

BOOK SEVEN

Odysseus at the Court of Alcinous in Phaeacia

[Nausicaa reaches the palace; Odysseus sets out for the city and meets Athena on the way, disguised as a young girl; she leads him to the palace; Odysseus admires Alcinous' palace and the nearby orchard; Odysseus enters the palace and talks to Arete, the queen; the Phaeacians offer Odysseus a meal; Odysseus converses with Arete and Alcinous, telling them of his voyage from Ogygia and his meeting with Nausicaa; Alcinous offers to help Odysseus get home; servants prepare a bed for him, and he goes to sleep out in the portico.]

So lord Odysseus, who had endured so much, prayed there,
while two strong mules took the girl into the city.
Once she reached her father's splendid palace,
she halted at the outer gates, while her brothers,
godlike men, crowded round her. They unhitched the mules,
then brought the clothes inside. The girl went to her room.
There her old chambermaid lit a fire for her—
Eurymedusa, an old woman from Apeire.
Curved ships had carried her from there some years ago,
[10] when she'd been chosen as a prize for Alcinous,
because he was the king of all Phaeacians
and people listened to him as if he were a god.
She'd raised white-armed Nausicaa in the palace.
Now she lit the fire and set food out in the room.

Then Odysseus got up and set off for the city.
Athena took good care to veil him in thick mist,
so no bold Phaeacian who ran into him
would cast verbal taunts and ask him who he was.
As he was about to enter the fine city,
[20] bright-eyed Athena met him—she was disguised
as a young girl carrying a pitcher. When she stopped
in front of him, noble Odysseus said to her:

“My child, could you direct me to the home
of the man called Alcinous. He's the king
of people here, and I'm a foreigner,

coming from a distant country far away.
I've suffered a great deal, and I don't know
any of the men who own this city
or the farmland."

Bright-eyed Athena
then said in reply:

- [30] "Honoured stranger,
in that case I'll show you the very house
you've just questioned me about. It's nearby,
close to my good father's home. But go quietly,
and I will lead the way. You must not look
at people or ask anyone a question.
The people here are not fond of strangers—
they don't extend a friendly welcome
to those from other lands, but put their trust
in their swift ships to carry them across
[40] vast gulfs of the sea, something Poseidon
has permitted them, for their ships move fast,
as swift as birds in flight or as a thought."

That said, Pallas Athena led off rapidly—
he followed closely in the goddess' footsteps.
The Phaeacians, so celebrated for their ships,
did not see him as he moved across the city
in their midst. Athena, fair-haired fearful goddess,
would not permit that. Her heart cared about him—
that's why she cast around him an amazing mist.

- [50] Odysseus was astonished by the harbours
and well-tended ships, by the meeting places,
where those heroes gathered, by the lofty walls,
topped with palisades—it was a marvellous sight.
When they reached the splendid palace of the king,
bright-eyed Athena was the first to speak:

"Honoured stranger,

here is the house you asked me to point out.
You'll find Zeus-fostered kings in there feasting.
But go inside, and do not be afraid.
In a man, boldness is always better
[60] at getting good results, even in the case
where he's a stranger from another land.
Inside the palace, you'll first greet the queen.
Her name is Arete, born of the same line
as Alcinous, the king. Originally,
Nausithous was born to the Earthshaker,
Poseidon, and to Periboea,
loveliest of women, youngest daughter
to great-hearted Eurymedon, once king
of the rebellious Giants. But he destroyed
[70] his reckless people and was killed himself.
Poseidon then had sex with Periboea,
who bore him a son, courageous Nausithous,
who ruled Phaeacians and who had two sons,
Rhexenor and Alcinous. Rhexenor,
a married man but with no sons, was killed
by Apollo's silver bow in his own home.
He left an only daughter, Arete.
Alcinous made her his wife and honoured her
beyond all other women on this earth,
[80] all the wives who now control their homes
under the direction of their husbands.
That's how much she is honoured from the heart
by her dear children, by Alcinous himself,
and by the people, too, who look on her
as if she were a goddess, when they greet her
as she walks through town. She does not lack
a fine intelligence, and thus for women
to whom she's well disposed she can resolve
disputes they go through with their husbands.
[90] So if you win her favour, there's a hope
you'll see your friends and make that journey back
to your own high-roofed home and native land."

Bright-eyed Athena finished. Then she went away,
across the restless sea, leaving lovely Scheria.
She came to Marathon and the wide streets of Athens
and entered the well-built palace of Erectheus.

