

Part Two: The Wanderings of Odysseus

Book 5: Calypso, the Sweet Nymph

Again the story begins with the gods. Zeus, unable to resist the pleas of his favorite daughter, Athena, sends the messenger-god Hermes to Calypso's island to order Odysseus released. Notice the particularly beautiful epic simile—the extended comparison—that gives life to Hermes' swift voyage to Ogygia (lines 251–257), and notice the wonderful description of the nymph's lair. It is important to remember that although Calypso is not described as evil, her seductive charms—even her promises of immortality for Odysseus—threaten to lead the hero away from the straight and narrow path back to Penelope.

No words were lost on Hermes the Wayfinder
who bent to tie his beautiful sandals on,
245 ambrosial,^o golden, that carry him over water
or over endless land in a swish of the wind,
and took the wand with which he charms asleep—
or when he wills, awake—the eyes of men.
So wand in hand he paced into the air,
250 shot from Pieria^o down, down to sea level,
and veered to skim the swell. A gull patrolling
between the wave crests of the desolate sea
will dip to catch a fish, and douse his wings;
no higher above the whitecaps Hermes flew
255 until the distant island lay ahead,
then rising shoreward from the violet ocean
he stepped up to the cave. Divine Calypso,
the mistress of the isle, was now at home.
Upon her hearthstone a great fire blazing
260 scented the farthest shores with cedar smoke
and smoke of thyme, and singing high and low
in her sweet voice, before her loom a-weaving,
she passed her golden shuttle to and fro.
A deep wood grew outside, with summer leaves
265 of alder and black poplar, pungent cypress.
Ornate birds here rested their stretched wings—
horned owls, falcons, cormorants—long-tongued
beachcombing birds, and followers of the sea.
Around the smoothwalled cave a crooking vine
270 held purple clusters under ply of green;
and four springs, bubbling up near one another
shallow and clear, took channels here and there
through beds of violets and tender parsley.
Even a god who found this place

245. **ambrosial:** fit for the gods.

