

Book 1

The man, Muse—tell me about that resourceful man, who wandered
far and wide, when he'd sacked Troy's sacred citadel:
many men's townships he saw, and learned their ways of thinking,
many the griefs he suffered at heart on the open sea,
battling for his own life and his comrades' homecoming. Yet 5
no way could he save his comrades, much though he longed to—
it was through their own blind recklessness that they perished,
the fools, for they slaughtered the cattle of Hēlios the sun god
and ate them: for that he took from them their day of returning.
Tell us this tale, goddess, child of Zeus; start anywhere in it! 10

Now the rest, all those who'd escaped from sheer destruction,
were home by now, survivors of both warfare and the sea;
Him alone, though longing for his homecoming and his wife,
the queenly nymph Kalypsō, bright among goddesses,
held back in her hollow cavern, desiring him for her husband. 15
But when the year arrived, with its circling seasons, in which
the gods had ordained he should make his homeward journey
to Ithákē, not even then would he be free of trials,
even among his own people. All the gods felt pity for him
except for Poseidōn, who still nursed unabated wrath 20
against godlike Odysseus until he reached his native land.

But now Poseidōn was visiting the remote Aithiopians—
who live in two sundered groups, both at mankind's frontiers,
the one at Hyperion's setting, the other where he rises—
to receive from them a full sacrifice of bulls and rams, 25
and was sitting there at the feast, enjoying himself: the other
gods were all assembled in the halls of Olympian Zeus.
Discussion was started among them by the Father of men and gods,
who'd been brooding in his heart over handsome¹ Aigisthos,

1. The epithet applied to Aigisthos is *amumōn*, which usually carries the formulaic meaning “blameless” or “peerless.” This seems inappropriate here, since Aigisthos murdered his cousin Agamemnon. A. A. Parry 1973, 123–24 argues on etymological grounds that *amumōn* could also mean “handsome” or “stately.” I accept this explanation *faute de mieux*, but suspect (see pp. 15–17 above) there may be some other reason for the presence of the surprising formulaic title.

slain by far-famed Orestēs, the son of Agamemnōn: 30
 with him in mind he now spoke among the immortals, saying:
 “My oh my, the way mortals will fasten blame on the gods!
 From us, they say, evils come, yet they themselves
 through their own blind recklessness have ills beyond
 their fated lot, as lately Aigisthos—beyond *his* fated lot— 35
 killed Atreus’ son at his homecoming, married his wife,
 though he knew this meant sheer destruction, since we’d told him
 before the event, sending Hermēs, the sharp-eyed Argos-slayer,
 he should neither slay the man nor marry his bedfellow,
 since vengeance for Atreus’ son would come from Orestēs 40
 once he’d reached manhood, and longed for his own country.
 So Hermēs said; but he failed, for all his good intentions,
 to dissuade Aigisthos, who now has paid the full penalty.”

Then the goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, responded to him, saying:
 “Our father, son of Kronos, highest above all rulers, 45
 that man indeed was destroyed by well-merited disaster—
 so may all others perish who commit such crimes!—
 but my heart is distressed on account of clever Odysseus,
 that ill-fated man, who, far from his dear ones, has long
 suffered griefs on a sea-ringed island, where the sea’s navel is: 50
 a tree-rich island, and a goddess has her home there,
 the daughter of crafty-minded Atlas, who knows the depths
 of every sea, who in person shoulders those lofty
 pillars that keep earth and firmament apart from each other.
 His daughter it is who detains that luckless, sorrowful man, 55
 forever beguiling him with soft and wheedling words
 to forget his island, Ithákē. Yet Odysseus, in his yearning
 to perceive were it only the smoke rising up into the sky
 from his homeland, longs now for death. But your own heart
 cares nothing for him, Olympian! Did not Odysseus 60
 by the Argives’ ships honor you with the sacrifices he made
 in the broad land of Troy? Why, Zeus, do you hate² him so?”

