“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. . . .”

“... That is the den of Scylla, where she yaps
680 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,
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.

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
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
through on a racing stroke. Better to mourn
six men than lose them all, and the ship, too. . .

Then you will coast Thrinakia, the island
where Helios’s cattle graze, fine herds, and flocks
of goodly sheep. The herds and flocks are seven,
with fifty beasts in each.

No lambs are dropped,
or calves, and these fat cattle never die. . .

Now give those kine a wide berth, keep your thoughts
intent upon your course for home,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.
But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction
for ship and crew. . .’’

“The crew being now silent before me, I
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,
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
you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,
erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,

730 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,
while our good ship made time, bound outward down
the wind for the strange island of Sirens.

735 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
briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,
each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades

740 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—
no long task, for a burning heat came down
from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward

745 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,
and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,
as we came smartly within hailing distance,

750 the two Sirens, noting our fast ship
off their point, made ready, and they sang. . . .

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;

755 but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes
got to his feet, he and Eurylochus,
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.

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

765 But scarcely had that island
faded in blue air when I saw smoke
and white water, with sound of waves in tumult—
a sound the men heard, and it terrified them.
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 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 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!

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.

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; 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, 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, so I tied on my cuirass 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 upon that cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere could I catch sight of her.

And all this time, in travail, sobbing, gaining on the current, we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire gorge 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.

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 against the gloom, our eyes
815  were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear
of being devoured.

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, 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 Aeaea: both forbade me
the island of the world’s delight, the Sun. . . .”

(from Book 12)