

THE SIRENS; SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

Odysseus and his men return to Circe's island, where Circe warns Odysseus of the perils that await him. In the following passage, Odysseus, quoting Circe, is still speaking at Alcinous's court.

“Listen with care

660 to this, now, and a god will arm your mind.
Square in your ship's path are Sirens, crying
beauty to bewitch men coasting by;
woe to the innocent who hears that sound!
He will not see his lady nor his children
665 in joy, crowding about him, home from sea;
the Sirens will sing his mind away
on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones
of dead men rotting in a pile beside them
and flayed skins shrivel around the spot.

Steer wide;

670 keep well to seaward; plug your oarsmen's ears
with beeswax kneaded soft; none of the rest
should hear that song.

But if you wish to listen,

let the men tie you in the lugger, hand
and foot, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,
675 so you may hear those Harpies'° thrilling voices;
shout as you will, begging to be untied,
your crew must only twist more line around you
and keep their stroke up, till the singers fade. . . .”

The next peril lies between two headlands. Circe continues her warning.

680 “. . . That is the den of Scylla, where she yaps
abominably, a newborn whelp's° cry,
though she is huge and monstrous. God or man,
no one could look on her in joy. Her legs—
and there are twelve—are like great tentacles,
unjointed, and upon her serpent necks
685 are borne six heads like nightmares of ferocity,
with triple serried° rows of fangs and deep
gullets of black death. Half her length, she sways
her heads in air, outside her horrid cleft,

Vocabulary

abominably (ə·bām'ə·nə·blē) *adv.*: in an extremely unpleasant or disgusting manner.

690 hunting the sea around that promontory°
for dolphins, dogfish, or what bigger game
thundering Amphitrite° feeds in thousands.
And no ship's company can claim
to have passed her without loss and grief; she takes,
from every ship, one man for every gullet.

695 The opposite point seems more a tongue of land
you'd touch with a good bowshot, at the narrows.
A great wild fig, a shaggy mass of leaves,
grows on it, and Charybdis lurks below
to swallow down the dark sea tide. Three times
700 from dawn to dusk she spews it up
and sucks it down again three times, a whirling
maelstrom;° if you come upon her then
the god who makes earth tremble could not save you.
No, hug the cliff of Scylla, take your ship
705 through on a racing stroke. Better to mourn
six men than lose them all, and the ship, too. . . .

675. **Harpies** (här'pēz): monsters, half bird and half woman, who are greedy for victims.

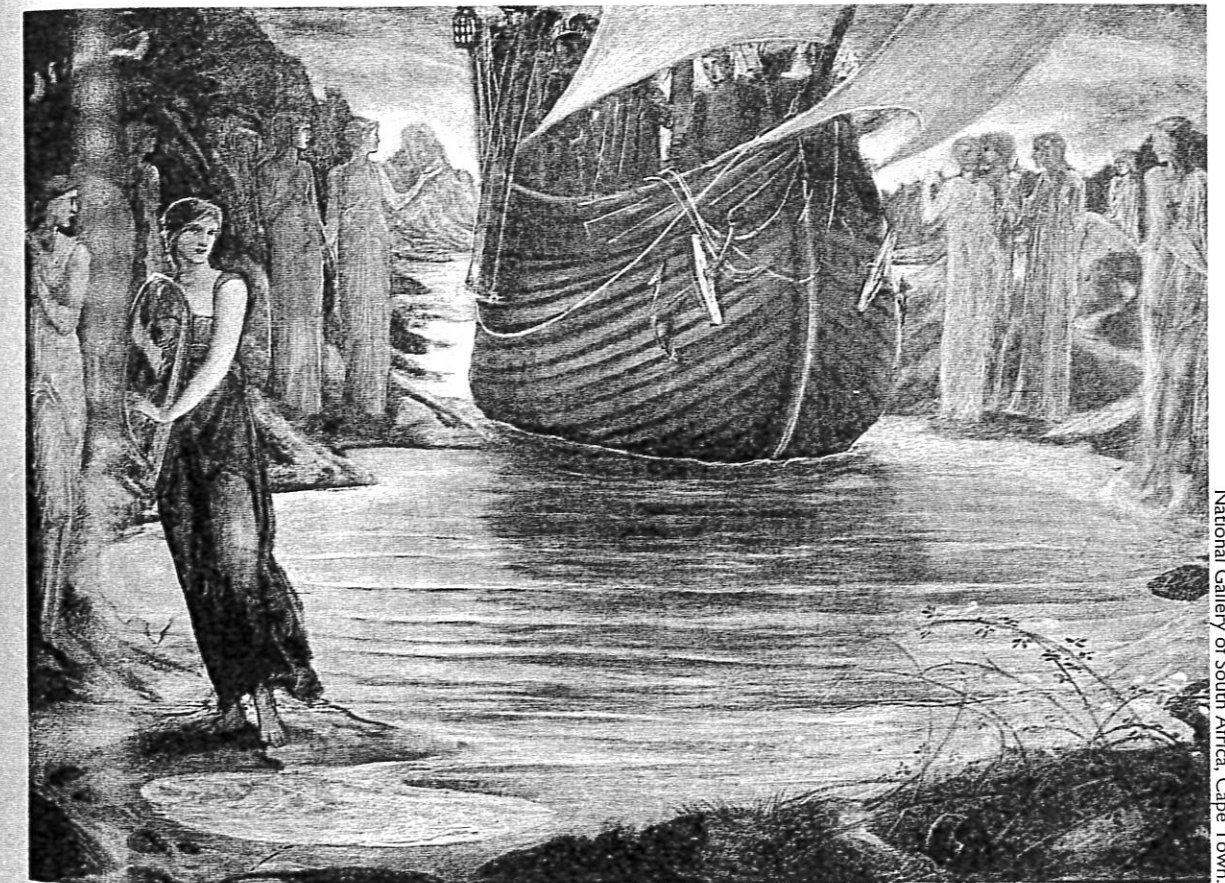
680. **whelp's** (hwelpz) *n.*: puppy's.