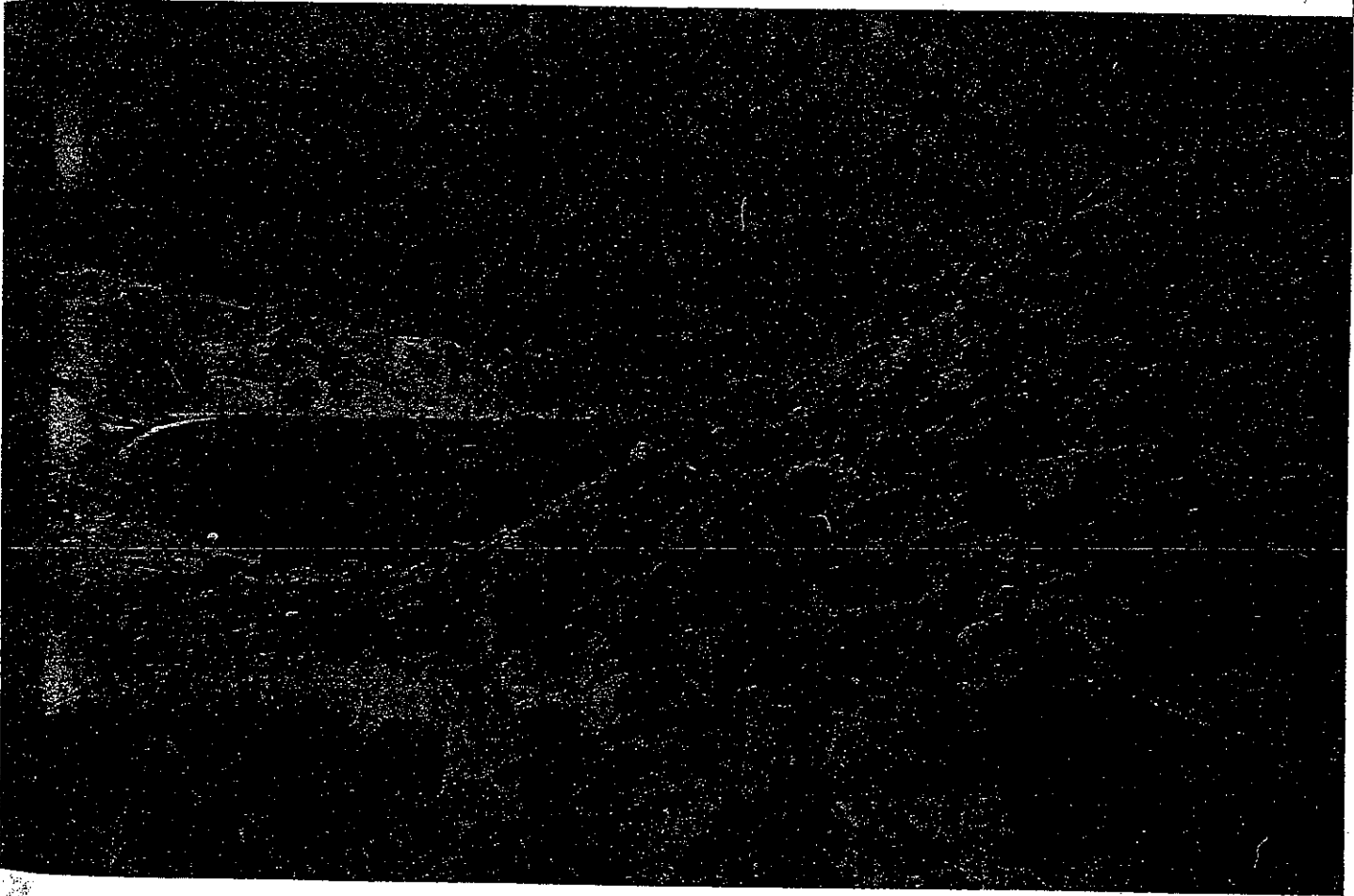
250. **Pieria:** a place in central Greece, a favorite spot of Hermes. It is not far from Olympus.

275 would gaze, and feel his heart beat with delight;
so Hermes did; but when he had gazed his fill
he entered the wide cave. Now face to face
the magical Calypso recognized him,
as all immortal gods know one another
280 on sight—though seeming strangers, far from home.
But he saw nothing of the great Odysseus,
who sat apart, as a thousand times before,
and racked his own heart groaning, with eyes wet
scanning the bare horizon of the sea. . . .

Hermes tells Calypso that she must give up Odysseus forever. And now, one quarter of the way through the epic, we are directly introduced to Odysseus. Notice what this great warrior is doing when we first meet him.

285 The strong god glittering left her as he spoke,
and now her ladyship, having given heed
to Zeus's mandate, went to find Odysseus

A view of the sea from one of the Greek islands.



in his stone seat to seaward—tear on tear
brimming his eyes. The sweet days of his lifetime
290 were running out in anguish over his exile,
for long ago the nymph had ceased to please.
Though he fought shy of her and her desire,
he lay with her each night, for she compelled him.
But when day came he sat on the rocky shore
295 and broke his own heart groaning, with eyes wet
scanning the bare horizon of the sea.
Now she stood near him in her beauty, saying:

“O forlorn man, be still.
Here you need grieve no more; you need not feel
300 your life consumed here; I have pondered it,
and I shall help you go. . . .”

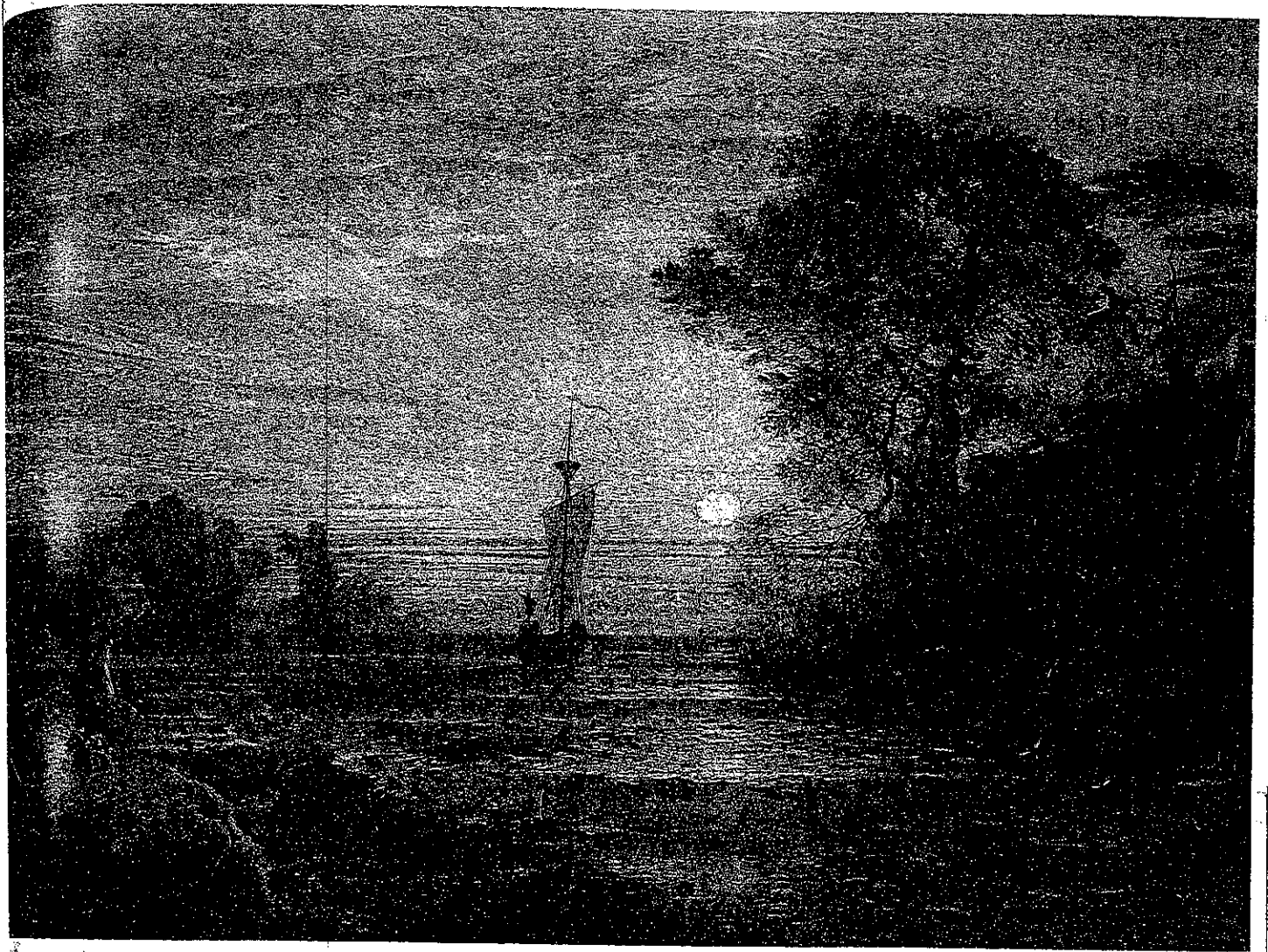
*Calypso promises Odysseus a raft and provisions, to help him
homeward without harm—provided the gods wish it. Now Odys-
seus and Calypso say goodbye.*

Swiftly she turned and led him to her cave,
and they went in, the mortal and immortal.
He took the chair left empty now by Hermes,
305 where the divine Calypso placed before him
victuals and drink of men; then she sat down
facing Odysseus, while her serving maids
brought nectar and ambrosia³⁰⁸ to her side.
Then each one's hands went out on each one's feast
310 until they had had their pleasure; and she said:
“Son of Laertes, versatile Odysseus,
after these years with me, you still desire
your old home? Even so, I wish you well.
If you could see it all, before you go—
315 all the adversity you face at sea—
you would stay here, and guard this house, and be
immortal—though you wanted her forever,
that bride for whom you pine each day.
Can I be less desirable than she is?
320 Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals
compare with goddesses in grace and form?”

