

## BOOK SIX Odysseus and Nausicaa

[Athena visits Nausicaa while she is sleeping in the palace and tells her to take the washing to the river; Nausicaa asks her father to provide a wagon and mules; Nausicaa goes with her attendants to the river, washes the clothes, and wakes up Odysseus; Odysseus emerges naked and talks to Nausicaa; she agrees to help him; Odysseus bathes, dresses, and eats; they set off for the city and reach the outskirts; Odysseus prays to Athena.]

While much-enduring lord Odysseus slept there,  
overcome with weariness and sleep, Athena  
went to the land of the Phaeacians, to their city.  
Many years ago these people used to live  
in wide Hypereia, close to the Cyclopes,  
proud arrogant men and much more powerful,  
who kept on robbing them. So god-like Nausithous  
had taken them away and led them off to settle  
in Scheria, far from any men who have to work  
[10] to earn their daily bread. He'd had them build a wall  
around the city, put up homes, raise temples  
to the gods, and portion out the land for farming.  
But some time past his fate had struck him and he'd gone  
down to the house of Hades. Now Alcinous was king,  
a man to whom the gods had granted wisdom.  
Athena, bright-eyed goddess, went to this man's home,  
to arrange a journey home for brave Odysseus.  
She moved into a wonderfully furnished room  
where a young girl slept, one like immortal goddesses  
[20] in form and loveliness. She was Nausicaa,  
daughter of great-hearted Alcinous. Close by her,  
beside each door post, her two attendants slept,  
girls whose beauty had been given by the Graces.<sup>1</sup>  
The shining doors were closed. Like a gust of wind,  
Athena slipped over to the young girl's bedside,  
stood there above her head, and then spoke to her.  
Her appearance changed to look like Dymas' daughter—  
he was a man famous for the ships he owned.

His daughter was the same age as Nausicaa,  
[30] whose heart was well disposed to her. In that form,  
bright-eyed Athena spoke out and said:

“Nausicaa,  
how did your mother bear a girl so careless?  
Your splendid clothes are lying here uncared for.  
And your wedding day is not so far away,  
when you must dress up in expensive robes  
and give them to your wedding escort, too.  
You know it’s things like these that help to make  
a noble reputation among men  
and please your honoured mother and father.  
[40] Come, at daybreak let’s wash out the clothing.  
I’ll go as well to help you, so with all speed  
you can prepare yourself—it won’t be long  
before you, too, are a married woman.  
You’ve already got men from this country  
asking for your hand in marriage, the finest  
in all Phaeacia, from whom you yourself  
derive your lineage. So come on now,  
ask your noble father to provide you,  
this morning early, a wagon and some mules,  
[50] so you can carry the bright coverlets,  
the robes and sashes. That would be better  
than going on foot, because the washing tubs  
stand some distance from the town.”

With these words,  
bright-eyed Athena went back to Olympus,  
where, men say, gods’ home endures forever,  
undisturbed by winds and never drenched with rain  
or covered by the snow—instead high overhead  
the air is always bright. There blessed gods are happy  
every day. That’s where the bright-eyed goddess went  
[60] once she’d finished speaking to Nausicaa.  
As soon as Dawn on her splendid throne arrived

and woke fair-robed Nausicaa, she was curious  
about her dream. So she went through the house  
to tell her dear father and her mother. She found them  
in the house—her mother sitting by the hearth  
with her servant women, spinning purple yarn.  
She came across her father as he was going out  
to meet some well-known kings in an assembly—  
he'd been summoned by Phaeacian noblemen.

[70] Nausicaa went to stand close by her father  
and then spoke to him:

“Dear father, can you prepare  
a high wagon with sturdy wheels for me,  
so I can carry my fine clothing out  
and wash it in the river? It's lying here  
all dirty. And it's appropriate for you  
to wear fresh garments on your person  
when you're with our leading men in council.  
You have five dear sons living in your home—  
two are married, but three are now young men

[80] still unattached, and they always require  
fresh-washed clothing when they go out dancing.  
All these things I have to think about.”

Nausicaa said these words because she felt ashamed  
to remind her father of her own happy thoughts  
of getting married. But he understood all that  
and answered, saying:

“I have no objection,  
my child, to providing mules for you,  
or any other things. Go on your way.  
Slaves will get a four-wheeled wagon ready  
with a high box framed on top.”

