

WITH THE HELP of King Alcinous, Odysseus finally returns home to the shores of Ithaca, where he is met by the goddess Athena. She warns him that his palace is overrun by more than 100 suitors who, believing Odysseus is dead, want to marry Penelope and take over his fortune. Following her advice, Odysseus disguises himself as a beggar and visits the palace. There he sees that two suitors in particular, Antinous and Eurymachus, are rude and demanding. Odysseus has a tearful reunion with his son, Telemachus, and together they discuss how to avenge their family honor. In the meantime, Penelope—who knows nothing of this and has given up hope for Odysseus' return—proposes an archery contest to the suitors, with marriage to her as the prize. She enters the storeroom and takes down the heavy bow that Odysseus left behind.



BOOK

THE TEST OF THE BOW

TWENTY-ONE



Now Penelope

sank down, holding the weapon on her knees,
and drew her husband's great bow out, and sobbed
and bit her lip and let the salt tears flow.

5 Then back she went to face the crowded hall,
tremendous bow in hand, and on her shoulder hung
the quiver spiked with coughing death. Behind her
maids bore a basket full of axeheads, bronze
and iron implements for the master's game.

10 Thus in her beauty she approached the suitors,
and near a pillar of the solid roof
she paused, her shining veil across her cheeks,
her maids on either hand and still,
then spoke to the banqueters:

"My lords, hear me:

15 suitors indeed, you commandeered this house
to feast and drink in, day and night, my husband
being long gone, long out of mind. You found
no justification for yourselves—none
except your lust to marry me. Stand up, then:

Guide for Reading

1-4 Notice that Penelope still grieves for Odysseus, even after 20 years.

7 **quiver** (kwĭv'ər): a case in which arrows are carried. What do you think is meant by "the quiver spiked with coughing death"?

8-9 **axeheads . . . game**: metal heads of axes (without handles) that Odysseus used to employ in a display of archery skill.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

commandeer (kŏm'en-dĭr') v. to take control of by force
justification (jŭs'te-fĭ-kā'shən) n. an explanation or excuse for an action



20 we now declare a contest for that prize.
Here is my lord Odysseus' hunting bow.
Bend and string it if you can. Who sends an arrow
through iron axe-helve sockets, twelve in line?
I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home,
25 my rich and beautiful bridal house, forever
to be remembered, though I dream it only."

Then to Eumaeus:

"Carry the bow forward.

Carry the blades."

Tears came to the swineherd's eyes
as he reached out for the big bow. He laid it
30 down at the suitors' feet. Across the room
the cowherd sobbed, knowing the master's weapon.
Antinous growled, with a glance at both:

"Clods.

They go to pieces over nothing.

You two, there,
why are you sniveling? To upset the woman
35 even more? Has she not pain enough
over her lost husband? *Sit down.*
Get on with dinner quietly, or cry about it
outside, if you must. Leave us the bow.
A clean-cut game, it looks to me.
40 Nobody bends that bowstave easily
in this company. Is there a man here
made like Odysseus? I remember him
from childhood: I can see him even now."

That was the way he played it, hoping inwardly
45 to span the great horn bow with corded gut
and drill the iron with his shot—he, Antinous,
destined to be the first of all to savor
blood from a biting arrow at his throat,
a shaft drawn by the fingers of Odysseus
50 whom he had mocked and plundered, leading on
the rest, his boon companions.

21–23 Note that the contest has two parts: first the suitor must bend the heavy bow and string it—a task that requires immense strength and skill—then he must shoot an arrow straight through the holes in 12 axe heads set up in a row.

28–38 Notice the emotion expressed by the swineherd Eumaeus and the cowherd Philoetius when they are reminded of their master. Then notice how Antinous treats Odysseus' servants.



44–51 Antinous imagines himself winning Penelope's contest. Notice, however, that his death is foreshadowed here.

51 boon companions: jolly friends.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

plunder (plūn'dər) v. to rob of property by force; steal from



DESPITE HEATING AND GREASING the bow, the lesser suitors prove unable to string it. The most able suitors, Antinous and Eurymachus, hold off. While the suitors are busy with the bow, Odysseus—still disguised as an old beggar—goes to enlist the aid of two of his trusted servants, Eumaeus the swineherd and Philoetius the cowherd.



Two men had meanwhile left the hall:
swineherd and cowherd, in companionship,
one downcast as the other. But Odysseus
55 followed them outdoors, outside the court,
and coming up said gently:

“You, herdsman,
and you, too, swineherd, I could say a thing to you,
or should I keep it dark?