To this the strategist Odysseus answered:

“My lady goddess, there is no cause for anger.
My quiet Penelope—how well I know—
325 would seem a shade before your majesty,
death and old age being unknown to you,
while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day
I long for home, long for the sight of home.

308. nectar and ambrosia: drink and food of the gods.



So Odysseus builds the raft and sets sail. But the sea god Poseidon, still angry at Odysseus, is by no means ready to allow an easy passage over his watery domain. He raises a storm and destroys the raft. It is only with the help of Athena and a sea nymph that Odysseus arrives, broken and battered, on the island of Scheria, home of the Phaeacians. There he hides himself in a pile of leaves and falls into a deep sleep.

330 A man in a distant field, no hearthfires near,
will hide a fresh brand^o in his bed of embers
to keep a spark alive for the next day;
so in the leaves Odysseus hid himself,
while over him Athena showered sleep
that his distress should end, and soon, soon.
335 In quiet sleep she sealed his cherished eyes.

Farewell to Calypso by Samuel Palmer (1848). Watercolor.

Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester

330. brand: a burning stick.

Book 6: The Princess Nausicaa

In this important episode, we meet the lovely teen-age princess, Nausicaa, and learn something about domestic life in those days. (Homer is not above telling us about doing laundry or taking baths.) We also learn here something about natural modesty and standards of moral behavior. The world of epic is the world of heroes, but it is also the world of everyday reality.

- Far gone in weariness, in oblivion,
the noble and enduring man slept on;
but Athena in the night went down the land
of the Phaeacians, entering their city. . . .
- 340 She took her way to a painted bedchamber
where a young girl lay fast asleep—so fine
in mould and feature that she seemed a goddess—
the daughter of Alcínous, Nausicaa.
On either side, as Graces^o might have slept,
- 345 her maids were sleeping. The bright doors were shut,
but like a sudden stir of wind, Athena
moved to the bedside of the girl, and grew
visible as the shipman Dymas's daughter,
a girl the princess's age, and her dear friend.
- 350 In this form gray-eyed Athena said to her:
"How so remiss, and yet thy mother's daughter?
leaving thy clothes uncared for, Nausicaa,
when soon thou must have store of marriage linen,
and put thy minstrelsy^o in wedding dress!
- 355 Beauty, in these, will make the folk admire,
and bring thy father and gentle mother joy.
Let us go washing in the shine of morning!
Beside thee will I drub,^o so wedding chests
will brim by evening. Maidenhood must end!
- 360 Have not the noblest born Phaeacians
paid court to thee, whose birth none can excel?
Go beg thy sovereign father, even at dawn,
to have the mule cart and the mules brought round
to take thy body-linen, gowns, and mantles.
- 365 Thou shouldst ride, for it becomes thee more,
the washing pools are found so far from home."
- On this word she departed, gray-eyed Athena,
to where the gods have their eternal dwelling—
as men say—in the fastness of Olympus.
- 370 Never a tremor of wind, or a splash of rain,
no errant snowflake comes to stain that heaven,
so calm, so vaporless, the world of light.
Here, where the gay gods live their days of pleasure,
the gray-eyed one withdrew, leaving the princess.

344. Graces: three sister goddesses who ruled over pleasure, charm, and beauty in human life.

354. minstrelsy: court singers and entertainers.

