

# ODYSSEY 22

And now Odysseus' cunning was revealed.  
He stripped off his rags and leapt with his bow  
To the great threshold. Spreading the arrows  
Out before his feet, he spoke to the suitors:

"Now that we've separated the men from the boys,  
I'll see if I can hit a mark that no man  
Has ever hit. Apollo grant me glory!"

As he spoke he took aim at Antinous,  
Who at that moment was lifting to his lips  
A golden cup—a fine, two-eared golden goblet—  
And was just about to sip the wine. Bloodshed  
Was the farthest thing from his mind.  
They were at a banquet. Who would think  
That one man, however strong, would take them all on  
And so ensure his own death? Odysseus  
Took dead aim at Antinous' throat and shot,  
And the arrow punched all the way through  
The soft neck tissue. Antinous fell to one side,  
The cup dropped from his hands, and a jet  
Of dark blood spurted from his nostrils.  
He kicked the table as he went down,  
Spilling the food on the floor, and the bread  
And roast meat were fouled in the dust.

The crowd

Burst into an uproar when they saw  
Antinous go down. They jumped from their seats  
And ran in a panic through the hall,

Scanning the walls for weapons—

A spear, a shield. But there were none to be had.

Odysseus listened to their angry jeers:

"You think you can shoot at men, you tramp?"

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"That's your last contest—you're as good as dead!"

"You've killed the best young man in Ithaca!"

"Vultures will eat you on this very spot!"

They all assumed he had not shot to kill,

And had no idea how tightly the net

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Had been drawn around them. Odysseus

Scowled at the whole lot of them, and said:

"You dogs! You thought I would never

Come home from Troy. So you wasted my house,

Forced the women to sleep with you,

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And while I was still alive you courted my wife

Without any fear of the gods in high heaven

Or of any retribution from the world of men.

Now the net has been drawn tight around you."

At these words the color drained from their faces,

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And they all looked around for a way to escape.

Only Eurymachus had anything to say:

"If you are really Odysseus of Ithaca,

Then what you say is just. The citizens

Have done many foolish things in this house

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And many in the fields. But the man to blame

Lies here dead, Antinous. He started it all,

Not so much because he wanted a marriage

Or needed one, but for another purpose,

Which Zeus did not fulfill: he wanted to be king

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In Ithaca, and to kill your son in ambush.

Now he's been killed, and he deserved it.

But spare your people. We will pay you back

For all we have eaten and drunk in your house.  
We will make a collection; each man will put in  
The worth of twenty oxen; we will make restitution  
In bronze and gold until your heart is soothed.  
Until then no one could blame you for being angry."

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Odysseus fixed him with a stare and said:

"Eurymachus, not even if all of you  
Gave me your entire family fortunes,  
All that you have and ever will have,  
Would I stay my hands from killing.  
You courted my wife, and you will pay in full.  
Your only choice now is to fight like men  
Or run for it. Who knows, one or two of you  
Might live to see another day. But I doubt it."

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Their blood turned milky when they heard this.  
Eurymachus now turned to them and said:

"Friends, this man is not going to stop at anything.  
He's got his arrows and bow, and he'll shoot  
From the threshold until he's killed us all.  
We've got to fight back. Draw your swords  
And use the tables as shields. If we charge him  
In a mass and push him from the doorway  
We can get reinforcements from town in no time.  
Then this man will have shot his last shot."

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With that, he drew his honed bronze sword  
And charged Odysseus with an ear-splitting cry.  
Odysseus in the same instant let loose an arrow  
That entered his chest just beside the nipple  
And spiked down to his liver. The sword fell  
From Eurymachus' hand. He spun around  
And fell on a table, knocking off dishes and cups,  
And rolled to the ground, his forehead banging  
Up and down against it and his feet kicking a chair  
In his death throes, until the world went dark.

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Amphinomus went for Odysseus next,  
Rushing at him with his sword drawn,  
Hoping to drive him away from the door. 95  
Telemachus got the jump on him, though,  
Driving a bronze-tipped spear into his back  
Square between his shoulder blades  
And through to his chest. He fell with a thud,  
His forehead hammering into the ground. 100  
Telemachus sprang back, leaving the spear  
Right where it was, stuck in Amphinomus,  
Fearing that if he tried to pull it out  
Someone would rush him and cut him down  
As he bent over the corpse. So he ran over 105  
To his father's side, and his words flew fast:

"I'll bring you a shield, Father, two spears  
And a bronze helmet—I'll find one that fits.  
When I come back I'll arm myself  
And the cowherd and swineherd. Better armed than not." 110

And Odysseus, the great tactician:

"Bring me what you can while I still have arrows  
Or these men might drive me away from the door."

