Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead, 
vowing to slaughter my best heifer for them 
before she calved, at home in Ithaca, 
and burn the choice bits on the altar fire; 

as for Teiresias, I swore to sacrifice 
a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock. 
Thus to assuage the nations of the dead 
I pledged these rites, then slashed the lamb and ewe, 
letting their black blood stream into the wellpit. 

Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebus, 

brides and young men, and men grown old in pain, 
and tender girls whose hearts were new to grief; 
many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads, 
battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear. 

From every side they came and sought the pit 
with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear. 

But presently I gave command to my officers 
to flay those sheep the bronze cut down, and make 
burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below— 
to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone. 

Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep 
the surging phantoms from the bloody pit 
till I should know the presence of Teiresias 

One shade came first—Elpenor, of our company, 
who lay unburied still on the wide earth 

as we had left him—dead in Kirke’s hall, 
untouched, unmourned, when other cares compelled us. 
Now when I saw him there I wept for pity 
and called out to him: 

'How is this, Elpenor, 
how could you journey to the western gloom 
swifter afoot than I in the black lugger?’
He sighed, and answered:

‘Son of great Laertes,
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,
bad luck shadowed me, and no kindly power;
ignoble death I drank with so much wine.

I slept on Kirke’s roof, then could not see
the long steep backward ladder, coming down,
and fell that height. My neck bone, buckled under,
snapped, and my spirit found this well of dark.
Now hear the grace I pray for, in the name
of those back in the world, not here—your wife
and father, he who gave you bread in childhood,
and your own child, your only son, Telemachus,
long ago left at home.

When you make sail
and put these lodgings of dim Death behind,
you will moor ship, I know, upon Aiaia Island;
there, O my lord, remember me, I pray,
do not abandon me unwept, unburied
to tempt the gods’ wrath,3 while you sail for home;
but fire my corpse, and all the gear I had,

and build a cairn for me above the breakers—
an unknown sailor’s mark for men to come.
Heap up the mound there, and implant upon it
the oar I pulled in life with my companions.’

He ceased, and I replied:

‘Unhappy spirit,
I promise you the barrow and the burial.’
So we conversed, and grimly, at a distance,
with my long sword between, guarding the blood,
while the faint image of the lad spoke on.

Now came the soul of Antikleía, dead,
my mother, daughter of Autolykos, 90
dead now, though living still when I took ship
for holy Troy. Seeing this ghost I grieved,
but held her off, through pang on pang of tears,
till I should know the presence of Tiresias.

Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward
bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me:

‘Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways,
why leave the blazing sun, O man of woe,

to see the cold dead and the joyless region?
Stand clear, put up your sword;
let me but taste of blood, I shall speak true.’

At this I stepped aside, and in the scabbard
let my long sword ring home to the pommel silver,
as he bent down to the sombre blood. Then spoke
the prince of those with gift of speech:

‘Great captain,
a fair wind and the honey lights of home
are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;
the god who thunders on the land prepares it,

not to be shaken from your track, implacable,
in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded.
One narrow strait may take you through his blows:
denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.
When you make landfall on Thrinakia first

and quit the violet sea, dark on the land
you’ll find the grazing herds of Helios
by whom all things are seen, all speech is known.
Avoid those kine, hold fast to your intent,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.

But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction
for ship and crew. Though you survive alone,
bereft of all companions, lost for years,
der under strange sail shall you come home, to find
your own house filled with trouble: insolent men
eating your livestock as they court your lady.
Aye, you shall make those men atone in blood!
But after you have dealt out death—in open
combat or by stealth—to all the suitors,
go overland on foot, and take an oar,

until one day you come where men have lived
with meat unsalted, never known the sea,
nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows
and oars that fledge light hulls for dipping flight.'
The spot will soon be plain to you, and I can tell you how: some passerby will say, “What winnowing fan is that upon your shoulder?”

Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon: a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back, and carry out pure hekatombs at home to all wide heaven’s lords, the undying gods, to each in order. Then a seaborne death soft as this hand of mist will come upon you when you are wearied out with rich old age, your country folk in blessed peace around you. And all this shall be just as I foretell…”

Odysseus speaks to the shade of his mother. She tells him that Penelope and Telemachus are still grieving for him and that his father, Laertes, has moved to the country, where he, too, mourns his son. Odysseus’ mother explains that she died from a broken heart. Odysseus also speaks with the spirits of many great ladies and men who died, as well as those who were punished for their earthly sins. Filled with horror, Odysseus and his crew set sail.