

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.

62. Charybdis (kə rib' dis)

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.

Literary Analysis

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

✓ Reading Check

What has Odysseus asked his shipmates to do in order 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.*

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

730 *Pleased by each purling note
Like honey twining
From her throat and my throat,
Who lies a-pining?*

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

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

Reading Strategy

Reading in Sentences

Reread lines 704–715 as sentences, ignoring the line breaks. What happens in each of the four sentences?

Literary Analysis

The Epic Hero and Conflict Which details in the Sirens' song are calculated to tempt a hero and bring him down?

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

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

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.

ardor (är' der) n. passion;
enthusiasm

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

My faithful company

Reading Strategy
Reading in Sentences
Explain what happens in
the sentence in lines
753-756.

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.

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

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

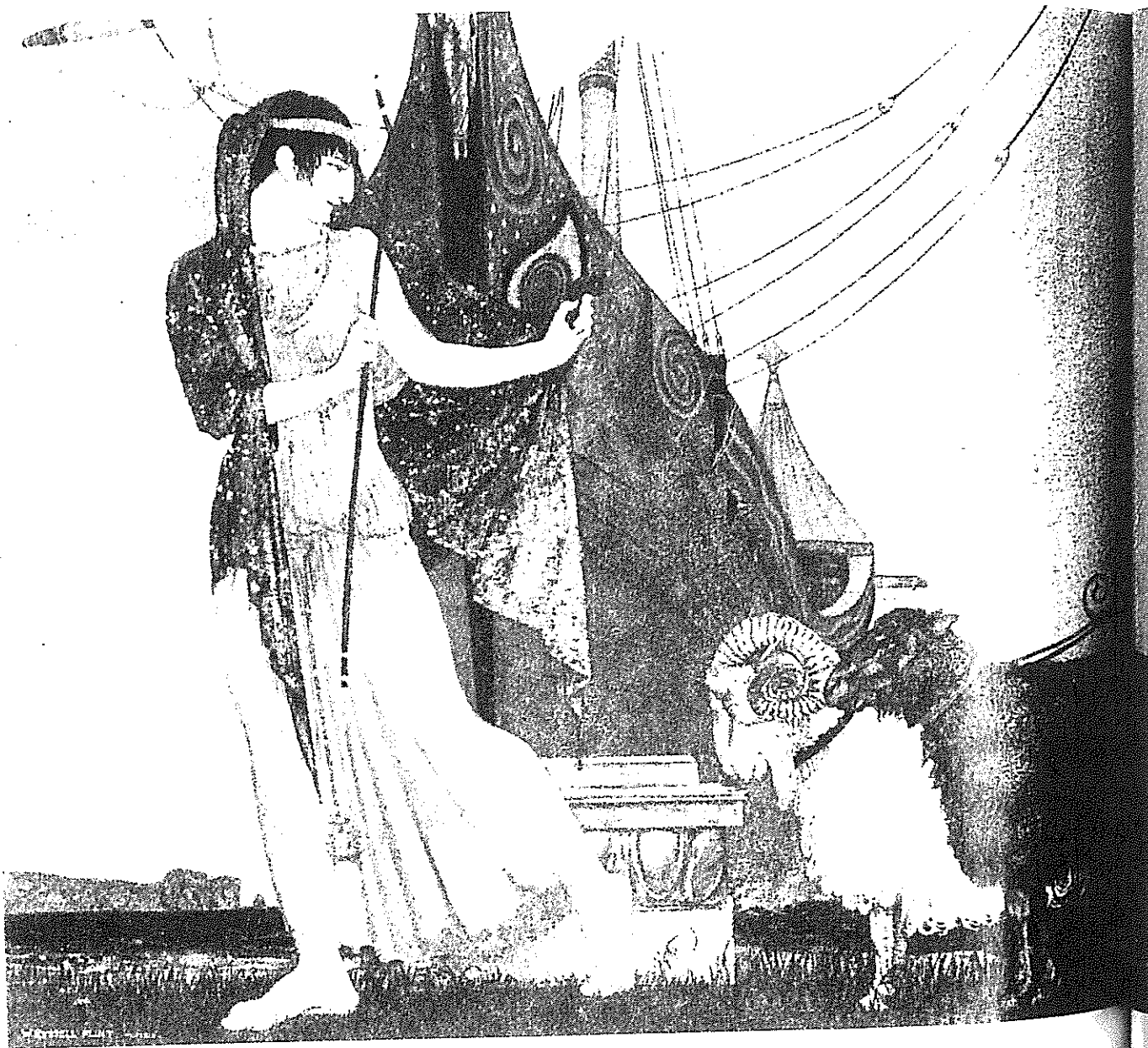
by hook or crook this peril too shall be
something that we remember.

