

ODYSSEY 18

And now there came the town beggar
Making his rounds, known throughout Ithaca
For his greedy belly and endless bouts
Of eating and drinking. He had no real strength
Or fighting power—just plenty of bulk. 5
Arnaeus was the name his mother had given him,
But the young men all called him Irus
Because he was always running errands for someone.
He had a mind to drive Odysseus out of his own house
And started in on him with words like this: 10

“Out of the doorway, geezer, before I throw you out
On your ear! Don’t you see all these people
Winking at me to give you the bum’s rush?
I wouldn’t want to stoop so low, but if you don’t
Get out now, I may have to lay hands on you.” 15

Odysseus gave him a measured look and said:

“What’s wrong with you? I’m not doing
Or saying anything to bother you. I don’t mind
If someone gives you a handout, even a large one. 20
This doorway is big enough for both of us.
There’s no need for you to be jealous of others.
Now look, you’re a vagrant, just like I am.
Prosperity is up to the gods. But if I were you,
I’d be careful about challenging me with your fists.
I might get angry, and old man though I am, 25
I just might haul off and bust you in the mouth.

I'd have more peace and quiet tomorrow.
I don't think you'd come back a second time
To the hall of Laertes' son, Odysseus."

This got Irus angry, and he answered: 30

"Listen to the mangy glutton run on,
Like an old kitchen woman! I'll fix him good—
Hit him with a left and then a right until
I knock his teeth out onto the ground,
The way we'd do a pig caught eating the crops. 35
Put 'em up, and everybody will see how we fight.
How are you going to stand up to a younger man?"

That's how they goaded each other on,
There on the great polished threshold.
Antinous took this in and said with a laugh: 40

"How about this, friends? We haven't had
This much fun in a long time. Thank God
For a little entertainment! The stranger and Irus
Are getting into a fight. Let's have them square off!"

They all jumped up laughing and crowded around 45
The two tattered beggars. And Antinous said:

"Listen, proud suitors, to my proposal.
We've got these goat paunches on the fire,
Stuffed with fat and blood, ready for supper.
Whichever of the two wins and proves himself 50
The better man, gets the stuffed paunch of his choice.
Furthermore, he dines with us in perpetuity
And to the exclusion of all other beggars."

Everyone approved of Antinous' speech.
Then Odysseus, who knew all the moves, said: 55

"Friends, there's no way a broken-down old man
Can fight with a younger. Still, my belly,
That troublemaker, urges me on. So,

I'll just have to get beat up. But all of you,
Swear me an oath that no one, favoring Irus, 60
Will foul me and beat me for him."

They all swore that they wouldn't hit him,
And then Telemachus, feeling his power, said:

"Stranger, if you have the heart for this fight,
Don't worry about the onlookers. If anyone 65
Strikes you, he will have to fight us all.
I guarantee this as your host, and I am joined
By Antinous and Eurymachus,
Lords and men of discernment both."

Everyone praised this speech.

Then Odysseus 70
Tied his rags around his waist, revealing
His sculpted thighs, his broad shoulders,
His muscular chest and arms. Athena
Stood near the hero, magnifying his build.
The suitors' jaws dropped open. 75
They looked at each other and said things like:

"Irus is history."

"Brought it on himself, too."

"Will you look at the thigh on that old man!"

So they spoke. Irus' heart was in his throat,
But some servants tucked up his clothes anyway 80
And dragged him out, his rolls of fat quivering.
Antinous laid into him, saying:

"You big slob. You'll be sorry
You were ever born, if you try to duck
This woebegone, broken-down old man. 85
I'm going to give it to you straight now.
If he gets the better of you and beats you,
I'm going to throw you on a black ship
And send you to the mainland to King Echetus,
The maimer, who will slice off your nose and ears 90

With cold bronze, and tear out your balls
And give them raw to the dogs to eat."

This made Irus tremble even more.
They shoved him out into the middle,
And both men put up their fists. Odysseus, 95
The wily veteran, thought it over.
Should he knock the man stone cold dead,
Or ease up on the punch and just lay him out flat?
Better to go easy and just flatten him, he thought,
So that the crowd won't get suspicious. 100
The fighters stood tall, circling each other,
And as Irus aimed a punch at his right shoulder,
Odysseus caught him just beneath the ear,
Crushing his jawbone. Blood ran from his mouth,
And he fell in the dust snorting like an ox 105
And gnashing his teeth, his heels kicking the ground.
The suitors lifted their hands and died
With laughter. Odysseus took Irus by one fat foot
And dragged him out through the doorway
All the way to the court and the portico's gates. 110
He propped him up against the courtyard's wall,
Stuck his staff in his hand, and said to him:

"Sit there now and scare off the pigs and dogs,
And stop lording it over the other beggars,
You sorry bastard, or things could get worse." 115

And he slung his old pouch over one shoulder,
Walked back to the threshold, and sat down.
The suitors went inside, laughing and joking,
And one of them came up to Odysseus and said:

"May Zeus and the other gods grant you, stranger, 120
Whatever your heart most dearly desires,
Since you have ended this glutton's begging career.
We'll ship him off to Echetus the mainer!"

