

Penelope with the Suitors (c. 1509) by Pinturicchio.

## THE TEST OF THE GREAT BOW

In Book 21, Penelope, like many unwilling princesses of myth and fairy tale, proposes an impossible task for those who wish to marry her. By so doing, she causes the bloody events that lead to the restoration of her husband. The test involves stringing Odysseus's huge bow, an impossible feat for anyone except Odysseus himself. Odysseus had left his bow home in Ithaca twenty years earlier.

Now the queen reached the storeroom door and halted.  
 Here was an oaken sill, cut long ago  
 and sanded clean and bedded true. Foursquare  
 1085 the doorjambs and the shining doors were set  
 by the careful builder. Penelope untied the strap  
 around the curving handle, pushed her hook  
 into the slit, aimed at the bolts inside,  
 and shot them back. Then came a rasping sound  
 1090 as those bright doors the key had sprung gave way—  
 a bellow like a bull's vaunt<sup>o</sup> in a meadow—

1091. vaunt (vònt) *n.*: boast.

followed by her light footfall entering  
 over the plank floor. Herb-scented robes  
 lay there in chests, but the lady's milk-white arms  
 1095 went up to lift the bow down from a peg  
 in its own 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.  
 1100 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 ax heads, bronze  
 and iron implements for the master's game.  
 1105 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:

1110 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:  
 1115 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 ax-helve sockets,<sup>o</sup> twelve in line?  
 I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home,  
 1120 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  
 1125 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?



Odysseus slaying the suitors. Detail from an Attic red-figured scyphus, or drinking cup, by the Penelope Painter, from Tarquinii, an ancient city in central Italy (c. 440 B.C.). Antikensammlung Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz.

1118. ax-helve sockets: An ax helve is an ax handle; a socket is a hollow piece lined with iron at the end of the handle. Shooting an arrow through a line of ax-helve sockets would be a task possible only for a superhero like Odysseus.

No, no; speak,  
my heart tells me. Would you be men enough  
1130 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!  
1135 Father Zeus, grant our old wish! Some courier<sup>o</sup>  
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.  
1140 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  
1145 except your own that I might come again.  
So now 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  
1150 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<sup>o</sup>— . . ."


Shifting his rags

1155 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, else they might weep till dark—

1160 "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:

1135. **courier** (koo'r'ē·ər) *n.*: guide  
or messenger.

 1122–1140. How does  
Odysseus test the loyalty of the  
swineherd and the cowherd? How  
do they prove that they can be  
trusted?

1154. **Parnassus** (pär·nas'əs): As a  
young man, Odysseus had gone  
hunting on Parnassus, his mother's  
home, and was gored above the knee  
by a boar.

1165 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  
1170 or groans of men, in hall or court, not one  
must show her face, but keep still at her weaving.  
Philoeteus, run to the outer gate and lock it.  
Throw the crossbar and lash 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  
nurse to retire with Penelope and the maids to the family chambers  
(the harem) 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,  
1175 turning the bow, tapping it, every inch,  
for borings that termites might have made  
while the master of the weapon was abroad.  
The suitors were now watching him, and some  
jested among themselves:

"A bow lover!"

"Dealer in old bows!"

1180 "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!"

1185 But the man skilled in all ways of contending,  
satisfied by the great bow's look and heft,

**Vocabulary**

**disdainful** (dis·dān'fəl) *adj.*: scornful; regarding someone as  
beneath you.

 1174–1220. As you read  
this scene, make notes about how  
you **visualize** it. Where are vari-  
ous characters placed? How are  
they reacting? It might help to  
draw a picture of the great hall  
and indicate where various actions  
take place.

like a musician, like a harper, when  
with quiet hand upon his instrument  
he draws between his thumb and forefinger  
1190 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  
1195 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<sup>o</sup> had flung that omen down.  
He picked one ready arrow from his table  
1200 where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still  
in the quiver for the young men's turn to come.  
He nocked<sup>o</sup> 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 flashed  
1205 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.  
1210 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,  
1215 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 clink and glitter of keen bronze  
1220 stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.


