

# ODYSSEY 21

Owl-eyed Athena now prompted Penelope  
To set before the suitors Odysseus' bow  
And the grey iron, implements of the contest  
And of their death.

Penelope climbed  
The steep stairs to her bedroom and picked up 5  
A beautiful bronze key with an ivory handle  
And went with her maids to a remote storeroom  
Where her husband's treasures lay—bronze, gold,  
And wrought iron. And there lay the curved bow  
And the quiver, still loaded with arrows, 10  
Gifts which a friend of Odysseus had given him  
When they met in Lacedaemon long ago.  
This was Iphitus, Eurytus' son, a godlike man.  
They had met in Messene, in the house of Ortilochus.  
Odysseus had come to collect a debt 15  
The Messenians owed him: three hundred sheep  
They had taken from Ithaca in a sea raid,  
And the shepherds with them. Odysseus  
Had come to get them back, a long journey  
For a young man, sent by his father and elders. 20  
Iphitus had come to search for twelve mares  
He had lost, along with the mules they were nursing.  
These mares turned out to be the death of Iphitus.  
When he came to the house of Heracles,  
Zeus' tough-hearted son, who killed him, 25  
Guest though he was, without any regard  
For the gods' wrath or the table they had shared—  
Killed the man and kept the strong-hoofed mares.

It was while looking for these mares that Iphitus  
Met Odysseus and gave him the bow 30  
Which old Eurytus had carried and left to his son.  
Odysseus gave him a sword and spear  
To mark the beginning of their friendship  
But before they had a chance to entertain each other  
Zeus' son killed Iphitus, son of Eurytus, 35  
A man like the gods. Odysseus did not take  
The bow with him on his black ship to Troy.  
It lay at home as a memento of his friend,  
And Odysseus carried it only on Ithaca.

Penelope came to the storeroom 40  
And stepped onto the oak threshold  
Which a carpenter in the old days had planed,  
Leveled, and then fitted with doorposts  
And polished doors. Lovely in the half-light,  
She quickly loosened the thong from the hook, 45  
Drove home the key and shot back the bolts.  
The doors bellowed like a bull in a meadow  
And flew open before her. Stepping through,  
She climbed onto a high platform that held chests  
Filled with fragrant clothes. She reached up 50  
And took the bow, case and all, from its peg,  
Then sat down and laid the gleaming case on her knees  
Her eyes welling with tears. Then she opened the case  
And took out her husband's bow. When she had her fill  
Of weeping, she went back to the hall 55  
And the lordly suitors, bearing in her hands  
The curved bow and the quiver loaded  
With whining arrows. Two maidservants  
Walked beside her, carrying a wicker chest  
Filled with the bronze and iron gear her husband 60  
Once used for this contest. When the beautiful woman  
Reached the crowded hall, she stood  
In the doorway flanked by her maidservants.  
Then, covering her face with her shining veil,  
Penelope spoke to her suitors: 65

"Hear me, proud suitors. You have used this house

For an eternity now—to eat and drink  
In its master's absence, nor could you offer  
Any excuse except your lust to marry me.  
Well, your prize is here, and this is the contest. 70  
I set before you the great bow of godlike Odysseus.  
Whoever bends this bow and slips the string on its notch  
And shoots an arrow through all twelve axes,  
With him will I go, leaving behind this house  
I was married in, this beautiful, prosperous house, 75  
Which I will remember always, even in my dreams."

Penelope said this, and then ordered Eumaeus  
To set out for the suitors the bow and grey iron.  
All in tears, Eumaeus took them and laid them down,  
And the cowherd wept, too, when he saw 80  
His master's bow. Antinous scoffed at them both:

"You stupid yokels! You can't see farther than your own noses.  
What a pair! Disturbing the lady with your bawling.  
She's sad enough already because she's lost her husband.  
Either sit here in silence or go outside to weep, 85  
And leave the bow behind for us suitors. This contest  
Will separate the men from the boys. It won't be easy  
To string that polished bow. There is no man here  
Such as Odysseus was. I know. I saw him myself  
And remember him well, though I was still a child." 90

So Antinous said, hoping in his heart  
That he would string the bow first and shoot an arrow  
Through the iron. But the only arrow  
He would touch first would be the one shot 95  
Into his throat from the hands of Odysseus,  
The man he himself was dishonoring  
While inciting his comrades to do the same.