Odysseus took heart at these auspicious words.
Antinous set before him the huge paunch 125

Stuffed with fat and blood, and Amphinomus
Served him a couple of loaves from the basket,
Toasted him with a golden cup, and said:

"Hail to the revered stranger. May good fortune
Come to you, though you have only bad luck now."

130

And Odysseus, from his mind's teeming depths:

"Amphinomus, you come across as a sensible man,
Just as your father was. I have heard of him,
Nisus of Dulichium, a good man, and wealthy,
Known far and wide. They say you are his son,
And you seem soft-spoken, a good man yourself.
So I'll tell you something you should take to heart.
Of all the things that breathe and move upon it,
Earth nurtures nothing feebler than man.

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While the gods favor him and his step is quick,
He thinks he will never have to suffer in life.

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Then when the blessed ones bring evil his way,
He bears it in sorrow with an enduring heart.

Our outlook changes with the kind of day
Zeus our Father decides to give us.

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I, too, once got used to prosperity,
And I did many foolish things in my pride,
Trusting my father and brothers would save me.

So I know a man should never be an outlaw,
But keep in peace the gifts heaven gives him.

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Just look at what the suitors are doing now,
Wasting the wealth and dishonoring the wife
Of a man who, I tell you, will not be gone long
From his family and friends and his native land.

He's very close. Better for you if some god
Leads you away from here and takes you home
Before you meet him upon his return.

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Once he's under this roof, I do not think
The suitors will escape without blood being spilled."

He spoke, poured a libation, drank the sweet wine,
And then gave the cup back to Amphinomus,

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Who went away through the hall with his head bowed
And his heart heavy with a sense of foreboding.
He would not escape death, though. Pallas Athena
Had him pinned, and he would be killed outright
By a spear from the hand of Telemachus.

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And now the Grey-eyed One put into the heart
Of Penelope, Icarius' wise daughter,
A notion to show herself to the suitors.
All of a sudden she wanted to make their blood pound—
And to make herself more worthy than ever
In the eyes of her son, and of her husband.
With a whimsical laugh she said to the housekeeper:

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"Eurynome, my heart longs, though it never has before,
To show myself to the suitors, hateful as they are.
And I would like to say something to my son,
Something that might help him—he should not
Continually keep the company of the suitors,
Overbearing men who speak politely to his face
And plan all the while to hurt him later."

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And the housekeeper Eurynome said:

"Yes indeed, child, everything you said is right.
Go on then, and speak your mind to your son
And don't hide anything—after you have bathed,
That is, and dabbed your cheeks with ointment.
Don't go like this, bleary-eyed from crying.
All this grieving only makes you look worse.
Your son is that age, you know. You prayed your heart out
For the gods to let you see him as a bearded man."

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And Penelope, in her circumspect way:

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"Eurynome, don't try, even though you love me,
To talk me into bathing and putting on makeup.
Any beauty I had the Olympian gods destroyed
On the day my husband left in the hollow ships.
But go tell Autonoë and Hippodameia

195

To come stand by my side when I enter the hall.
It would be shameful for me to go alone among men."

She spoke, and the old housekeeper went off
To tell the two women Penelope wanted them.

Athena's eyes glinted. She had another idea. 200

First, she made Penelope so sweetly drowsy
That she leaned back, her whole body limp,
And went to sleep right there on her couch.
Then the shimmering goddess went to work on her,
So that all the men would gape in wonder. 205

First she cleansed her lovely face, using
The pure, distilled Beauty that Aphrodite
Anoints herself with when she goes garlanded
Into the beguiling dance of the Graces. 210

Then she made her look taller, and filled out her figure,
And made her skin whiter than polished ivory.
Her work done, the goddess glimmered away.
Just then, some of the women came by,
Talking noisily, and Penelope woke up. 215
She rubbed her cheeks with her hands and said:

"What a soft, sweet sleep! If only Artemis
Would send as soft a death to me at once
So I would no longer waste away in sorrow,
Longing for my dear husband's winning ways.
He was in all ways the very best of men." 220

She spoke. Light from the upper rooms
Flooded the stairs as Penelope came down,
Not alone, two maids trailed behind—

And when she had come among the suitors
She stood in her glory beside a column 225
That supported the roof of the great house,

Hiding her cheeks behind her silken veils,
Grave handmaidens standing on either side.

