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Book 6: Odysseus Meets the Maiden

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Just over sixty years ago, Charles Segal published a widely influential article identifying Scheria as a ‘border realm’ situated between the ‘fantasy world’ of Odysseus’ wanderings and the quotidian reality of Ithaca. In this fantasy world, the hero inhabits his unconscious, so that his journey home is equally a return to consciousness. Jonathan Shay has more recently given this unconscious realm sharper contours by relating the adventures to obstacles returning veterans must overcome in their struggle to recover civilian identity.

In an earlier study, I identified Scheria as a border realm of a different kind, arguing that the Phaeacians are otherworldly ferrymen, who convey Odysseus home to Ithaca from an Island of the Blessed. Building on this I hope to show that he undergoes ontological change on Scheria, where he is reintegrated into human society after having lived eight years as a divine consort. To facilitate this change, Athena exploits the incipient transition of Nausicaa from childhood to adult domestic status as wife and mother. Nausicaa serves as gatekeeper but she is also a protatic character: Odysseus must win her favor despite his appearance, after which she reconditions him—Athena’s enhancements amount to the same thing said in metaphysics—and escorts him to the city where he repeats the process. He will do so again on Ithaca. This mirroring effect points to a further goal of the essay: to show by way of example that the episode belongs to a dense and comprehensive, inter- and intra-textual network that contributes greatly to the poem’s complexity and depth.

Death and rebirth feature prominently in transition rituals and mythology; and typically associated imagery and action are not difficult to find in the account of Odysseus’ arrival on Scheria. During a storm that destroys his ship, Odysseus nearly drowns, weighed down by his immortal clothing. This he sheds and with it the last vestige of his former identity, so that he arrives on Scheria effectively without one. In a further ordeal he swims two days before reaching Scheria. Passing from salt-water to fresh, he swims up the island’s birth canal to make landfall. He then buries himself beneath a huge mound of leaves at the base of arboreal womb, reduced to the merest ‘seed’ of life (5.490). Next day he emerges from its dense foliage naked as the day he was born and just as ugly to find himself amidst a throng of women. Afterwards, he bathes, clothes himself and eats, reborn into human society.

In the liminal space of Scheria, Odysseus constructs an identity appropriate to the situation in which he finds himself, and as important his own about-to-be-reclaimed status as ruler of Ithaca and husband of Penelope. In doing so he must reject marriage to Nausicaa, just as he rejected immortality as Calypso’s consort. Nausicaa poses the final threat to his return, but since she is not a goddess, unable confer immortality or compete with one in beauty, these are not the reasons. What marriage to Nausicaa would offer is a human community in which Odysseus could realize the heroic goals of honor and epic fame. It is in this context that the temptation posed by a beautiful princess in a fabulously wealthy kingdom becomes salient, as a substitute Ithaca that is superior in every respect. Except one. In the end, the cunning wisdom that Penelope shares with her husband, their mutual suffering, and like-mindedness, are superior even to such alternatives.

As Book Six begins, Odysseus is lying naked beneath Athena’s tree, the olive. (Sacred trees are a controlling metaphor of the poem). Odysseus reached Scheria moments before with Athena’s assistance after Poseidon wrecks his raft during the first
storm of winter. After he takes shelter against the elements, Athena puts him to sleep and departs. The shift in divine influence from Poseidon’s hostility to Athena’s support announces the fact of the transition that Odysseus undergoes along with its nature. Although her influence is more forceful elsewhere, Athena intervenes more frequently in this short Book than any other. Odysseus’ repose is then contrasted by Athena’s activity as she flies off to the Phaeacian city.

Homer often pauses briefly after introducing something new to provide context before continuing. He here begins with the overlapping categories of geographical and cultural orientation: the Phaeacians used to live “near the Cyclopes,” who plundered them constantly until they emigrated under king Nausithous to Scheria, “far from men” (5, 8). Alcinous produces a related pairing when he boasts that the Phaeacians once transported Elysium-dwelling Rhadamanthys to Euboea, “furthest distant of lands” (7.321-4). We have already learned that Scheria lies 17 days east of Ogygia by continuous sail (5.270-81). Its liminal status is not simply typological but topographical, as Homer establishes for the audience at the outset. We presently learn that that the father of Nausithous, as of Polyphemus, is Poseidon. His own grandfather, Eurymedon, ruled the Giants (7.59-60), whom Alcinous groups with the Phaeacians and Cyclopes as ‘close’ to the gods (7.205: ἐγκόθικος); Zeus earlier said the same about the Phaeacians (5.35=19.279: ἀγκόθικος). Although sometimes taken metaphorically, Homeric usage would suggest that physical proximity is meant by both terms, though it does not necessarily exclude further connotations of ‘divine birth’ or simply ‘beloved.’ Nausicaa says of the Phaeacians: ‘we are dear to the gods and live at the ends of the earth (201-5: ἐγνατωτοί). Their relationship and location are so closely juxtaposed as to suggest they are related or nearly synonymous, as in a hendiadys; the Aethiopians are comparable (1.22-6; cf. 7.199-203, Il. 1.423-5). The gods’ love sets the stage for the terrible irony that the one who should be dearest of all destroys them for befriending Odysseus.

