

H O M E R

The
Odyssey

TRANSLATED BY

Robert Fagles

INTRODUCTION AND
NOTES BY

BERNARD KNOX

THE HERO AS SINGER

ODYSSEY I. 1-12

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
driven time and again off course, once he had plundered
the hallowed heights of Troy.

Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,
fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.
But he could not save them from disaster, hard as he strove—
the recklessness of their own ways destroyed them all,
the blind fools, they devoured the cattle of the Sun
and the Sungod blotted out the day of their return. 10
Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus,
start from where you will—sing for our time too.

ODYSSEY VIII. 527-558

And he went and took his seat beside the king.
By now they were serving out the portions, mixing wine,
and the herald soon approached, leading the faithful bard
Demodocus, prized by all the people—seated him in a chair 530
amid the feasters, leaning it against a central column.

At once alert Odysseus carved a strip of loin,
rich and crisp with fat, from the white-tusked boar
that still had much meat left, and called the herald over:
“Here, herald, take this choice cut to Demodocus
so he can eat his fill—with warm regards
from a man who knows what suffering is . . .

From all who walk the earth our bards deserve

The herald placed the gift in Demodocus’ hands
and the famous blind bard received it, overjoyed.

They reached for the good things that lay outspread
and when they’d put aside desire for food and drink,
Odysseus, master of many exploits, praised the singer:

“I respect you, Demodocus, more than any man alive—
surely the Muse has taught you, Zeus’s daughter,
or god Apollo himself. How true to life,
all too true . . . you sing the Achaeans’ fate,

all they did and suffered, all they soldiered through, 550
as if you were there yourself or heard from one who was.

But come now, shift your ground. Sing of the wooden horse
Epeus built with Athena’s help, the cunning trap that
good Odysseus brought one day to the heights of Troy,
filled with fighting men who laid the city waste.

Sing *that* for me—true to life as it deserves—

THE HERO AS SINGER

ODYSSEY VIII. 527-558 (cont.)

and I will tell the world at once how freely
the Muse gave *you* the gods' own gift of song."

ODYSSEY IX. 1-43

Odyseus, the great teller of tales, launched out on his story:
"Alcinous, majesty, shining among your island people,
what a fine thing it is to listen to such a bard
as we have here—the man sings like a god.
The crown of life, I'd say. There's nothing better
than when deep joy holds sway throughout the realm
and banqueters up and down the palace sit in ranks,
enthralled to hear the bard, and before them all, the tables
heaped with bread and meats, and drawing wine from a mixing-bowl
the steward makes his rounds and keeps the winecups flowing. 10
This, to my mind, is the best that life can offer.

But now

you're set on probing the bitter pains I've borne,
so I'm to weep and grieve, it seems, still more.
Well then, what shall I go through first,
what shall I save for last?
What pains—the gods have given me my share.
Now let me begin by telling you my name . . .
so you may know it well and I in times to come,
if I can escape the fatal day, will be your host,
your sworn friend, though my home is far from here. 20
I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, known to the world
for every kind of craft—my fame has reached the skies.
Sunny Ithaca is my home. Atop her stands our seamark,
Mount Neriton's leafy ridges shimmering in the wind.
Around her a ring of islands circle side-by-side,
Dulichion, Same, wooded Zacynthus too, but mine
lies low and away, the farthest out to sea,
rearing into the western dusk
while the others face the east and breaking day.
Mine is a rugged land but good for raising sons— 30
and I myself, I know no sweeter sight on earth
than a man's own native country.

True enough,

Calypso the lustrous goddess tried to hold me back,
deep in her arching caverns, craving me for a husband.
So did Circe, holding me just as warmly in her halls,
the bewitching queen of Aeaea keen to have me too.

THE HERO AS SINGER

ODYSSEY IX. 1-43 (cont.)

But they never won the heart inside me, never.
So nothing is as sweet as a man's own country,
his own parents, even though he's settled down
in some luxurious house, off in a foreign land 40
and far from those who bore him.

No more. Come,
let me tell you about the voyage fraught with hardship
Zeus inflicted on me, homeward bound from Troy . . .

ODYSSEY IX. 558-74

I called back with another burst of anger, 'Cyclops—
if any man on the face of the earth should ask you
who blinded you, shamed you so—say Odysseus, 560
raider of cities, *he* gouged out your eye,
Laertes' son who makes his home in Ithaca!'

So I vaunted and he groaned back in answer,
'Oh no, no—that prophecy years ago . . .
it all comes home to me with a vengeance now!
We once had a prophet here, a great tall man,
Telemus, Eurymus' son, a master at reading signs,
who grew old in his trade among his fellow-Cyclops.
All this, he warned me, would come to pass someday—
that I'd be blinded here at the hands of one Odysseus. 570
But I always looked for a handsome giant man to cross my path,
some fighter clad in power like armor-plate, but now,
look what a dwarf, a spineless good-for-nothing,
stuns me with wine, then gouges out my eye!