Homer, the poet who first immortalized the name of Odysseus, wrote probably some time in the eighth-century BCE, drawing on folkloric material, but creating an epic that celebrated the heroic attributes the Greeks of his time valued.

For the full introduction to this story and for other stories, see *The Allyn & Bacon Anthology of Traditional Literature* edited by Judith V. Lechner. Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003.


After sailing awhile, they came to the island of Æolus, who is the king of the winds, and who dwelt there with his children, six sons, and six daughters. Right well did Æolus entertain them, feasting them royally for a whole month, while he heard from Ulysses the story of all that had been done at Troy. And when Ulysses prayed him that he would help him on his way homewards, Æolus hearkened to him, and gave him the skin of an ox, in which he had bound all contrary winds, so that they should not hinder him. But he let a gentle west wind blow, that it might carry him and his comrades to their home. For nine days it blew and now they were near to Ithaca, their country, so that they saw lights burning in it, it being night-time. But now, by an ill chance, Ulysses fell asleep, being wholly wearied out, for he had held the helm for nine days, nor trusted it to any of his comrades. And while he slept his comrades, who had cast eyes of envy on the great ox hide, said one to another—

“Strange it is how men love and honour this Ulysses whithersoever he goes. And now he comes back from Troy with much spoil, but we with empty hands. Let us see what it is that Æolus hath given, for doubtless in this ox hide is much silver and gold.”

So they loosed the great bag of ox hide, and lo! all the winds rushed out, and carried them far away from their country. But Ulysses, waking from the tumult, doubted much whether he should not throw himself into the sea and so die. But he endured, thinking it better to live. Only he veiled his face and so sat, while the ships drove before the winds, till they came once more to the island of Æolus. Then Ulysses went to the palace of the king, and found him feasting with his wife and children, and sat him down on the threshold. Much did they wonder to see him, saying, “What evil power has hindered thee, that thou didst not reach thy country and home?”

Then he answered, “Blame not me, but the evil counsels of my comrades, and sleep, which mastered me to my hurt. But do ye help me again.”

But they said, “Begone; we may not help him whom the gods hate; and hated of them thou surely art.”

So Æolus sent him away. Then again they launched their ships and set forth, toiling wearily at the oars, and sad at heart.

Six days they rowed, nor rested at night, and on the seventh they came to Lamos, which was a city of the Læstrygons, in whose land the night is as the day, so that a man might earn
double wage, if only he wanted not sleep—shepherd by day and herdsman by night. There was a fair haven with cliffs about it, and a narrow mouth with great rocks on either side. And within are no waves, but always calm.

Now Ulysses made fast his ship to the rocks, but the others entered the haven. Then he sent two men and a herald with them, and these came upon a smooth road by which waggons brought down wood from the mountain to the city. Here they met a maiden, the stalwart daughter of Antiphates, king of the land, and asked of her who was lord of that country. Whereupon she showed them her father’s lofty palace. And they, entering this, saw the maiden’s mother, big as a mountain, horrible to behold, who straightway called to Antiphates, her husband. The messengers, indeed fled to the ships; but he made a great shout, and the Læstrygons came flocking about him, giants, not men. And these broke off great stones from the cliffs, each stone as much as a man could carry, and cast them at the ships, so that they were broken. And the men they speared, as if they were fishes, and devoured them. So it happened to all the ships in the haven. Ulysses only escaped, for he cut the hawser with his sword, and bade his men ply their oars, which indeed they did right willingly.

After a while, they came to the island of Ææa, where Circé dwelt, who was the daughter of the Sun. Two days and nights they lay upon the shore in great trouble and sorrow. On the third, Ulysses took his spear and sword and climbed a hill that there was, for he wished to see to what manner of land they had come. And having climbed it, he saw the smoke rising from the palace of Circé, where it stood in the midst of a wood. Then he thought awhile: should he go straightway to the palace that he saw, or first return to his comrades on the shore? And this last seemed better; and it chanced that as he went he saw a great stag which was going down to the river to drink, for indeed the sun was now hot, and casting his spear at it he pierced it through. Then he fastened together the feet with green withes and a fathom’s length of rope, and slinging the beast round his neck, so carried it to the ship, leaning on his spear; for indeed it was heavy to bear, nor could any man have carried it on the shoulder with one hand. And when he was come to the ship, he cast down his burden. Now the men were sitting with their faces muffled, so sad were they. But when he bade them be of good cheer, they looked up and marvelled at the great stag. And all that day they feasted on deer’s flesh and sweet wine, and at night lay down to sleep on the shore. But when morning was come, Ulysses called them all together and spake—

“I know not, friends, where we are. Only I know, having seen smoke yesterday from the hill, that there is a dwelling in this island.”

It troubled the men much to hear this, for they thought of the Cyclops and of the Læstrygons; and they wailed aloud, but there was no counsel in them. Wherefore Ulysses divided them into two companies, setting Eurylochus over the one and himself over the other, and shook lots in a helmet who should go and search out the island, and the lot of Eurylochus leapt out. So he went, and comrades twenty and two with him. And in an open space in the wood they found the palace of Circé. All about were wolves and lions; yet these harmed not the men, but stood on their hind legs, fawning upon them, as dogs fawn upon their master when he comes from his meal. And the men were afraid. And they stood in the porch and heard the voice of Circé as she sang with a lovely voice and plied the loom. Then said Polites, who was dearest of all his comrades to Ulysses—

“Some one within plies a great loom, and sings with a loud voice. Some goddess is she, or woman. Let us make haste and call.”