Homer describes founding Scheria as one would a colony. The founder, Nausithous, encloses it with defensive walls, builds houses for his people, temples for the gods, and allots farmland. This ‘colony’ would have had a distinctly modern feel to the audience, and Homer wants them to be impressed by it. Nausicaa adds further details: there is a grove of Athena and nearby spring; it is situated on a peninsula; its walls are lofty; twin harbors sport ship-sheds; there is a monumental agora with stone seating; and, somewhat ominously, a Poseidon sanctuary ‘balancing’ Athena’s grove. Her father’s palace is exceptional. In all this, the Phaeacians are precisely opposed to the Cyclopes. One might infer that they practice what for Odysseus is the most important cultural institution of all: xēinia, or the laws of hospitality. But as it happens their civilized values are questionable on this very point as Athena makes explicit (7.31-3). One sees in retrospect why Homer introduces them with their physical isolation. The Phaeacians have no need to practice xēinia, or for that matter exogamy.

Homer’s digression marks the time it takes Athena to reach the palace. She enters the bedchamber where Nausicaa lies sleeping with two maidservants at either side of the door (15-9). Our first image of Nausicaa relates her to Penelope. Maidservants flank Penelope on either side of the doorway to the main hall when she appears to the suitors in Book 1, as also in her later appearances; whereas Penelope’s servants embody her chastity, Nausicaa’s literally guard hers. Athena passes by them and through the door to Nausicaa’s bed ‘like a breath of wind,’ taking the form of a girl especially dear to her.
Her assumed identity allows Athana to scold Nausicaa as remiss about washing her wedding clothes. ‘Your marriage is near,’ she complains, ‘every nobleman in town is already a suitor.’ This is also true of Penelope, of course, and the scene unmistakably echoes another in which Penelope is involved. Athena makes a phantom of Penelope’s sister, who enters her bedchamber by slipping through the door closure (4.796-802). But instead of rousing her to action, the phantom helps her sleep.

Having achieved the opposite effect on Nausicaa as on Odysseus, Athena departs from her as she had from him. This time her destination is Olympus. Her arrival there entails a detailed account that may seem digressive, but accomplishes several things with some subtlety. With the Scherian foundation narrative, the account frames the dream sequence, and not simply structurally. As noted, that the Phaeacians are ‘close’ to the gods can be taken literally. Nausithous is introduced in the story of Scheria’s settlement as godlike (7), and Alcinous has their wisdom (12), while Nausicaa is introduced as like one in appearance (16), and even her maidservants are given beauty by the Graces (18). In fact the number of divine attributes awarded the Phaeacians is unparalleled: like his father, Alcinous is ‘godlike’ (7.231; 8.256), his son Clytoneus their equivalent (8.119), like Arete’s father (7.146), and all the Phaeacians (6.241), who are dear to them (203). Even without a reinforcing structural relation there is clearly a thematic one. The account of Olympus also resonates with Nausicaa’s physical beauty and equally her mental landscape now that Athena has broached her looming marriage. How fully it occupies her thoughts is on display when she asks her father for a wagon to wash the family clothing. Her somewhat overdramatic concern with laundry, which happens to include clothes for her brothers, three of whom she notes remain unmarried, betrays Nausicaa’s thoughts and endearingly reveals her youthful modesty. That she disguises her motives with the need to wash men’s clothes plays into Athena’s own motive for sending Nausicaa to the washing hole, to provide Odysseus with proper attire. In fact everything Odysseus needs at this moment is traditionally provided by women: clothes, food and a bath.

Not unrelated are the early, abundant indications of Phaeacian prosperity, confirming their divine favor and resources to ensure Odysseus’ return. It also foreshadows the account of Alcinous’ palace: there is nothing remotely like it in Homer except, once again, the abodes of the gods on Olympus. The wealth of Scheria and its royal palace are signaled at once as Athena enters Nausicaa’s ‘highly elaborate’ chamber with its ‘shining,’ i.e., metal clad, doors (15, 19). Nausicaa finds her mother spinning costly purple yarn (53). But the pièce de resistance is the golden flask of olive oil Arete gives Nausicaa as she sets out simply to do the laundry (79). Remoteness from other men, closeness to the gods, and preternatural wealth, each helps establish the status of Scheria as a border realm from the very beginning.

