

3

Read after
p. 937

THE CATTLE OF THE SUN GOD

A Odysseus urges his exhausted crew to bypass Thrinakia, the island of the sun god, Helios. But the men insist on landing. Odysseus makes them swear not to touch the god's cattle. Odysseus is still speaking.

"In the small hours of the third watch, when stars
845 that shone out in the first dusk of evening
had gone down to their setting, a giant wind
blew from heaven, and clouds driven by Zeus
shrouded land and sea in a night of storm;
so, just as Dawn with fingertips of rose
850 touched the windy world, we dragged our ship
to cover in a grotto, a sea cave
where nymphs had chairs of rock and sanded floors.
I mustered all the crew and said:

'Old shipmates,
our stores are in the ship's hold, food and drink;
855 the cattle here are not for our provision,
or we pay dearly for it.

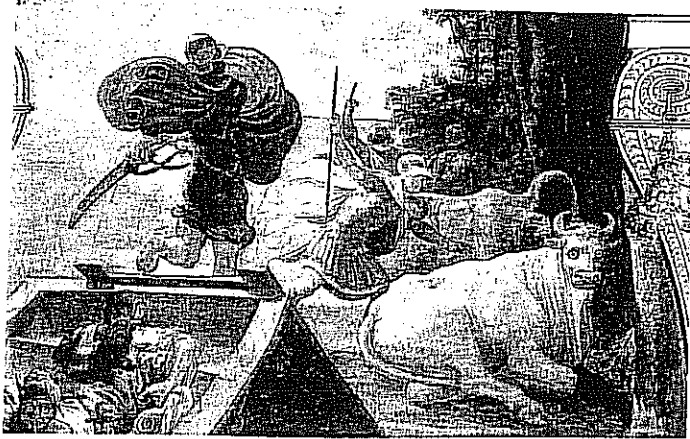
Fierce the god is
B who cherishes these heifers and these sheep:
Helios; and no man avoids his eye.'

To this my fighters nodded. Yes. But now
860 we had a month of onshore gales, blowing
day in, day out—south winds, or south by east.
As long as bread and good red wine remained
to keep the men up, and appease their craving,
they would not touch the cattle. But in the end,
865 when all the barley in the ship was gone,
hunger drove them to scour the wild shore
with angling hooks, for fishes and sea fowl,
whatever fell into their hands; and lean days
wore their bellies thin.

The storms continued.
870 So one day I withdrew to the interior



Suppose you wanted write a script dramatizing this famous part of the Odyssey—the crew's struggle against the Sirens and against Scylla and Charybdis. Who would be your main characters? How would you use music and visuals—especially in the Sirens scene? Write down your ideas about a dramatic presentation.



The Companions of Ulysses Slaying the Cattle of the Sun God Helios (16th century) by Pellegrino Tibaldi.

to pray the gods in solitude, for hope
 that one might show me some way of salvation.
 Slipping away, I struck across the island
 to a sheltered spot, out of the driving gale.
 I washed my hands there, and made supplication^o
 to the gods who own Olympus, all the gods—
 but they, for answer, only closed my eyes
 under slow drops of sleep.

Now on the shore Eurylochus
 made his insidious^o plea:

‘Comrades,’ he said,
 ‘You’ve gone through everything; listen to what I say.
 All deaths are hateful to us, mortal wretches,
 but famine is the most pitiful, the worst
 end that a man can come to.

Will you fight it?

Come, we’ll cut out the noblest of these cattle
 for sacrifice to the gods who own the sky;
 and once at home, in the old country of Ithaca,
 if ever that day comes—
 we’ll build a costly temple and adorn it
 with every beauty for the Lord of Noon. ©
 But if he flares up over his heifers lost,
 wishing our ship destroyed, and if the gods
 make cause with him, why, then I say: Better
 open your lungs to a big sea once for all (D)
 than waste to skin and bones on a lonely island!’

Thus Eurylochus; and they murmured ‘Aye!’
 trooping away at once to round up heifers.
 Now, that day tranquil cattle with broad brows
 were grazing near, and soon the men drew up
 around their chosen beasts in ceremony.
 They plucked the leaves that shone on a tall oak—
 having no barley meal—to strew^o the victims,

875. **supplication:** humble requests; prayers.

879. **insidious:** crafty; sly.



What is Eurylochus’s “insidious plea” (lines 879–894)? If you were a member of the crew, would you be swayed by this argument, or would you heed Odysseus’ warning? Do you think murdering the cattle is justified, or is it sacrilege?

901. **strew:** scatter about.

performed the prayers and ritual, knifed the kine
and flayed each carcass, cutting thighbones free
to wrap in double folds of fat. These offerings,
905 with strips of meat, were laid upon the fire.
Then, as they had no wine, they made libation
with clear spring water, broiling the entrails first;
and when the bones were burnt and tripes shared,
they spitted the carved meat.

Just then my slumber
910 left me in a rush, my eyes opened,
and I went down the seaward path. No sooner
had I caught sight of our black hull, than savory
odors of burnt fat eddied around me;
grief took hold of me, and I cried aloud:

915 'O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,
you made me sleep away this day of mischief!
O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour!
Here they sat, and a great work they contrived.'

Lampetia^o in her long gown meanwhile
920 had borne swift word to the Overlord of Noon:

'They have killed your kine.'

And the Lord Helios
burst into angry speech amid the immortals:

'O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,
punish Odysseus' men! So overweening,^o
925 now they have killed my peaceful kine, my joy
at morning when I climbed the sky of stars,
and evening, when I bore westward from heaven.
Restitution or penalty they shall pay—
and pay in full—or I go down forever
930 to light the dead men in the underworld! . . .'

(from Book 12)

When Odysseus and his men set sail again, they are punished by death—a thunderbolt from Zeus destroys their boat and all the men drown. Only Odysseus survives. Exhausted and nearly drowned, he makes his way to Calypso's island, where we met him originally, in Book 5.

Odysseus has brought us up to date. He can now rest and enjoy the comforts of Alcinous' court—but not for long. Ahead lies his most difficult task—reclaiming his own kingdom.

At this moment of suspense, Homer might have put aside his harp until the next night.



Zeus, seated on his throne holding thunderbolts (6th B.C.). Bronze statuette from Mount Lyceum.

919. **Lampetia** (lam-pē'shē daughter of Helios. Lampetia guarded her father's herds o

924. **overweening**: excess proud.



What exactly has happened to cause god's fury?