358. drub: beat the clothes on rocks, to get the dirt out.

375 And now Dawn took her own fair throne, awaking
the girl in the sweet gown, still charmed by dream.
Down through the rooms she went to tell her parents,
whom she found still at home: her mother seated
near the great hearth among her maids—and twirling
380 out of her distaff yarn dyed like the sea—;
her father at the door, bound for a council
of princes on petition of the gentry.
She went up close to him and softly said:

“My dear Papa, could you not send the mule cart
385 around for me—the gig with pretty wheels?
I must take all our things and get them washed
at the river pools; our linen is all soiled.
And you should wear fresh clothing, going to council
with counselors and first men of the realm.
390 Remember your five sons at home: though two
are married, we have still three bachelor sprigs;
they will have none but laundered clothes each time
they go to the dancing. See what I must think of!”

She had no word to say of her own wedding,
395 though her keen father saw her blush. Said he:

“No mules would I deny you, child, nor anything.
Go along, now; the grooms will bring your gig
with pretty wheels and the cargo box upon it.”

He spoke to the stableman, who soon brought round
400 the cart, low-wheeled and nimble;
harnessed the mules, and backed them in the traces.
Meanwhile the girl fetched all her soiled apparel
to bundle in the polished wagon box.

Her mother, for their luncheon, packed a hamper
405 with picnic fare, and filled a skin of wine,
and, when the princess had been handed up,
gave her a golden bottle of olive oil
for softening girls' bodies, after bathing.

Nausicaa took the reins and raised her whip,
410 lashing the mules. What jingling! What a clatter!
But off they went in a ground-covering trot,
with princess, maids, and laundry drawn behind.
By the lower river where the wagon came

were washing pools, with water all year flowing
415 in limpid spillways that no grime withstood.
The girls unhitched the mules, and sent them down
along the eddying stream to crop sweet grass.
Then sliding out the cart's tail board, they took
armloads of clothing to the dusky water,

420 and trod them in the pits, making a race of it.
All being drubbed, all blemish rinsed away,

they spread them, piece by piece, along the beach
 whose pebbles had been laundered by the sea;
 then took a dip themselves, and, all anointed
 425 with golden oil, ate lunch beside the river
 while the bright burning sun dried out their linen.
 Princess and maids delighted in that feast;
 then, putting off their veils,
 they ran and passed a ball to a rhythmic beat,
 430 Nausicaa flashing first with her white arms. . . .
 Soon it was time, she knew, for riding homeward—
 mules to be harnessed, linen folded smooth—
 but the gray-eyed goddess Athena made her tarry,^o
 so that Odysseus might behold her beauty
 and win her guidance to the town.
 435 It happened
 when the king's daughter threw her ball off line
 and missed, and put it in the whirling stream—
 at which they all gave such a shout, Odysseus
 awoke and sat up, saying to himself:
 440 "Now, by my life, mankind again! But who?
 Savages, are they, strangers to courtesy?
 Or gentle folk, who know and fear the gods?
 That was a lusty cry of tall young girls—
 most like the cry of nymphs, who haunt the peaks,
 445 and springs of brooks, and inland grassy places.
 Or am I amid people of human speech?
 Up again, man; and let me see for myself."
 He pushed aside the bushes, breaking off
 with his great hand a single branch of olive,
 450 whose leaves might shield him in his nakedness;
 so came out rustling, like a mountain lion,
 rain-drenched, wind-buffed, but in his might at ease,
 with burning eyes—who prowls among the herds
 or flocks, or after game, his hungry belly
 455 taking him near stout homesteads for his prey.
 Odysseus had this look, in his rough skin
 advancing on the girls with pretty braids;
 and he was driven on by hunger, too.
 Streaked with brine, and swollen, he terrified them,
 460 so that they fled, this way and that. Only
 Alcinous's daughter stood her ground, being given
 a bold heart by Athena, and steady knees.
 She faced him, waiting. And Odysseus came,
 debating inwardly what he should do:
 465 embrace this beauty's knees in supplication?
 or stand apart, and, using honeyed speech,
 inquire the way to town, and beg some clothing?

