Previously, on the *Odyssey*, book xi*…*

* Odysseus travels to the Underworld and makes the offerings according to Circe's instructions. For someone who doesn’t listen well, he sure is great at following divine directions. The shades of the dead (shades = ghosts) gather to drink the blood (gross) and then talk to Odysseus.
* The first shade is Elpenor, freshly fallen from Circe's roof. Odysseus's eyes bug out when he sees one of his crew members—he weeps (shocker) and listens to the newly sober man's story:

"Son of Laertes and seed of Zeus, resourceful Odysseus,

the evil will of the spirit and the wild wine bewildered me.

I lay down on the roof of Circe's palace, and never thought,

when I went down, to go by way of the long ladder,

but blundered straight off the edge of the roof, so that my neck bone

was broken out of its sockets, and my soul went down to Hades'.

But now I pray you, by those you have yet to see, who are not here,

by your wife, and byyour father, who reared you When you were little,

and by Telemachos whom you left alone in your palace;

for I know that after you leave this place and the house of Hades

you will put back with your well-made ship to the island, Aiaia;

there at that time, my lord, I ask that you remember me,

and do not go and leave me behind unwept, unburied,

when you leave, for fear I might become the gods' curse upon you;

but burn me there with all my armor that belongs to me,

and heap up a grave mound beside the beach of the gray sea,

for an unhappy man, so that those to come will know of me.

Do this for me, and on top of the grave mound plant the oar

with which I rowed when I was alive and among my companions."

* Odysseus then glimpses his mother's shade among the rest of the dead. This is news to him, since last he heard she was still alive. Awk-ward…
* Fortunately, he is soon distracted from his weeping by the arrival of Teiresias (the dead blind prophet Circe told him to talk to).
* Teiresias drinks the blood of Odysseus' sacrifice and then speaks.
* His first words are a warning: don't eat Helios' (the sun god’s) cattle. He’s probably worried that Odysseus isn’t familiar with Greek customs of hospitality. Or he recently ran into Polyphemus. His next are to casually announce that Odysseus will survive alone.
* In other words, all of his companions will die. Good thing somehow none of his men happen to overhear.
* The good news is, Odysseus will make it home after all, but he'll find trouble there. He'll have to make the suitors pay for their insolence with … wait for it … blood. Dun dun DUN!
* Teiresias continues:

“after you have killed these suitors in your own palace,

either by treachery, or openly with the sharp bronze,

then you must take up your well-shaped oar and go on a journey

until you come where there are men living who know nothing

of the sea, and who eat food that is not mixed with salt, who never

have known ships whose cheeks are painted purple, who never

have known well-shaped oars, which act for ships as wings do.”

* There, he has to pray to Poseidon and sacrifice what seems to be half a zoo. Thankfully, Teiresias ends on an uplifting note:

“Death will come to you from the sea, in

some altogether unwarlike way, and it will end you

in the ebbing time of a sleek old age. Your people

about you will be prosperous. All this is true that I tell you.''

* Okay, that's great, says Odysseus, but why is his mother here, and can he talk to her? Sure, says Teiresias, as long as she drinks the blood of the sacrifice, too.
* One gory mess later, Odysseus finally gets to ask his mother Antikleia for a status update:

“But come now, tell me this, and give me an accurate answer.

What doom of death that lays men low has been your undoing?

Was it a long sickness, or did Artemis of the arrows

come upon you with her painless shafts, and destroy you?

And tell me of my father and son whom I left behind. Is

my inheritance still with them, or does some other

man hold them now, and thinks I will come no more? Tell me

about the wife I married, what she wants, what she is thinking,

and whether she stays fast by my son, and guards everything,

or if she has married the best man among the Achaians."

* She responds:

"All too much with enduring heart she does wait for you

there in your own palace, and always with her the wretched

nights and the days also waste her away with weeping.

No one yet holds your fine inheritance, but in freedom

Telemachos administers your allotted lands, and apportions

the equal feasts, work that befits a man with authority

to judge, for all call him in. Your father remains, on the estate

where he is, and does not go to the city. There is no bed there

nor is there bed clothing nor blankets nor shining coverlets,

but in the winter time he sleeps in the house, where the thralls do,

in the dirt next to the fire, and with foul clothing upon him;

but when the summer comes and the blossoming time of harvest,

everywhere he has places to sleep on the ground, on fallen

leaves in piles along the rising ground of his orchard,

and there he lies, grieving, and the sorrow grows big within him

as he longs for your homecoming, and harsh old age is on him.

