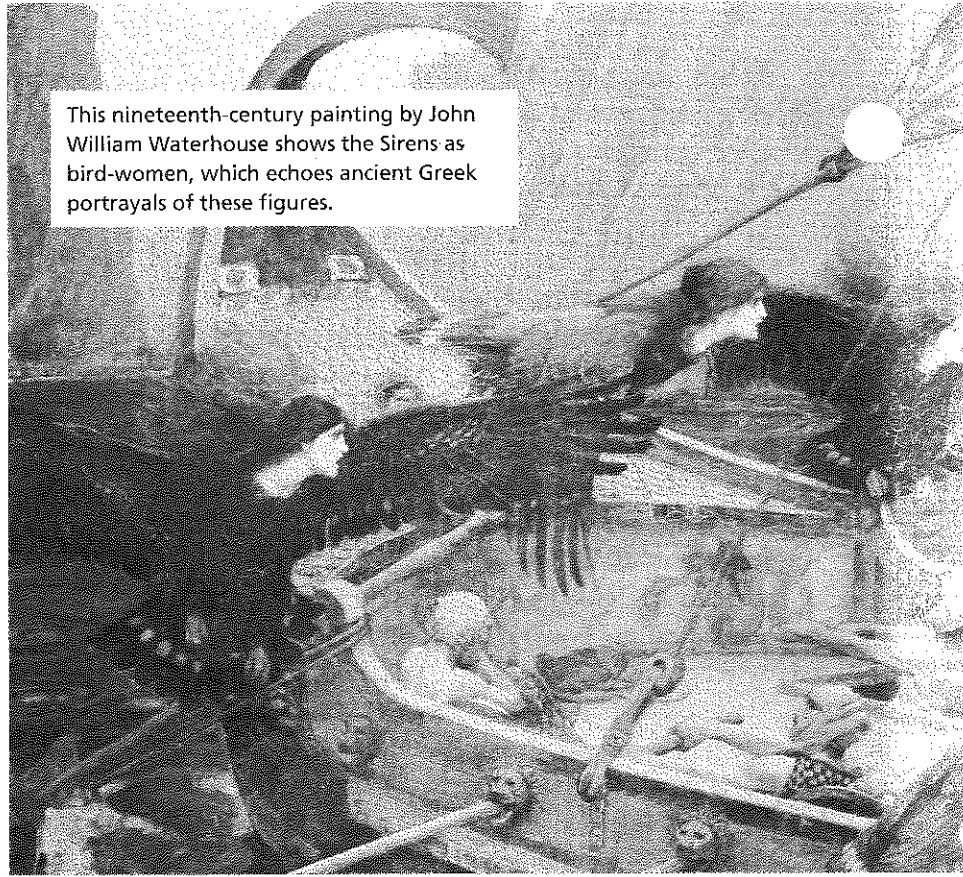


This nineteenth-century painting by John William Waterhouse shows the Sirens as bird-women, which echoes ancient Greek portrayals of these figures.



The Sirens

Odysseus returns to Circe's island. The goddess reveals his course to him and gives advice on how to avoid the dangers he will face: the Sirens, who lure sailors to their destruction; the Wandering Rocks, sea rocks that destroy even birds in flight; the perils of the sea monster Scylla and, nearby, the whirlpool Charybdis;⁶² and the cattle of the sun god, which Tiresias has warned Odysseus not to harm.

62. Charybdis (kuh RIHB dihs)

As Circe spoke, Dawn mounted her golden throne,
and on the first rays Circe left me, taking
her way like a great goddess up the island.