And then Telemachus, with a sigh of disgust:

"Look at me! Zeus must have robbed me of my wits.  
My dear mother declares, for all her good sense, 100  
That she will marry another and abandon this house,

And all I do is laugh and think it is funny.  
Well, come on, you suitors, here's your prize,  
A woman the likes of whom does not exist  
In all Achaea, or in sacred Pylos, 105  
Nowhere in Argos or in Mycenae,  
Or on Ithaca itself or on the dark mainland.  
You all know this. Why should I praise my mother?  
Let's get going. Don't start making excuses  
To put off stringing the bow. We'll see what happens. 110  
And I might give that bow a try myself.  
If I string it and shoot an arrow through the axeheads,  
It won't bother me so much that my honored mother  
Is leaving this house and going off with another,  
Because I would at least be left here as someone 115  
Capable of matching his father's prowess."

With that he took off his scarlet cloak, stood up,  
And unstrapped his sword from his shoulders.  
Then he went to work setting up the axeheads,  
First digging a long trench true to the line 120  
To hold them in a row, and then tamping the earth  
Around each one. Everyone was amazed  
That he made such a neat job of it  
When he had never seen it done before.  
Then he went and took his stance on the threshold 125  
And began to try the bow. Three times  
He made it quiver as he strained to string it,  
And three times he eased off, although in his heart  
He yearned to draw that bow and shoot an arrow  
Through the iron axeheads. And on his fourth try 130  
He would have succeeded in muscling the string  
Onto its notch, but Odysseus reined him in,  
Signaling him to stop with an upward nod.  
So Telemachus said for all to hear:

"I guess I'm going to be a weakling forever!  
Or else I'm still too young and don't have the strength  
To defend myself against an enemy.  
But come on, all of you who are stronger than me—  
Give the bow a try and let's settle this contest." 135

And he set the bow aside, propping it against  
The polished, jointed door, and leaning the arrow  
Against the beautiful latch. Then Telemachus  
Sat down on the chair from which he had risen. 140

Antinous, Eupeithes' son, then said:

"All right. We go in order from left to right,  
Starting from where the wine gets poured." 145

Everyone agreed with Antinous' idea.  
First up was their soothsayer, Leodes,  
Oenops' son. He always sat in the corner  
By the wine-bowl, and he was the only one  
Who loathed the way the suitors behaved. 150  
He now carried the bow and the arrow  
Onto the threshold, took his stance,  
And tried to bend the bow and string it,  
But his tender, unworn hands gave out,  
And he said for all the suitors to hear: 155

"Friends, I'm not the man to string this bow.  
Someone else can take it. I foresee it will rob  
Many a young hero of the breath of life.  
And that will be just as well, since it is far better 160  
To die than live on and fall short of the goal  
We gather here for, with high hopes day after day.  
You might hope in your heart—you might yearn—  
To marry Penelope, the wife of Odysseus,  
But after you've tried this bow and seen what it's like, 165  
Go woo some other Achaean woman  
And try to win her with your gifts. And Penelope  
Should just marry the highest bidder,  
The man who is fated to be her husband."

And he set the bow aside, propping it against  
The polished, jointed door, and leaning the arrow  
Against the beautiful latch. Then  
He sat down on the chair from which he had risen.  
And Antinous heaped contempt upon him: 170

What kind of thing is that to say, Leodes?  
 I'm not going to stand here and listen to this.  
 You think this bow is going rob some young heroes  
 Of life, just because you can't string it?  
 The truth is your mother didn't bear a son  
 Strong enough to shoot arrows from bows.  
 But there are others who will string it soon enough."