Cloud-gatherer Zeus responded to her, saying: “My child,
 what’s this word that’s escaped the barrier of your teeth?
 Now how could I ever forget the godlike Odysseus, 65

2. There is an untranslatable pun here (and elsewhere) involving the name Odysseus and the verb *odussomai*, meaning to hate, or be wrathful. Cf. 19.409 and note ad loc.

who for mind surpasses all mortals, who's sacrificed most
to the deathless gods who possess the wide firmament? No,
it's Poseidōn, the Earth-Shaker, whose fury with him is relentless,
unceasing, because of the Kyklōps, whose eye he blinded—
the godlike Polyphēmos, whose strength is the mightiest 70
among all the Kyklōpes: the nymph Thoōsa bore him,
daughter of Phorkys who rules the unharvested sea,
for there in the hollow sea caves she lay with Poseidōn.
That's why Earth-Shaker Poseidōn is wroth with Odysseus:
not killing him, but forever frustrating his homeward journey. 75
So come, let all of us here give some thought to his return,
how to get him home safely: Poseidōn will have to abandon
his rage, he won't be able, with all the immortals united
against him, to strive alone, lacking the gods' goodwill."

The goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, responded to him, saying: 80
"Our father, son of Kronos, highest above all rulers,
if indeed it is now agreeable to the blessed gods
that quick-witted Odysseus should return to his own home,
let us then dispatch Hermēs, the guide, the slayer of Argos,
to the isle of Ōgygia, so that as soon as may be 85
he can inform the fair-tressed nymph of our firm decision
on steadfast-minded Odysseus: that he's to return home.
I meanwhile will go to Ithákē, approach his son,
put more strength in his heart, give him the courage
to summon the long-haired Achaians to assembly, and make 90
a strong case to the suitors, who without cease slaughter
his flocks of sheep and his shambling, crumple-horned cattle;
and then I'll send him to Sparta and sandy Pylos, to seek
news of his father's homecoming—he may learn something—
and win a good reputation among men at large." 95

So she spoke,
and bound on her elegant sandals under her feet,
immortal, golden, that bore her both over the sea
and across the boundless earth, as swift as the wind's blast;
and she took her brave spear, so massive, thick and strong,
its tip of sharp bronze, with which she routs the ranks of men, 100
heroes against whom she, a strong sire's daughter, is wroth,
and took off, down from the heights of Olympos, landing
on Ithákē, right before Odysseus' outer entrance,

his courtyard's threshold, still grasping the bronze spear,
in the guise of a stranger, the Taphian leader Mentēs. 105

There she found the bold suitors. They at the time
were amusing themselves with board games out of doors,
seated on hides of oxen they themselves had slaughtered,
while heralds and henchmen were busy on their behalf,
some mixing wine and water for them in bowls, 110
while others were swabbing the tables with porous sponges
and setting them out, or carving meat in lavish helpings.

By far the first to see her was godlike Tēlemachos,
who was sitting among the suitors, sorely vexed at heart,
in his mind's eye seeing his noble father, how he might 115
return, make a scattering of the suitors through his domain,
and himself gain honor, be king of his own possessions.
Thinking thus, there among the suitors, he noticed Athēnē,
and went at once to the forecourt, embarrassed at heart
that a guest had to wait outside. He stood beside her, 120
clasped her right hand, took charge of the bronze spear,
and addressed her with winged words, saying: "Greetings, stranger!
As a guest you're welcome among us, and afterwards, when
you've shared our meal, then explain to us what it is you need."

That said, he led the way, and Pallas Athēnē followed. 125
When they entered the lofty house, Tēlemachos carried
her spear across and stood it beside a tall pillar, in
a polished spear rack, where many more spears were standing,
that belonged to steadfast Odysseus. Athēnē herself
he led and had sit down in a backed chair, spreading 130
a cloth on it first: a finely wrought chair, with footstool,
and beside it an inlaid seat for himself, away from the others,
the suitors, lest his guest, irritated by their uproar,
should be put off his food, among such arrogant men—
and besides, he wanted to ask him about his absent father. 135

Then a handmaid brought water for them in an exquisite
golden pitcher, poured it into a silver basin, so they
could rinse their hands, then set a polished table beside them,
and a grave housekeeper brought them bread, and with it
appetizers galore, giving freely of what was to hand, 140
while a carver made up and sent them platefuls of meat

of every kind, and set by them golden goblets, while
a herald went to and fro to furnish them with wine.