[90] Once he'd said this,  
he called out to his slaves, and they did what he ordered.  
They prepared a smooth-running wagon made for mules,

led up the animals, and then yoked them to it.  
Nausicaa brought her fine clothing from her room.  
She placed it in the polished wagon bed. Her mother  
loaded on a box full of all sorts of tasty food.  
She put in delicacies, too, and poured some wine  
into a goat skin. The girl climbed on the wagon.  
Her mother also gave her some smooth olive oil  
[100] in a golden flask, so she and her attendants  
could use it when they bathed. Then Nausicaa  
took the bright reins and whip and lashed the mules ahead.  
With a clatter of hooves, the mules moved quickly off,  
carrying clothing and the girl, not by herself,  
for her attendants went with her as well.  
When they reached the stream of the fair-flowing river,  
where the washing tubs were always standing ready,  
full of fresh water flowing up from underneath  
and spilling over, enough to clean one's clothing,  
[110] even garments really soiled, they took the mules  
out of their wagon harnesses, then drove them  
along the banks beside the swirling river,  
to let them graze on clover sweet as honey.  
The girls picked up the clothing from the wagon,  
carried it in their arms down to the murky water,  
and trampled it inside the washing trenches,  
each one trying to work more quickly than the others.  
Once they'd washed the clothes and cleaned off all the stains,  
they laid the garments out in rows along the sea shore,  
[120] right where the waves which beat upon the coast  
had washed the pebbles clean. Once they had bathed themselves  
and rubbed their bodies well with oil, they ate a meal  
beside the river mouth, waiting for the clothes to dry  
in the sun's warm rays. When they'd enjoyed their food,  
the girl and her attendants threw their head scarves off  
to play catch with a ball, and white-armed Nausicaa  
led them in song. Just as when archer Artemis  
moves across the mountains, along lofty ridges  
of Erymanthus or Taygetus, full of joy,

[130] as she pursues wild boars and swiftly running deer,  
with nymphs attending on her, daughters of Zeus,  
who bears the aegis, taking pleasure in the hunt,  
and Leto's heart rejoices, while Artemis  
holds her head and eyebrows high above them all,  
so recognizing her is easy, though all of them  
are beautiful—that's how that unmarried girl  
stood out then from her attendants.

But when the girl  
was going to harness up the mules and start to fold  
the splendid clothes to make the journey homeward,  
[140] Athena, bright-eyed goddess, thought of something else,  
so that Odysseus might wake up and then could see  
the lovely girl, who would conduct him to the city  
of Phaeacian men. So when the princess threw the ball  
at one of those attendants with her, she missed the girl  
and tossed it in the deep and swirling river.

They gave a piercing cry which woke up lord Odysseus.  
So he sat up, thinking in his heart and mind:  
“Here's trouble! In this country I have reached,  
what are the people like? Are they violent

[150] and wild, without a sense of justice?  
Or are they kind to strangers? In their minds  
do they fear the gods? A young woman's shout  
rang out around me—nymphs who live along  
steep mountain peaks and by the river springs  
and grassy meadows. Could I somehow be  
near men with human speech? Come on then,  
I'm going to try to find out for myself.”

With these words, lord Odysseus crept out from the thicket.  
With his strong hands, he broke off from thick bushes  
[160] a leafy branch to hold across his body and conceal  
his sexual organs. He emerged, moving just like  
a mountain lion which relies on its own strength—  
though hammered by the rain and wind, it creeps ahead,  
its two eyes burning, coming in among the herd

of sheep or cattle, or stalking a wild deer—  
his belly tells him to move in against the flocks,  
even within a well-built farm. That's how Odysseus  
was coming out to meet those fair-haired girls,  
though he was stark naked. He was in great distress,  
[170] but, caked with brine, he was a fearful sight to them,  
and they ran off in fear and crouched down here and there  
among the jutting dunes of sand. The only one  
to stand her ground was Alcinous' daughter.  
For Athena had instilled her heart with courage  
and taken from her arms and legs all sense of fear.  
So she stood there facing up to him. Odysseus  
wondered whether he should grasp the lovely girl  
around her knees and plead his case or keep his distance,  
remaining where he was, and with gentle words  
[180] entreat her to inform him where the city was  
and provide him clothing. As he thought about it,  
it seem to him a better plan to stand apart  
and appeal to her with words of reassurance,  
in case her heart grew angry when he clasped her knee.  
So he quickly used his cunning and spoke to her  
with soothing language:

“O divine queen,  
I come here as a suppliant to you.  
Are you a goddess or a mortal being?  
If you're one of the gods who hold wide heaven,  
[190] then I think you most resemble Artemis,  
daughter of great Zeus, in your loveliness,  
your stature, and your shape. If you're human,  
one of those mortals living on the earth,  
your father and noble mother are thrice-blest,  
and thrice-blest your brothers, too. In their hearts  
they must glow with pleasure for you always,  
when they see a child like you moving up  
into the dance. But the happiest heart,  
more so than all the rest, belongs to him

[200] who with his wedding gifts will lead you home.

These eyes of mine have never gazed upon  
anyone like you—either man or woman.

As I observe you, I'm gripped with wonder.

In Delos once I saw something like this—  
a youthful palm-tree shoot growing up  
beside Apollo's altar. I'd gone there,  
with many others in my company,  
on the trip where Fate had planned for me  
so many troubles. But when I saw that,

[210] my heart looked on a long time quite astonished—

I'd never noticed such a lovely tree  
springing from the earth. And, lady, that's how  
I am amazed at you, lost in wonder,  
and am very much afraid to clasp your knee.

But great distress has overtaken me.

Yesterday, my twentieth day afloat,

I escaped the wine-dark sea. Before that,  
waves and swift-driving storm winds carried me  
from Ogygia island. And now a god

[220] has tossed me on shore here, so that somehow

I'll suffer trouble in this place as well.

For I don't think my problems will end now.

Before that day, there are still many more  
the gods will bring about. But, divine queen,  
have pity. You're the first one I've approached,  
after going through so much grief. I don't know  
any other people, none of those who hold  
the city and its land. Show me the town.

Give me some rag to throw around myself,

[230] perhaps some wrapping you had for the clothes  
when you came here. As for you, may gods grant  
all your heart desires—may they give you  
a husband, home, and mutual harmony,  
a noble gift—for there is nothing better  
or a stronger bond than when man and wife  
live in a home sharing each other's thoughts.

That brings such pain upon their enemies  
and such delight to those who wish them well.  
They know that themselves, more so than anyone.”

[240] White-armed Nausicaa then answered him and said:

“Stranger, you don’t seem to be a wicked man,  
or foolish. Olympian Zeus himself  
gives happiness to bad and worthy men,  
each one receiving just what Zeus desires.  
So he has given you your share, I think.  
Nonetheless, you still must bear your lot.  
But now you’ve reached our land and city,  
you’ll not lack clothes or any other thing  
we owe a hard-pressed suppliant we meet.

[250] I’ll show the town to you, and I’ll tell you  
what our country’s called—the Phaeacians  
own this city and this land. As for me,  
I am the daughter of brave Alcinous—  
Phaeacian power and strength depend on him.”  
Nausicaa finished speaking. Then she called out  
to her fair-haired attendants:

“Stand up, you girls,  
Have you run off because you’ve seen a man?  
Surely you don’t think he’s an enemy?  
For there’s no man now alive or yet to be

[260] who’ll reach this land of the Phaeacians  
bringing war, because gods truly love us,  
and we live far off in the surging sea,  
the most remote of people. Other men  
never interact with us. No. So this man  
is some poor wanderer who’s just come here.  
We must look after him, for every stranger,  
every beggar, comes from Zeus, and any gift,  
even something small, is to be cherished.  
So, my girls, give this stranger food and drink.

[270] Then bathe him in the river, in a place  
where there’s some shelter from the wind.”



Nausicaa finished. They stood up and called out to one another. Then they took Odysseus aside, to a sheltered spot, following what Nausicaa, daughter of great-hearted Alcinous, had ordered. They set out clothing for him, a cloak and tunic, and gave him the gold flask full of smooth olive oil. They told him to bathe there in the flowing river, but lord Odysseus said to the attendants:

- [280] “Would you young ladies move some distance off, so I can wash salt water from my shoulders by myself and then rub on the olive oil. It’s a long time since oil was on my skin. I won’t wash myself in front of you, for I’m ashamed to stand stark naked in the presence of such fair-haired girls.” Once he’d said this, the two attendants moved away and told Nausicaa. Then lord Odysseus washed his body in the river, rinsing off the salt
- [290] covering his broad shoulders and his back, and wiping the encrusted brine out of his hair. When he’d washed himself all over and rubbed on oil, he put on clothes the unmarried girl had given him. Then Athena, Zeus’s daughter, made him appear taller and stronger, and on his head she curled his hair—it flowed up like a flowering hyacinth. Just as a skilful workman sets a layer of gold on top of silver, a craftsman who has been taught all sorts of arts by Athena and Hephaestus,
- [300] and what he creates is truly beautiful, that’s how the goddess graced his head and shoulders. Then Odysseus went to sit some distance off, beside the shore, glowing with charm and beauty. Nausicaa gazed at him in admiration, then spoke to her fair-haired attendants, saying: “Listen to me, my white-armed followers—I have something to say. This man here