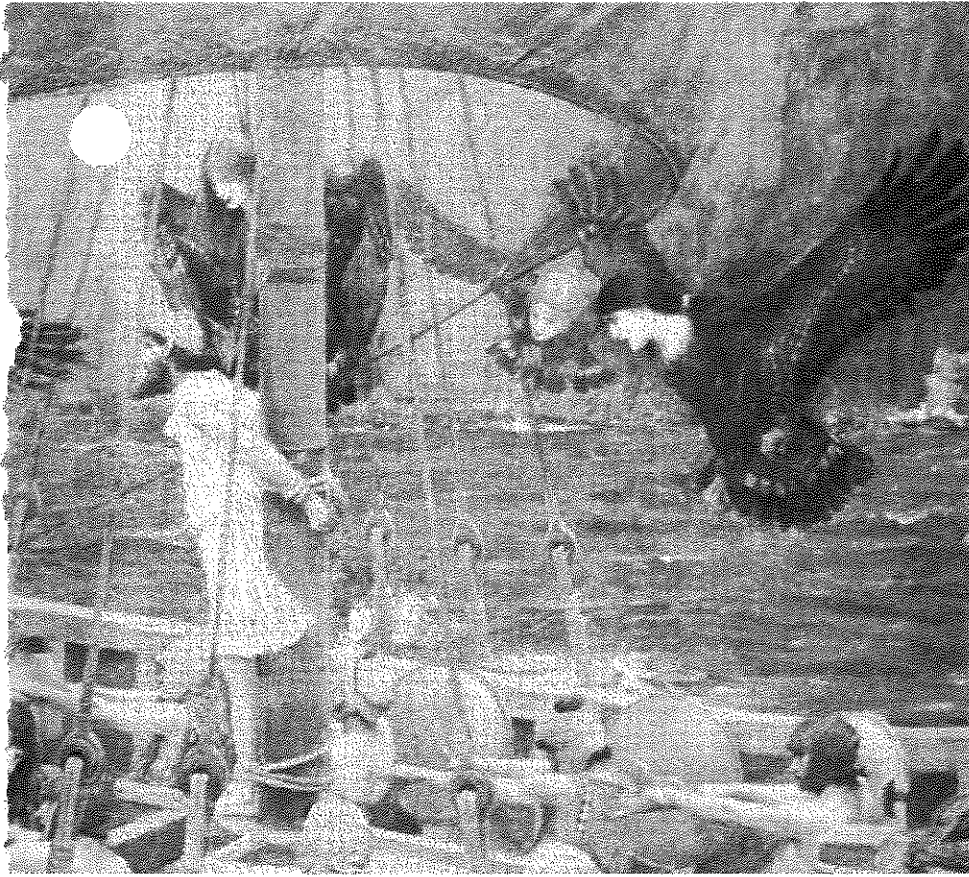
675 I made straight for the ship, roused up the men
to get aboard and cast off at the stern.

They scrambled to their places by the rowlocks
and all in line dipped oars in the gray sea.

680 But soon an offshore breeze blew to our liking—
a canvas-bellying breeze, a lusty shipmate
sent by the singing nymph with sunbright hair.

So we made fast the braces, and we rested,
letting the wind and steersman work the ship.

685 The crew being now silent before me, I
addressed them, sore at heart:



‘Dear friends,
 more than one man, or two, should know those things
 Circe foresaw for us and shared with me,
 so let me tell her forecast: then we die
 with our eyes open, if we are going to die,
 690 or know what death we baffle if we can. Sirens
 weaving a haunting song over the sea
 we are to shun, she said, and their green shore
 all sweet with clover; yet she urged that I
 alone should listen to their song. Therefore
 695 you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,
 erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,
 and if I shout and beg to be untied,
 take more turns of the rope to muffle me.’

I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast,
 700 while our good ship made time, bound outward down
 the wind for the strange island of Sirens.

Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm
 came over all the sea, as though some power
 lulled the swell.

The crew were on their feet
 705 briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In lines 719–744, mark the end words of the lines of several stanzas of the Sirens' song.

QUESTION: What do you notice about these words in relation to each other?

CONCLUDE: How does this contribute to a sense of the Sirens' music?

63. Argos' old soldiery soldiers from Argos, a city in ancient Greece.

each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades
and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved
a massive cake of beeswax into bits
and rolled them in my hands until they softened—
710 no long task, for a burning heat came down
from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward
I carried wax along the line, and laid it
thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb
amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,
715 and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,
as we came smartly within hailing distance,
the two Sirens, noting our fast ship
off their point, made ready, and they sang:

720 *This way, oh turn your bows,
Achaea's glory,
As all the world allows—
Moor and be merry.*

725 *Sweet coupled airs we sing.
No lonely seafarer
Holds clear of entering
Our green mirror.*

730 *Pleased by each purling note
Like honey twining
From her throat and my throat,
Who lies a-pining?*

735 *Sea rovers here take joy
Voyaging onward,
As from our song of Troy
Graybeard and rower-boy
Goeth more learnèd.*

*All feats on that great field
In the long warfare,
Dark days the bright gods willed,
Wounds you bore there,*

740 *Argos' old soldiery⁶³
On Troy beach teeming,
Charmed out of time we see.
No life on earth can be
Hid from our dreaming.*

745 The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water
made me crave to listen, and I tried to say
'Untie me!' to the crew, jerking my brows;

but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes
got to his feet, he and Eurylochus,
750 and passed more line about, to hold me still.
So all rowed on, until the Sirens
dropped under the sea rim, and their singing
dwindled away.

My faithful company
rested on their oars now, peeling off
755 the wax that I had laid thick on their ears;
then set me free.

NOTES

the combers and the smoke
large waves that break on the
beach and the ocean spray.