And so it was with me also and that was the reason I perished,

nor in my palace did the lady of arrows, well-aiming,

come upon me with her painless shafts, and destroy me,

nor was I visited by sickness, which beyond other

things takes the life out of the body with hateful weakness,

but, shining Odysseus, it was my longing for you, your cleverness

and your gentle ways, that took the sweet spirit of life from me."

* He tries three times to embrace her, but this doesn't work out too well, since Antikleia is dead. Odysseus is flummoxed; Antikleia responds: silly son, hugs are for humans:

"Oh my child, ill-fated beyond all other mortals,

this is not Persephone, daughter of Zeus, beguiling you,

but it is only what happens, when they die, to all mortals.

The sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together,

and once the spirit has left the white bones, all the rest

of the body is made subject to the fire's strong fury;

but the soul flitters out like a dream and flies away. Therefore

you must strive back toward the light again with all speed; but remember

these things for your wife, so you may tell her hereafter."

* When she leaves, there's a long line of other dead people waiting to talk to him. The shades don't get too many visitors around these parts.
* Odysseus draws his sword to hold them back. (Except they're already dead, so not sure how effective that would be.) He lets them come and drink one at a time.
* Odysseus speaks first to a long line of princesses: Tyro, Antiope, Alkmene, Megara, Epikaste, Chloris, Leda, Iphimedeia, Phaidra, Prokris, Ariadne, Maira, Klymene, and Eriphyle.
* The list could have continued, because he saw 1 million women, but Odysseus stops his narrative because he is le tired. The Phaiakians are all "No way! You’re so godlike in your storytelling!"
* Queen Arete, clearly impressed by all these stories, decides that when they do finally send Odysseus on his way, it should be with lots of sparkly things (i.e., treasure).
* King Alkinoös then asks Odysseus if, while he was down in the underworld, he met any of his friends who died at Troy.
* He sure did!
* Back in the Underworld, Odysseus sees Agamemnon and hears the tragic story of his murder at the hands of Aigisthos (his brother) and Klytaimestra (his wife):

"Son of Laertes and seed of Zeus, resourceful Odysseus,

not in the ships; nor did Poseidon, rousing a stormblast

of battering winds that none would wish for, prove my destruction,

nor on dry land did enemy men destroy me in battle;

Aigisthos, working out my death and destruction, invited

me to his house, and feasted me, and killed me there, with the help

of my sluttish wife, as one cuts down an ox at his manger.

So I died a most pitiful death, and my other companions

were killed around me without mercy, like pigs with shining

tusks, in the house of a man rich and very powerful,

for a wedding, or a festival, or a communal dinner.

You have been present in your time at the slaughter of many

men, killed singly, or in the strong encounters of battle;

but beyond all others you would have been sorry at heart

for this scene, how we lay sprawled by the mixing bowl and the loaded

tables, all over the palace, and the whole floor was steaming

with blood; and most pitiful was the voice I heard of Priam's

daughter Kassandra, killed by treacherous Klytaimestra

over me; but I lifted my hands and with them beat on

the ground as I died upon the sword, but the sluttish woman

turned away from me and was so hard that her hands would not

press shut my eyes and mouth though I was going to Hades'.

So there is nothing more deadly or more vile than a woman

who stores her mind with acts that are of such sort, as this one

did when she thought of this act of dishonor, and plotted

the murder of her lawful husband. See, I had been thinking

that I would be welcome to my children and thralls of my household

when I came home, but she with thoughts surpassingly grisly

splashed the shame on herself and the rest of her sex, on women

still to come, even on the one whose acts are virtuous."

* Agamemnon is understandably bitter against women and considers all of them treacherous. Oh, except for Penelope, whom he praises for her loyalty. (Nice save.) Even so, he cautions Odysseus:

"So by this, do not be too easy even with your wife,

nor give her an entire account of all you are sure of.

Tell her part of it, but let the rest be hidden in silence.”

Urging him:

“And put away in your heart this other thing that I tell you.

When you bring your ship in to your own dear country, do it

secretly, not in the open. There is no trusting in women.”