Then in came the arrogant suitors, and all immediately
settled themselves in rows on the seats and benches, 145
and heralds now poured water over their hands, while maids
brought them bread by the basketful, and youths
filled the bowls to the brim with drink for them, and they
reached out their hands to the good things ready for them.
But when they had satisfied their desire for food and drink, 150
the suitors' minds now turned to other pleasures,
to singing and dancing, a feast's proper complement,
and a herald brought out for Phēmios his well-tuned lyre—
he sang for the suitors only because he was forced to—
and he struck a chord, introducing his own fine song. 155

But Tēlemachos now spoke to grey-eyed Athēnē, leaning
his head close to hers, so that no one else could hear him:
“Dear stranger, would you be shocked by what I tell you?
All these men care about is music and singing, easy enough
for them—they're freeloading off another man's livelihood, 160
a man whose white bones may be rotting in the rain
away on the mainland, or rolled by the sea's breakers.
If they were to see him, if he ever returned to Ithákē,
they'd all be praying that they could run away faster, not
as now, that they were richer in gold and expensive clothes! 165
But no, he must have suffered a wretched fate, nor is there
any comfort for us, not even should someone, somewhere,
claim he'll come back: his day of returning's perished.
But now tell me this, and give me a truthful answer:
Who are you? From where? What city? Who are your parents? 170
On what kind of ship did you come here? How did sailors
bring you to Ithákē? What place do they say they're from?
For I don't imagine you made your way here on foot!
And tell me this truly too, that I may be certain of it:
Is this your first visit here, or are you one of my father's 175
guest-friends? Many the men who used to visit our home,
just as he too traveled widely among mankind.”

Then the goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, responded to him, saying:
“So, I'll answer the questions you asked me fully and truthfully.

I declare I am Mentēs, wise Anchialos' son, 180
 and that I rule the Taphians, master rowers; and now,
 as you see, I've put in here by ship, with my companions,
 sailing the wine-dark deep to meet men of foreign speech,
 on my way to Temésē for copper, with a cargo of gleaming iron.
 My ship's out there, by the countryside, far from the city, 185
 in the harbor of Rheithron, down below wooded Nēion.
 Guest-friends of each other Odysseus and I claim we are
 from way back—you can go ask that elderly hero
 Laërtēs, who, they say, no longer comes to the city,
 but far away in the backwoods has a hard existence 190
 with one old woman servant, who sees to his victuals and drink
 when exhaustion steals over and weakens his limbs as he
 shuffles along the high slope of his patch of vineyard.
 So now I've come, for indeed word had it that your father
 was back home; but the gods must be thwarting his return, 195
 since not yet has he died in this world, the noble Odysseus,
 but still lives, perhaps held prisoner, out on the vast deep
 in some sea-girt island, kept there by violent men,
 wild savages, who, most likely, are holding him under duress.
 But I shall now make a prediction for you, just as the immortals 200
 put it into my mind—and I think it will come to pass,
 though I am no seer, have no clear knowledge of bird-signs!
 Not much longer will he be away from his own beloved
 country, no, not even if iron bonds restrain him—he'll
 find a way to return, this man of many resources! 205
 But now tell me this, and declare it to me truly,
 if indeed, big as you are, you're Odysseus' own son—because
 your head and fine eyes bear an amazing resemblance
 to his: many the hours we spent with one another
 before he embarked for Troy, like so many others, 210
 the finest of the Achaians, in the hollow ships, and set forth.
 But since then I've not seen Odysseus, nor he me."