Now I say

Reading Check

What does Odysseus put
in his shipmates' ears
before they hear the
Sirens sing?

Circe Meanwhile Had Gone Her Ways . . . , 1924, William Russell Flint Collection of the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations



▲ **Critical Viewing** The beautiful sorceress Circe both helps and hinders Odysseus on his journey home. What can you tell about Circe from this illustration? [**Deduce**]

Heads up, lads!

We must obey the orders as I give them.
Get the oar shafts in your hands, and lay back
775 hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.
Zeus help us pull away before we founder.
You at the tiller, listen, and take in
all that I say—the rudders are your duty;
keep her out of the combers and the smoke;⁶⁴
780 steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we
fetch up in the smother, and you drown us.’

That was all, and it brought them round to action.
But as I sent them on toward Scylla,⁶⁵ I
told them nothing, as they could do nothing.
785 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,
so I tied on my cuirass⁶⁶ and took up
two heavy spears, then made my way along
790 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
upon the cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere
could I catch sight of her.

And all this time,
795 in travail,⁶⁷ sobbing, gaining on the current,
we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port
and on our starboard beam Charybdis,⁶⁸ dire
gorge⁶⁹ of the salt seatide. By heaven! when she
vomited, all the sea was like a cauldron
800 seething over intense fire, when the mixture
suddenly heaves and rises.

The shot spume
soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain.
But when she swallowed the sea water down
we saw the funnel of the maelstrom,⁷⁰ heard
805 the rock bellowing all around, and dark
sand raged on the bottom far below.
My men all blanched against the gloom, our eyes

Reading Strategy

Reading in Sentences

How would you rewrite Odysseus’ pep talk in paragraph form without poetic line breaks?

64. the combers (kōm’ ers) and the smoke the large waves that break on the beach and the ocean spray.

65. Scylla (sil’ ə)

66. cuirass (kwi ras’) *n.* armor for the upper body.

67. travail (trə vāl’) *n.* very hard work.

68. Charybdis (kə rib’ dis)

69. gorge (gōrj) *n.* hungry, consuming mouth.

70. maelstrom (māl’ strəm) *n.* large, violent whirlpool.

Reading Check

What orders does Odysseus give his shipmates?

were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear
of being devoured.

Then Scylla made her strike,
810 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
high overhead. Voices came down to me
in anguish, calling my name for the last time.

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

so these
820 were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.

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

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

The Cattle of the Sun God

In the small hours of the third watch, when stars
that shone out in the first dusk of evening
830 had gone down to their setting, a giant wind
blew from heaven, and clouds driven by Zeus
shrouded land and sea in a night of storm;
so, just as Dawn with fingertips of rose
touched the windy world, we dragged our ship
835 to cover in a grotto, a sea cave
where nymphs had chairs of rock and sanded floors.
I mustered all the crew and said:

Reading Strategy

Reading in Sentences By
reading in sentences
rather than line breaks,
explain what happens in
lines 810–814.

Literary Analysis

The Epic Hero How does
Odysseus show the heroic
quality of loyalty in lines
823–825?