686. **serried** (ser'ēd) *adj.*: crowded together; densely packed.

689. **promontory** (präm'an·tôr'ē) *n.*: high area of land that juts out into a body of water.

691. **Amphitrite** (am'fi·trīt'ē): goddess of the sea and wife of Poseidon.

702. **maelstrom** (māl'strəm) *n.*: large, violent whirlpool.



The Sirens (c. 1875) by Sir Edward Burne-Jones.

National Gallery of South Africa, Cape Town.

770 Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern,
 trying to put heart into them, standing over
 every oarsman, saying gently,

‘Friends,

have we never been in danger before this?
 More fearsome, is it now, than when the Cyclops
 775 penned us in his cave? What power he had!
 Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits
 to find a way out for us?

Now I say

by hook or crook this peril too shall be
 something that we remember.

Heads up, lads!

780 We must obey the orders as I give them.
 Get the oar shafts in your hands, and lie back
 hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.
 Zeus help us pull away before we founder.^o

You at the tiller, listen, and take in
 785 all that I say—the rudders are your duty;
 keep her out of the combers^o and the smoke;
 steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we
 fetch up in the smother,^o and you drown us.’

That was all, and it brought them round to action.
 790 But as I sent them on toward Scylla, I
 told them nothing, as they could do nothing.
 They would have dropped their oars again, in panic,
 to roll for cover under the decking. Circe’s
 bidding against arms had slipped my mind,
 795 so I tied on my cuirass^o and took up
 two heavy spears, then made my way along
 to the foredeck—thinking to see her first from there,
 the monster of the gray rock, harboring
 torment for my friends. I strained my eyes
 800 upon that cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere
 could I catch sight of her.

And all this time,

in travail,^o sobbing, gaining on the current,
 we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port
 and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire
 805 gorge^o of the salt sea tide. By heaven! when she
 vomited, all the sea was like a caldron
 seething over intense fire, when the mixture
 suddenly heaves and rises.




Scylla. Greek bronze.
 National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

783. **founder** (foun'dər) *v.*: sink.

786. **combers** (kōm'ərz) *n.*: large waves.

788. **smother** (smuθ'ər) *n.*: commotion; violent action or disorder.

 770–793. Think about what kind of leader Odysseus is. What does he tell his men, to reassure them? What does he decide not to tell them? Why?

795. **cuirass** (kwi·ras') *n.*: armor for the breast and back.

802. **travail** (trə·vāl') *n.*: hard, exhausting work or effort; tiring labor.

805. **gorge** (gôrj) *n.*: throat and jaws of a greedy, all-devouring being.

The shot spume
 soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain.

810 But when she swallowed the sea water down
 we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard
 the rock bellowing all around, and dark
 sand raged on the bottom far below.
 My men all blanched^o against the gloom, our eyes
 815 were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear
 of being devoured.

814. **blanched** (blancht) *v.*: grew pale.

Then Scylla made her strike,
 whisking six of my best men from the ship.

I happened to glance aft at ship and oarsmen
 and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling
 820 high overhead. Voices came down to me
 in anguish, calling my name for the last time.

A man surf-casting on a point of rock
 for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod
 to drop the sinker and the bait far out,
 825 will hook a fish and rip it from the surface
 to dangle wriggling through the air;

so these

were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.

She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den,
 in the dire grapple,^o reaching still for me—
 830 and deathly pity ran me through
 at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered
 questing the passes of the strange sea.


We rowed on.

The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too,
 and Scylla dropped astern.

Then we were coasting

835 the noble island of the god, where grazed
 those cattle with wide brows, and bounteous flocks
 of Helios, lord of noon, who rides high heaven.
 From the black ship, far still at sea, I heard
 the lowing of the cattle winding home
 840 and sheep bleating; and heard, too, in my heart
 the words of blind Teiresias of Thebes
 and Circe of Aeaëa: both forbade me
 the island of the world's delight, the Sun. . . ."

(from Book 12)

 843. Suppose you wanted to write a **screenplay** dramatizing this famous part of the *Odyssey*—the crew's struggle against the Sirens and against Scylla and Charybdis. Who would be your main characters? How would you use music and visuals—especially in the Sirens scene? Write down your ideas about filming the epic.