Odysseus moved towards Alcinous's splendid home.
He stood there, his heart thinking over many things
before he came up to the threshold made of bronze.

- [100] Above the high-vaulted home of brave Alcinous
there was a radiance, as if from sun or moon.
Bronze walls extended out beyond the threshold
in various directions to the inner rooms,
which had a blue enamel cornice. Golden doors
blocked the way into the well-constructed palace.
The bronze threshold had silver doorposts set inside
and a silver lintel. The handles were of gold.
On both sides of the door stood gold and silver dogs,
immortal creatures who would never age,
[110] created by Hephaestus' matchless artistry,
to guard the palace of great-hearted Alcinous.
On either side within, seats were set against the wall,
from the doorway right through to the inner room,
with soft rugs covering them, elegantly woven
women's handiwork. On these, Phaeacian leaders
would sit to eat and drink from their abundant stores.
Gold statues of young men stood on sturdy pedestals,
holding torches in their hands to give light at night
for people feasting in the hall. And Alcinous
[120] had fifty women servants in the palace:
some working at the millstone ground up yellow grain,
some wove fabric, or sitting down, twisted yarn,
hands fluttering like leaves on a tall poplar tree,
while olive oil dripped down.¹ Just as Phaeacian men
have more skill than anyone at sailing a fast ship
across the sea, so their women have great skill
at working on the loom, for Athena gave them,

above all others, a knowledge of fine handiwork
and keen intelligence. Beyond the courtyard,
[130] but near the door, stands an enormous orchard,
four land measures, with a hedge on either side.
Huge and richly laden trees grow there—pomegranates,
pears, and apple trees with shining fruit, sweet figs,
and fertile olive trees. And in this orchard
no fruit gets destroyed or dies in winter time
or during summer. It lasts all year long. West Wind,
as he blows in, always brings some fruits to life
and ripens others—pear growing above pear,
apple upon apple, grapes in cluster after cluster,
[140] and fig after fig. And inside that orchard,
Alcinous has a fertile vineyard planted, too.
In part of it, a sunny patch of level ground,
grapes are drying in the sun. In another place
men are gathering up and treading other grapes.
In front the unripe grapes are shedding blossoms,
while others change into a purple colour.
Beside the final row of vines there are trim beds
with every kind of plant growing all year round.
There are two springs inside—one sends its water
[150] through all the garden, and on the opposite side
the other runs below the threshold of the yard,
where people of the town collect their water,
towards the high-roofed palace. These glorious things
were gifts from the gods to the home of Alcinous.
Lord Odysseus, who had endured so much, stood there
and gazed around. When his heart had marvelled at it all,
he moved fast across the threshold into the house.
There he found Phaeacian counsellors and leaders
making libations to honour keen-eyed Hermes,
[160] killer of Argus. They poured him a final tribute
whenever they intended to retire to bed.
Long-suffering lord Odysseus, still enclosed in mist,
the thick covering poured around him by Athena,
went through the hall until he came to Arete

and Alcinous, the king. With his arms Odysseus
embraced the knees of Arete, and at that moment
the miraculous mist dissolved away from him.
The people in the palace were all silent,
as they gazed upon the man, struck with wonder
[170] at the sight. Odysseus then made this entreaty:

“Arete, daughter of godlike Rhexenor,
I’ve come to you and to your husband here,
to your knees, in supplication to you—
a man who’s experienced so much distress—
and to those feasting here. May gods grant them
happiness in life, and may they each pass on
riches in their homes to all their children,
and noble honours given by the people.
Please rouse yourself to help me return home,
[180] to get back quickly to my native land.
I’ve been suffering trouble for a long time
so far away from friends.”

Odysseus finished.

Then he sat down by the fire, right on the ashes
inside the hearth. All the people there were silent.
No one said a word. Then, finally, an old man,
lord Echeneus, a Phaeacian elder statesman,
a skillful speaker full of ancient wisdom,
with their common good in mind, spoke up and said:

“Alcinous, it is not at all appropriate
[190] or to our credit that this stranger sits
on the ground at our hearth, in the ashes.
The people here are holding themselves back,
waiting for your word. Come, tell the stranger
to get up. Then invite the man to sit
on a silver-studded chair. Tell the heralds
to mix wine, so we may make an offering
to thunder-loving Zeus, who accompanies

all pious suppliants. And tell the steward
to provide this stranger with a dinner
from what she has in store.”

