of Sirens.

62. Charybdis (kə rib' dis)

Literary Analysis

Epic Hero What does Odysseus reveal about his character by sharing information with his men?

✓ Reading Check

What instructions does Odysseus give his shipmates as they prepare to deal with the Sirens?

Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm
came over all the sea, as though some power
lulled the swell.

The crew were on their feet
705 briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,
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—
710 no long task, for a burning heat came down
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,
715 and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,
as we came smartly within hailing distance,
the two Sirens, noting our fast ship
off their point, made ready, and they sang:

720 *This way, oh turn your bows,
Achaea's glory,
As all the world allows—
Moor and be merry.*

*Sweet coupled airs we sing.
No lonely seafarer
725 Holds clear of entering
Our green mirror.*

*Pleased by each purling note
Like honey twining*

Reading Skill
Historical and
Cultural Context

What does Odysseus' mention of Helios reveal about ancient Greek beliefs regarding astronomical events?

 **Reading Check**

How does Odysseus keep his shipmates from hearing the Sirens sing?

730 From her throat and my throat,
Who lies a-pining?

Sea rovers here take joy
Voyaging onward,
As from our song of Troy
Graybeard and rower-boy
735 Goeth more learned.

All feats on that great field
In the long warfare,
Dark days the bright gods willed,
Wounds you bore there,

740 Argos' old soldiery⁶³
On Troy beach teeming,
Charmed out of time we see.
No life on earth can be
Hid from our dreaming.

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

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

Scylla and Charybdis

But scarcely had that island
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.
760 Oars flew from their hands; the blades went knocking
wild alongside till the ship lost way,
with no oar blades to drive her through the water.

Literary Analysis

Epic Hero Which details in the Sirens' song are designed to flatter the epic hero?

63. Argos' old soldiery soldiers from Argos, a city in ancient Greece.

Vocabulary Builder

ardor (är' dər) *n.*
passion; enthusiasm