

THE ODYSSEY OF HOMER
BOOK VI
Harvey Bialy, tr.

so godly Odysseus lay down to sleep & Athena set out for
the land of the Phaeacians

who once had lived in fertile
Hyperia, near the Cyclopes but
were ravaged by them
so Nausithoos took his people
to Skytheria
far from such greed
& built a wall around his city
& houses & temples
& partitioned the fields
[He now walks with Death
and it is wise Alkinoos who rules]

& to his house
went grey-eyed Athena
planning the return of
proud Odysseus

she came to the room
where Nausicaea, the beautiful daughter of Alkinoos
slept

& on either side
of the bolted & gleaming bronze door
slept her handmaids
like those of Aphrodite herself

& the goddess went
like wind to her bed
took the image of a friend

Dumantos, the shipbuilder's daughter

& spoke to her

"whose child that
so careless

have become
clothes
neglected, what plans for

wedding feast what
will you
wear what of
your parents
to the sea
with the sun
have them washed

all those Phaeacians
want you
maybe a
foreign prince

too

with the sun
have them washed

have the ox-cart
ready for your clothes
bright blankets
princess
ride with the sun
to the washing stones"

left her then &
the tawny-eyed goddess
went back to Olympus
went where they say
the gods have always lived
where there is no rain nor snow
nor strong winds
only the white light
of the sun
& the gods
who bathe there
are always happy
went
home.

Now Dawn came
seated on her golden throne
and awoke Nausicaea

the princess
still with the dream went quickly
to find her parents
in the great hall
her mother at the fire
with her women
weaving the sea-purple wool
& her father
on his way to a council
called by the elders of the city
she stopped
on the point of leaving
and stood close to him
& said

"dear father
please have the ox-cart readied
my bright silks
are soiled
& I should take them to the river

& you also must have fine clothes for council
& of your five sons
three unmarried
always need fresh cloth
for dancing"

ashamed to speak of her own marriage
the wise king understood
answered her

"nothing child
I would not give you
go, I will have
the oxen yoked"

called then to the slaves
and they hitched the fast-running cart &
yoked the animals
while the princess placed the shining cloth
& her mother prepared food
& filled a goatskin with wine
& a golden flask
with soft olive oil

then Nausicaea
took the reins & whip
there was a clatter
as the oxen
started off.

Now when they came
to the polished rocks at the river
washed always by white water
they set the animals to graze
on the honeyed water-grass
and they set
to washing
laying the rainment out
where the sand was warm & clean

and they bathed

and rubbed oil

slowly over their

skin
lay in the sun

drinking wine and

eating figs

waiting for

the clothes

to dry

then freeing their hair
made a circle
began dancing
round

throwing
a
ball &
white-armed Nausicaea
led them,
all
singing.

as Artemis
over the mountains
or along the cliffs
of Taygetus & Erymanthoos
loves to chase
boars & swift deer
& play wildly
with the nymphs
while the gods laugh
& she holds her head
above them
& is easily known
even in
the midst of
that much beauty
so

among the dancers
shown
this unwed princess
Nausicaea
with the white arms

but when she was about to
fold the garments
the goddess
lion-eyed Athena
had plans
for Odysseus to awake
& see the maiden
who would guide him
to her city

so when the princess
next threw the ball
it landed in a deep eddy
& she cried
& Odysseus awoke

where
 have I
 come

to a wild land
with beast-like men

or

one where
strangers are welcomed
and the gods feared

there was a sound

as of girls
or nymphs

are their men here
who speak
like men

and with his crusted bloodied hand
he broke a green young branch
to cover his thighs

he came forward
like a mountain cat
beaten by the rain & wind
& hungry for fat cows
he came forward
like a hungry cat
into that company of fair girls
naked & stinking
& with radiant eyes

& Nausicaea only did not run
when she saw him
Athena gave her courage
& she stood
as he faced her

miserable Odysseus
wanted to grab her knees
to touch that beautiful girl
but thought better
& standing apart
spoke sweetly
& sly

O queen who holds herself
like Artemis
three times blessed are your parents
three times blessed your brothers
what joy they must have of you
a golden flower
joining the dance

three times blessed are they
but most blessed
is he who will marry
& take you home

for I have never seen
mortal beauty
like yours

once in Delphos
near Apollo's altar
I saw a young date-palm
for I went there too
and many were with me
on that luckless journey
but
when I saw that young tree
I stopped
& gazed in wonder

& just so
lady I
look at you
& am afraid to touch

O queen
help me

show me
the city
give me
some rag
to wear

& may the gods give you
a husband, home & peace

there is no thing better
than a man & woman
in their own house

content.

& the white-armed maiden answered him

stranger
you speak well

what fate Zeus has given you
must bear
but I will see you get
what you have asked

you will have clean cloth
& I will show you the city
& name its people

it is the Phaeacians
who hold this land
& I am the daughter of Alkinoos
with whom the power lies

then called
to her girls

hold
this is no enemy
& I know you do not run
at the sight of a naked man

give this stranger food & drink
& wash him in the river
in a spot sheltered from the wind

they stopped
& did
as they were bid

took Odysseus to a cove
set a cloak & tunic

near him
& gave him olive oil
in the golden flask

but he would not let them
wash him
saying
 in your company
I will not bathe
I am ashamed to show myself
to so many
fair ladies

then
with water from the river
godly Odysseus
washed the stuff of the sea
from his back and shoulders
the salt from
his matted hair
& rubbed oil
into his broken skin

& he went
& sat
looking out
over the sea
his body shining

& Nausicaea
when she saw him
listen girls
I swear
Zeus has sent
this man

before ah

but now
he is a god

do you think
he might
stay here

what a husband
he would make

but enough

give the stranger
food & drink

& while Odysseus ate
the gentle princess
finished yoking the cart
mounted
& then called to him

rise stranger
I will take you

to my father's house

only this
do for me
please

as long as
we pass through
the fields
stay with my girls
behind thee cart
but when we are near
the city
around which is a high wall
with a harbor on either side
& a narrow entrance
through which
the curved ships
are drawn to dock
& the temple of Poseidon is there also
& it is there
the men are
busy with the tackle
of their black ships
for the Phaeacians
have no use for the bow
but love
masts & oars
& stately ships

now it is these men
I would have you shun
lest they tease me
saying

who is this handsome stranger
follows Nausicaea

or

she's found a foreigner
to marry

and

she has no use for Phaeacian men

& other things
which would embarrass me
I would certainly blame a maiden
seen with a man before her marriage

but listen to me
near the city
you will find a grove of poplars

that is my father's park & vineyard
wait there until you think
I have reached home
then go to the city
& ask for the house of great-hearted Alkinoos

when you find it
pass quickly through the great hall
until you find my mother
she sits
always weaving
next to my father's throne
he will be there drinking wine but
pass him by &
throw your arms around my mother's knees
if you please her
you will see your land again

then she raised the whip
& they left the river

the sun was setting
when they came to the grove
sacred to Athena
& Odysseus prayed to her

Here me
 daughter of Zeus
let me find love & pity among these people

& the goddess heard him
but did not show herself
for fear of Poseidon

whose fury Odysseus bore until he came at last to Ithaka.