The suitors' knees grew weak when they saw her.
They were spellbound, in love, and each man prayed
That he would lie beside her in bed. But, 230

It was to her son, Telemachus, that she spoke:

"Telemachus, what can you be thinking of?
You were intelligent even as a child,
But now that you have reached manhood— 235
So handsome and tall that any stranger
Who happened to see you would be able to tell
You're a rich man's son—you're not thinking straight,
Not any more. Just look at what has happened
Here in these halls! How would you like it 240
If our guest, sitting as he is in our house,
Were to be treated roughly and come to harm?
It would be a disgrace, and the shame would be yours."

And Telemachus, in his clear-headed way:

"I don't blame you for being angry, Mother, 245
But I'm aware of all this myself. I know
Everything that is going on here, good and bad.
I used to think as a child, but not any more.
But I can't think clearly with all these men
Sitting around driving me to distraction. 250
They don't mean me any good, and I have
No one to help me. But I can tell you this,
That the fight between the stranger and Irus
Did not go the way the suitors wanted.
Our guest proved to be the better man. 255
O Father Zeus, and Athena and Apollo,
If only the suitors were beaten like that,
Their limbs unstrung, nodding their heads,
Some in the courtyard and some in the hall,
Just as Irus now sits by the gate, 260
Lolling his head as if he were drunk,
Unable to stand up or get himself home,
Wherever that is, because his limbs are like putty."

Thus mother and son. Then Eurymachus
Addressed Penelope, saying to her: 265

"Daughter of Icarius, wise Penelope,

If all the Greeks throughout the mainland
Could see you now, even more suitors
Would be here tomorrow, feasting in your hall,
For you are far and away the most beautiful
And most intelligent woman in the world." 270

And wise Penelope answered him:

"Eurymachus, the gods destroyed my beauty
On the day when the Argives sailed for Ilion
And with them went my husband, Odysseus. 275
If he were to come back and be part of my life,
My fame would be greater and more resplendent.
But now I grieve, so many sorrows
Has some spirit visited upon me.
And this much is true: when Odysseus left 280
He clasped my right hand in his and said to me:
'I do not think, my wife, that all the Greeks
Will return from Ilion safe and sound.
They say the Trojans are real warriors,
Spearmen and bowmen, and they drive chariots, 285
Which can turn the tide in any battle.
So I do not know whether the god of war
Will send me back or if I'll go down
There in Troy. So everything here is in your hands.
Take care of my father and of my mother 290
As you do now, or even more, when I am gone.
But when you see our son a bearded man,
Marry whom you will, and leave this house.'
So he spoke, and it's all coming true. 295
There will come a night when a hateful marriage
Will darken my bed, cursed as I am, my happiness
Destroyed by Zeus. And I have more heartache.
This isn't the way suitors usually behave
When men compete for the hand of a lady,
A woman of some worth, a rich man's daughter. 300
They bring cattle, and fat sheep,
To feast the bride's friends, and they give her
Glorious gifts. They do not devour
Another's livelihood without recompense."

She spoke, and Odysseus, the godlike survivor,
Smiled inwardly to see how she extracted gifts
From the suitors, weaving a spell upon them
With her words, while her mind was set elsewhere.

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Then Antinous, Eupeithes' son, said to her:

"Daughter of Icarius, wise Penelope,
As far as gifts go, take whatever any man
Wishes to give. It's not good to refuse gifts.
But as for us, we're not going back to our lands
Or anywhere else until you marry
Whoever proves to be the best of the Achaeans."

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Everyone approved of what Antinous said,
And each man sent a herald to fetch his gifts.
Antinous' man brought a beautiful robe,
All embroidered. It had twelve golden brooches,
Each of them fitted with hooked clasps.
Eurymachus' man came back right away
With an intricately crafted golden chain
Strung with amber and bright as the sun.
Eurydamas' attendants brought a pair of earrings,
Three elegant teardrops gleaming from each.
From the house of Peisander, Polyctor's son,
There came a necklace of exquisite beauty.
And so it went, each man bringing
One lovely gift after another.

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And Penelope,
A moving silver grace, went up to her chamber,
Her women behind her bearing the beautiful gifts.

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The suitors turned to amusing themselves
With dance and song until evening fell.
When twilight shaded their merrymaking
They set up three braziers in the great hall
To give them light. They stoked these with kindling,
Seasoned and dry and newly split with the axe.
They set torches between the braziers,

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And the household women set about lighting them.
Zeus-bred Odysseus, always thinking,
Went up to these women and had a word with them:

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"Maidservants of Odysseus, your long-absent lord,
Go off now to where your revered queen is sitting
And do your spinning, or card wool, by her side.
Sit with her and keep her company. Cheer her up.
I'll take care of keeping the torches lit
For these men. Even if they stay up until dawn
They won't outlast me. I can put up with a lot."