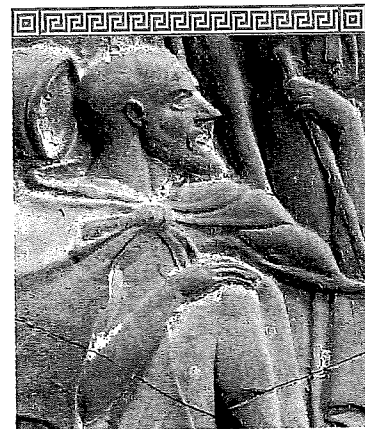
No, no; speak,
my heart tells me. Would you be men enough
60 to stand by Odysseus if he came back?
Suppose he dropped out of a clear sky, as I did?
Suppose some god should bring him?
Would you bear arms for him, or for the suitors?”

The cowherd said:

“Ah, let the master come!
65 Father Zeus, grant our old wish! Some courier
guide him back! Then judge what stuff is in me
and how I manage arms!”

Likewise Eumaeus
fell to praying all heaven for his return,
so that Odysseus, sure at least of these,
70 told them:

“I am at home, for I am he.
I bore adversities, but in the twentieth year
I am ashore in my own land. I find
the two of you, alone among my people,
longed for my coming. Prayers I never heard
75 except your own that I might come again.
So now what is in store for you I’ll tell you:



72-75 What is the quality that Odysseus values so highly in these two servants?

If Zeus brings down the suitors by my hand
I promise marriages to both, and cattle,
and houses built near mine. And you shall be
80 brothers-in-arms of my Telemachus.
Here, let me show you something else, a sign
that I am he, that you can trust me, look:
this old scar from the tusk wound that I got
boar hunting on Parnassus—
85 Autolycus' sons and I.”

Shifting his rags

he bared the long gash. Both men looked, and knew,
and threw their arms around the old soldier, weeping,
kissing his head and shoulders. He as well
took each man's head and hands to kiss, then said—
90 to cut it short, else they might weep till dark—

“Break off, no more of this.
Anyone at the door could see and tell them.
Drift back in, but separately at intervals
after me.

Now listen to your orders:

95 when the time comes, those gentlemen, to a man,
will be dead against giving me bow or quiver.
Defy them. Eumaeus, bring the bow
and put it in my hands there at the door.
Tell the women to lock their own door tight.
100 Tell them if someone hears the shock of arms
or groans of men, in hall or court, not one
must show her face, but keep still at her weaving.
Philoetius, run to the outer gate and lock it.
Throw the cross bar and lash it.”

He turned back

105 into the courtyard and the beautiful house
and took the stool he had before. They followed
one by one, the two hands loyal to him.

Eurymachus had now picked up the bow.
He turned it round, and turned it round
110 before the licking flame to warm it up,
but could not, even so, put stress upon it

84 Parnassus (pär-näs'əs): a mountain in central Greece.

85 Autolycus' (ô-töl'ÿ-kəs) sons: Odysseus' uncles. (Autolycus was Odysseus' grandfather on his mother's side.)

94-104 Odysseus has a plan but reveals to the servants only the details they must take care of. On the basis of the orders he gives, what do you think Odysseus is planning?



to jam the loop over the tip
 though his heart groaned to bursting.
Then he said grimly:

“Curse this day.

115 What gloom I feel, not for myself alone,
and not only because we lose that bride.
Women are not lacking in Achaea,
in other towns, or on Ithaca. No, the worst
is humiliation—to be shown up for children
measured against Odysseus—we who cannot
120 even hitch the string over his bow.
What shame to be repeated of us, after us!”

113–121 Since most of the suitors have already tried the challenge and failed, Eurymachus here speaks for all of them when he expresses his shame and embarrassment. Is the suitors’ concern about their reputation for physical strength similar to attitudes men have today?

116 Achaea (ə-kē’ə): the Greek mainland.

Then spoke Odysseus, all craft and gall:

“My lords, contenders for the queen, permit me:
a passion in me moves me to speak out.

125 I put it to Eurymachus above all
and to that brilliant prince, Antinous. . . .
But let me try my hand at the smooth bow!
Let me test my fingers and my pull
to see if any of the oldtime kick is there,
130 or if thin fare and roving took it out of me.”

Now irritation beyond reason swept them all,
since they were nagged by fear that he could string it.
Antinous answered, coldly and at length:

“You bleary vagabond, no rag of sense is left you.
135 Are you not coddled here enough, at table
taking meat with gentlemen, your betters,
denied nothing, and listening to our talk?
When have we let a tramp hear all our talk?
The sweet goad of wine has made you rave!”



140 At this the watchful queen Penelope
interposed:

“Antinous, discourtesy
to a guest of Telemachus—whatever guest—
that is not handsome. What are you afraid of?
Suppose this exile put his back into it
145 and drew the great bow of Odysseus—
could he then take me home to be his bride?
You know he does not imagine that! No one
need let that prospect weigh upon his dinner!
How very, very improbable it seems.”

122–130 Remember that Odysseus is disguised as an old beggar. Think about the effect of an old beggar's request to try the challenge just after the finest princes in the land have failed so miserably.

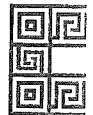
130 thin fare and roving: poor food and hard travel.

134–139 How does Antinous react to the beggar's request?