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Then Antinous called to Melanthius, the goatherd:

Get over here and start a fire, Melanthius,  
 and set by it a bench with a fleece over it,  
 and bring out a tub of lard from the pantry,  
 so we can grease the bow, and warm it up.  
 Then maybe we can finish this contest."

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He spoke, and Melanthius quickly rekindled the fire  
 and placed by it a bench covered with a fleece  
 and brought out from the pantry a tub of lard  
 With which the young men limbered up the bow—  
 but they still didn't have the strength to string it.

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Only Antinous and godlike Eurymachus,  
 the suitors' ringleaders—and their strongest—  
 were still left in the contest.

Meanwhile,

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two other men had risen and left the hall—  
 the cowherd and swineherd—and Odysseus himself  
 went out, too. When the three of them  
 were outside the gates, Odysseus said softly:

Cowherd and swineherd, I've been wondering  
 I should tell you what I'm about to tell you now.  
 Let me ask you this. What would you do  
 Odysseus suddenly showed up here  
 out of the blue, just like that?  
 Would you side with the suitors or Odysseus?  
 Tell me how you stand."

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And the cattle herder answered him:

"Father Zeus, if only this would come true!  
Let him come back. Let some god guide him.  
Then you would see what these hands could do." 210

And Eumaeus prayed likewise to all the gods  
That Odysseus would return.

When Odysseus  
Was sure of both these men, he spoke to them again:

"I am back, right here in front of you.  
After twenty hard years I have returned to my home. 215  
I know that only you two of all my slaves  
Truly want me back. I have heard  
None of the others pray for my return.  
So this is my promise to you. If a god  
Beats these proud suitors down for me, 220  
I will give you each a wife, property,  
And a house built near mine. You two shall be  
Friends to me and brothers to Telemachus.  
And look, so you can be sure of who I am,  
Here's a clear sign, that scar from the wound 225  
I got from a boar's tusk when I went long ago  
To Parnassus with the sons of Autolycus."

And he pulled his rags aside from the scar.  
When the two men had examined it carefully,  
They threw their arms around Odysseus and wept, 230  
And kept kissing his head and shoulders in welcome.  
Odysseus kissed their heads and hands,  
And the sun would have gone down on their weeping,  
Had not Odysseus stopped them, saying:

"No more weeping and wailing now. Someone might come 235  
Out of the hall and see us and tell those inside.  
We'll go back in now—not together, one at a time.  
I'll go first, and then you. And here's what to watch for.  
None of the suitors will allow the bow and quiver

To be given to me. It'll be up to you, Eumaeus,  
To bring the bow over and place it in my hands. 240  
Then tell the women to lock the doors to their hall,  
And if they hear the sound of men groaning  
Or being struck, tell them not to rush out  
But to sit still and do their work in silence. 245  
Philoetius, I want you to bar the courtyard gate  
And secure it quickly with a piece of rope."

With this, Odysseus entered his great hall  
And sat down on the chair from which he had risen.  
Then the two herdsmen entered separately. 250

Eurymachus was turning the bow  
Over and over in his hands, warming it.  
On this side and that by the fire, but even so  
He was unable to string it. His pride hurt,  
Shoulders sagging, he groaned and then swore: 255

"Damn it! It's not just myself I'm sorry for,  
But for all of us—and not for the marriage either.  
That hurts, but there are plenty of other women,  
Some here in Ithaca, some in other cities.  
No, it's that we fall so short of Odysseus' 260  
Godlike strength. We can't even string his bow!  
We'll be laughed at for generations to come!"

