

Homer, *The Odyssey*

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Tell me the tale of a man, Muse, who had so many roundabout ways
To wander, driven off course, after sacking Troy's hallowed keep;
Many the peoples whose cities he saw and whose ways of thinking he learned,
Many the toils he suffered at sea, anguish in his heart
As he struggled to safeguard his life and the homecoming of his companions.
But he did not save his companions even so, though he longed to,
For their heedlessness destroyed them, theirs and nobody else's—
Fools that they were, like children, who devoured the sun-god Hyperion's
Cattle, and so he took from them the day of their homecoming.
Goddess, start where you will;
daughter of Zeus, share the tale with us too.
Now all of the other men—those who'd fled looming destruction—
Were home again, escaped from the war or saved from the depths of the sea,
Except for him. Though he yearned to come home, though he yearned for his wife,
A nymph—the Lady Kalypso, that radiant goddess—kept him
Back in her smooth-hollowed caves, burning to make him her husband.
But at last the time came around, as the seasons wheeled in their cycles,
To fulfill the fate the gods had spun for him: to sail homeward

To Ithaka, though even there he could not escape his trials—

Even among kith and kin. For all the gods pitied him

Except for Poseidon, who raged hotly, never relenting,

Against Odysseus the godlike until he reached his own land.

Now, though, that god had gone off to visit the Æthiops, faraway people—

Æthiops, remotest of men, whose tribes are divided in twain:

Half of them live where the sun sets, the other half where it rises.

Off he had gone to receive a hecatomb of bulls and young rams.

So he was away enjoying the feast while all the other gods

Were assembled together inside the halls of Olympian Zeus.

To them the Father of men and of gods began to speak,

For he'd been put in mind of Aigisthos, a man who was not one to blame,

Whom the son of Agamemnon, far-famed Orestes, had slain.

With this man in mind, then, Zeus addressed a word to the immortals. "Outrageous! Look how mortals heap blame upon the gods!

They like to say that we are the source of their ills, but if they have

More than their share of woe, it's through their own heedlessness.

'More than his share': So it was just lately with Aigisthos,

Who first married Atreïdes's wife, then slew the man as he came home—

This, though he knew in advance of his looming ruin, for we'd warned him,
Having already sent down Hermes, that keen-sighted Slayer of Argos,
To tell him, 'Do not slay the man, nor woo his wife
Since vengeance for Atreus's son will come one day from Orestes
The moment he comes of age and longs for his native land.'
This is what Hermes said. But sensible though his words were,
He failed to win over the mind of Aigisthos, who now has paid dearly."
To him the goddess Athena replied, she of the bright owl-eyes:
"Kronídes, father to all of us, highest of all who hold power,
The ruin that laid this man low was no more than what was fitting.
Whoever does as he did should perish just as he perished.
But my heart is cleft in two on behalf of my clever Odysseus,
An ill-fated man who has suffered too long, far from his people,
On an island surrounded by waves in the very heart of the sea,
An island covered in trees. A goddess has her home there,
The daughter of baleful Atlas who knows the deepest parts
Of the sea and, all by himself, holds aloft the giant
Columns that keep the earth and the firmament safely apart.
His daughter's the one who holds back our woeful, weeping man,
Endlessly trying to charm him with melting, wheedling talk,

To make him forget about Ithaka. But Odysseus, who longs simply
To catch sight of the smoke of the fires of home as it leaps in the air
Above his own land, now yearns for death. Has your heart now
Turned from him, Olympian? Were you not pleased when Odysseus
Sacrificed to you, Zeus, by the ships of the Achaeans
Among Troy's sprawling plains? Yet you now find Odysseus odious?"
Zeus, who marshals the clouds, now spoke to her in reply:
"Child of mine, what a speech has slipped through the fence of your teeth!
Could I ever forget Odysseus, a man who is like a god
And surpasses all other men with his mind—surpasses them too
In the gifts that he gave the immortals who inhabit the far-flung heavens?
No, Poseidon who makes the earth tremble persists in his anger
All because of the Cyclops, whose one sole eye our man blinded— Godlike Polyphêmos, whose power is greatest by far
Among all the Cyclops people. (It was Thóösa who bore him—
A nymph, the daughter of Phórkys who rules the sea's restless wastes—
Inside the smooth-hollowed caves after mingling in love with Poseidon.)
Since then, Poseidon Earth-Shaker has been holding Odysseus back—
Not in order to kill him, but to keep him from reaching his homeland.