And Telemachus was off to the room  
Where the weapons were stored. He took 115  
Four shields, eight spears, and four bronze helmets  
With thick horsehair plumes and brought them  
Quickly to his father. Telemachus armed himself,  
The two servants did likewise, and the three of them  
Took their stand alongside the cunning warrior, 120  
Odysseus. As long as the arrows held out  
He kept picking off the suitors one by one,  
And they fell thick as flies. But when the master archer  
Ran out of arrows, he leaned the bow  
Against the doorpost of the entrance hall 125  
And slung a four-ply shield over his shoulder,  
Put on his head a well-wrought helmet  
With a plume that made his every nod a threat,

And took two spears tipped with heavy bronze.

Built into the higher wall of the main hall 130  
Was a back door reached by a short flight of stairs  
And leading to a passage closed by double doors.  
Odysseus posted the swineherd at this doorway,  
Which could be attacked by only one man at a time.  
It was just then that Agelaus called to the suitors: 135

"Let's one of us get up to the back door  
And get word to the town. Act quickly  
And this man will have shot his last."

But the goatherd Melanthius answered him:

"That won't work, Agelaus. 140  
The door outside is too near the courtyard—  
An easy shot from where he is standing—  
And the passageway is dangerously narrow.  
One good man could hold it against all of us.  
Look, let me bring you weapons and armor 145  
From the storeroom. That has to be where  
Odysseus and his son have laid them away."

So saying, Melanthius clambered up  
To Odysseus' storerooms. There he picked out  
Twelve shields and as many spears and helmets 150  
And brought them out quickly to give to the suitors.  
Odysseus' heart sank, and his knees grew weak  
When he saw the suitors putting on armor  
And brandishing spears. This wasn't going to be easy.  
His words flew out to Telemachus: 155

"One of the women in the halls must be  
Waging war against us—unless it's Melanthius."

And Telemachus, cool-headed under fire:

"No, it's my fault, Father, and no one else's.  
I must have left the storeroom door open, 160

And one of them spotted it.

Eumaeus!

Go close the door to the storeroom,  
And see whether one of the women is behind this,  
Or Melanthius, son of Dolius, as I suspect."

As they were speaking, Melanthius the goatherd 165  
Was making another trip to the storeroom  
For more weapons. The swineherd spotted him  
And was quick to point him out to Odysseus:

"There he goes, my lord Odysseus—  
The sneak—just as we thought, on his way 170  
To the storeroom! Tell me what to do.  
Kill him if I prove to be the better man,  
Or bring him to you, so he can pay in full  
For all the wrongs he has done here in your house?"

Odysseus brought his mind to bear on this: 175

"Telemachus and I will keep the suitors busy  
In the hall here. Don't worry about that.  
Tie him up. Bend his arms and legs behind him  
And lash them to a board strapped onto his back.  
Then hoist him up to the rafters in the storeroom 180  
And leave him there to twist in the wind."

This was just what Eumaeus and the cowherd  
Wanted to hear. Off they went to the storeroom,  
Unseen by Melanthius, who was inside  
Rooting around for armor and weapons. 185  
They lay in wait on either side of the door,  
And when Melanthius crossed the threshold,  
Carrying a beautiful helmet in one hand  
And in the other a broad old shield,  
Flecked with rust—a shield the hero Laertes 190  
Had carried in his youth but that had long since  
Been laid aside with its straps unstitched—  
Eumaeus and the cowherd Philoetius  
Jumped him and dragged him by the hair

Back into the storeroom. They threw him 195  
Hard to the ground, knocking the wind out of him,  
And tied his hands and feet behind his back,  
Making it hurt, as Odysseus had ordered.  
Then they attached a rope to his body  
And hoisted him up along the tall pillar 200  
Until he was up by the rafters, and you,  
Swineherd Eumaeus, you mocked him:

"Now you'll really be on watch, Melanthius,  
The whole night through, lying on a feather bed—  
Just your style—and you're sure to see 205  
The early dawn come up from Ocean's streams,  
Couched in gold, at the hour when you drive your goats  
Up to the hall to make a feast for the suitors."

So Melanthius was left there, racked with pain,  
While Eumaeus and the cowherd put on their armor, 210  
Closed the polished door, and rejoined Odysseus,  
The cunning warrior. So they took their stand  
There on the threshold, breathing fury,  
Four of them against the many who stood in the hall.