When they reach the washing places, Nausicaa and her maidservants make sport of their chores as they compete with one another to clean the robes. Afterwards, they bathe, rub themselves down with olive oil, take their meal, and casting off their veils begin tossing a ball. They sing and dance as they play, Nausicaa acting as choral leader. Fortunately, none of this awakens Odysseus, but it does make them look their best. There is also no particular reason for them wearing veils as they wash clothing in a deserted spot, and somewhat inconvenient to do so while bathing or eating. But describing them as unveiling asks the audience to visualize their faces, and more important to imagine Odysseus staring openly at Nausicaa and admiring her beauty as he supplicates her; we
are never told that she or her companions replace them. As important, unveiling has erotic connotations exploited elsewhere in Homer, and as important it was a central feature of wedding ceremonies.\(^6\) Prenuptial bathing by bride and groom, dancing and feasting, all belonged to them.

Thus far we seem to be witnessing an idyllic scene with a band of young maidens playing childhood games. But now the narrative pace begins to quicken and oscillate between narrative scenarios and poetic registers that portray Nausicaa as a threat to Odysseus and vice versa. As the dancing grows increasingly energetic, Homer launches into a simile comparing Nausicaa and her maidservants to Artemis and her band of nymphs (102-9). At first, the comparison seems entirely natural—and meant to be—as choral dances by maidens approaching marriage are a distinctive feature of Artemis-cult.\(^7\) In vase paintings, Artemis is sometimes depicted taking part in the procession. But this is not how the simile progresses, and it invites a retrospective reinterpretation of the scene. Our Artemis is traversing the mountains hunting boar and deer. The goddess is most conspicuously associated with the latter, which in Homer exist to be preyed on. Boars, on the other hand, are the opposite, and these evoke the deadliest of all, which Artemis loosed on Calydon; while Erymanthus was the habitat of the boar from Heracles’ labors. This Artemis is a fearsome hunter, which does not bode well for Odysseus. Like Actaeon in some traditions, if Odysseus merely offends her his life is forfeit. In which context, that Nausicaa and her maidservants have just bathed while Odysseus was sleeping nearby might gain in significance, though the threat posed by seeing her naked remains in any case.\(^8\) Nevertheless, as the simile concludes, Homer reminds us of Nausicaa’s beauty just before Odysseus meets her, declaring that Artemis stands head and shoulders above her nymphs, though all are beautiful (cp. hAp. 198).

Athena intervenes at the end of the scene as she had to begin it, preventing Nausicaa from returning home before she and Odysseus can be properly introduced. So when Nausicaa next throws the ball, it lands in the river and the girls cry out, awakening Odysseus. He responds with a despondent moan, followed by a question that divides the world in two:

To what land of mortals have I come this time?
Are they savages, unjust, and given to wanton violence?
Or do they love strangers and their hearts god-fearing?

\(119-21\)

He has plainly experienced both and from that experience fears the worst. In fact, he asked this same question when he arrived among the Cyclopes (9.175-6). He will again when he reaches Ithaca. This well illustrates Reinhardt’s observation that the same repeated verses can have striking differences of tone.\(^9\) In the Cyclops-adventure he is confident, adventurous, here anxious, weary, even defeated. On Ithaca, he feels betrayed. The irony of asking if he is going to face savages is palpable, for it is Odysseus who looks the savage as he goes to meet the beautiful princess of a fabulously wealthy kingdom. Homer thereby introduces an element of humor that recurs throughout the episode. But asking whether the inhabitants are hostile or friendly also, and uncoincidentally, echoes the ambiguities surrounding the preceding simile.
Odysseus remarks at once that he heard a female cry, like that of nymphs, or could it be, humans? This too echoes the simile, reformulating as alternative identities the comparison of Nausicaa’s maidservants to mountain-dwelling nymphs. As paired alternatives it also echoes his preceding question, whether the inhabitants are savage, as he fears, or civilized. The intimations accumulate that Odysseus may be in danger, further reinforced by the word for the girls’ cry, which in the Iliad is commonly made by fighting warriors (122; cf. 117: ἄνηρ). ‘Onward!’ he rallies himself, ‘I will test them and see.’ In the Cyclops-episode, he also describes himself going to ‘test’ the inhabitants, followed by the above question as to whether they are civilized or savage.

With that, Odysseus emerges. As he does, he breaks off an olive-branch to cover himself. There is some wit, which belongs to Homer, in Odysseus demonstrating his modesty with the tree of the virgin goddess of civilization. But it could not contrast more starkly with his appearance otherwise, for he resembles nothing so much than one of the wild men he fears meeting. Homer conveys the effect by comparing him to the only animal from ancient Greece more deadly than a wild boar:

But he went out like a lion, mountain-fed, trusting in his strength, one who goes rained upon and wind-blown, and his eyes blaze like fire, but he goes after the cows or sheep or wild (agroteras) deer, for his belly commands him to enter the well-built fold and make an attempt (peiresonta) on the flocks.