Sagacious Tēlemachos responded to her, saying:
 "So, stranger, I'll give you a full and truthful answer.
 My mother says I'm his child, but for my own part 215
 I cannot tell: never yet did any man know his begetting!
 Indeed, I could wish I'd been the son of some fortunate
 gentleman, taken by age while among his own possessions!

But truth is, it was the most ill-fated of mortals who,
 so they say, begot me—since you're asking about this matter.” 220
 Then the goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, responded to him, saying:
 “No nameless lineage, surely, did the gods decree for you
 hereafter, since such as you are you were born to Penelopē!
 But now tell me this, and declare it to me truly:
 What party, what gathering's this? What's your concern with it? 225
 A feast, is it? Or a wedding? No communal dinner, surely?
 The riotous, arrogant manner in which, as it seems to me,
 they are carrying on in your house! A man might well take offense,
 walking in on this shameful behavior—any decent man, that is.”

Sagacious Tēlemachos then responded to her, saying: 230
 “Since, stranger, you ask this, and question me on these matters,
 our household once looked to be rich and respectable,
 so long as that certain man was here among his people;
 but now the gods have willed otherwise, have planned misfortune,
 have vanished him utterly, as they've done to no other man 235
 ever—I wouldn't be grieving so over his death
 had he fallen alongside his comrades upon Trojan soil
 or expired in his friends' arms after winding up the war!
 Then all the Achaians would have made him a burial mound,
 and great glory would have been his, and his son's, hereafter. 240
 But now, ingloriously, the storm winds have swept him away.
 He's gone, out of sight, out of knowledge, leaving me pain and sorrow
 —and it's not on his sole account that I'm lamenting now,
 since the gods have inflicted other harsh troubles on me.
 All those highborn leaders who lord it over the islands— 245
 Doulichion and Samē and forested Zákynthos,
 besides those who rule as princes over rocky Ithákē—
 are all paying court to my mother, and devouring our property.
 Yet she neither refuses this hateful marriage, nor can she make
 an end of the business, while they with feasting keep on 250
 eating away our substance: very soon they'll destroy me too.”

Outraged by his statement, Athēnē responded, saying:
 “It's true, you're in urgent need of the vanished Odysseus,
 to come and lay hands on these shameless suitors!
 How I wish he'd appear now, here at your outer gate, 255
 armed with helmet and shield and a brace of spears,

the way he was the first time I set eyes upon him,
 in our house, drinking wine and enjoying himself, on his way
 back from Ephyrē, where he'd gone to see Ilos, Mermeros' son.
 Odysseus had voyaged there aboard his speedy vessel 260
 in search of a lethal poison that he wanted to get
 to smear the bronze tips of his arrows. But Ilos refused
 to give it him, fearing the wrath of the gods that are forever;
 yet my father did, for he loved the man most dearly.
 If only Odysseus might come, thus arrayed, among the suitors! 265
 They'd all find a quick death then, and a bitter marriage.
 But of course all this rests on the knees of the gods—
 whether or not he'll return and exact full retribution
 in his own halls. But I urge you yourself to consider
 how you might drive out these suitors from your household, 270
 so pay attention now, mark carefully what I tell you.
 Tomorrow call an assembly of the Achaian heroes:
 Speak your mind to them all, let the gods be your witnesses!
 Tell the suitors all to disperse, to go back home;
 And if your mother's heart is urging her toward marriage, 275
 she should return to her powerful father's domain,
 where they'll set up the wedding and arrange the bride-gifts,
 lots of them, all that's fitting to go with a much-loved daughter.
 And for you yourself wise advice, if you'll take it: man a ship,
 the best you have, with twenty rowers, and go 280
 to seek news of your father, who's been so long absent,
 just in case some person can tell you, or you pick up a rumor
 from Zeus, the most common way that mortals gather tidings.
 Go first to Pylos, interrogate noble Nestōr,
 and from there to Sparta, to fair-haired Menelaös, 285
 for he was the last of all the bronze-corseleted Achaians
 to get home. If you hear that your father's alive, and on his
 way back, then, though beleaguered, hold on for another year;
 but if you get word that he's dead, no longer living,
 then make your way back to your own dear country, 290
 raise him a burial mound, perform funeral rites at it—
 lavish ones, as is fitting—and find your mother a husband.
 Then, when all this business is over and done with,
 is the time to consider, in your mind and spirit,
 how you might slaughter these suitors in your halls, 295
 whether by guile or openly. It does not become you