Antinous, son of Eupeithes, answered him:

"That'll never happen, Eurymachus,  
And you know it. Now look, today is a holiday 265  
Throughout the land, a sacred feast  
In honor of Apollo, the Archer God.  
This is no time to be bending bows.  
So just set it quietly aside for now.  
As for the axes, why don't we leave them 270  
Just as they are? No one is going to come  
Into Odysseus' hall and steal those axes.  
Now let's have the cupbearer start us off  
So we can forget about the bow



And pour libations. Come morning, 275  
We'll have Melanthius bring along  
The best she-goats in all the herds,  
So we can lay prime thigh-pieces  
On the altar of Apollo, the Archer God,  
And then finish this business with the bow." 280

Antinous' proposal carried the day.  
The heralds poured water over everyone's hands,  
And boys filled the mixing bowls up to the brim  
And served out the wine, first pouring 285  
A few drops into each cup for libation.  
When they had poured out their libations  
And drunk as much as they wanted, Odysseus  
Spoke among them, his heart full of cunning:

"Hear me, suitors of the glorious queen—  
And I address Eurymachus most of all, 290  
And godlike Antinous, since his speech  
Was right on the mark when he said that for now  
You should stop the contest and leave everything  
Up to the gods. Tomorrow the Archer God  
Will give the victory to whomever he chooses. 295  
But come, let me have the polished bow.  
I want to see, here in this hall with you,  
If my grip is still strong, and if I still have  
Any power left in these gnarled arms of mine,  
Or if my hard traveling has sapped all my strength." 300

They seethed with anger when they heard this,  
Afraid that he would string the polished bow,  
And Antinous addressed him contemptuously:

"You don't have an ounce of sense in you,  
You miserable tramp. Isn't it enough 305  
That we let you hang around with us,  
Undisturbed, with a full share of the feast?  
You even get to listen to what we say,  
Which no other stranger, much less beggar, can do.  
It's wine that's screwing you up, as it does 310

Anyone who guzzles it down. It was wine  
 That deluded the great centaur, Eurytion,  
 In the hall of Peirithous, the Lapith hero.  
 Eurytion got blind-drunk and in his madness  
 Did a terrible thing in Peirithous' house.  
 The enraged Lapiths sliced off his nose and ears  
 And dragged him outside, and Eurytion  
 Went off in a stupor, mutilated and muddled.  
 Men and centaurs have been at odds ever since.  
 Eurytion hurt himself because he got drunk.  
 And you're going to get hurt, too, I predict,  
 Hurt badly, if you string the bow. No one  
 In all the land will show you any kindness.  
 We'll send you off in a black ship to Echetus,  
 Who maims them all. You'll never get out alive.  
 So just be quiet and keep on drinking,  
 And don't challenge men who are younger than you."

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It was Penelope who answered Antinous:

"It is not good, or just, Antinous,  
 To cheat any of Telemachus' guests  
 Who come to this house. Do you think  
 That if this stranger proves strong enough  
 To string Odysseus' bow, he will then  
 Lead me to his home and make me his wife?  
 I can't imagine that he harbors this hope.  
 So do not ruin your feast on that account.  
 The very idea is preposterous."

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Eurymachus responded to this:

"Daughter of Icarius, wise Penelope,  
 Of course it's preposterous that this man  
 Would marry you. That's not what we're worried about.  
 But we are embarrassed at what men—and women—will say:  
 A bunch of weaklings were wooing the wife  
 Of a man they couldn't touch—they couldn't even string  
 His polished bow. Then along came a vagrant  
 Who strung it easily and shot through the iron."

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That's what they'll say, to our lasting shame."

And Penelope, her eyes narrowing:

"Eurymachus, men who gobble up  
The house of a prince cannot expect 350  
To have a good reputation anywhere.  
So there isn't any point in bringing up honor.  
This stranger is a very well-built man  
And says he is the son of a noble father.  
So give him the bow and let us see what happens. 355  
And here is my promise to all of you.  
If Apollo gives this man the glory  
And he strings the bow, I will clothe him  
In a fine cloak and tunic, and give him  
A javelin to ward off dogs and men, 360  
And a double-edged sword, and sandals  
For his feet, and I will give him passage  
To wherever his heart desires."

This time it was Telemachus who answered:

"As for the bow, Mother, no man alive 365  
Has a stronger claim than I do to give it  
To whomever I want, or to deny it—  
No, none of the lords on rocky Ithaca  
Nor on the islands over toward Elis,  
None of them could force his will upon me, 370  
Not even if I wanted to give this bow  
Outright, case and arrows and all,  
As a gift to the stranger.