(130-4)

This is what the maidservants see, and they flee in all directions: ‘for he was terrible to look upon, all befouled with brine’ (137-8). A significant verbal echo reinforces it. The word Odysseus uses to describe himself testing the inhabitants Homer uses to describe the lion making an attempt on the flocks, so that Nausicaa and her maidservants are directly correlated with them. To judge from the simile, it would seem that the tables have been turned so that Nausicaa and her maidens are now the prey. Nothing could be farther from the case of course: this is the initial Odyssean registration of an antinomy between apparent and actual identity that is a defining characteristic of Odysseus in both epics. And of the Odyssey itself.

The lion simile mirrors the previous one: Nausicaa is compared to Artemis hunting deer in the mountains; Odysseus to a mountain bred lion hunting wild deer. In calling them wild, Homer employs a cult title of Artemis. Artemis thrills to the chase; the lion is driven by hunger to attack. Nausicaa is joyous and beautiful; the lion bedraggled and in need. The reciprocal relation between the two similes invites an integrated reading that turns the tables back again. Odysseus has not reentered the scene by the time Nausicaa is compared to Artemis, so any relationship between him and the animals she hunts is implicit. But Artemis is the potnia thērōn, the mistress of all wild animals, including lions. Now that Nausicaa has been compared to the goddess, and Odysseus a lion, his identity as her potential victim is direct: the hunter becomes the hunted.

Intratextual connections add further complexity. There are six lion-similes in the Odyssey: four compare Odysseus to a lion, and in the other three Odysseus-the-lion kills Penelope’s suitors. Menelaus compares Odysseus to a lion who kills deer representing
them; and Telemachus later repeats the simile to Penelope (4.335-40; 17.126-31; cf. 4.724, 814). When she learns that the suitors are attempting to ambush Telemachus, Penelope is uniquely compared to a frightened lion (4.791-3). Polyphemus is compared to a lion as he eats Odysseus’ companions (9.293). These similes culminate in the horrific image of Odysseus standing among the suitors’ corpses, ‘like a lion after eating a cow, all covered in blood and terrible to look upon’ (Od. 22.401-6). In the Iliad, warriors are compared to lions forty times or so, making it the most common simile-type. Iliadic lions are usually successful killing their prey and warding off attackers, but not always, and they are themselves killed on three occasions. The image of a hungry, mountain-fed lion putting flocks to the test is thus traditional. Taken by itself, the simile would seem to cast Odysseus as a predator and an heroic warrior. That is, he is cast either as Nausicaa’s would be killer or as hero of a mock-epic with her maidservants as the routed enemy.

The advancing lion reverts to Odysseus just as he is ‘about to mingle with the maidens, naked as he was’ (13.5-6: μίξεσθαι, γυμνός περ ἐών). The verb can be used in a military context to describe fighters ‘mixing it up.’ But with the adjective describing him as naked it has overt sexual connotations. This invites reinterpretation of the lion-image as pointing an alternative narrative scenario in which Odysseus rapes Nausicaa instead of killing or being killed by her. But a more innocent interpretation is possible. Theognis describes an erotic lion who captures his prey but shows restraint:

Like a lion, trusting in its strength, who with his feet
captures a fawn from under its mother, I did not drink blood:
And having mounted its lofty walls, the city I did not sack.
And having yoked the horses, my chariot I did not mount,
I accomplished but did not, and concluding I concluded not,
and doing I did not, and finishing I finished not.
(949-54)

Under either scenario, the lion’s hunger could be seen as metaphorical though we presently learn that Odysseus’ hunger is very real. The folk-tale theme, ‘Maiden at the Well’ and the like could also point to an erotic theme or lead to xenia, which is the relationship Odysseus does ultimately establish with the household. In yet another shift of tone, Nausicaa transforms from a huntress into a warrior as Athena places ‘courage’ (θάρσος) in her so that she ‘stands her ground’ (μένε) against Odysseus. The term for courage is not especially common, but is elsewhere used of men in Homer, except once of Athena where it is derogatory. Moreover, it is not only a male virtue but typically employed in an antagonistic and military context. The verb can describe someone standing to face an attacking enemy, its meaning as such preserved in the proper name ‘Mene-laos’ or such formations as menēdeīos (withstanding the foe). With her own transformation into a warrior maiden the situation once again becomes a military-encounter, perhaps one fought in a locus amoenus.

