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 (ē'ə·ləs), 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 (les·trig·ō'nē·ənz), 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.

"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
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

to listen there: inside her quiet house they heard the goddess Circe.

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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.

No one would speak, until Polites°—most faithful and likable of my officers—said:

'Dear friends, no need for stealth: here's a young weaver singing a pretty song to set the air atingle on these lawns and paven courts.

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.



Pigs, swineherd, and Odysseus by the Pig Painter. Pelike, or jar (470–460 B.C.).

555. Polites (pō·lī'tēz').

557. stealth (stelth) *n.:* sneaky behavior.



Circe offers the magic potion to Odysseus. Detail from Greek vase from Thebes.

British Museum, London.

On thrones she seated them, and lounging chairs, while she prepared a meal of cheese and barley and amber honey mixed with Pramnian wine, adding her own vile pinch, to make them lose desire or thought of our dear fatherland.

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 acorns, mast, and cornel berries—fodder for hogs who rut and slumber on the earth.

575. mast n.: various kinds of nuts

used as food for hogs.

567. Pramnian wine: strong wine

from Mount Pramnos in ancient

Greece.

Down to the ship Eurylochus came running to cry alarm, foul magic doomed his men!
But working with dry lips to speak a word 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. . . ."

sponses to this horrible experience. What have the men done to deserve being turned into pigs? How does Circe violate the laws of hospitality?

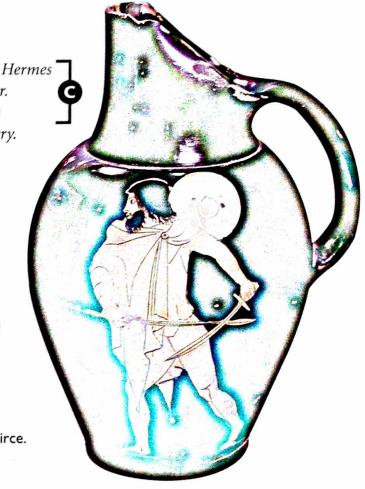
(from Book 10)

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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.

Odysseus pursuing Circe. Greek vase. Louvre, Paris, France.



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, brides and young men, and men grown old in pain, and tender girls whose hearts were new to grief; 595 many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads,

battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear.

From every side they came and sought the pit with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear. But presently I gave command to my officers 600 to flay those sheep the bronze cut down, and make burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below— A to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone.° Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep 605 B the surging phantoms from the bloody pit _till I should know the presence of Teiresias. . . .

> Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me:

'Son of Laertes and the gods of old, 610 Odysseus, master of landways and seaways, why leave the blazing sun, O man of woe, to see the cold dead and the joyless region? Stand clear, put up your sword; let me but taste of blood, I shall speak true.'

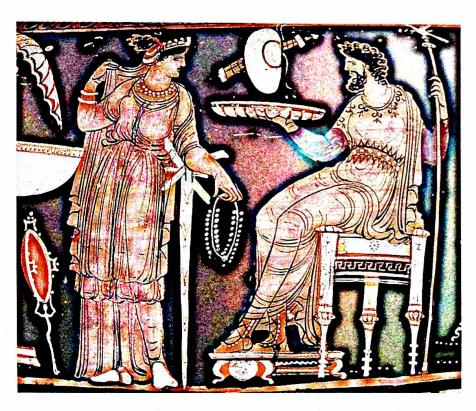
615 At this I stepped aside, and in the scabbard let my long sword ring home to the pommel silver, as he bent down to the somber blood. Then spoke the prince of those with gift of speech:

'Great captain,

a fair wind and the honey lights of home are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;

601. flay (flā) v.: strip the skin from.

603. Persephone (pər·sef'ə·nē).



Persephone, queen of the underworld, with her husband, Hades (4th century B.C.). British Museum, London.

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the god who thunders on the land prepares it, not to be shaken from your track, implacable,° in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded. One narrow strait may take you through his blows: denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates. When you make landfall on Thrinakia first and quit the violet sea, dark on the land you'll find the grazing herds of Helios by whom all things are seen, all speech is known. Avoid those kine,° hold fast to your intent, and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca. But if you raid the beeves,° I see destruction for ship and crew. Though you survive alone, bereft of all companions, lost for years, under strange sail shall you come home, to find your own house filled with trouble: insolent men eating your livestock as they court your lady. Aye, you shall make those men atone in blood! But after you have dealt out death—in open combat or by stealth—to all the suitors, go overland on foot, and take an oar, until one day you come where men have lived with meat unsalted, never known the sea, nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows and oars that fledge light hulls for dipping flight. The spot will soon be plain to you, and I can tell you how: some passerby will say, "What winnowing fano is that upon your shoulder?" Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon: a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back, and carry out pure hecatombs° at home to all wide heaven's lords, the undying gods, to each in order. Then a seaborne death soft as this hand of mist will come upon you when you are wearied out with rich old age, your countryfolk in blessed peace around you. And all this shall be just as I foretell."..."

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(from Book 11)

Vocabulary rancor (ran'kər) n.: bitter hatred; ill will.

622. implacable (im • plak *ə • bəl) *adj.:* unyielding; merciless.

630. kine (kīn) *n*.: old term for "cattle."

632. beeves *n*.: another old term for "cattle."

648. winnowing fan: device used to remove the useless dry outer covering from grain. (These people would never have seen an oar.)

652. hecatombs (hek'ə·tōmz') *n.*: sacrifices of one hundred cattle at a time to the gods. In Greek, *hekaton* means "one hundred."

does Odysseus receive? Take notes on how you might film this important scene in the underworld. How many actors would you need? What props would you use? You might sketch the scene as you visualize it.