

Scott RICHARDSON
Indirection in the *Odyssey*

When Nausikaa gets it in her head to do the laundry in preparation for her wedding day, which will surely come soon, she boldly delays her father's workday with a request for the proper equipment, explaining, with a façade of ingenuity that might have fooled anyone else, that she must look out for her brothers' hygiene. Alkinoos has no trouble decoding his daughter's appeal and grants it without betraying his understanding of her true purpose. We have just heard a conversation in which the communication takes place beneath the surface of the words: what is spoken by both parties is not what is truly conveyed by Nausikaa and meant by Alkinoos. This indirect interchange is a paradigm of the distinctive mode of communication in the *Odyssey*. We like to think of language as a medium for the clear disclosure of thoughts, yet the *Odyssey* as a rule suggests that language tends toward obfuscation rather than illumination and that communication is something of a game which some people are better than others at playing. This attitude toward language extends to a generally suspicious view of the way the world works, both among humans and between mortals and the deities. Keep in mind that Nausikaa does not come up with the laundry idea on her own. Athena, who wants a warm reception for her hero and is sending the girl to the shore for that purpose only, cold-bloodedly misleads her with the cock-and-bull expectation of an impending marriage, a misunderstanding of the "communication" which does the trick: Odysseus finds safety in Skheria and conveyance to Ithaka, leaving behind a disappointed Nausikaa, who knows how to play her part of the language game well but is poor at her young age at picking up the indirection and false surfaces in others' words.

Dialogue in the *Odyssey* is founded on indirection, and success in life owes a great deal to both using and recognizing speech as a means of disguising thought and intent. The indirection in the dialogue reflects the nature of the *Odyssey's* world, in which survival and happiness depend on assuming that appearance is deceiving and that the straightforward is masking a reality that must be deciphered. The narrator himself is a prime illustration. We rely on our narrator to be up-front with us, honest, helpful, a clear-spoken guide into the world of the story, yet the *Odyssey's* narrator, while pretending to be faithful and reliable, frequently treats us to the same sort of obliqueness and even deviousness that the characters use toward each other. Indirection is the norm in the poem, and the implied view of language as smoke and mirrors not only comments on the nature of human communication but also supports a worldview at the heart of the *Odyssey* as a whole, one characterized by distrust, uncertainty, and, at more positive moments, playfulness.