Homer locates Odysseus in multiple narrative environments that would prevent him from reaching Ithaca alive: rapist, seducer, killer, victim. Marriage soon poses another threat. Odysseus recognizes this and choses a different role that until now has remained latent, and, while counterintuitive on several fronts, will paradoxically make his safe return possible. In this sense, Odysseus authors his own story. An analogy can thus
be drawn between him and an epic poet negotiating among numerous competing traditions to sing the one true account; Odysseus must find his way out of these narratives and into the one in which he reaches home. He has already signaled that he means no harm by covering himself with an olive branch. Despite his gesture, the maidservants incorrectly identify the story they are in. The suitors of Penelope make the same error.

Before continuing to Odysseus’ supplication, I need to show that the scene in which he appears resonates in meaningful ways with two others. It is helpful for our purposes that grand entrances are easily overworked and thus not particularly common in the _Odyssey_. Consequently, those that do occur stand out. One of the related scenes is not only highly dramatic in itself, but made still more prominent through its triple repetition: “Penelope Appears Before the Suitors.” After Athena, disguised as Mentes, instructs Telemachus to journey in search of his father, she places ‘spirit’ and ‘courage’ (1.321: μένος…θάρσος) in his heart and departs. Penelope then enters the megaron and asks Phemius to stop singing tale of the Greek Return epic, from which her husband is conspicuously absent. Telemachus denies her request and sends her back to her room. To a man, the suitors raise a ruckus over Penelope’s beauty and pray to sleep with her (1.337ff.).

There is a similar triangulation of characters and actions as here: disconcerting sounds cause husband and wife to make a sudden appearance before a group of the opposite sex, from whom they keep their distance in a display of modesty. In a further display Penelope covers her face with a veil, Odysseus his manhood with a branch. Their appearance is met by the opposed behavior of a princess and prince, surrounded by a group of age mates, whose reaction likewise differs. In either case, the group responds to the adult’s appearance, the royal youth to the request. Both youths act under the influence of a disguised Athena who motivates Nausicaa and Telemachus to take journeys; she then gives them courage to face the adult. Penelope stands before a pillar, tall and stout enough to uphold the room of the megaron, and makes a request, Odysseus stands before an Olive tree and does the same. Penelope mourns her absent husband, Odysseus wishes a joyous marriage for Nausicaa. The maidservants respond with fear, the suitors desire.

Central to both scenes, then, is the theme of marriage: Odysseus and Penelope are about to remarry. The prince and princess are too, not to each other in Homer, though there were traditions in which they do.16 The suitors raise the issue of marriage in the most vulgar terms possible. The most important aspect of all this is the mutual loyalty Penelope and Odysseus demonstrate in either scene.

The second _comparandum_ is the arrival of Telemachus at Pylus. Elsewhere I have argued that a common narrative pattern organizes the _Odyssey_ into three quasi-autonomous units: the _Telemachy_, Books 1-4, _Phaeacis_, 5-12, and _Revenge_, 13-24.17 What makes this important for our purposes is the themes of Books 3, 6, and 13 overlap significantly. The most obvious thematic match for the present scene is the arrival of Odysseus on Ithaca in Book 13. Together they frame the _Phaeacis_, bringing the episodes into structural relationship: Odysseus sleeps on the shore and awakens to encounter a royal youth whom he supplicates as to a god for assistance; while standing by an olive tree near running water; and Athena is present and helps Odysseus. The arrival of Telemachus at Pylus in Book 3, however, better tracks our scene in terms of narrative function. It likewise centers on a parental figure, Nestor, an unmarried youth, again Telemachus, and a larger group associated with the welcoming character, Nestor’s
subjects. Telemachus is received by Peisistratus, the unmarried son of Nestor. There are of course significant differences, but the one between the central themes, of xênia at Pylus and marriage on Scheria, is not so great as one might imagine. They are in important respects isomorphic and serve related functions: both rituals incorporate an outsider into the household on a permanent basis in a subordinate position; and establish a ‘general reciprocity’ of mutual support between households.\(^{18}\) The encounter between Nausicaa and Odysseus also ends with him and Alcinous establishing xênia. In terms of the households, Telemachus is renewing an already established relationship, but he is also entering that relationship on a personal level. More broadly, father and son are incorporated into properly functioning societies, something currently unavailable to them on Ithaca. The one into which Telemachus gains entry is marked lyrically: he arrives at Pylus as 4,500 men are sacrificing to Poseidon, the ancestor of Nestor as also Alcinous. This is the number of men who served under Nestor at Troy, so that the scene evokes his camp there, likewise situated on the seashore. The scale of the slaughter is unparalleled in Homer and reinforces the ‘Iliadic’ ambience. Many of the men on the beach would have been veterans of the war, and Nestor is of course one of its most important leaders. Athena again places ‘courage’ in Telemachus, so that he can face Nestor (3.76); he returns to Ithaca prepared to assist his father in a heroic exploit. Odysseus, the Trojan War veteran, reenters the human and civilized world on Scheria. His social reintegration can be understood as a preliminary to recovering his identity as ruler and head of his household. Parallel scenes of incorporation prepare Telemachus and Odysseus to return to Ithaca and assume their proper roles there.