433. tarry: linger, be late.

In his swift reckoning, he thought it best
to trust in words to please her—and keep away;
470 he might anger the girl, touching her knees.
So he began, and let the soft words fall:

“Mistress: please: are you divine, or mortal?
If one of those who dwell in the wide heaven,
you are most near to Artemis, I should say—
475 great Zeus’s daughter—in your grace and presence.
If you are one of earth’s inhabitants,
how blest your father, and your gentle mother,
blest all your kin. I know what happiness
must send the warm tears to their eyes, each time
480 they see their wondrous child go to the dancing!
But one man’s destiny is more than blest—
he who prevails, and takes you as his bride.
Never have I laid eyes on equal beauty
in man or woman. I am hushed indeed.
485 So fair, one time, I thought a young palm tree
at Delos near the altar of Apollo—
I had troops under me when I was there
on the sea route that later brought me grief—
but that slim palm tree filled my heart with wonder:
490 never came shoot from earth so beautiful.
So now, my lady, I stand in awe so great
I cannot take your knees.^o And yet my case is desperate:
twenty days, yesterday, in the wine-dark sea,
on the ever-lunging swell,^o under gale winds,
495 getting away from the Island of Ogygia.
And now the terror of Storm has left me stranded
upon this shore—with more blows yet to suffer,
I must believe, before the gods relent.
Mistress, do me a kindness!
500 After much weary toil, I come to you,
and you are the first soul I have seen—I know
no others here. Direct me to the town,
give me a rag that I can throw around me,
some cloth or wrapping that you brought along.
505 And may the gods accomplish your desire:
a home, a husband, and harmonious
converse with him—the best thing in the world
being a strong house held in serenity
where man and wife agree. Woe to their enemies,
510 joy to their friends! But all this they know best.”
Then she of the white arms, Nausicaa, replied:
“Stranger, there is no quirk or evil in you
that I can see. You know Zeus metes out fortune
to good and bad men as it pleases him.

492. The taking of the knees is an act of respect and humility and petition. By kneeling before a person and holding on to his or her knees, a petitioner shows that he or she means no harm but desires mercy or help.

494. ever-lunging swell: waves that plunge up and down.

515 Hardship he sent to you, and you must bear it.
 But now that you have taken refuge here
 you shall not lack for clothing, or any other
 comfort due to a poor man in distress.
 The town lies this way, and the men are called
 520 Phaeacians, who own the land and city.
 I am daughter to the Prince Alcinous,
 by whom the power of our people stands.”

Turning, she called out to her maids-in-waiting:
 “Stay with me! Does the sight of a man scare you?
 525 Or do you take this one for an enemy?
 Why, there’s no fool so brash, and never will be,
 as to bring war or pillage^o to this coast,
 for we are dear to the immortal gods,
 living here, in the sea that rolls forever,
 530 distant from other lands and other men.
 No: this man is a castaway, poor fellow;
 we must take care of him. Strangers and beggars
 come from Zeus: a small gift, then, is friendly.
 Give our new guest some food and drink, and take him
 535 into the river, out of the wind, to bathe.”

They stood up now, and called to one another
 to go on back. Quite soon they led Odysseus
 under the river bank, as they were bidden;
 and there laid out a tunic, and a cloak,
 540 and gave him olive oil in the golden flask.
 “Here,” they said, “go bathe in the flowing water.”
 But heard now from that kingly man, Odysseus:
 “Maids,” he said, “keep away a little; let me
 wash the brine from my own back, and rub on
 545 plenty of oil. It is long since my anointing.
 I take no bath, however, where you can see me—
 naked before young girls with pretty braids.”