So they called to her, and she came out and beckoned them that they should follow. So they went, in their folly. And she bade them sit, and mixed for them a mess, red wine, and in it
barley-meal and cheese and honey, and mighty drugs withal, of which, if a man drank, he forgot all that he loved. And when they had drunk she smote them with her wand. And lo! they had of a sudden the head and voices and the bristles of swine, but the heart of a man was in them still. And Circé shut them in sties, and gave them mast and acorns and cornel to eat.

But Eurylochus fled back to the ship. And for a while he could not speak, so full was his heart of grief, but at the last he told the tale of what had befallen. Then Ulysses took his silver-studded sword and his bow, and bade Eurylochus guide him by the way that he had gone.

Nor would he hearken when Eurylochus would have hindered him, but said, “Stay here by the ship, eating and drinking, if it be thy will, but I must go, for necessity constrains me.”

And when he had come to the house, there he met Hermes of the golden wand, in the shape of a fair youth, who said to him—

“Art thou come to rescue thy comrades that are now swine in Circé’s house? Nay, but thou shalt never go back thyself. Yet, stay; I will give thee such a drug as shall give thee power to resist all her charms. For when she shall have mixed thee and mess, and smitten thee with her wand, then do thou rush upon her with thy sword making as if thou wouldst slay her. And when she shall pray for peace, do thou make her swear by the great oath that binds the gods that she will not harm thee.”

Then Hermes showed Ulysses a certain herb, whose root was black, but the flower white as milk. “Moly,” the gods call it, and very hard it is for mortal man to find. Then Ulysses went into the house, and all befell as Hermes had told him. For Circé would have changed him as she had changed his comrades. Then he rushed at her with his sword, and made her swear the great oath which binds the gods that she would not harm him.

But, afterwards, when they sat at meat together, the goddess perceived that he was silent and ate not. Wherefore she said, “Why dost thou sit, Ulysses, as though thou wert dumb? Fearest thou any craft of mine? Nay, but that may not be, for have I not sworn the great oath that binds the gods?”

And Ulysses said, “Nay, but who could think of meat and drink when such things had befallen his companions?”

Then Circé led the way, holding her wand in her hand, and opened the doors of the sties, and drove out the swine that had been men. Then she rubbed on each another mighty drug, and the bristles fell from their bodies and they became men, only younger and fairer than before. And when they saw Ulysses they clung to him and wept for joy, and Circé herself was moved with pity.

Then said she, “Go, Ulysses, to thy ship, and put away all the goods and tackling in the caves that are on the shore, but come again hither thyself, and bring thy comrades with thee.”

Then Ulysses went. Right glad were they who had stayed to see him, glad as the calves who have been penned in the fold-yard when their mothers come back in the evening. And when he told them what had been, and would have them follow him, they were all willing, save only Eurylochus, who said—

“O ye fools, whither are we going? To the dwelling of Circé, who will change us all into swine, or wolves or lions, and keep us in prison, even as the Cyclops did! For was it not this same foolhardy Ulysses that lost our comrades there?”

Then was Ulysses very wroth, and would have slain Eurylochus, though near of kin to him. But his comrades hindered him, saying, “Let him abide here and keep the ship, if he will. But we will go with thee to the dwelling of Circé.”

Then Ulysses forbore. Nor did Eurylochus stay behind, but followed with the rest. So
they went to the dwelling of Circé, who feasted them royally, so that they remained with her for a whole year, well content.

But when the year was out they said to Ulysses, “It were well to remember thy country, if it is indeed the will of the gods that thou shouldst return thither.”

Then Ulysses besought Circé that she would send him on his way homewards, as indeed she had promised to do. And she answered—

“I would not have you abide in my house unwillingly. Yet must thou first go another journey, even to the dwellings of the dead, there to speak with the seer Tiresias.”

But Ulysses was sore troubled to hear such things, and wept aloud, saying, “Who shall guide us in this journey?—for never yet did ship make such a voyage as this.”

Then said Circé, “Seek no guide; only raise the mast of thy ship and spread the white sails, and sit in peace. So shall the north wind bear thee to the place on the ocean shore where are the groves of Persephoné, tall poplars and willows. There must thou beach thy ship. And after that thou must go alone.”

Then she told him all that he must do if he would hold converse with the dead seer Tiresias, and hear what should befall him. So the next morning he roused his companions, telling them that they should now return. But it chanced that one of them, Elpenor by name, was sleeping on the roof, for the coolness, being heavy with wine. And when he heard the stir of his comrades, he rose up, nor thought of the ladder, but fell from the roof and brake his neck. And the rest being assembled, Ulysses told them how they must take another journey first, even to the dwellings of the dead. This they were much troubled to hear yet they made ready the ship and departed.