140–149 The epithet “watchful queen” characterizes Penelope as patient and observant. Here she scolds the suitors for their lack of courtesy and hospitality—values they consistently ignore—and urges them to give the stranger a chance.



AT TELEMACHUS' REQUEST, Penelope leaves the men to settle the question of the bow among themselves.



WORDS
TO
KNOW **gall** (gôl) *n.* scornful boldness



150 The swineherd had the horned bow in his hands
moving toward Odysseus, when the crowd
in the banquet hall broke into an ugly din,
shouts rising from the flushed young men:

“Ho! Where
do you think you are taking that, you smutty slave?”

153-157 How would you describe the way the suitors treat the old swineherd?

155 “What is this dithering?”

“We’ll toss you back alone
among the pigs, for your own dogs to eat,
if bright Apollo nods and the gods are kind!”

He faltered, all at once put down the bow, and stood
in panic, buffeted by waves of cries,
160 hearing Telemachus from another quarter
shout:

“Go on, take him the bow!

Do you obey this pack?

You will be stoned back to your hills! Young as I am
my power is over you! I wish to God
165 I had as much the upper hand of these!
There would be suitors pitched like dead rats
through our gate, for the evil plotted here!”

162-172 As Penelope did earlier, Telemachus stands up to the suitors. He wishes that he had as much power over them as he has, despite his youth, over the servant Eumaeus. The suitors just laugh at Telemachus, but as they do, Eumaeus is able to deliver the bow safely to Odysseus.

Telemachus’ frenzy struck someone as funny,
and soon the whole room roared with laughter at him,
170 so that all tension passed. Eumaeus picked up
bow and quiver, making for the door,
and there he placed them in Odysseus’ hands.
Calling Eurycleia to his side he said:

173-178 Eumaeus orders Eurycleia to lock the women’s room. Why does he say that the orders came from Telemachus rather than from Odysseus?

“Telemachus

trusts you to take care of the women’s doorway.
175 Lock it tight. If anyone inside
should hear the shock of arms or groans of men
in hall or court, not one must show her face,
but go on with her weaving.”

The old woman
nodded and kept still. She disappeared

WORDS
TO
KNOW

dithering (dīth’er-ĭng) *n.* acting in a nervous or uncertain way **dither** *v.*
frenzy (frĕn’zē) *n.* a wildly excited state of mind

180 into the women's hall, bolting the door behind her.
Philoetius left the house now at one bound,
catlike, running to bolt the courtyard gate.
A coil of deck-rope of papyrus fiber
lay in the gateway; this he used for lashing,
185 and ran back to the same stool as before,
fastening his eyes upon Odysseus.

And Odysseus took his time,
turning the bow, tapping it, every inch,
for borings that termites might have made
while the master of the weapon was abroad.
190 The suitors were now watching him, and some
jested among themselves:

“A bow lover!”

“Dealer in old bows!”

“Maybe he has one like it
at home!”

“Or has an itch to make one for himself.”

“See how he handles it, the sly old buzzard!”

195 And one disdainful suitor added this:

“May his fortune grow an inch for every inch he bends it!”

But the man skilled in all ways of contending,
satisfied by the great bow's look and heft,
like a musician, like a harper, when
200 with quiet hand upon his instrument
he draws between his thumb and forefinger
a sweet new string upon a peg: so effortlessly
Odysseus in one motion strung the bow.
Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it,
205 so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang
a swallow's note.

In the hushed hall it smote the suitors
and all their faces changed. Then Zeus thundered
overhead, one loud crack for a sign.
And Odysseus laughed within him that the son



198 heft: weight.

199–203 In this epic simile
Odysseus' stringing of the bow
is compared to the stringing of a
harp. What qualities of Odysseus
does this comparison emphasize?

206 smote: struck; affected
sharply.

207–208 The thunder, a sign from
Zeus, indicates that the gods are
on Odysseus' side.

210 of crooked-minded Cronus had flung that omen down.
He picked one ready arrow from his table
where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still
in the quiver for the young men's turn to come.
He nocked it, let it rest across the handgrip,
215 and drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow,
aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

210 Cronus (krō'nes): Zeus' father.

214 nocked it: placed the arrow's feathered end against the bow-string.

Now flashed
arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle
through every socket ring, and grazed not one,
to thud with heavy brazen head beyond.

219 brazen: made of brass.

220 Odysseus said:

Then quietly

“Telemachus, the stranger
you welcomed in your hall has not disgraced you.
I did not miss, neither did I take all day
stringing the bow. My hand and eye are sound,
not so contemptible as the young men say.
225 The hour has come to cook their lordships' mutton—
supper by daylight. Other amusements later,
with song and harping that adorn a feast.”

He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince
Telemachus, true son of King Odysseus,
230 belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear,
and with a clink and glitter of keen bronze
stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.

228–232 Book 21 ends with the image of father and son standing side by side facing more than 100 enemies.