They left him, then, and went to tell the princess.
 And now Odysseus, dousing in the river,
 550 scrubbed the coat of brine from back and shoulders
 and rinsed the clot of sea-spume from his hair;
 got himself all rubbed down, from head to foot,
 then he put on the clothes the princess gave him.
 Athena lent a hand, making him seem
 555 taller, and massive, too, with crimping hair
 in curls like petals of wild hyacinth,
 but all red-golden. Think of gold infused
 on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art
 Hephaestus^o taught him, or Athena: one
 560 whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished



527. pillage: violent looting or stealing.

559. Hephaestus: god of crafts.



beauty over Odysseus's head and shoulders.
Then he went down to sit on the sea beach
in his new splendor. There the girl regarded him,
and after a time she said to the maids beside her:

565 "My gentlewomen, I have a thing to tell you.
The Olympian gods cannot be all averse
to this man's coming here among our islanders.
Uncouth he seemed, I thought so, too, before;
but now he looks like one of heaven's people.

570 I wish my husband could be fine as he
and glad to stay forever on Scheria!

Ulysses and Nausicaa by Peter Paul
Rubens (17th century). Oil.

Firenze Gallery. Photo: Art Resource

But have you given refreshment to our guest?"

At this the maids, all gravely listening, hastened
to set out bread and wine before Odysseus,
575 and ah! how ravenously that patient man
took food and drink, his long fast at an end.

The princess Nausicaa now turned aside
to fold her linens; in the pretty cart
she stowed them, put the mule team under harness,
580 mounted the driver's seat, and then looked down
to say with cheerful prompting to Odysseus:

"Up with you now, friend; back to town we go;
and I shall send you in before my father
who is wondrous wise; there in our house with him
585 you'll meet the noblest of the Phaeacians.
You have good sense, I think; here's how to do it:
while we go through the countryside and farmland
stay with my maids, behind the wagon, walking
briskly enough to follow where I lead.

590 But near the town—well, there's a wall with towers
around the Isle, and beautiful ship basins
right and left of the causeway of approach;
seagoing craft are beached beside the road
each on its launching ways. The agora,^o
595 with fieldstone benches bedded in the earth,
lies either side Poseidon's shrine—for there
men are at work on pitch-black hulls and rigging,
cables and sails, and tapering of cars.

The archer's craft is not for Phaeacians,
600 but ship designing, modes of oaring cutters
in which they love to cross the foaming sea.
From these fellows I will have no salty talk,
no gossip later. Plenty are insolent.

And some seadog might say, after we passed:
605 'Who is this handsome stranger trailing Nausicaa?
Where did she find him? Will he be her husband?
Or is she being hospitable to some rover
come off his ship from lands across the sea—
there being no lands nearer. A god, maybe?

610 a god from heaven, the answer to her prayer,
descending now—to make her his forever?
Better, if she's roamed and found a husband
somewhere else: none of our own will suit her,
though many come to court her, and those the best.'

615 This is the way they might make light of me.
And I myself should hold it shame
for any girl to flout^o her own dear parents,
taking up with a man, before her marriage."

594. agora: marketplace, or town square.

617. flout: scorn, insult.

Book 8: The Song of the Minstrel

Odysseus is received in Book 7 as an unknown guest by Nausicaa's father, King Alcinous, and by the Phaeacian court. To the ancient people of Greece and Asia Minor, all guests were god-sent and had to be treated with great care before they could be asked to identify themselves and state their business.

Alcinous orders a banquet for his mystery guest. When everything is prepared, Odysseus is seated in the guest's place of honor. The famous blind minstrel, Demodocus, is called. Odysseus gives the singer a gift of pork crisp with fat and requests a song about the wooden horse of Troy. In effect, he asks for a song about himself.

