

THE ENCHANTRESS CIRCE

After sailing from the Cyclops's island, Odysseus and his men land on the island of Aeolia. There the wind king, Aeolus, does Odysseus a favor. He puts all the stormy winds in a bag so that they will not harm the Ithacans. The bull's-hide bag containing the winds is wedged under Odysseus's afterdeck. During the voyage, when the curious and suspicious sailors open the bag, thinking it contains treasure, the evil winds roar up into hurricanes that blow the ships back to Aeolia. Aeolus drives them away again.

On the island of the Laestrygonians, gigantic cannibals, all the ships but one are destroyed and their crews devoured. Odysseus's ship escapes and lands on Aeaea, the home of the enchantress and goddess Circe. Here a party of twenty-three men, led by Eurylochus, goes off to explore the island. Odysseus is still telling his story to Alcinous and his court.

540 "In the wild wood they found an open glade,
around a smooth stone house—the hall of Circe—
and wolves and mountain lions lay there, mild
in her soft spell, fed on her drug of evil.
None would attack—oh, it was strange, I tell you—
but switching their long tails they faced our men
545 like hounds, who look up when their master comes
with tidbits for them—as he will—from table.
Humbly those wolves and lions with mighty paws
fawned on our men—who met their yellow eyes
and feared them.

In the entranceway they stayed
550 to listen there: inside her quiet house
they heard the goddess Circe.

Low she sang
in her beguiling voice, while on her loom
she wove ambrosial fabric sheer and bright,
by that craft known to the goddesses of heaven.
555 No one would speak, until Polites^o—most
faithful and likable of my officers—said:

'Dear friends, no need for stealth:^o here's a young weaver
singing a pretty song to set the air
atingle on these lawns and paven courts.
560 Goddess she is, or lady. Shall we greet her?'
So reassured, they all cried out together,
and she came swiftly to the shining doors
to call them in. All but Eurylochus—
who feared a snare—the innocents went after her.

565 On thrones she seated them, and lounging chairs,
while she prepared a meal of cheese and barley
and amber honey mixed with Pramnian wine,^o

adding her own vile pinch, to make them lose
desire or thought of our dear fatherland.
570 Scarce had they drunk when she flew after them
with her long stick and shut them in a pigsty—
bodies, voices, heads, and bristles, all
swinish now, though minds were still unchanged.
So, squealing, in they went. And Circe tossed them
575 acorns, mast,^o and cornel berries—fodder
for hogs who rut and slumber on the earth.
Down to the ship Eurylochus came running
to cry alarm, foul magic doomed his men!
But working with dry lips to speak a word
580 he could not, being so shaken; blinding tears
welled in his eyes; foreboding filled his heart.
When we were frantic questioning him, at last
we heard the tale: our friends were gone....”

(from Book 10)

Odysseus leaves the ship and rushes to Circe’s hall. The god Hermes stops him to give him a plant that will weaken Circe’s power. (Homer calls it a moly; it might have been a kind of garlic.) Protected by the plant’s magic, Odysseus resists Circe’s sorcery. The goddess, realizing she has met her match, frees Odysseus’s men. Now Circe, “loveliest of all immortals,” persuades Odysseus to stay with her. Odysseus shares her meat and wine, and she restores his heart. After many seasons of feasting and other pleasures, Odysseus and his men beg Circe to help them return home. She responds to their pleas with the command that Odysseus alone descend to the Land of the Dead, “the cold homes of Death and pale Persephone,” queen of the underworld. There Odysseus must seek the wisdom of the blind prophet Teiresias.

THE LAND OF THE DEAD

In the Land of the Dead, Odysseus seeks to learn his destiny. The source of his information is Teiresias, the famous blind prophet from the city of Thebes. The prophet’s lack of external sight suggests the presence of true insight. Circe has told Odysseus exactly what rites he must perform to bring Teiresias up from the dead. Odysseus continues telling his story to Alcinous’s court.

“Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead,
585 vowing to slaughter my best heifer for them
before she calved, at home in Ithaca,
and burn the choice bits on the altar fire;
as for Teiresias, I swore to sacrifice
a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock.
590 Thus to assuage the nations of the dead
I pledged these rites, then slashed the lamb and ewe,
letting their black blood stream into the well pit.
Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebus,