

The *Odyssey* of Homer

Book 6

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Book 6

Odysseus Meets Nausicaa

Reading 6

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This reading comes from the Cave's

The Best of Homer's Odyssey.

IN THIS WAY did much-enduring godlike Odysseus slumber there, worn out with sleep and trouble. Even so, Athena went to the land and city of the Phaeacians.

4-23 *Athena goes to the city to speak to Nausicaa, the beautiful daughter of Alcinous and Arete. Her father is the son of Nausithous, the man who led the Phaeacians to distant Scheria from the land of the Cyclopes—obnoxious men, proud and powerful, who had constantly plundered the Phaeacians. Athena enters into Nausicaa's bedchamber "like a breath of air" and appears to her in the form of her friend, the daughter of Dymas.*

24-35 Appearing like her, bright-eyed Athena said, "How did your mother give birth to such a careless one? Your splendid clothes lie there uncared for, even though your wedding day is near at hand when you'll need fine clothes for yourself and you'll want to furnish them to those who may accompany you. It is from such things that a noble reputation rises among humans, [30] and in them that a father and queenly mother rejoice and are glad. But let's go wash them when the light appears at the break of day. I will go with you as your helper so that you may quickly be ready—you won't be a maiden much longer! You're already being courted by all the best men of the Phaeacians in the land.

36-40 *Athena finishes by telling Nausicaa to have her father prepare mules and a wagon for her.*

41-46 Speaking in this manner, bright-eyed Athena departed for Olympus, where, they say, the abode of the gods stands firm, immovable forever. Neither is it shaken by wind, nor drenched with heavy rain, nor does snow fall there. But a clear sky spreads out cloudless like a great white sail, and the bright sun fills the sky. And there upon Olympus the blessed gods are delighted every day.

47-84 *When Nausicaa wakes up, she goes to her father Alcinous and asks him for a wagon to convey the clothes to the river and washing tanks. She's shy about mentioning the reason, the need for clean wedding garments, so she adds that she will wash her father's and brother's clothing as well. He grants her the wagon, which the slaves make ready, while her mother stores food and wine for a feast, and olive oil for bathing in a golden flask. Then, boarding the wagon with her handmaidens, she urges the mules on to the river.*

85-101 When they came to the beautiful river's streams, where the washing tanks were always full—for in abundance clear water flowed up from beneath to cleanse even the filthiest clothes—they unhitched the mules from the four-wheeled wagon and let them stray along the eddying stream [90] to nibble on the honey-sweet grass. And from the wagon they took the clothing in their arms and carried it into the deep water. There they stamped the laundry in the pits, vying with one another for speed.

Once they had washed and cleansed the clothing of all the stains, they spread it carefully in rows along the seashore just where the waves washed many small pebbles up on the dry beach. After bathing and anointing themselves richly with olive oil, they took their meal on the riverbank and waited for the clothes to dry in the light of the sun. When Nausicaa and her handmaids were satisfied with food, [100] they threw off their veils in order to play ball. And it was white-armed Nausicaa herself who was first in the dance.

102-110 *Dancing, the princess is like Artemis in beauty, standing out amid her handmaidens as Artemis does amid the wood nymphs.*

115-121 But when Nausicaa thought about turning toward home once again, and so about yoking the mules and folding up the beautiful clothes, then did the goddess, bright-eyed Athena, form a new plan. She would wake up Odysseus and have him see the sweet looking girl. Then she would lead him to the city of the Phaeacian men.

Just then the princess threw the ball to one of the handmaidens, but she missed her and instead threw it into a deep eddy. Seeing it fall, they shouted aloud. At this, godlike Odysseus awoke, sat up, and considered anxiously in his mind and spirit, "Ah me! To what land of mortals have I come? Are they violent and insolent men? Are they uncivilized and wild, without justice or the proper observance of custom? Or are they hospitable men, loving strangers? And do they themselves fear the gods in their minds?"

122-148 *Odysseus thinks the voices may be those of nymphs. Not knowing, he ventures from his resting place to take a look, breaking off a leafy branch to cover his bare genitals. Wary, the need of his belly drives him forward like a hungry lion dangerously breaking into a sheep pen.*

When they see Odysseus, the handmaidens flee—all but for Nausicaa. Despite his disfigured looks, she stands opposite him with a courage supplied by Athena.

Meanwhile, Odysseus wonders whether he should approach her and take her knees as a suppliant or stand apart and call out to her to give him clothing and show him the way to her city. Finally, he speaks.

