

Scylla and Charybdis

But scarcely had that island
faded in blue air than I saw smoke
and white water, with sound of waves in tumult—
a sound the men heard, and it terrified them.

760 Oars flew from their hands; the blades went knocking
wild alongside till the ship lost way,
with no oar blades to drive her through the water.
Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern,
trying to put heart into them, standing over
765 every oarsman, saying gently,

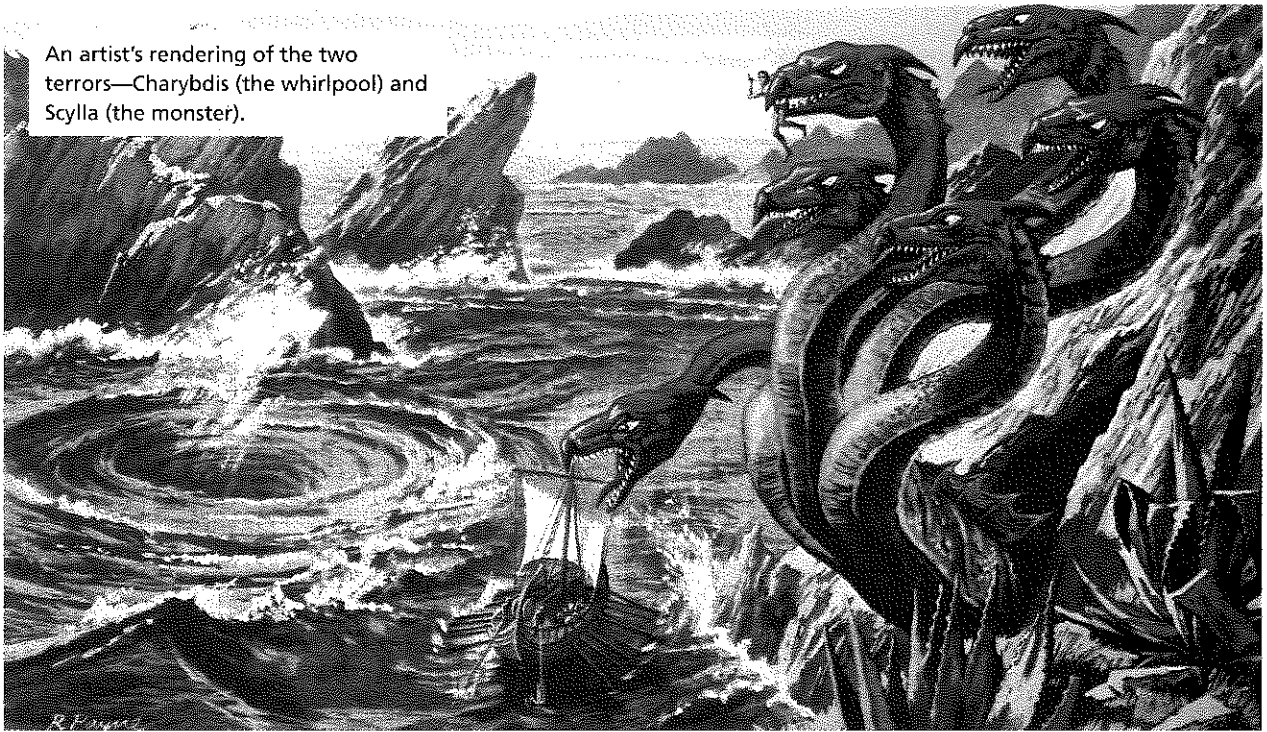
‘Friends,
have we never been in danger before this?
More fearsome, is it now, than when the Cyclops
penned us in his cave? What power he had!
Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits
770 to find a way out for us?’

Now I say
by hook or crook this peril too shall be
something that we remember.

Heads up, lads!
We must obey the orders as I give them.
Get the oar shafts in your hands, and lay back
775 hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.
Zeus help us pull away before we founder.
You at the tiller, listen, and take in
all that I say—the rudders are your duty;
keep her out of the combers and the smoke;⁶⁴
780 steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we
fetch up in the smother, and you drown us.’

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

An artist's rendering of the two terrors—Charybdis (the whirlpool) and Scylla (the monster).



NOTES

65. **Scylla** (SIHL uh)

66. **cuirass** (kwih RAS) *n.* armor for the upper body.

67. **travail** (truh VAYL) *n.* very hard work.

68. **gorge** (gawrj) *n.* throat or gullet.

69. **maelstrom** (MAYL struhm) *n.* large, violent whirlpool.

That was all, and it brought them round to action.

But as I sent them on toward Scylla,⁶⁵ I told them nothing, as they could do nothing.

785 They would have dropped their oars again, in panic, to roll for cover under the decking. Circe's bidding against arms had slipped my mind, so I tied on my cuirass⁶⁶ and took up two heavy spears, then made my way along
790 to the foredeck—thinking to see her first from there, the monster of the gray rock, harboring torment for my friends. I strained my eyes upon the cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere could I catch sight of her.

And all this time,
795 in travail,⁶⁷ sobbing, gaining on the current, we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire gorge⁶⁸ of the salt seatide. By heaven! when she vomited, all the sea was like a cauldron
800 seething over intense fire, when the mixture suddenly heaves and rises.

The shot spume soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain. But when she swallowed the sea water down we saw the funnel of the maelstrom,⁶⁹ heard
805 the rock bellowing all around, and dark

sand raged on the bottom far below.
My men all blanched against the gloom, our eyes
were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear
of being devoured.

Then Scylla made her strike,
810 whisking six of my best men from the ship.
I happened to glance aft at ship and oarsmen
and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling
high overhead. Voices came down to me
in anguish, calling my name for the last time.

815 A man surfcasting on a point of rock
for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod
to drop the sinker and the bait far out,
will hook a fish and rip it from the surface
to dangle wriggling through the air:

so these
820 were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.

She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den,
in the dire grapple, reaching still for me—
and deathly pity ran me through
at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered,
825 questing the passes of the strange sea.

We rowed on.
The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too,
and Scylla dropped astern.

NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark the words in lines 815–820 that describe a sports activity.

QUESTION: Why does Homer liken this activity to Scylla's actions?

CONCLUDE: What does this comparison suggest about Scylla's power?