

Your father's son you are—your words have all his wisdom.  
It's easy to spot the breed of a man whom Zeus  
has marked for joy in birth and marriage both.  
Take great King Nestor now:  
Zeus has blessed him, all his livelong days,  
growing rich and sleek in his old age at home,  
his sons expert with spears and full of sense.  
Well, so much for the tears that caught us just now;  
let's think again of supper. Come, rinse our hands.  
Tomorrow, at dawn, will offer me and Telemachus  
time to talk and trade our thoughts in full.”

Asphalion quickly rinsed their hands with water,  
another of King Menelaus' ready aides-in-arms.  
Again they reached for the good things set before them.

Then Zeus's daughter Helen thought of something else.  
Into the mixing-bowl from which they drank their wine  
she slipped a drug, heart's-ease, dissolving anger,  
magic to make us all forget our pains ...  
No one who drank it deeply, mulled in wine,  
could let a tear roll down his cheeks that day,  
not even if his mother should die, his father die,  
not even if right before his eyes some enemy brought down  
a brother or darling son with a sharp bronze blade.  
So cunning the drugs that Zeus's daughter plied,  
potent gifts from Polydamna the wife of Thon,  
a woman of Egypt, land where the teeming soil  
bears the richest yield of herbs in all the world:  
many health itself when mixed in the wine,  
and many deadly poison.  
Every man is a healer there, more skilled  
than any other men on earth—Egyptians born  
of the healing god himself. So now Helen, once  
she had drugged the wine and ordered winecups filled,  
resuming the conversation, entertained the group:  
“My royal king Menelaus—welcome guests here,  
sons of the great as well! Zeus can present us

times of joy and times of grief in turn:  
all lies within his power.  
So come, let's sit back in the palace now,  
dine and warm our hearts with the old stories.  
I will tell something perfect for the occasion.  
Surely I can't describe or even list them all,  
the exploits crowding fearless Odysseus' record,  
but what a feat that hero dared and carried off  
in the land of Troy where you Achaeans suffered!  
Scarring his own body with mortifying strokes,  
throwing filthy rags on his back like any slave,  
he slipped into the enemy's city, roamed its streets—  
all disguised, a totally different man, a beggar,  
hardly the figure he cut among Achaea's ships.  
That's how Odysseus infiltrated Troy,  
and no one knew him at all ...

I alone, I spotted him for the man he was,  
kept questioning him—the crafty one kept dodging.  
But after I'd bathed him, rubbed him down with oil,  
given him clothes to wear and sworn a binding oath  
not to reveal him as Odysseus to the Trojans, not  
till he was back at his swift ships and shelters,  
then at last he revealed to *me*, step by step,  
the whole Achaean strategy. And once he'd cut  
a troop of Trojans down with his long bronze sword,  
back he went to his comrades, filled with information.  
The rest of the Trojan women shrilled their grief. Not I:  
my heart leapt up—

my heart had changed by now—

I yearned

to sail back home again! I grieved too late for the madness  
Aphrodite sent me, luring me there, far from my dear land,  
forsaking my own child, my bridal bed, my husband too,  
a man who lacked for neither brains nor beauty.”

And the red-haired Menelaus answered Helen:  
“There was a tale, my lady. So well told.  
Now then, I have studied, in my time,

the plans and minds of great ones by the score.  
And I have traveled over a good part of the world  
but never once have I laid eyes on a man like *him*—  
what a heart that fearless Odysseus had inside him!  
What a piece of work the hero dared and carried off  
in the wooden horse where all our best encamped,  
our champions armed with bloody death for Troy ...  
when along *you* came, Helen—roused, no doubt,  
by a dark power bent on giving Troy some glory,  
and dashing Prince Deiphobus squired your every step.  
Three times you sauntered round our hollow ambush,  
feeling, stroking its flanks,  
challenging all our fighters, calling each by name—  
yours was the voice of all our long-lost wives!  
And Diomedes and I, crouched tight in the midst  
with great Odysseus, hearing you singing out,  
were both keen to spring up and sally forth  
or give you a sudden answer from inside,  
but Odysseus damped our ardor, reined us back.  
Then all the rest of the troops kept stock-still,  
all but Anticlus. He was hot to salute you now  
but Odysseus clamped his great hands on the man's mouth  
and shut it, brutally—yes, he saved us all,  
holding on grim-set till Pallas Athena  
lured you off at last.”

But clear-sighted Telemachus ventured,  
“Son of Atreus, King Menelaus, captain of armies,  
so much the worse, for not one bit of that  
saved *him* from grisly death ...  
not even a heart of iron could have helped.  
But come, send us off to bed. It's time to rest,  
time to enjoy the sweet relief of sleep.”

And Helen briskly told her serving-women  
to make beds in the porch's shelter, lay down  
some heavy purple throws for the beds themselves,  
and over them spread some blankets, thick woolly robes,