To resume: Odysseus faces the seemingly insurmountable task of winning the favor and assistance of a beautiful princess despite his appearance. This directly anticipates his interview with Penelope in Book 19. In either case he employs the only resources left him, his famous eloquence and ingenuity. Homer alerts us to this when he says Odysseus’ speech that was sweet and angling for personal advantage (148: κερδαλέον). Capping the incongruities and false signals, our savage lion now addresses a tender maiden with courtly speech that displays considerable experience in conducting himself with noble women and winning their favor.

Odysseus supplicates Nausicaa, laying emphasis on her marriage which he sees is imminent. Supplication is related to marriage and guest-friendship, both structurally and by social function.\(^{19}\) All three relationships are sealed by gift-giving, and Nausicaa signals Odysseus’ success by providing them. Unlike marriage and guest-friendship, supplication involves voluntary self-abasement, so that Nausicaa’s actions return Odysseus’ honor to him, allowing a social relationship such as guest-friendship to be established. This constellation of themes prepares for Odysseus’ appearance in the royal palace, where he supplicates Arete, and is accepted as a guest-friend by Alcinous, who offers him Nausicaa in marriage! His supplication here as there is followed by the offer of food and wine.

Odysseus deliberates whether to grasp Nausicaa by the knees or speak from where he stands. As is common in such scenes he chooses the latter, more reasoned, course of action. This is a critical calculation, as it involves foregoing the ritual sanctions imposed by establishing direct physical contact. It also continues the comedic element, centered on the first alternative, as with his earlier questions. And it continues the erotic theme: grasping her knees with both hands, as he will presently do when he supplicates Arete,
not insignificantly while touching her knees, would involve exposing himself at close quarters (7.142). Two highly charged moments are prepared for simultaneously. In the deliberation itself, Odysseus decides to maintain his distance to avoid angering Nausicaa. We are again reminded that if he merely offends Nausicaa he is a dead man. More dramatic is his impassioned declaration as he pleads for mercy: ‘dread is my fear to grasp your knees, beset though I am with misery hard to bear’ (168-9).

The erotic theme continues as a central feature of his supplication, casting further light on why the encounter is introduced by ‘naked though he was.’ This elucidates, in turn, his opening gambit, which might seem a bit peculiar at first. The speech has three parts, with subdivisions, and continues the alternating structure of his questions and following deliberation: in the first and third part, he praises Nausicaa’s beauty, in the second he begs her assistance. Nausicaa’s response likewise alternates, between granting his supplication and rebuking her servants.

Odysseus begins his supplication by addressing Nausicaa with an ambiguous term as anassa, or ‘mistress.’ The word occurs four times in Homer: Odysseus addresses Nausicaa this way again momentarily; it is also used in a propitiatory prayer to Athena and once of Demeter. Its masculine form can refer to a human ‘lord’ or to a god, usually Zeus or Artemis’ brother Apollo. Odysseus follows by asking whether Nausicaa is a goddess or a mortal, then dilates on either possibility. Odysseus leads with the more flattering alternative, and flattery is of course the objective as he can see perfectly well that a girl with a mule drawn wagon washing the family laundry is no goddess. When he next likens her to Artemis he has suggested she might be a goddess three times in as many verses. Odysseus thus establishes at the outset that he is a reassuringly pious lion. In drawing the comparison to Artemis, Odysseus seems at first to be conspiring with the poet. He understands not only the situation in which he finds himself, but can even listen in on Homer singing the tale. But while the simile represents Nausicaa as a threat to him, Odysseus’ own objectives in making the comparison are rather the opposite; and therein lies the wit and cunning, which belongs to him. Artemis is the only Olympian goddess, Athena excepted, who is virgin. Athena is twice disqualified for comparison, both as the patroness of Odysseus and equally because she is asexual, even ‘male,’ in contrast to Artemis, whose unrealized sexual potential is one of her defining aspects. In comparing Nausicaa to Artemis, Odysseus points to the sort of relationship he hopes to establish: mortal supplicant of a virgin goddess, an Actaeon who accompanies Artemis on the hunt but does not see her naked. He continues with an opposed image that belongs to the same strategy. It is introduced with a brief priamel, underlined by verbal repetition, in which Odysseus declares her family blessed to include her; but most blessed by far is the man she weds. It would seem that he can not only hear the poet but read Nausicaa’s thoughts and deepest desires. He flatters to win her favor by inviting Nausicaa to picture herself with a husband, but not himself. The point is already clear enough though he makes it inescapable by mentioning a rich dowry which he cannot provide.