[200] When he heard these words,
brave and kingly Alcinous stretched out his hand,
reached for Odysseus, that wise and crafty man,
raised him from the hearth, and invited him to sit
in a shining chair, after he had asked his son,
handsome Laodamas, the son he loved the most,
who sat beside him, to stand up and offer it.
An attendant carried in a fine gold pitcher,
then poured some water out into a silver basin,
so he could wash his hands. A polished table
[210] was set up beside him, and the housekeeper,
a well-respected female servant, brought in food,
set it in front of him, with many tasty treats
offered freely from her store. And so Odysseus,
that noble, long-suffering man, could eat and drink.
Then royal Alcinous spoke to his herald:

“Pontonous, prepare wine in the mixing bowl,
then serve it to all people in the hall,
so we may pour libations out to Zeus,
who loves lightning, for he accompanies
all pious suppliants.”

[220] Once Alcinous said this,
Pontonous prepared the honeyed wine, and then poured
the first drops for libation into every cup.
When they’d made their offering and drunk their fill of wine,
Alcinous then addressed the gathering and said:

“You Phaeacians counsellors and leaders,
pay attention to me so I can say
what the heart here in my chest commands.
Now that you have all finished eating,

- return back to your homes and get some rest.
- [230] In the morning we'll summon an assembly
with more elders, entertain this stranger
here in our home, and also sacrifice
choice offerings to the gods. Then after that,
we'll think about how we can send him off,
so that this stranger, with us escorting him
and without further pain or effort, may reach
his native land, no matter how far distant.
Meanwhile he'll not suffer harm or trouble,
not before he sets foot on his own land.
- [240] After that he'll undergo all those things
Destiny and the dreaded spinning Fates
spun in the thread for him when he was born,
when his mother gave him birth.² However,
if he's a deathless one come down from heaven,
then gods are planning something different.
Up to now, they've always shown themselves to us
in their true form, when we offer up to them
a splendid sacrifice. They dine with us,
sitting in the very chairs we also use.
- [250] If someone travelling all by himself
meets them, they don't hide their true identity,
because we are close relatives of theirs,
like Cyclopes and the wild tribes of Giants."³

Resourceful Odysseus then answered Alcinous:

- "Alcinous, you should not concern yourself
about what you've just said—for I'm not like
the immortal gods who hold wide heaven,
not in my form or shape. I'm like mortal men.
If, among human beings, you know of some
- [260] who bear a really heavy weight of trouble,
I might compare myself with them for grief.
Indeed, I could recount a longer story—
all those hardships I have had to suffer

from the gods. But let me eat my dinner,
though I'm in great distress. For there's nothing
more shameless than a wretched stomach,
which commands a man to think about its needs,
even if he's really sad or troubles
weigh down his heart, just the way my spirit
[270] is now full of sorrow, yet my belly
is always telling me to eat and drink,
forgetting everything I've had to bear,
and ordering me to stuff myself with food.
But when Dawn appears, you should stir yourselves
so you can set me in my misery
back on my native soil, for all I've suffered.
If I can see my goods again, my slaves,
my large and high-roofed home, then let life end."

Once Odysseus finished, they all approved his words,
[280] and, because he'd spoken well and to the point,
they ordered that their guest should be sent on his way.
Then, after they had poured libations and had drunk
to their heart's content, each of them returned back home
to get some rest. In the hall, lord Odysseus was left
sitting by Arete and godlike Alcinous.
Servants cleared away the remnants of the feast.
White-armed Arete spoke first, for when she saw
his cloak and tunic, she recognized his lovely clothes
as ones made by her servant women and herself.
So she spoke to him—her words had wings:

[290] "Stranger,
first of all, I'll ask you this: Who are you?
What people do you come from? And those clothes—
who gave them to you? Did you not tell us
you came here wandering across the sea?"

Resourceful Odysseus then answered her and said:

- “O queen, it would be hard to tell the story
of my miseries from start to finish—
heavenly gods have given me so many.
But in answer to what you have asked me
- [300] I can tell you this. There is an island
called Ogygia far off in the sea.
A cunning, fearful goddess lives there,
fair-haired Calypso, Atlas’ daughter.
None of the gods associates with her,
nor any mortal men. But one of the gods
led me in my misfortune to her hearth.
I was alone, for Zeus had struck my ship
with his bright lightning bolt and shattered it,
right in the middle of the wine-dark sea.
- [310] All my other fine companions perished there,
but I clung to the keel of my curved ship
and drifted for nine days. The tenth black night,
gods brought me to Ogygia, the island
where that fair-haired, fearful goddess lives—
I mean Calypso. She received me kindly,
loved and fed me. She promised she’d make me
ageless and immortal for eternity.
But she never won the heart here in my chest.
I stayed there seven years, the entire time,
- [320] always soaking the immortal clothing
Calypso gave me with my constant tears.
But, as the circling years kept moving past me,
the eighth year came. Then she commanded me,
with her encouragement, to sail back home—
either because she’d got some news from Zeus,
or else her mind had changed. She sent me off
on a well-lashed raft, and she provided
many things—food and sweet wine. She dressed me
in immortal clothing, and sent a wind,
- [330] a warm and gentle breeze. Seventeen days
I sailed across the sea. On the eighteenth
the shadowy mountains of your country

