followed by her light footfall entering over the plank floor. Herb-scented robes lay there in chests, but the lady's milk-white arms went up to lift the bow down from a peg in its polished bow case.

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.

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 ox heads, bronze and iron implements for the master's game. 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 still, then spoke to the banqueters:

"My lords, hear me: suitors indeed, you recommended 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: we now declare a contest for that prize.

Here is my lord Odysseus' haunting bow. Bend and string it if you can. Who sends an arrow through iron ax-helve sockets, 12 twelve in line? I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home, my rich and beautiful bridal house, forever to be remembered, though I dream it only." . . .

Many of the suitors boldly try the bow, but not one man can even bend it enough to string it.

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

"You, herdsmen, and you, too, swineherd, I could say a thing to you, or should I keep it dark?"
my heart tells me. Would you be men enough
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!"

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,
told them:

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

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—
to cut it short, che 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:

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. 
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. 
Philaeus, run to the outer gate and lock it. 
Throw the crosbait and latch it."..." 

Now Odysseus, still in his beggar’s clothes, asks to try the bow. 
The suitors refuse to allow a mere beggar to try where they have failed, 
but Penelope insists that the stranger be given his chance. The sus-
pense is very great—by this act, Penelope has accepted her husband as a suitor. 
Eumaeus, the swineherd, hands Odysseus the bow and tells the 
men to receive with Penelope and the maids to the family chumbers 
(basements) and to bolt the doors. Odysseus had earlier told 
Telemachus to remove the suitors’ weapons from the great hall. 
Now he takes the bow.

And Odysseus took his time, 
turning the bow, tapping it, every inch, 
for bodings that termites might have made 
while the master of the weapon was abroad. 
The suitors were now watching him, and some 
jealous 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!"

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,

Vocabulary

disdainful (di-sån’'fəl) adj: scornful; regarding someone as 
somehow you
like a musician, like a harper, when
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,
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
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,
and drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow,
aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

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

Then quietly
Odysseus said:
"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.
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,
belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear,
and with a c linker and glitter of keen bronze
stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.

Vocabulary

adorn (ə dōrn) v: add beauty to; decorate.
not a good ash spear was there for a man to take and throw.
All they could do was yell in outrage at Odysseus:
"Foul! to shoot at a man! That was your last shot!"
"Your own throat will be slit for this!"
"Our finest lad is down!
You killed the best on Ithaca."
"Buzzards will tear your eyes out!"

For they imagined as they wished—that it was a wild shot, an unintended killing—fools, not to comprehend they were already in the grip of death.
But glaring under his brows Odysseus answered:
"You yellow dogs, you thought I'd never make it home from the land of Troy. You took my house to plunder, twisted my maids to serve your beds. You dared bid for my wife while I was still alive.
Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide heaven,
contempt for what men say of you hereafter.
Your last hour has come. You die in blood."
As they all took this in, sickly green fear pulled at their entrails, and their eyes flickered looking for some hatch or hideaway from death.
Eurymaches alone could speak. He said:
"If you are Odysseus of Ithaca come back, all that you say these men have done is true.
Rash actions, many here, more in the countryside.
But here he lies, the man who caused them all.
Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on
to do these things. He cared less for a marriage
than for the power Cronion has denied him
as king of Ithaca. For that
he tried to trap your son and would have killed him.
He is dead now and has his portion. Spare
your own people. As for ourselves, we'll make restitution of wine and meat consumed,
and add, each one, a tithe of twenty oxen
with gifts of bronze and gold to warm your heart. Meanwhile we cannot blame you for your anger."

Odysseus glowered under his black brows and said:
"Not for the whole treasure of your fathers,
all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold,
put up by others, would I hold my hand.
There will be killing till the score is paid.
You forced yourselves upon this house. Fight your way out,
or run for it, if you think you'll escape death.
I doubt one man of you skins by..."

Telemachus joins his father in the fight. They are helped by the windswept and cowherd. Now the suitors, trapped in the hall without weapons, are struck right and left by arrows, and many of them lie dying on the floor.

At this moment that unnamning thundercloud, the aegis, Athena's shield, took form aloft in the great hall.

And the suitors mad with fear at her great sign stampeded like stung cattle by a river when the dazed shimmering gadfly strikes in summer, in the flowering season, in the long-drawn days.
After them the attackers wheeled, as terrible as falcons from erwies in the mountains veering over and diving down
with talons wide unsheathed on flights of birds,
whom cower down the sky in chutes and bursts along the valley—
but the pouncing falcons grip their prey, no frantic wing avail
and farmers love to watch those beaked hunters.
So these now fell upon the suitors in that hall,
turning, turning to strike and strike again,
while torn men moaned at death, and blood ran smoking over the whole floor..."

Vocabulary

*glowered* (gla'ərd) v.: glared; stared angrily.
*avails* (ə-vālz) v.: is of use; helps.

1271. Cronion (krō'nē-ən): another name for Zeus, meaning "son of Cronus."

Ulysses Slapping the Suitors (detail)
(1802) by Henry Fuseli.
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1221–1303. How does this bloody episode relate to the epic's theme about the value of hospitality and about what happens to people who mock divine law?