The minstrel stirred, murmuring to the god, and soon
620 clear words and notes came one by one, a vision
of the Achaeans in their graceful ships
drawing away from shore: the torches flung
and shelters flaring: Argive soldiers crouched
in the close dark around Odysseus: and
625 the horse, tall on the assembly ground of Troy. . . .
For Troy must perish, as ordained, that day
she harbored the great horse of timber; hidden
the flower of Achaea lay, and bore
slaughter and death upon the men of Troy.
630 He sang, then, of the town sacked^o by Achaeans
pouring down from the horse's hollow cave,
this way and that way raping the steep city . . .

The splendid minstrel sang it.

And Odysseus
let the bright molten tears run down his cheeks,
635 weeping the way a wife mourns for her lord
on the lost field where he has gone down fighting . . .

Here Alcinous notices Odysseus's tears and demands that his guest reveal his identity.

“ . . . Friend, you must not be
secretive any longer! Come, in fairness,
tell me the name you bore in that far country;
640 how were you known to family, and neighbors?
No man is nameless—no man, good or bad,
but gets a name in his first infancy,
none being born, unless a mother bears him!
Tell me your native land, your coast and city—”

At this moment of suspense, Homer might have put aside his harp until the next night.

630. sacked: all its goods taken by force.

Responding to the Epic

Analyzing the Epic

Identifying Facts

1. What **images** does Homer use to help his audience see and smell the fragrant place where the nymph Calypso lives?
2. What does Calypso offer Odysseus to tempt him to stay with her and abandon his quest? What is Odysseus's response?
3. What inspires Nausicaa to organize her washing expedition? What reason does she give her father?
4. In a macho culture like Odysseus's, a hero is by definition a "ladies' man." From the point of view of Homer's audience, Odysseus was not unfaithful to Penelope as long as he kept her in mind as his ultimate goal. Homer never tires of telling us that Odysseus would rather be with Penelope than with Calypso or Circe, who keep him against his will. Thus, to the Greeks, morality does not come into question in Odysseus's relationship with the "witches" in the story. But with Nausicaa it is something else. She is a real human girl ready for marriage. What is Odysseus's condition when Nausicaa sees him first? How does Odysseus use his famed wit to handle this situation and win Nausicaa's confidence?

Interpreting Meanings

5. When we first see Odysseus, he is weeping. Why? We rarely see a twentieth-century hero weeping. What would most people feel today about a hero who cries? What does Odysseus's crying tell us about the values of Homeric society as opposed to modern values?
6. Look back at Odysseus's first speech to Nausicaa, starting at line 472 on page 739. What do we learn about Odysseus's **character** from this speech? What is especially significant about his references to marriage?
7. Based on what she says and does, how would you describe Nausicaa's **character** traits? What does this portrait of Nausicaa reveal about the life and values of a teen-age girl in Homeric society?
8. Look at how Demodocus is treated at Alcinoüs's banquet. What does this tell us about the role

of poets and poetry in Homer's time? Do storytelling and music play a similar role in our society? (How would a contemporary ruler entertain honored guests?)

Analyzing Language and Vocabulary

Homeric Similes

The **Homeric simile** (sometimes called the **epic simile** or the **heroic simile**) is an extended comparison between something that the audience cannot have seen (such as the god Hermes skimming the waves) and something ordinary and domestic which they would have been familiar with (such as a sea gull fishing: see lines 251–257 on page 732).

1. Write out at least three Homeric similes that you find in these episodes. (Include their line numbers.)
2. Explain how each simile brings the audience into the story by comparing a strange or unfamiliar occurrence with something domestic or familiar.
3. Make up three Homeric similes of your own, in which you compare something strange or unfamiliar with something domestic and familiar. You might consider describing something like:

A space launch

The surface of Uranus

A view of a blood sample through a microscope

Writing About the Epic

A Creative Response

Writing a Journal Entry. Suppose you are Nausicaa. Describe your thoughts and feelings as you saw Odysseus come out of hiding and appear before you. Write as if you are writing in a journal. Use the first-person pronoun, "I," as if we were hearing Nausicaa's voice.