And then Athena was with them, Zeus' daughter 215  
Looking just like Mentor and assuming his voice.  
Odysseus, glad to see her, spoke these words:

"Mentor, old friend, help me out here.  
Remember all the favors I've done for you.  
We go back a long way, you and I." 220

He figured it was Athena, the soldier's goddess.  
On the other side, the suitors yelled and shouted,  
Agelaus' voice rising to rebuke Athena:

"You there, Mentor, don't let Odysseus  
Talk you into helping him and fighting us. 225  
This is the way I see it turning out.  
When we have killed these men, father and son,  
We'll kill you next for what you mean to do

In this hall. You'll pay with your life.  
And when we've taken care of all five of you, 230  
We'll take everything you have, Mentor,  
Everything in your house and in your fields,  
And add it to Odysseus' property.  
We won't let your sons stay in your house  
Or let your daughters or even your wife 235  
Go about freely in the town of Ithaca."

This made Athena all the more angry,  
And she turned on Odysseus and snapped at him:

"I can't believe, Odysseus, that you,  
Of all people, have lost the guts you had 240  
When you fought the Trojans for nine long years  
To get Helen back, killing so many in combat  
And coming up with the plan that took wide Troy.  
How is it that now, when you've come home,  
You get all teary-eyed about showing your strength 245  
To this pack of suitors? Get over here  
Next to me and see what I can do. I'll show you  
What sort of man Mentor, son of Alcimus, is,  
And how he repays favors in the heat of battle."

Athena spoke these words, but she did not yet 250  
Give Odysseus the strength to turn the tide.  
She was still testing him, and his glorious son,  
To see what they were made of. As for herself,  
The goddess flew up to the roofbeam  
Of the smoky hall, just like a swallow. 255

The suitors were now rallied by Agelaus  
And by Damastor, Eurynomus, and Amphimedon,  
As well as by Demoptolemus and Peisander,  
Son of Polyctor, and the warrior Polybus.  
These were the best of the suitors lucky enough 260  
To still be fighting for their lives. The rest  
Had been laid low by the showers of arrows.  
Agelaus now made this speech to them:



"He's had it now. Mentor's abandoned him  
After all that hot air, and the four of them 265  
Are left alone at the outer doors.  
All right, now. Don't throw your spears all at once.  
You six go first, and hope that Zeus allows  
Odysseus to be hit and gives us the glory.  
The others won't matter once he goes down." 270

They took his advice and gave it their best,  
But Athena made their shots all come to nothing,  
One man hitting the doorpost, another the door,  
Another's bronze-tipped ash spear sticking 275  
Into the wall. Odysseus and his men  
Weren't even nicked, and the great hero said to them:

"It's our turn now. I say we throw our spears  
Right into the crowd. These bastards mean to kill us  
On top of everything else they've done to wrong me."

He spoke, and they all threw their sharp spears 280  
With deadly aim. Odysseus hit Demoptolemus;  
Telemachus got Euryades; the swineherd, Elatus;  
And the cattle herder took out Peisander.  
They all bit the dirt at the same moment,  
And the suitors retreated to the back of the hall, 285  
Allowing Odysseus and his men to run out  
And pull their spears from the dead men's bodies.

The suitors rallied for another volley,  
Throwing their sharp spears with all they had.  
This time Athena made most of them miss, 290  
One man hitting the doorpost, another the door,  
Another's bronze-tipped ash spear sticking  
Into the wall. But Amphimedon's spear  
Grazed Telemachus' wrist, breaking the skin,  
And Ctessipus' spear clipped Eumaeus' shoulder 295  
As it sailed over his shield and kept on going  
Until it hit the ground. Then Odysseus and his men  
Got off another round into the throng,  
Odysseus, sacker of cities, hitting Eurydamas;

Telemachus getting Amphimedon; the swineherd, Polybus; 300  
 And lastly the cattle herder striking Ctessipus  
 Square in the chest. And he crowed over him:

"Always picking a fight, just like your father.  
 Well, you can stop all your big talk now.  
 We'll let the gods have the last word this time. 305  
 Take this spear as your host's gift, fair exchange  
 For the hoof you threw at godlike Odysseus  
 When he made his rounds begging in the hall."

Thus the herder of the spiral-horned cattle.

Odysseus, meanwhile, had skewered Damastor's son 310  
 With a hard spear-thrust in hand-to-hand fighting,  
 And Telemachus killed Leocritus, Evenor's son,  
 Piercing him in the groin and driving his bronze spear  
 All the way through. Leocritus pitched forward,  
 His forehead slamming onto the ground.