* Agamemnon tries to ask about his son’s fate, but Odysseus refuse to speculate, because apparently it’s suddenly “bad to babble emptily."
* Then appear the spirits of Achilleus, Patroklos, Antilochos, and Telamonian Aias, some of Odysseus's buddies from the Trojan war.
* Odysseus praises Achilleus for having earned so much honor and glory in his life; surely his death is like, the greatest death ever (a.k.a. the all-time *kleos* high score).
* Nope. Actually, Achilleus says, being dead sucks. He'd rather “follow the plow as thrall to another/man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on,/than be a king over all the perished dead.” Wise words.
* He then asks Odysseus about his son, Neoptolemos; Odysseus responds with what he knows of the lad's brilliance (an excellent speaker, second only to Odysseus, obviously) and luck in battle.
* Then Odysseus pleads with Telamonian Aias to forget their earlier quarrel in Troy over Achilleus's arms.
  + [Mythological Context Lesson: back at Troy, Odysseus and Aias competed for the arms of Achilleus, who had been killed, and therefore didn't need his weapons anymore. The arms were supposed to go to the bravest man, but the Greeks couldn't bring themselves to make a decision since they figured whoever lost would leave the war in a huff. Since they couldn't afford to lose either of these great heroes, they let the Trojan captives decide. The Trojans picked Odysseus, and the enraged Aias killed himself. Sore loser.]
* Some salt is so strong that even Odysseus’ “words of conciliation” won’t fix it:

"Aias, son of stately Telamon, could you then never

even in death forget your anger against me, because of

that cursed armor? The gods made it to pain the Achaians,

so great a bulwark were you, who were lost to them. We Achaians

grieved for your death as incessantly as for Achilleus

the son of Peleus at his death, and there is no other

to blame, but Zeus; he, in his terrible hate for the army

of Danaan [Greek] spearmen, visited this destruction upon you.

Come nearer, my lord, so you can hear what I say and listen

to my story; suppress your anger and lordly spirit."

'So I spoke. He gave no answer, but went off after

the other souls of the perished dead men, into the darkness.

* Before he goes, Odysseus also sees Minos, Orion, Tityos, Tantalos, and Sisyphos. These are all figures of Greek myth receiving external punishment in the pits of Tartarus; if you're interested in the specifics (obviously you are), you should turn to Google. While you’re at it, you can look up my favorite ancient Greek vase painting, “The Suicide of Ajax” (a depiction of the myth mentioned above) by my favorite ancient Greek vase painter, Exekias. Seriously, nothing beats his v-shaped composition.
* And lastly, he runs into an old friend (of yours, as you should recognize this passage), “powerful Herakles,” who casually reminds him that he’s not the first mortal to visit the underworld:

'After him I was aware of powerful Herakles;

his image, that is, but he himself among the immortal

gods enjoys their festivals, married to sweet-stepping

Hebe, child-of great Zeus and Hera of the golden sandals.

All around him was a clamor of the dead as of birds scattering

scared in every direction; but he came on, like dark night,

holding his bow bare with an arrow laid on the bowstring,

and forever looking, as one who shot, with terrible glances.

There was a terrible belt crossed over his chest, and a golden

baldrick, with marvelous works of art that figured upon it,

bears, and lions with glaring eyes, and boars of the forests,

the battles and the quarrels, the murders and the manslaughters.

May he who artfully designed them, and artfully put them

upon that baldrick, never again do any designing.

He recognized me at once as soon as his eyes had seen me,

and full of lamentation he spoke to me in winged words:

"Son of Laertes and seed of Zeus, resourceful Odysseus,

unhappy man, are you too leading some wretched destiny

such as I too pursued when I went still in the sunlight?

For I was son of Kronian Zeus, but I had an endless·

spell of misery. I was made bondman to one who was far worse

than I, and he loaded my difficult labors on me. One time

he sent me here to fetch the dog back, and thought there could be

no other labor to be devised more difficult than that

one, but I brought the dog up and led him from the realm of Hades,

and Hermes saw me on my way, with Pallas Athene,"

* Herakles wanders back into the realm of Hades and all the shades come crowding in “with inhuman clamor” to drink the blood. Odysseus freaks out (as if saying that “green fear took hold of [him]” makes it sound any manlier) and runs back to his ship.
* Everyone leaves the Underworld a little bit wiser and with a few fewer sacrificial animals. Win-win-win.

And without further ado, we proudly present book XII: