

Pleasant pictures of social and domestic activities in palaces, gardens, huts and even caves present themselves to the reader of Homer's Odyssey. Perhaps these scenes, like the genre paintings of Pieter Breughel or the serene interiors of Jan Vermeer, can fascinate us with their air of offering a peep-hole into the life of an age long gone, and also teach us that "just as there is great music without words, so there is great painting without an important subject matter"¹ - or great poetry, for that matter.

As the Odyssey opens, the goddess Athena has left Olympus to rouse Telemachus into leaving home to search for his long absent father Odysseus. She waits outside the outer gate, while all the suitors of Odysseus' presumed widow Penelope are lounging on steerhide rugs in front of the doors to the hall, playing checkers. Telemachus quickly invites her in, taking her spear from her and setting it in his father's polished spear-rack beside a tall pillar. He settles her into an elegant chair, first spreading a linen cloth over the seat, and beside the footstool for her feet he draws up an inlaid stool for himself. There, well away from the rowdy suitors, the two wash their hands over a silver basin with water from a golden ewer, while a servingmaid sets a polished table beside them. The housekeeper brings bread and a variety of side-dishes from her pantry, the carver serves platters of different cuts of meat, while a herald fills and refills their golden goblets with wine.²

In the meantime, quite unknown of course to the worried Telemachus and his mother, Odysseus is enjoying the hospitality of the nymph Calypso on the island of Ogygia far off in the violet sea, with very mixed feelings. Calypso lives, elegantly enough, with several handmaidens in a large cave. She weaves with a golden shuttle, singing as she walks to and fro in front of her loom, while the scent of juniper and cedar wood from the fire wafts far out over Ogygia. Around her cave grows a wood of poplars, alders and cypresses, while close beside it are lawns of violets and parsley, four fountains in a row, and the trailing stems and clustering fruit of a flourishing grape-vine. But if Calypso is happy, Odysseus is not. He is bored and homesick, and spends his days weeping and sulking on a rock down by the sea. Not until Calypso sets him to raft-building with all the resources of a well stocked Homeric hardware store (a great bronze axe with an olive wood handle, a polished adze, augers, pegs, bolts and sailcloth) is Odysseus satisfied. He leaves Ogygia after five busy days of raft-building fortified for a hard voyage ahead by a bath, scented new clothes, a wineskin, a big waterskin, plenty of provisions, not forgetting some treats, and a warm gentle wind, all courtesy of the generous Calypso. Homer doesn't record that Odysseus thanks her. He merely spreads his sail to the breeze and sails gladly away.³

After a stormy voyage, ending in near disaster, Odysseus swims ashore on Scheria the magic kingdom of King Alcinous, Queen Arete and their daughter, the spirited maiden Nausicaa. It seems that Alcinous and Arete also have five sons, who need a constant supply of clean clothes to go dancing in, and so it happens that Nausicaa and her servant girls are down at the shore playing ball and waiting for the newly washed clothes to dry. After an awkward moment or two for Odysseus, who has lost his clothes in the desperate swim for shore, Nausicaa welcomes the handsome, if salt-stained, stranger as a princess should. She suggests that if he follows her wagon home to the palace, Alcinous will undoubtedly entertain him kindly. Odysseus is very impressed on his arrival there with the grandeur of the palace and grounds on a site close as a man can shout to the city. The buildings are tall, with bronze sheeting on walls and roofs, and a decorative blue enamel cornice. Golden doors

and silver doorposts set off a pair of gold and silver dogs guarding the entrance, while lighting is provided within by golden youths on pedestals with torches in their hands.

Alcinous' gardens, however, are a little less overwhelmingly grand. Outside the royal courtyard is a hedged orchard of pears, apples, pomegranates, figs and olives. Since Scheria is a magic land, none of these fruits seem to go out of season, but ripen endlessly, pear on pear, fig on fig, apple on apple all year round. A vineyard and a well-watered garden, trim and cared-for, lie beside the orchard. Odysseus' welcome is gracious and ceremonious; after a meal with wine and speeches, he is led to a bed under the courtyard portico. In a sturdily-built roped bedstead, spread with purple blankets, coverlets and fleecy cloaks, Odysseus sleeps until the rosy-fingered dawn appears once more.⁴

But not alone in the caves of nymphs or in kings' palaces does Odysseus find a warm welcome on his travels. On his eventual return to Ithaca (for Alcinous sent him home in a speedy ship, prow curved like a stallion's neck, cutting the waves swifter than a falcon flies) Odysseus goes first to his old swineherd Eumaeus' hut. Eumaeus does not recognize Odysseus, disguised as an old beggar, but welcomes him in nonetheless. Eumaeus lives in a hut close to the pig-yards and sties, built like they are, no doubt, of stone and split oak posts and fenced with thorn bushes. His four pig-hands are out to work, herding pigs here and there, or driving one into town to provide the suitors with fresh pork, while Eumaeus himself is cutting out a pair of oxhide sandals. His dogs make a furious rush at Odysseus, until Eumaeus drops his leather, rushes at top speed out through the yard gate shouting and flinging stones at them, and leads Odysseus safely into his hut. Inside he strews the floor with a fresh thick bed of rushes, and spreads on them a wild goat's skin for Odysseus to rest on. By nightfall Odysseus has had two good meals (of roast pork, naturally) and is well settled by the fire alongside the pig hands; the night is wet, windy and moonless, but Odysseus rests comfortably, wrapped around with Eumaeus' spare winter cloak on a bed of sheep and goat skins, while the conscientious Eumaeus goes out to check on his pigs and spend the night with them and the dogs, sheltering from the rain and the northerly winds under an overhanging rock.⁵

Hospitality in Homer's Odyssey, then, ranges in setting from swineherds' huts to palaces, presented in glowing colours and precise in every homely detail, like nothing so much as a set of illustrations by a skilled contemporary genre painter. The subject matter is often unimportant, but the poetry is vivid, unforgettable and great.

1 E. H. Gombrich, The Story of Art, p. 323 (Phaidon Press, 1963). (1979-80 Hagey Lecturer).

2 Od. I ll. 102-143.

3 Od. V ll. 56-269.

4 Od. VII, ll. 81-132, 334-345.

5 Od. XIV, ll. 1-50, 518-533.