Only then 315

Did Athena hold up her overpowering aegis  
 From her high perch, and the minds of the suitors  
 Shriveled with fear, and they fled through the hall

*Like a herd of cattle that an iridescent gadfly*  
*Goads along on a warm spring afternoon,* 320

With Odysseus and his men after them

*Like vultures with crooked talons and hooked beaks*  
*Descending from the mountains upon a flock*  
*Of smaller birds, who fly low under the clouds*  
*And over the plain. The vultures swoop down* 325  
*To pick them off; the smaller birds cannot escape,*  
*And men thrill to see the chase in the sky.*

Odysseus and his cohorts were clubbing the suitors  
 Right and left all through the hall; horrible groans  
 Rose from their lips as their heads were smashed in, 330  
 And the floor of the great hall smoked with blood.

It was then that Leodes, the soothsayer, rushed forward,  
Clasped Odysseus' knees, and begged for his life:

"By your knees, Odysseus, respect me  
And pity me. I swear I have never said or done 335  
Anything wrong to any woman in your house.  
I tried to stop the suitors when they did such things,  
But they wouldn't listen, wouldn't keep their hands clean,  
And now they've paid a cruel price for their sins.  
And I, their soothsayer, who have done no wrong, 340  
Will be laid low with them. That's the gratitude I get."

Odysseus scowled down at the man and said:

"If you are really their soothsayer, as you boast you are,  
How many times must you have prayed in the halls  
That my sweet homecoming would never come, 345  
And that you would be the one my wife would go off with  
And bear children to! You're a dead man."

As he spoke his strong hand reached for a sword  
That lay nearby—a sword Agelaus had dropped  
When he was killed. The soothsayer was struck 350  
Full in the neck. His lips were still forming words  
When his lopped head rolled in the dust.

All this while the bard, Phemius, was busy  
Trying not to be killed. This man, Terpes' son,  
Sang for the suitors under compulsion. 355  
He stood now with his pure-toned lyre  
Near the high back door, trying to decide  
Whether he should slip out from the hall  
And crouch at the altar of Zeus of the Courtyard—  
The great altar on which Laertes and Odysseus 360  
Had burned many an ox's thigh—  
Or whether he should rush forward  
And supplicate Odysseus by his knees.  
Better to fall at the man's knees, he thought.  
So he laid the hollow lyre on the ground 365  
Between the wine-bowl and silver-studded chair

And ran up to Odysseus and clasped his knees.  
His words flew up to Odysseus like birds:

"By your knees, Odysseus, respect me  
And pity me. You will regret it someday 370  
If you kill a bard—me—who sings for gods and men.  
I am self-taught, and a god has planted in my heart  
All sorts of songs and stories, and I can sing to you  
As to a god. So don't be too eager  
To slit my throat. Telemachus will tell you 375  
That I didn't come to your house by choice  
To entertain the suitors at their feasts.  
There were too many of them; they made me come."

Telemachus heard him and said to his father:

"He's innocent; don't kill him. 380  
And let's spare the herald, Medon,  
Who used to take care of me when I was a child,  
If Philoetius hasn't already killed him—  
Or the swineherd—or if he didn't run into you  
As you were charging through the house." 385

Medon heard what Telemachus said.  
He was under a chair, wrapped in an oxhide,  
Cowering from death. Now he jumped up,  
Stripped off the oxhide, ran to Telemachus  
And fell at his knees. His words rose on wings: 390

"I'm here, Telemachus! Hold back, and ask your father  
To hold back too, or he might kill me with cold bronze,  
Strong as he is and as mad as he is at the suitors,  
Who ate away his house and paid you no honor."

Odysseus smiled at this and said to him: 395

"Don't worry, he's saved you. Now you know,  
And you can tell the world, how much better  
Good deeds are than evil. Go outside, now,  
You and the singer, and sit in the yard

Away from the slaughter, until I finish  
Everything I have to do inside the house." 400

So he spoke, and the two went out of the hall  
And sat down by the altar of great Zeus,  
Wide-eyed and expecting death at any moment.  
Odysseus, too, had his eyes wide open, 405  
Looking all through his house to see if anyone  
Was still alive and hiding from death.  
But everyone he saw lay in the blood and dust,  
The whole lot of them,

*like fish that fishermen  
Have drawn up in nets from the grey sea 410  
Onto the curved shore. They lie all in heaps  
On the sand beach, longing for the salt waves,  
And the blazing sun drains their life away.*

So too the suitors, lying in heaps.

Then Odysseus called to Telemachus: 415

"Go call the nurse Eurycleia for me.  
I want to tell her something."