has not come among god-like Phaeacians  
against the will of those immortals  
[310] who possess Olympus. Previously I thought  
he was crude and rough, but now he seems  
like the gods who occupy wide heaven.  
Would a man like that could be my husband,  
living here and happy to remain. But come,  
my girls, offer the stranger food and drink.”  
When Nausicaa had spoken, they heard her words  
and quickly did what they’d been told. They set out  
food and drink before resourceful lord Odysseus.  
He ate and drank voraciously—many days had passed  
[320] since he’d last tasted food. Then white-armed Nausicaa  
thought of something else. She folded up the clothes,  
put them in the handsome wagon, harnessed up  
the strong-hooved mules, and climbed up by herself.  
She called out to Odysseus, then spoke to him:  
“Get up now, stranger, and go to the city.  
I’ll take you to my wise father’s house,  
where, I tell you, you will get to meet  
all the finest of Phaeacians. You seem  
to me to have good sense, so act as follows—  
[330] while we are moving through the countryside  
past men’s farms, walk fast with my attendants  
behind the mules and wagon. I’ll lead the way.  
Then we’ll reach the city. A lofty wall  
runs round it, and there are lovely harbours  
on both sides—each has a narrow entrance,  
with curving boats drawn up along the road,  
since each man has a place for his own ship.  
The assembly ground stands there as well,  
around the splendid temple to Poseidon,  
[340] built with huge stones set deep within the earth.  
Here the people tend to their black ships,  
busy with the gear—fixing ropes and sails  
and shaping tapered oars. The Phaeacians  
have no use for bow or quiver, but for masts,

boat oars, and well-trimmed ships, in which with joy  
they cross the grey salt sea. Their talk is crude,  
and that I would avoid, in case someone  
insults me later on—among the people  
there are really insolent men, and thus  
[350] one of the nastier types might well say,  
if he bumped into us:

‘Who’s the man  
who’s following Nausicaa? A stranger—  
he’s tall and handsome! Where did she find him?  
No doubt he’ll be her husband. She’s brought here  
some shipwrecked vagrant, a man whose people  
live far away, for no one dwells near us,  
or he’s some god come down from heaven,  
answering those prayers she’s always making.  
She’ll have him as her husband all her days.  
[360] It’s better that way, even if she went  
and found herself a man to marry  
from some other place—she has no respect  
for those Phaeacians, her own countrymen,  
the many noble men who’d marry her.’  
“That’s what they would say, and their remarks  
would injure me. But I would do the same  
to some other girl who acted just like that,  
who, while her father and her mother lived,  
against their wishes hung around with men  
[370] before the day she married one in public.  
So, stranger, pay attention to what I say,  
and with all speed you can get my father  
to arrange an escort for your journey home.  
You’ll come across a fine grove to Athena—  
it’s near the road, a clump of poplar trees.  
There’s a fountain, with meadows all around.  
My father has a fertile vineyard there,  
some land, as well, within shouting distance  
of the town. Sit down there, and wait a while,

- [380] until we move into the city and reach  
my father's house. When you think we've had time  
to reach my home, then go in the city  
of the Phaeacians and inquire about  
my father's house, great-hearted Alcinous.  
It's easy to pick out—an infant child  
could lead you to it. For Phaeacians homes  
are built in a style utterly unlike  
the palace of heroic Alcinous.  
Once inside the house and in the courtyard,  
[390] move through the great hall quickly till you reach  
my mother seated at the hearth, in the firelight,  
against a pillar, spinning purple yarn—  
a marvellous sight. Servants sit behind her.  
My father's chair is there by the same pillar,  
where, like a god, he sits and sips his wine.  
Move past him. Then with your arms embrace  
my mother's knees, if you desire to see  
the joyful day of your return come soon,  
even though your home is far away.  
[400] If her heart and mind are well-disposed to you,  
then there is hope you'll see your friends and reach  
your well-built house and your own native land."  
Saying this, Nausicaa cracked the shining whip  
and struck the mules. They quickly left the flowing river,  
moving briskly forward at a rapid pace.  
Using her judgment with the whip, she drove on  
so Odysseus and her servants could keep up on foot.  
Just at sunset, they reached the celebrated grove,  
sacred to Athena. Lord Odysseus sat down there  
[410] and made a quick prayer to great Zeus' daughter:  
"Hear me, child of aegis-bearing Zeus,  
unwearied goddess, listen to me now,  
for you did not respond to me back then,  
when I was being beaten down at sea  
and the great Earthshaker destroyed my raft.  
Grant that I arrive at the Phaeacians

as a friend, someone worthy of their pity.”  
So he prayed. And Pallas Athena heard him.  
But she did not reveal herself to him directly—  
[420] she feared her father’s brother, who was still furious,  
and would keep raging against godlike Odysseus  
until he finally reached his native land.