

Book 22: Death in the Great Hall

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest fight of the islands
Leapt and stood on the broad door sill, 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.
5 Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before,
If I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo.”

He drew on his fist the cruel head of an arrow for Antinous
Just as the young man leaned to life his beautiful drinking cup,
Embossed, two-handled, golden: the cup was in his fingers:
10 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 for--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
15 And punched up to the feathers through his throat.

Backward and down he went, letting the winecup fall
From his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted
Crimson runnels, a river of mortal red,
And one last kick upset his table
20 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,
25 Not a good ashed spear was there for a man to take and throw.
All they could do was yell in outrage as Odysseus:

“Foul! To shoot a man! That was your last shot!”

“Your own throat will be slit for this!”

“Our finest lad is down!”

“You killed the best in Ithaca.”

“Buzzards will tear your eyes out!”

30 For they imagined as they wished--that it was wild shot,
And 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
35 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.
40 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:

45 “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 ringleaders; he whipped us on
50 To do these things. He cared less for a marriage
Than for the power Cronion had 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
55 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.”

60 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.
65 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.”

They felt their knees fail, and their hearts--but heard
Eurymachus for the last time rallying them.

70 “Friends,” he said, “the man is implacable.
Now that he’s got his hands on bow and quiver
He’ll shoot from the big door stone there
Until he kills us to the last man.

Fight, I say,
Let’s remember the joy of it. Swords out!
75 Hold up your tables to deflect his arrows.
After me, everyone: rush him where he stand.
If we can budge him from the door, if we can pass
Into the town, we’ll call out men to chase him.
This fellow with his bow will shoot no more.”

80 He drew his own sword as he spoke, a broadsword of fine bronze,
Honed like a razor on either edge. Then crying hoarse and loud
He hurled himself at Odysseus. But the kingly man let fly
And arrow at that instant, and the quivering feathered butt
Sprang to the nipple of his breast as the barb stuck in his liver.
85 The bright broadsword clanged down. He lurched and fell aside,
Pitching across his table. His cup, his bread and meat,
Were split and scattered far and wide, and his head slammed on the ground.
Revulsion, anguish in his heart, with both feet kicking out,
He downed his chair, while the shrouding wave of mist closed on his eyes.

90 Amphinomus now came running at Odysseus,
Broadsword naked in his hand. He thought to make
The great soldier give way at the door.
But with a spear throw from behind Telemachus hit him
Between the shoulders, and the lancehead drove
95 Clear through his chest. He left his feet and fell
forward, thudding, forehead against the ground.

Telemachus swerved around him, leaving the long dark spear
Planted in Amphinomus. If he paused to yank it out
Someone might jump him from behind or cut him down with a sword
100 At the moment he bent over. So he ran--ran from the tables
To his father’s side and halted, panting, saying:

“Father let me bring you a shield and spear
A pair of spears, a helmet.
I can arm on the run myself; I’ll give
105 Outfits to Eumaeus and this cowherd.
Better to have equipment.”

Said Odysseus:

“Run then, while I hold them off with arrows
As long as the arrows last. When all are gone
If I’m alone they can dislodge me.”

Quick
110 Upon his father’s word Telemachus
Ran to the room where spears and armor lay.
He caught up four light shields, four pairs of spears,
Four helms of war high-plumed with flowing manes,
And ran back, loaded down, to his father’s side.
115 He was the first to pull a helmet on
And slide his bare arm in a buckler strap.
The servants armed themselves, and all three took their stand
Beside the master of battle.

While he had arrows
He aimed and shot, and every shot brought down
120 One of his huddling enemies.
But when all barbs had flown from the bowman’s fist,
He leaned his bow in the bright entry way
Beside the door, and armed: a four-ply shield
Hard on his shoulder, and a crested helm,
125 Horsetailed, nodding stormy upon his head,
The took his tough and bronze-shod spears...

The suitors make various unsuccessful attempts to expel Odysseus from his post at the door. Athena urges Odysseus on to battle, yet holds back her fullest aid, waiting for Odysseus and Telemachus to prove themselves. Six of the suitors attempt an attack on Odysseus, but Athena deflects their arrows. Odysseus and his men seize this opportunity to launch their own attack, and the suitors begin to fall. At last Athena’s presence becomes known to all, as the shape of her shield becomes visible above the hall. The suitors, recognizing the intervention of the gods on Odysseus’ behalf, are frantic to escape but to no avail. Odysseus and his men are compared to falcons who show no mercy to the flocks of birds they pursue and capture. Soon the room is reeking with blood. Thus the battle with the suitors comes to an end, and Odysseus prepares himself to meet Penelope.