(from Book 21)

#### Vocabulary

**adorn** (ə·dôrn') v.: add beauty to; decorate.

1198. **Cronus** (krō'nās): father of Zeus, called crooked-minded because of his schemes to destroy his children.

1202. **nocked** (nākt) v.: fitted to the bowstring.

 1220. What do you predict will happen next? Review the episode, looking for clues in what Odysseus says and does.

## DEATH AT THE PALACE

The climax of the story is here, in Book 22. Although Odysseus is ready to reclaim his rightful kingdom, he must first confront more than a hundred hostile suitors. The first one he turns to is Antinous. All through the story, Antinous has been the meanest of the suitors and their ringleader. He hit Odysseus with a stool when the hero appeared in the hall as a beggar, and he ridiculed the disguised king by calling him a bleary vagabond, a pest, and a tramp.

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest fighter of the islands  
leapt and stood on the broad doorsill, his own bow in his  
hand.

He poured out at his feet a rain of arrows from the quiver  
and spoke to the crowd:

"So much for that. Your clean-cut game is over.

1225 Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before,  
if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo."

He drew to his fist the cruel head of an arrow for Antinous  
just as the young man leaned to lift his beautiful drinking  
cup,

1230 embossed, two-handled, golden: the cup was in his fingers,  
the wine was even at his lips, and did he dream of death?  
How could he? In that revelry amid his throng of friends  
who would imagine a single foe—though a strong foe  
indeed—

could dare to bring death's pain on him and darkness on  
his eyes?


Odysseus' arrow hit him under the chin  
1235 and punched up to the feathers through his throat.

Backward and down he went, letting the wine cup fall  
from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted  
crimson runnels,<sup>o</sup> a river of mortal red,  
and one last kick upset his table

1240 knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood.  
Now as they craned to see their champion where he lay  
the suitors jostled in uproar down the hall,  
everyone on his feet. Wildly they turned and scanned  
the walls in the long room for arms; but not a shield,

#### Vocabulary

**revelry** (rev'əl·rē) n.: merrymaking; festivity.

 1221–1303. As you read this action scene, imagine it as a film. After you finish reading, choose one part of the scene, and sketch it in your notebook. Make a list of the props you would need if you were filming the battle.

1226. **Help me, Apollo:** Odysseus prays to Apollo because this particular day is one of the god's feast days. Apollo is also the god of archery.

1238. **runnels** (run'əlz) n.: streams.

1245 not a good ashen 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!”

1250 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  
1255 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.  
1260 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.  
Eurymachus alone could speak. He said:  
1265 “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  
1270 to do these things. He cared less for a marriage  
than for the power Cronion<sup>o</sup> 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  
1275 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.”



Suitor hiding behind a table: The return of Odysseus. Limestone relief from Turkey (380 B.C.).

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

1271. **Cronion** (krō'nē·ən): another name for Zeus, meaning “son of Cronus.”

1280 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.  
1285 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 swineherd 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 unmanning thundercloud,  
the aegis, Athena’s shield,  
took form aloft in the great hall.

1290 And the suitors mad with fear  
at her great sign stampeded like stung cattle by a river  
when the dread shimmering gadfly strikes in summer,  
in the flowering season, in the long-drawn days.  
After them the attackers wheeled, as terrible as falcons  
from eyries<sup>o</sup> in the mountains veering over and diving  
1295 down  
with talons wide unsheathed on flights of birds,  
who cower down the sky in chutes and bursts along the  
valley—  
but the pouncing falcons grip their prey, no frantic wing  
avails,  
and farmers love to watch those beakèd hunters.  
1300 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. . . .

(from Book 22)

**Vocabulary**

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



Ulysses Slaying the Suitors (detail) (1802) by Henry Fuseli.  
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1295. **eyries** (er'ēz) n.: nests built in high places.

**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 laws?