So Telemachus went  
To Eurycleia's room, rattled the door, and called:

"Get up and come out here, old woman—you  
Who are in charge of all our women servants. 420  
Come on. My father has something to say to you."

Eurycleia's response died on her lips.  
She opened the doors to the great hall,  
Came out, and followed Telemachus  
To where Odysseus, spattered with blood and grime  
Stood among the bodies of the slain. 425

*A lion that has just fed upon an ox in a field  
Has his chest and cheeks smeared with blood,  
And his face is terrible to look upon.*

So too Odysseus,  
Smeared with gore from head to foot.

When Eurycleia 430  
Saw all the corpses and the pools of blood,  
She lifted her head to cry out in triumph—  
But Odysseus stopped her cold,  
Reining her in with these words:

“Rejoice in your heart, but do not cry aloud. 435  
It is unholy to gloat over the slain. These men  
Have been destroyed by divine destiny  
And their own recklessness. They honored no one,  
Rich or poor, high or low, who came to them.  
And so by their folly they have brought upon themselves 440  
An ugly fate.

Now tell me, which of the women  
Dishonor me and which are innocent?”

And Eurycleia, the loyal nurse:

“Yes indeed, child, I will tell you all.  
There are fifty women in your house, 445  
Servants we have taught to do their work,  
To card wool and bear all the drudgery.  
Of these, twelve have shamed this house  
And respect neither me nor Penelope herself.  
Telemachus has only now become a man, 450  
And his mother has not allowed him  
To direct the women servants.

May I go now  
To the upstairs room and tell your wife?  
Some god has wrapped her up in sleep.”

Odysseus, his mind teeming, answered her: 455

“Don’t wake her yet. First bring those women  
Who have acted so disgracefully.”

While the old woman went out through the hall  
To tell the women the news—and to summon twelve—

Odysseus called Telemachus and the two herdsmen  
And spoke to them words fletched like arrows:

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"Start carrying out the bodies,  
And have the women help you.

Then sponge down  
All of the beautiful tables and chairs.  
When you have set the whole house in order,  
Take the women outside between the round house  
And the courtyard fence. Slash them with swords  
Until they have forgotten their secret lovemaking  
With the suitors. Then finish them off."

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Thus Odysseus, and the women came in,  
Huddled together and shedding salt tears.  
First they carried out the dead bodies  
And set them down under the courtyard's portico,  
Propping them against each other. Odysseus himself  
Kept them at it. Then he had them sponge down  
All of the beautiful tables and chairs.  
Telemachus, the swineherd, and the cowherd  
Scraped the floor with hoes, and the women  
Carried out the scrapings and threw them away.  
When they had set the whole house in order,  
They took the women out between the round house  
And the courtyard fence, penning them in  
With no way to escape. And Telemachus,  
In his cool-headed way, said to the others:

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"I won't allow a clean death for these women—  
The suitors' sluts—who have heaped reproaches  
Upon my own head and upon my mother's."

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He spoke, and tied the cable of a dark-prowed ship  
To a great pillar and pulled it about the round house,  
Stretching it high so their feet couldn't touch the ground.

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*Long-winged thrushes, or doves, making their way  
To their roosts, fall into a snare set in a thicket,  
And the bed that receives them is far from welcome.*

So too these women, their heads hanging in a row,  
The cable looped around each of their necks.  
It was a most piteous death. Their feet fluttered  
For a little while, but not for long.

495

Then they brought Melanthius outside,  
And in their fury they sliced off  
His nose and ears with cold bronze  
And pulled his genitals out by the root—  
Raw meat for the dogs—and chopped off  
His hands and feet.

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                    This done,  
They washed their own hands and feet  
And went back into their master's great hall.

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Then Odysseus said to Eurycleia:

"Bring me sulfur, old woman, and fire,  
So that I can fumigate the hall.  
And go tell Penelope to come down here,  
And all of the women in the house as well."

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And Eurycleia, the faithful nurse:

"As you say, child. But first let me bring you  
A tunic and a cloak for you to put on.  
You should not be standing here like this  
With rags on your body. It's not right."

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Odysseus, his mind teeming, answered her:

"First make a fire for me here in the hall."

He spoke, and Eurycleia did as she was told.  
She brought fire and sulfur, and Odysseus  
Purified his house, the halls and the courtyard.

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Then the old nurse went through Odysseus'  
Beautiful house, telling the women the news.



They came from their hall with torches in their hands  
And thronged around Odysseus and embraced him.  
And as they kissed his head and shoulders and hands  
He felt a sudden, sweet urge to weep,  
For in his heart he knew them all.

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