Test of the Bow (p 965)

Eumaeus, the swineherd, hands Odysseus the bow and tells the nurse to retire with Penelope and the maids to the family chambers 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 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!”

“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,
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

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 flashed
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.”

(from Book 21)
Death at the Palace

The climax of the story is here, in Book 22. Although Odysseus is ready to reclaim his 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. 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, 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 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, a river of mortal red, and one last kick upset his table 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, 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!”

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. Eurymachus 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 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.

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 in the mountains veering over and diving 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.

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. . . .

**Odysseus and Penelope**

Odysseus calls forth the maids who have betrayed his household by associating with the suitors. He orders them to clean up the house and dispose of the dead. Telemachus then “pays” them by hanging them in the courtyard.

Eurycleia tells Penelope about the return of Odysseus and the defeat of the suitors. The faithful wife—the perfect mate for the wily Odysseus—suspects a trick from the gods. She decides to test the stranger who claims to be her husband.

Crossing the doorsill she sat down at once in firelight, against the nearest wall, across the room from the lord Odysseus.

There leaning against a pillar, sat the man and never lifted up his eyes, but only waited for what his wife would say when she had seen him. And she, for a long time, sat deathly still in wonderment—for sometimes as she gazed she found him—yes, clearly—like her husband, but sometimes blood and rags were all she saw. Telemachus’s voice came to her ears:

“Mother, cruel mother, do you feel nothing, drawing yourself apart this way from Father? Will you not sit with him and talk and question him? What other woman could remain so cold? Who shuns her lord, and he come back to her from wars and wandering, after twenty years?
Your heart is hard as flint and never changes!"

Penelope answered:
"I am stunned, child. I cannot speak to him. I cannot question him. I cannot keep my eyes upon his face."

If really he is Odysseus, truly home, beyond all doubt we two shall know each other better than you or anyone. There are secret signs we know, we two."

A smile came now to the lips of the patient hero, Odysseus, who turned to Telemachus and said:
"Peace: let your mother test me at her leisure. Before long she will see and know me best. These tatters, dirt—all that I'm caked with now—make her look hard at me and doubt me still. . . ."

Odysseus orders Telemachus, the swineherd, and the cowherd to bathe and put on fresh clothing.

Greatesthearted Odysseus, home at last, was being bathed now by Eurynome and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him taller, and massive, too, with crisping hair in curls like petals of wild hyacinth but all red-golden. Think of gold infused on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art Hephaestus taught him, or Athena: one whose work moves to delight; just so she lavished beauty over Odysseus' head and shoulders. He sat then in the same chair by the pillar, facing his silent wife, and said:
"Strange woman, the immortals of Olympus made you hard, harder than any. Who else in the world would keep aloof as you do from her husband if he returned to her from years of trouble, cast on his own land in the twentieth year?

Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on. Her heart is iron in her breast."

Penelope spoke to Odysseus now. She said: "Strange man, if man you are . . . This is no pride on my part nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely. I know so well how you—how he—appeared boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same . . . Make up his bed for him, Euryclydia. Place it outside the bedchamber my lord built with his own hands. Pile the big bed with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen."

With this she tried him to the breaking point, and he turned on her in a flash, raging:
"Woman, by heaven you've stung me now! Who dared to move my bed? No builder had the skill for that—unless a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal in his best days could budge it with a crowbar. There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign, built into that bed—my handiwork and no one else's!

An old trunk of olive grew like a pillar on the building plot, and I laid out our bedroom round that tree, lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof, gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors. Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches, hewed and shaped the stump from the roots up into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve
as model for the rest, I planed them all,
inlaid them all with silver, gold, and ivory,
and stretched a bed between—a pliant web
of oxhide thongs dyed crimson. There's our sign!
I know no more. Could someone else's hand
have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?"

Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees
grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.

With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,
throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him,
murmuring:

“Do not rage at me, Odysseus!
No one ever matched your caution! Think
what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us
life together in our prime and flowering years,
kept us from crossing into age together.
Forgive me, don't be angry. I could not
welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself
long ago against the frauds of men,
impostors who might come—and all those many
whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . .
But here and now, what sign could be so clear

as this of our own bed?
No other man has ever laid eyes on it—
only my own slave, Actoris, that my father
sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.
You make my stiff heart know that I am yours.”

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache
of longing mounted, and he wept at last,
his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms, longed for
as the sun-warmed earth is longed for by a swimmer
spent in rough water where his ship went down
under Poseidon's blows, gale winds and tons of sea.
Few men can keep alive through a big surf
to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches
in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind:
and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,
her white arms round him pressed, as though forever. . .

(from Book 23)