The wish for a husband pivots to a second comparison, of Nausicaa to the sprout of a date palm. Homer prepared for this when Odysseus uses a branch of Athena’s tree to cover himself. Odysseus does so himself when he employs a mixed metaphor, comparing Nausicaa to a ‘young shoot entering the dance’ (157). His reference to dancing reminds us of the activity she was engaging in, together with its implications. Plant metaphors are commonly applied to ‘blooming’ youths; interestingly, Sappho compares a bridegroom to
a ‘slender shoot’ (115LP: δρπακι βραδίνωι). But as important here is that a sapling is not yet fruitful. In both senses the metaphor is analogous to comparing Nausicaa to a virgin goddess. As important is that Artemis was born at the base of a date palm on Delos, and ‘is the real mistress of the sanctuary.’

Like Athena’s olive, her palm is sacred, inviolate. In making these comparisons, Odysseus acknowledges that Nausicaa has the power of life and death over him, demonstrates that he is no lion, and propitiates her in a way that separates them by an insurmountable sexual barrier. It also allows him to declare with oblique modesty that he once commanded a great host, but has now fallen on hard times. He exaggerates his sufferings to help win her pity, declaring that he has been driven across the sea by storm winds for twenty days instead of three; for related reasons he tactfully omits Calypso, and with equal tact mentions her to Arete (170-11; 7.254-63). This leads to a plea for pity and assistance, which happens to include the beggar’s rags to wear that Athena provides in the parallel scene from Book 13. On Ithaca, his rags belong to a false identity, as they would have here; and although Nausicaa indirectly calls Odysseus a beggar, she provides him with clothing that reflect his true status (208). The supplication proper flows naturally into a second reference to her future husband. Implicitly he wishes that in exchange for helping him the gods will grant her one, someone else. In a gratuitous appendage to his wish, he obliquely describes his relationship of like-mindedness with Penelope as the perfect marriage (181). He too reveals his inner thoughts, which like Nausicaa are centered on imminent marriage, though unlike Alcinous she betrays no sign of understanding. But even if Nausicaa possessed a cleverness she never displays, like-mindedness is not something that she and Odysseus could ever enjoy.

Odysseus does not volunteer his name, which may go unnoticed here though it introduces a theme of the Phaeacis that foreshadows his tactics on Ithaca. It would also be imprudent as he can see that he is in the civilized world and from this rightly infer that his fame precedes him. More important is that even if he were unknown to the Phaeacians naming himself would distract from his objective of persuading Nausicaa to help him with the strategy of praising her desirability and eliciting her pity. Hardly less important, and equally applicable throughout the adventure, is that he cannot lay claim to the identity of Odysseus until he has demonstrated it, and nothing could seem further from the truth at the moment than he is the hero who sacked Troy.

Neither does Nausicaa ask for his name, but she does approve his performance, finding that he seems neither base nor fool (187; cf. 258). She then admonishes Odysseus that Zeus distributes blessings as he will, and has given these misfortunes to him, which it is necessary to ‘endure.’ The irony and humor are obvious that so naïve and sheltered a maiden would lecture Odysseus on bearing up under godsent suffering. But her deportment is also impeccable: she declares that he will lack nothing appropriate for a ‘suppliant who has endured trials’ (193). For a second time, she affirms his traditional epithet as ‘much enduring’ and along with his physical appearance and tale of woe his heroic identity as a man of pain.

Nausicaa next scolds her maidservants for fleeing since no one will harm the Phaeacians. Her explanation that other men do not mingle with them overlooks how the plainly human Odysseus is doing just that, to which the verbal echo draws attention, as also to the word itself (205). This prepares for her likewise ironic censure of any woman who should ‘mingle’ with men before her marriage (288).
In another of the episode’s many charming moments, the maidservants stand about calling to one another as they summon the courage to approach the courtly lion. They set beside him clothing, and provide olive oil for his bath. Still covered by a branch, Odysseus declines to bathe in their presence out of modesty; and they duly notify Nausicaa. A further motive is his unsightly appearance, since he allows domestic slave-women to bathe him before dinner on the following day (8.449-54). This would help explain why they ask him to bathe himself although Nausicaa instructed them to do so. In that case the effect is further humor as his appearance continues to frighten them.

