

## The Sirens

Odysseus returns to Circe's island. The goddess reveals his course to him and gives advice on how to avoid the dangers he will face: the Sirens, who lure sailors to their destruction; the Wandering Rocks, sea rocks that destroy even birds in flight; the perils of the sea monster Scylla and, nearby, the whirlpool Charybdis;<sup>62</sup> and the cattle of the sun god, which Tiresias has warned Odysseus not to harm.

62. Charybdis (kə rib' dis)

As Circe spoke, Dawn mounted her golden throne,  
and on the first rays Circe left me, taking  
her way like a great goddess up the island.  
675 I made straight for the ship, roused up the men  
to get aboard and cast off at the stern.  
They scrambled to their places by the rowlocks  
and all in line dipped oars in the gray sea.  
But soon an offshore breeze blew to our liking—  
680 a canvas-bellying breeze, a lusty shipmate  
sent by the singing nymph with sunbright hair.  
So we made fast the braces, and we rested,  
letting the wind and steersman work the ship.  
The crew being now silent before me, I  
685 addressed them, sore at heart:

### 46 ◀ Critical Viewing

The sorceress Circe both helps and hinders Odysseus on his journey home. What can you tell about Circe from this illustration? **[Deduce]**

47 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,  
690 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  
695 you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,  
erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,  
and if I shout and beg to be untied,  
take more turns of the rope to muffle me.'

### Literary Analysis

**Epic Hero** What does Odysseus reveal about his character by sharing information with his men?

### 48 Reading Check

What instructions does Odysseus give his shipmates as they prepare to deal with the Sirens?

I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast,  
700 while our good ship made time, bound outward down  
the wind for the strange island of Sirens.

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  
705 briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,  
each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades  
and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved  
a massive cake of beeswax into bits  
49 and rolled them in my hands until they softened—  
710 no long task, for a burning heat came down  
from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward  
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,  
715 and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,  
as we came smartly within hailing distance,  
the two Sirens, noting our fast ship  
off their point, made ready, and they sang:

720 *This way, oh turn your bows,  
Achaëa's glory,  
As all the world allows—  
Moor and be merry.*

725 *Sweet coupled airs we sing.  
No lonely seafarer  
Holds clear of entering  
Our green mirror.*

730 *Pleased by each purling note  
Like honey twining  
From her throat and my throat,  
Who lies a-pining?*

735 *Sea rovers here take joy  
Voyaging onward,  
As from our song of Troy  
Graybeard and rower-boy  
Goeth more learned.*

50 *All feats on that great field  
In the long warfare,  
Dark days the bright gods willed,  
Wounds you bore there,*

**Reading Skill**  
**Historical and Cultural Context** What does  
Odysseus' mention of  
Helios reveal about  
ancient Greek beliefs  
regarding astronomical  
events?

**Literary Analysis**  
**Epic Hero** Which details  
in the Sirens' song are  
designed to flatter the  
epic hero?



740

50

↑  
*Argos' old soldiery*<sup>63</sup>  
*On Troy beach teeming,*  
*Charmed out of time we see.*  
*No life on earth can be*  
*Hid from our dreaming.*

: **63. Argos' old soldiery**  
 : soldiers from Argos, a city  
 : in ancient Greece.

**Vocabulary**

**ardor** (är' dər) *n.*  
 : passion; enthusiasm

745

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;  
 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.  
 750 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;  
 755 then set me free.