Go to your rooms,  
Mother, and take care of your work,  
Spinning and weaving, and have the maids do theirs. 375  
This bow is men's business, and my business  
Especially, since I am the master of this house."

Penelope was stunned and turned to go,  
Her son's masterful words pressed to her heart.  
She went up the stairs to her room with her women 380

And wept for Odysseus, her beloved husband,  
Until grey-eyed Athena cast sleep on her eyelids.

Downstairs, the noble swineherd was carrying  
The curved bow across the hall. The suitors  
Were in an uproar, and one of them called out: 385

"Where do you think you're going with that bow,  
You miserable swineherd? You're out of line.  
Go back to your pigsties, where your own dogs  
Will wolf you down—a nice, lonely death—  
If Apollo and the other gods smile upon us." 390

Afraid, the swineherd stopped in his tracks  
And set the bow down. Men were yelling at him  
All through the hall, and now Telemachus weighed in:

"Keep going with the bow. You'll regret it  
If you try to obey everyone. I may be 395  
Younger than you, but I'll chase you back  
Into the country with a shower of stones.  
I am stronger than you. I wish I were as strong  
When it came to the suitors. I'd throw more than one  
Out of here in a sorry state. They're all up to no good." 400

This got the suitors laughing hilariously  
At Telemachus. The tension in the room eased,  
And the swineherd carried the bow  
Across to Odysseus and put it in his hands.  
Then he called Eurycleia aside and said: 405

"Telemachus says you should lock the doors to the hall,  
And if the women hear the sound of men groaning  
Or being struck, tell them not to rush out  
But to sit still and do their work in silence."

Eumaeus' words sank in, and Eurycleia 410  
Locked the doors to the crowded hall.

Meanwhile, Philoetius left without a word  
And barred the gates to the fenced courtyard.

Beside the portico there lay a ship's hawser  
Made of papyrus. Philoetius used this 415  
To secure the gates, and then he went back in,  
Sat down on the chair from which he had risen,  
And kept his eyes on Odysseus.

He was handling the bow, turning it over and over  
And testing its flex to make sure that worms 420  
Had not eaten the horn in its master's absence.  
The suitors glanced at each other  
And started to make sarcastic remarks:

"Ha! A real connoisseur, an expert in bows!"

"He must have one just like it in a case at home." 425

"Or plans to make one just like it, to judge by the way  
The masterful tramp keeps turning it in his hands."

"May he have as much success in life  
As he'll have in trying to string that bow."

Thus the suitors, while Odysseus, deep in thought, 430  
Was looking over his bow. And then, effortlessly,

*Like a musician stretching a string  
Over a new peg on his lyre, and making  
The twisted sheep-gut fast at either end,*

Odysseus strung the great bow. Lifting it up, 435  
He plucked the string, and it sang beautifully  
Under his touch, with a note like a swallow's.  
The suitors were aghast. The color drained  
From their faces, and Zeus thundered loud,  
Showing his portents and cheering the heart 440  
Of the long-enduring, godlike Odysseus.  
One arrow lay bare on the table. The rest,  
Which the suitors were about to taste,  
Were still in the quiver. Odysseus picked up  
The arrow from the table and laid it upon 445

The bridge of the bow, and, still in his chair,  
Drew the bowstring and the notched arrow back.  
He took aim and let fly, and the bronze-tipped arrow  
Passed clean through the holes of all twelve axeheads  
From first to last. And he said to Telemachus:

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"Well, Telemachus, the guest in your hall  
Has not disgraced you. I did not miss my target,  
Nor did I take all day in stringing the bow.  
I still have my strength, and I'm not as the suitors  
Make me out to be in their taunts and jeers.  
But now it is time to cook these men's supper,  
While it is still light outside, and after that,  
We'll need some entertainment—music and song—  
The finishing touches for a perfect banquet."

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He spoke, and lowered his brows. Telemachus,  
The true son of godlike Odysseus, slung on  
His sharp sword, seized his spear, and gleaming in bronze  
Took his place by his father's side.

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