

Monday, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2020

L.I. I know who Circe and the Sirens were.

Lesson 20: The Sirens

Before we left her island, the goddess Circe said: 'Your next encounter will be with the **Sirens**, who bewitch all who approach them and wreck their ships. There is no homecoming for the man who draws near them unawares and hears the Sirens' voices, for with their high clear song the Sirens bewitch him, as they sit with their cliffs piled high with the skeletons of men, whose withered skin hangs still on their bones. Drive your ship past the spot and to prevent any of your crew from hearing, **soften some beeswax and plug their ears with it**. But if you wish to listen yourself, lash yourself to the mast. But if you command and beg your men to release you, they must add to the bonds that already hold you fast.



When your crew have carried you past the Sirens, there lie two rocks, which rear their sharp peaks up to the very sky, and are capped by black clouds, and half-way up there is a murky cavern. It is the home of Scylla, a dreadful and repulsive creature. She has six necks, each ending in a grisly head with triple rows of fangs, set thick and close, and darkly menacing death. Her heads protrude from the **fearful abyss**. No crew can boast that they have ever

sailed their ship past Scylla **unscathed**, for from every vessel she snatches and carries off a six men, one with each of her heads.

Below the other of the rocks lies dreaded **Charybdis**, a whirlpool which sucks the dark waters down, spews them up and swallows ships down in its wild and whirling dread. Heaven keep you from Charybdis, for once the whirlpool has you, not even Poseidon the Earthshaker could save you from destruction then. No, you must hug Scylla's rock and with all speed drive your ship through, since it is far better to lose six men than your whole crew.'



'Yes, Circe,' I replied, 'but tell me this. I must be quite clear about it. Could I not somehow steer clear of deadly Charybdis, yet ward off Scylla when she attacks my crew?'

'Stubborn fool!' the beautiful sorceress Circe replied: 'Scylla was not born for death: she is an **undying fiend**. She is a thing of terror, invincible, ferocious and impossible to fight. No, against her there is no defence, and the best course of action is to flee. For if you waste time by the rock in

putting on your armour, I am afraid she may dart out once more, make a grab with all six heads and snatch another six of your crew. So drive your ship past with all your might.

'Next you will reach the island of the Sun God Apollo's Cattle. If you leave them untouched and fix your mind on getting home, there is some chance that all of you may reach Ithaka, though not without suffering. **But if you hurt the cattle, it will mean the destruction of your ship and your company.** And if you yourself escape, you will reach home in a wretched state, having lost all your comrades, and you will find trouble in your house - insolent men eating up your livelihood, offering wedding gifts to your royal wife.'

As Circe's speech came to an end, the glorious goddess left me and made her way inland, to send us the friendly escort of a favourable wind, to fill the sails of our ship. We set the course between Scylla and Charybdis. Then, anxious and worried, I addressed my men.

'My friends,' I said, 'it is not right that only one or two of us should know the prophecies that Circe has made to me, and I am going to pass them on to you, so that we all may be forewarned, whether we die, or escape the worst and save our lives. Her first warning concerned the Sirens with their **divine** song. We must beware of them and steer clear of them, and put wax in our ears to avoid their **alluring** song, but I alone must hear their voices. You must bind me very tight, lashed to the mast of our ship so that I cannot stir from the spot. And even if I command and beg you to release me, you must tighten and add to my bonds.'

In this way I explained every detail to my men. In the meantime our good ship, with that friendly breeze to drive her, approached the Sirens' isle.

But now the wind dropped, some power lulled the waves, and breathless calm set in. My men drew in the sail and churned the white water with their oars. Meanwhile I took a lump of wax and cut it up small with my sharp sword. I gave all my men in turn some wax to plug their ears with, so they could not hear the Sirens' tempting call to death. Then they bound me hand and foot, lashing me to the mast itself. This done, they once more churned the white water with their oars.

We made good progress and had just come within call of the shore when the Sirens became aware that there was a ship bearing down on them, and broke into their high, clear song:



'Draw near, Odysseus, man of many tales, and bring your ship to rest so that you may hear our voices. No sea captain ever sailed his ship past this point without listening to the honey-sweet tones that flow from our lips, and no one who has listened has not been delighted. We know all that the Greeks and Trojans suffered on the field of Troy, and we know of the Greeks. Draw near, Odysseus, man of many tales.'

This was the sweet song the Sirens sang, and my heart was filled with such a longing to listen that I ordered my men to set me free, gesturing with my eyes. But no matter how I raged and cursed, commanded and begged them, desperate to draw nearer to the honey-sweet tones, my men swung forward with their oars and rowed ahead, while Eurylochus tightened my ropes and added more. When they had rowed past the

Sirens and could no longer hear, my good companions were quick to clear their ears of wax, and free me.

**Activity A: tick the statements which were part of Circe's instructions.**

- a) Sail close to Charybdis so as not to lose six men at the hands of Scylla.
- b) Let your men enjoy the song of the Sirens.
- c) Fill your men's ears with wax and instruct them to quickly row past the Sirens' isle.
- d) Ask your men to tie you to the mast; if you beg to be released, your men must tie you tighter.

**Activity B: What makes a hero? Who do you think is the hero in this episode of the Odyssey: Odysseus or his men? Write your answer in the space below using the following words: curiosity, persistence.**

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'To be stuck between a rock and a hard place' is an idiom which means to face a dilemma. It comes in part from this episode in the Odyssey. In the space below, explain why Odysseus is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Use the words 'dilemma', 'Charybdis' and 'Scylla'.

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