After bathing, Odysseus dons his clothes and Athena enhances his appearance. Her makeover causes Nausicaa to marvel and exclaim that he resembles a god, hoping that her own husband looks such as he does and that it would please Odysseus to remain on Scheria; she marvels at him again after his second bath. Modesty again prevents her from saying so directly, but she plainly hopes that her husband is he. Astonishingly, Alcinous offers her to Odysseus in marriage and wishes he would remain on Scheria as soon as they meet (7.311-6). And we know in advance from Nausicaa’s own lips that she would approve. The erotic lion has captured his prey, just as the heroic one will do on Ithaca. For a moment, his situation also resembles Penelope’s, but Odysseus had the foresight to indicate before his transformation that he was neither threat nor husband material. One sees why didn’t Athena rejuvenate him before encountering a sheltered maiden in which his very life was at stake. Athena has been testing him. Only when he passes her test does she provide the tools by which he could have won her favor with less effort. Odysseus has been granted and assumed a social identity, specifically in the institution of xenia that is a primary index of culture and civilized values in the poem. This is embedded in the alternative question, are they savage or friendly to strangers, that he put to himself as he prepared to meet the inhabitants.

The maidservants now give Odysseus food and drink, reversing the order of Nausicaa’s command that they feed and then bathe him. This hysteron proteron, or chiastic pattern, is common in Homer, but rendered necessary here by the rejuvenation scene which should follow the bath, while the bath should precede the meal. He eats it greedily, notably like a lion driven by hunger. Nausicaa then informs Odysseus that she will send him to her father’s palace. She launches into a digressive account of the city mentioned earlier, one that we could have visualized through Odysseus’ eyes as he enters it. But Homer is holding the requisite narrative space in reserve for the palace itself. This is also the most prominent of several recurring elements from the beginning of the episode that provide closure via ring-composition. A comprehensive frame is created by Athena putting Odysseus to bed beneath her tree and his praying to Athena in her sacred grove (cf. 305-6~52-3).

Nausicaa continues with what at first appears to be yet another digression, declaring that she fears the bitter speech of the Phaeacians. As it happens, Nausicaa repeats what she just told her maidservants, with further echoes of Athena’s makeover and words to Nausicaa as she sleeps: ‘who is this big and handsome stranger following Nausicaa; doubtless he will be her husband; he must come from far away since no one is near; perhaps he is a god, much prayed for (poluærētos), come from heaven; bah, she despises the many fine Phaeacians who court her’ (276-84). Unlike Odysseus, she does reveal her name, but one can detect further modesty in how she does so only indirectly. This enables Odysseus to praise her by name after his second bath in the palace (8.464).
On the other hand, ‘much prayed for’ not only echoes her mother’s name, Arete, but is the very one Euryclea hinted Autolycus should give the infant Odysseus (19.403-4).

Only now do we learn that with her imagined obloquy Nausicaa has been offering an advance explanation of her request that Odysseus wait in the grove until she reaches home. The roundabout way she does so may betray some embarrassment at her treatment of a suppliant; Alcinous makes just this charge when Odysseus describes their encounter to him (7.299-301). But it also gives Odysseus and the audience another glimpse of her own secret thoughts. Not that her concern is entirely misplaced, especially after Athena rejuvenates him. In fact, Nausicaa riding in a mule drawn wagon with Odysseus walking alongside would have resembled a wedding procession. These commonly took place at eventide in winter, which corresponds to the setting here. She concludes by instructing Odysseus to supplicate Arete as he had her. She neglects to mention her mother’s name, which Athena, disguised as another maiden, helpfully provides him.

Odysseus does as he is told and takes his seat in Athena’s precinct. His prayer as he waits marks the time of Nausicaa’s return journey home. He asks Athena to hearken now at least, for she did not when Poseidon wrecked his raft. We know otherwise, of course, and to bring the irony home Homer assures us that Athena gave heed, but had regard for her father’s brother. The episode closes with Homer repeating his programmatic announcement in the Odyssey-prologue that Poseidon’s rage was unremitting until Odysseus reached home (1.20-1).

Corinne Pache, in memoriam


Farnell (n. 7) 434.

E. *Il*. 21.470; Paus. 5.19; cf. Farnell (n. 7) 431-8; Burkert (n. 7) 149-50.

12.299-308; cf. C. Tsagalis (Lorenzo Valla, forthcoming) *ad loc*.


Cf. wordplay at *Il*. 3.52, with E. Cook (Lorenzo Valla, forthcoming) *ad 3.52*.

Felson-Rubin, N. 1996. *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 182-3, notes that Penelope: “is the creator of several plots that we can label from her own female-centered perspective: COURTSHIP and MARRIAGE, DALLIANCE, DISDAIN and BRIDE OF DEATH, and PATIENCE. She dreaded INFIDELITY and wanted to avoid it at all cost.”

Eust. 1796 (Hellanic., fr. 170c Jacoby; Arist. fr. 506 Rose).


Cook, ibid.

Burkert (n. 7) 144.


Cairns, D. 1990. “Mixing with Men and Nausicaa’s Nemesis.” *CQ* 40: 263-6, shows that the word here implies ‘be on intimate terms,’ beyond propriety but not going so far as having sex. Still, the echo is unmistakable and its use unmistakably sexualized at 136, so it seems to me that the term is here at least highly ironic.