to persist in childish ways: you're no longer a child.
Or have you not heard what glory noble Orestēs won
among all mankind when he slew his father's murderer,
crafty Aigisthos, for killing his famous father? 300
You too, my friend—for I see how handsome and tall you are—
be valiant, that men yet unborn may speak well of you!
But now I shall go back down to my swift ship,
where my comrades must be waiting impatiently for me.
So think on these things, and pay heed to what I've told you." 305

Sagacious Tēlemachos then responded to her, saying:
"Stranger, the words that you said were spoken considerately,
as a father would speak to his son: I will never forget them.
But please do stay longer, though eager to be on your way,
so that when you've had a bath and refreshed your spirit 310
you can go to your ship with a present, happy at heart—
an expensive and beautiful gift, to be an heirloom for you
from me, such as guest-friends exchange with one another."

The goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, responded to him, saying:
"Delay me no longer—I need to resume my journey: 315
and whatever gift your heart incites you to give me,
give it me when I return here, to take back home. And choose
something really precious: it'll bring you its worth in exchange."

That said, the goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, departed,
flying up through the skylight. Into his heart she set
courage and strength, and put him in mind of his father 320
even more than before. Reflecting on what had happened
his mind was in awe: this must be a god, he thought.

At once he approached the suitors, a godlike mortal.
For them the far-famed minstrel was singing, and they 325
sat listening in silence. His song recounted the Achaians'
wretched homecoming from Troy, laid on them by Athēnē.
From upstairs the marvelous tale was heard and pondered
by Ikarios' daughter, the prudent Penelopē, who now
went down from her high bright upper chamber: not 330
alone, for two of her handmaids followed in attendance.
When she, bright among women, came where the suitors were,
she stood by the central post of the snugly timbered roof,
holding up her shining veil in front of her face,

and flanked on either side by a devoted handmaid, 335
and then, in tears, addressed the godlike minstrel:
“Phēmios, much else you know to keep mortals spellbound—
deeds of men and of gods, made famous by minstrels:
give them one such song as you sit here, let them in silence
still drink their wine, but quit this lay you’re singing, 340
so unhappy, it always agonizes the heart in my breast,
since on me beyond all others has come unforgettable
grief, for that much-loved being I picture with such longing—
my husband, of wide renown through Hellas and mid-Argos.”

Sagacious Tēlemachos then responded to her, saying: 345
“Mother, why do you begrudge so excellent a minstrel
the right to please in whatever way he chooses?
It’s not minstrels who are at fault, but Zeus, who deals out
to bread-eating mortals whatever he likes for each.
Don’t blame this bard for singing the Danaäns’ grim fate: 350
men always show most enthusiasm for the newest lay
that’s performed with a view to enchant their listening ears!
So harden your mind and heart, be resigned to listen:
It was not Odysseus alone who lost his day of returning
from Troy—many others perished, just as he did. 355
So go back to your room, get down to your regular tasks,
at the loom, with the distaff; see to it that your handmaids
do their proper work too! But speechmaking is men’s business,
and mine above all, since mine is the power in this household.”

Taken aback, Penelopē now withdrew to her chamber, 360
and stored in her heart her son’s smart observations.
Upstairs she went, her handmaids with her, and then
wept for Odysseus, her own dear husband, until
grey-eyed Athēnē spread sweet sleep over her eyelids.