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The women looked at each other and laughed.
Then Melantho, fair-cheeked and sassy,
Had some ugly words for him. This Melantho
Was born to Dolius, but Penelope
Had reared her as her very own child,
Spoiling her with toys and whatever she wanted.
Even so she had no feeling for Penelope
But loved Eurymachus and slept with him.
And now she lit into Odysseus:

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"You must be out of your mind, you old wreck,
Unwilling to go to the blacksmith's to sleep
Or anywhere else. You just blabber on here,
Bold as can be, with all these real men around,
Feeling no fear. Are you drunk, or are you
Always like this, with all your blather?
Pleased with yourself, aren't you, because you beat that bum,
Irus? Someone a lot better than Irus
Might stand up to you soon and pound you
Bloody with his fists as he drives you outside."

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Odysseus shot her a dark look and growled:

"Just let me tell Telemachus what you are saying,
You bitch. He'll cut you to ribbons on the spot."

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His words scattered the women, sending them
Flying through the hall in terror, convinced

That he meant what he said.

Odysseus

Took his stand by the torches, keeping them lit
And watching all the men. But his heart seethed
With other business, soon to be finished.

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Now Athena was not about to let the suitors
Abstain from insults. She wanted pain
To sink deeper into Odysseus' bones.
And so Eurymachus began to jeer
At him for his friends' entertainment:

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"Hear me, suitors of our glorious queen,
While I speak my mind. It is not without
The will of the gods that this man has come
To Odysseus' palace. We get a nice glow
Of torchlight from him—from his head,
That is, since it doesn't have a hair on it!"

385

And then speaking directly to Odysseus,
Destroyer of cities, Eurymachus said:

"I wonder if you'd like to be a hired hand,
Stranger. Should I hire you to work
On one of my outlying farms gathering fieldstones
And planting tall trees? Oh, I'll pay you.
I'll keep you fed the year round out there,
Give you some clothes and sandals to wear.
But you've never done a hard day's work
In your life, preferring to beg your way through town
For food to stuff into your bottomless belly."

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And Odysseus, his mind teeming:

"Eurymachus, I wish we could have a contest
Working in the fields during the summertime,
When the days are long, just you and I
Out in a hayfield with long, curved scythes,
And plenty of grass so we could test our work,
Fasting until late evening.

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Or how about this?

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We could each drive oxen, the best there are,
Big and tawny, both well fed with grass,
The same age, yoked the same way, tireless animals—
And each with four acres of rich soil to plow.
Then you'd see if I could cut a straight furrow
Clear to the end.

410

And it would be even better

If Zeus brought war upon us from somewhere,
Today, right now, and I had a shield, two spears,
And a bronze helmet that fit close to my temples.
Then you would see me out in the front ranks,
And you wouldn't stand here jeering at me
Because of my belly. But you are insufferable,
And you have a hard heart. No doubt you think
You are some great man, a tough guy,
Because you hang out with puny weaklings.
If Odysseus came back home, these doors,
Wide as they are, would be far too narrow
For you to squeeze through as you made for daylight."

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This made Eurymachus all the more furious.
Scowling at Odysseus he said to him:

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"You won't get away with this kind of talk,
Bold as can be with all these real men around,
Feeling no fear. Are you drunk, or are you
Always like this, with all your blather?
Are you all pumped up because you beat that bum, Irus?"

430

And he grabbed a footstool, but Odysseus,
Wary of the man, sat down at the knees
Of Amphinomus, the suitor from Dulichium,
And Eurymachus' missile struck a cupbearer
On the right hand. The wine jug he held
Clattered to the ground, and the man groaned
And fell backward into the dust.

435

The suitors

Were in an uproar throughout the shadowy hall.
One man would glance at his neighbor and say:

"Better if the stranger had never made it here;
Then he couldn't have brought us all this trouble.
Here we are, brawling about beggars. Our feasts
Will be ruined if we let things turn ugly." 440

Then Telemachus made his voice heard:

"You are all raving now. Your drunken guzzling 445
Is beginning to show, or some god
Is stirring you up. But now that you have feasted,
Go home and get some rest—whenever you're ready,
Of course. I'm not driving anyone away."

He spoke, and they all bit their lips and marveled 450
At Telemachus for speaking so boldly.
Then Amphinomus addressed the suitors:

"Friends, no man should be angry at a thing
Fairly spoken, or respond by arguing.
Do not mistreat this stranger any longer, 455
Or any of godlike Odysseus' household.
Now let the cupbearer start us off
So we can pour libation and go home to rest.
This stranger we will leave in Odysseus' halls—
Where he landed—and in Telemachus' keeping." 460

Amphinomus' words pleased everyone,
And a bowl was mixed by his herald, Mulus.
He served a cup to each man in turn,
And they poured libations to the blessed gods
And drank sweet wine to their hearts' content. 465
Then they all went home and took their rest.