

The subtle temptation of nausikaa

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



The character of Nausikaa is somewhat of an anomaly within The Odyssey. Among women, she is a wholly developed character. Though such depth initially engages Odysseus, it becomes the force that propels him to his ultimate homecoming.

A remarkable aspect of Nausikaa is the completeness of her character. She leaves the impression of a young woman self-possessed and poised. She exudes rationality above all other traits, displayed especially when she proves to be one of the sole characters of the text not taken in by Odysseus' flattery; it is only after Athene "gilded with grace his head and his shoulders" (VI, 235) that Nausikaa's interest is piqued. She admits "A while ago he seemed an unpromising man to me" (VI, 242). Her resistance of Odysseus' charm is unprecedented, and proves both her sophistication and level-headedness.

Nausikaa also radiates confidence. Upon her initial encounter with Odysseus, she is the only woman who stands her ground, later chastising her maidservants for running in fear: "Stand fast, girls. Where are you flying, just because you have looked on a man?" (VI, 199-200) Such courage is doubtless the product of the city itself, which values boldness above all else: both Athene and Nausikaa warn Odysseus to be bold upon meeting with the king and queen. Athene advises him to "go in with a spirit that fears nothing. The bold man proves the better for every action in the end, even though he be a stranger" (VII, 51). Even the palace itself is built of "brazen walls" (VII, 86).

As the developed human being that she is-replete with desires, thoughts, and a host of admirable human qualities-Nausikaa arrives as a sharp contrast to Odysseus' other love interests, who lean toward the one-dimensional and otherworldly. It is her inherent realism as a human that makes Nausikaa so tempting to Odysseus-she is, in fact, a viable option as a wife.

Their initial meeting-which takes place in a paradise-like oceanfront setting (including "a swirling river" and "sweet river grass", as well as bathing and frolicking women (VI, 90-6))-begins on a sexual note, with Odysseus arriving unclothed where Nausikaa herself was naked just a short time before. Thus Nausikaa is established as the most subtle of temptresses from their very first encounter. This premise is further expounded as she is perpetually mentioned as being beautiful-"like the immortal goddess for stature and beauty" (VI, 16). Her beauty is in fact over-emphasized; nearly every one of her lines in the text is coupled with a description of her attractiveness, a comparison of herself and a deity, or a combination of the two. This continual reminder serves to translate to the reader how fully tempting-and dangerous to Odysseus' homecoming-Nausikaa truly is.

It must be noted that Nausikaa frequently attempts to portray herself as naïve. This projected innocence-which fits smoothly with the theme of disguise in *The Odyssey*-is simply a device cleverly employed by Nausikaa to make her more alluring to Odysseus. Such projection can be observed when she feigns shyness while considering the reactions of the harbormen (VI, 270-90). This angle actually works to Nausikaa's advantage; such docility in

a female in something he has not encountered for years, having been dominated by aggressive women for a full decade.

Interestingly enough, Athene perpetuates the theme of girlish innocence, planting it into Odysseus' consciousness by transforming herself into a girl who helps him reach Alkinoös' palace (VII, 18-21). This setup—a sharp woman disguised as a young girl who helps guide Odysseus to the city—is suspiciously familiar. In fact, Athene declares early on that Nausikaa should act as “[Odysseus'] guide to the city of the Phaiakians” (VI, 112). The fact that Nausikaa uses such a shell of innocence as her tactic for acquiring Odysseus is only yet another testament to her cunning.

Odysseus' reaction to such a graceful, desirable individual is utterly surprising: Nausikaa, instead of obstructing his homecoming, actually propels him toward it. His relationship with Nausikaa, and the perfectly ideal circumstances surrounding it, allows him the epiphany that he will only be satisfied with his true home in Ithaka. Thus Nausikaa helps to establish his emotional preparation to return home.

Equally important, though, is the physical preparation for Odysseus' homecoming that Nausikaa provides. His physical and emotional preparation are subtly intertwined, as is clear upon close examination of the text. Intriguingly, each time Nausikaa or Alkinoös mentions marriage (which will lead to the eventual revelation of the necessity of Odysseus' homecoming), the topic is immediately changed to ship preparation for his departure (Odysseus' physical homecoming) (VI, 280-290 and VII, 309-24). Thus

Nausikaa relates again her true purpose in the text: assisting Odysseus in achieving his homecoming.

The culmination of all of Odysseus and Nausikaa's complex interplay is found within their concise goodbye (VIII, 461-8). Nausikaa begins by saying, "Goodbye, stranger" (VIII, 461), which conveys once again her rationality: she acknowledges that he indeed is, after all, a stranger whom she had no true claim to. She is subtly communicating that she didn't place an unwarranted value in their relationship.

"I was the first you owed your life to" (VIII, 462) she continues-Nausikaa, indeed, made Odysseus fully aware of what exactly his life back home was worth to him, though that may not be the exact sentiment she is attempting to convey. Odysseus, though, adopts this meaning and replies, "maiden, my life was your gift" (VIII, 468). The meaning of this simple sentence is illuminated when one considers what exactly Nausikaa unwillingly gave to Odysseus-both appreciation for his home life and a passage home. His true 'life', which he has been toiling to achieve for ten years, is ultimately not won, but given to him as a gift from Nausikaa through resisting her.

The true significance of the pair's final goodbye is uncovered by replacing each appearance of 'life' in the text with 'homecoming'. This computes logically because Odysseus' life is stubbornly fixated on his homecoming, and his identity not fully realized until he reaches home. When replaced, however, it becomes clear that Nausikaa indeed was the first Odysseus owed his homecoming to-"Maiden, my homecoming was your gift"-as she is the instrument by which Odysseus realizes the weight of his *nomos*.