But the suitors created an uproar throughout the shadowy hall, 365
each praying that he might be the one to bed and lie with her,
and among them sagacious Tēlemachos was the first to speak:
“You, my mother’s suitors, domineering and arrogant,
for now let us feast and enjoy ourselves, but please,
no shouting! It’s a rare pleasure to be able to hear 370
a minstrel like this one, with a voice like that of the gods!

But tomorrow at dawn let's go and be seated in assembly,
all of us, where I'll make you a forthright public request:
Get out of my home! Go find other feasts for yourselves,
consume your own goods, move around from house to house! 375
But if this is what you regard as better, more profitable,
to devour one man's livelihood without offering compensation,
then gobble on! I'll petition the gods who are forever,
and maybe Zeus will grant me an occasion of reprisal,
so that you, while still feasting for free in my halls, all perish!" 380

So he spoke; and all of them bit their lips hard, astonished
at the way Tēlemachos had spoken out so boldly.

Antinoös, son of Eupeithēs, now addressed him, saying:
"Tēlemachos, it must be the gods themselves who've taught you
this high-flown delivery, this audacious way of speaking! 385
You, king of sea-girt Ithákē? May the son of Kronos never
grant you the throne, though it's yours by ancestral right!"

Sagacious Tēlemachos responded to him, saying:
"Antinoös, what I now say may perhaps offend you.
This too I'd be glad to accept, were Zeus the giver: 390
do you think it the worst fate that could befall a man?
To be king's no disaster: right from the start your domain
Is enriched, and you yourself are held in greater honor.
Still, there are many other princes of the Achaians,
both young and old, who dwell here in sea-girt Ithákē: 395
any one of them might get this, since noble Odysseus
is dead. But I shall be lord over our own household,
and the servants that noble Odysseus got as booty for me."

Then Eurymachos, son of Polybos, responded to him, saying:
"Tēlemachos, all these matters rest on the knees of the gods— 400
like, which of the Achaians will be king in sea-girt Ithákē!
So keep your possessions, lord it over your own household,
and may the man never come here who'd deprive you by force
of your possessions, as long as Ithákē's inhabited! Yet
I'd like, my good friend, to ask you about that stranger— 405
Where did he come from? What country does he claim as his?
Where are his relatives, his family acres, to be found?
Did he come here with news about your father's return,

or was it just to take care of some business of his own?
The way he took off and vanished, not even waiting 410
to meet us—he didn't look, though, like some common fellow.”

Sagacious Tēlemachos then responded to him, saying:
“Eurymachos, by now all hope for my father's return
has perished. No longer do I trust rumors from any source,
or give any heed to prophecies, such as my mother 415
might pick up from a seer that she'd invited home.
As for this stranger, he's from Taphos, a friend
of my father, he says, named Mentēs, wise Anchialos' son,
and is lord of the Taphians, those master rowers.”

So spoke
Tēlemachos; but in his heart he knew the immortal goddess. 420

The suitors now turned to dancing and the pleasures of song,
pursuing their revels until it was evening: only darkness
interrupted their merrymaking, only then
did each of them slope off homeward to take his rest.

But Tēlemachos made his way to the handsome courtyard, 425
in a sheltering corner of which his chamber had been built,
and sought his bed there, pondering much in his mind,
escorted by his old nurse, who bore the lighted torches—
faithful Eurykleia, daughter of Ōps, Peisēnōr's son.

Long ago she'd been bought by Laërtēs, at a good price, 430
when she was still a young girl: twenty oxen, no less.

He respected her in his home no less than his loyal wife,
but never made love to her, for fear of his wife's anger.

So now it was she who carried the lighted torches: of all
the servants she loved him most, had nursed him as a child. 435

He opened the door of his well-carpentered chamber,
sat down on the bed and took off his soft tunic,
then placed it in the hands of this wise old woman, who
now folded and smoothed the tunic, hung it up

on a peg at the side of the corded bedstead, and went 440
out of the chamber, pulled the door shut behind her

with its silver hook, and drew the bolt home by its thong.

So the whole night through, wrapped in a woolen blanket,
he brooded over the journey Athēnē had planned for him.