149-161 "I take your knees, O queen. Are you a goddess or are you a mortal? [150] If you are a goddess, one of the gods who possess the wide sky above, then I say that you are most like Artemis, the daughter of mighty Zeus, in your looks, form, and stature. But if you are someone among mortals who live on the earth, then three times blessed are your father and queen mother, and three times blessed are your brothers, too. Surely their spirits forever grow warm

with happy thoughts because of you, seeing such a beautiful flower entering the dance. But that one is blessed in his heart above all others who prevails with wedding gifts and leads you home. [160] For with my own eyes, I've never seen a mortal such as you are—whether a man or a woman. Awe holds me as I look at you."

162-169 *Odysseus compares Nausicaa to a young tree he once saw on Apollo's altar in Delos. He goes on to explain his trouble from afar.*

169-197 "Sorrow that is hard to bear has come upon me. [170] Yesterday, on the twentieth day, I escaped from the wine-faced sea. During all that time, waves and rushing wind carried me away from the island of Ogygia. And now some god has tossed me ashore here so that I may yet surely suffer even more evil. My guess is that the misfortune will not stop yet—not until the gods give me more.

"But pity me, O queen. I have come upon you first after much suffering and toil, and I know nothing about the men who hold the land here or the city. Show me to the city and give me some rag to throw around myself—perhaps the cloth you used to carry the clothing when you came here. [180] And may the gods grant you as much as your heart eagerly desires—a man for a husband, and a house. And may a noble unity of mind and feeling accompany these. For nothing is greater and nothing better than when a man and woman dwell in their household with the same thoughts, feelings, and mind—a huge pain to their enemies and joy to their friends. Their glory is very well known."

In reply, white-armed Nausicaa said, "Stranger, since you do not seem to be a base or senseless man, and since Olympian Zeus himself dispenses fortune and happiness to men, to both the good and the bad as he wills, whether he be a brave man or a coward, noble or base—[190] so I believe that surely he has given misfortune to you. Regardless, you must endure it either way. But now, since you have come to our land and city, you will have whatever any suppliant who has suffered much would need—clothing

or anything. I will show you to the city, and I will tell you the name of the people. The Phaeacians hold this land and city, and I am the daughter of greathearted Alcinous, who holds power and strength from the Phaeacians."

198-205 *Seeing that her handmaidens are running off for fear of Odysseus, Nausicaa attempts to calm them, assuring them that the distance of Scheria and the care of the gods will defend them against all harm. But more, they have a duty to help the wandering stranger.*

206-210 "But this man who has come here is some unhappy wanderer. And now we must take care of him since all strangers and beggars come from Zeus—and a gift, even if small, is valued. So, my handmaidens, give the stranger food and drink, [210] and wash him in the river in a spot sheltered from the wind."

211-320 *Nausicaa's handmaidens obey. Yet instead of allowing them to bathe him in the river, Odysseus asks to bathe alone since he's so filthy. He does. And Athena makes him appear taller, stronger, and handsomer than he earlier appeared.*

When Nausicaa gazes at him in awe, she declares he is like one of the gods, and she wishes that he might stay and become her husband. She orders her handmaidens to give him refreshment, and so they offer him food and drink. He eagerly eats as one who has not eaten for a long time.

When it is time to go, Nausicaa explains how she will guide Odysseus to the city. While they are still in the countryside and field, they will go together, she says. But once they reach a grove sacred to Athena, they will split up. The grove itself is part of her father's official domain. It's just outside the city—before the city walls and its harbor that holds all the Phaeacian ships (for, as she explains, the Phaeacians are sailors and care only for ships). Nausicaa desires to split up because she doesn't want any of the people gossiping about her walking with a strange man, making up all kinds of stories about marriage and whatnot. Rather, they'll separate at Athena's grove and go one after the other to her father's house. He'll make it to the house with the help of someone within the city. Lastly, Nausicaa gives Odysseus instructions regarding what to do when he actu-

BOOK 6 ▪ ODYSSEUS MEETS NAUSICAA

ally reaches the house and is within its court. He should approach her mother for help. If she helps him, she says, then he may yet reach his house and homeland.

And now, Nausicaa drives the wagon toward the city and her home while her handmaidens and Odysseus follow on foot.

321-331 As the sun was setting, they came to the glorious grove, sacred to Athena, and godlike Odysseus sat down there. Right away he prayed to the daughter of mighty Zeus:

“Hear me, child of aegis-bearing Zeus. Listen to me, unwearied one. Since you didn’t hear me before when I was shipwrecked, when the glorious Earth-shaker Poseidon reduced me to nothing, hear me now. Allow me to come to the Phaeacians as one pitied and held dear.”

That’s what Odysseus said in prayer, and Pallas Athena heard him. Still, she did not yet appear to him face to face, for she feared and respected her father’s brother Poseidon, who vehemently resisted godlike Odysseus until he came to his own land.

So ends Book 6. **See you in Book 7, “The House of Alcinous.”**

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