came in sight, and my fond heart was happy.
But I had no luck—I still had to learn
great torments, which the Shaker of the Earth,
Poseidon, sent at me. He stirred up winds
against me, blocked my route, and shook the sea
in an amazing way. The surging waves
did not allow the raft to carry me,
[340] for all my heavy groaning, since that storm
smashed my raft to pieces. But I swam on,
cutting across the gulf, until wind and wave
carried me ahead and left me on your shore.
If I'd tried to land there, the pounding surf
would have tossed me up onshore, throwing me
against huge rocks in a perilous place.
So I moved back again, kept on swimming,
until I reached a river, which I thought
the best place I could land—it was free of rocks,
[350] and there was shelter from the wind, as well.
I staggered out and fell down on the beach,
gasping for breath. Immortal night arrived.
So I climbed up from that heaven-fed river,
gathered leaves around me in the bushes,
and fell asleep. Some god poured over me
an endless sleep, so there among the leaves,
my fond exhausted heart slept through the night,
past daybreak and noon—not until the sun
was in decline did that sweet sleep release me.
[360] Then I observed your daughter's servants
playing on the shore, and she was with them,
looking like a goddess. I entreated her,
and she revealed no lack of noble sense,
the sort you would not hope to come across
in one so young at a first encounter—
young people always act so thoughtlessly.
She gave me lots of food and gleaming wine,
bathed me in the river, and gave me clothes.
Though I'm in pain, I've told the truth in this."

Alcinous then answered him and said:

[370] “Stranger,
my child was truly negligent this time.
She did not bring you with her servants
here to our home, although it was to her
that you first made your plea.”

Resourceful Odysseus
then said in answer to the king:

“My lord,
in this you must not criticize your daughter,
I beg you, for she is quite innocent.
She did indeed tell me to follow her
with her attendants, but I was unwilling,
[380] afraid and shamed, in case, when you saw us,
you would be angry, for on this earth
groups of men are quick to grow enraged.”

Alcinous then said in answer to Odysseus:

“Stranger,
the heart here in my chest is not like that.
It does not get incensed without a reason.
It’s better in all things to show restraint.
By Father Zeus, Athena, and Apollo,
I wish, given the kind of man you are,
with a mind that thinks so like my own,
[390] you’d marry my child and become my son,
and then stay here. I’d give you a home
and wealth, as well, if you chose to remain.
But no Phaeacian will detain you here,
against your will. No. May that never be
the will of Father Zeus. I’ll arrange a time,
so you can know for certain when you’re leaving—

let it be tomorrow. While you lie asleep,
they'll carry you across the tranquil sea,
until you reach your native land and home,
[400] or whatever place you wish, even though
it may take them far past Euboea.
Some of our people who saw that island
when they carried fair-haired Rhadamanthus
to visit Tityus, the son of Gaea,
say it is the most remote of places.⁴
They went there and, without any effort,
made the journey home in the same day.
So you, too, will discover for yourself
I have the finest ships and young men, too,
[410] who churn salt water with their oar blades."

Alcinous finished. Long-suffering lord Odysseus
was pleased and spoke out in prayer, saying:

"Father Zeus,
may Alcinous complete all he has said.
Then on this grain-giving earth his fame
will never be extinguished, and I
will reach my native land."

As they conversed like this,
white-armed Arete commanded her attendants
to set a bed outside, under the portico,
placing fine purple blankets on the top,
[420] with coverlets spread over them, and then,
over those some woolly cloaks to keep him warm.
The servants left the chamber, torches in their hands.
Once they had worked fast to arrange the well-made bed,
they came to call Odysseus, saying:

"Stranger,
come now and rest. Your bed is ready."

When they said this, he welcomed thoughts of going to sleep.
So long-suffering lord Odysseus lay down there,
on the corded bed, beneath the echoing portico.
But Alcinous rested in an inner chamber
[430] in the high-roofed house—his lady wife lay there, as well,
stretched out beside him, sharing their marriage bed.