

## Book 21: The Test of the Bow

*In Books 18-20, Odysseus observes the suitors and finds that two in particular, Antinous and Eurymachus, are rude and demanding. Penelope asks Odysseus the beggar for news of her husband. He says he has heard that Odysseus is on his way home. Penelope, however, has given up hope for Odysseus' return. She proposes an archery contest to the suitors, with marriage to her as the prize. She enters the storeroom and takes down the heavy bow that Odysseus left behind.*

Now the queen reached the storeroom door and halted.  
Here was an oaken sill, cut long ago  
And sanded clean and bedded true. Foursquare  
The doorjambs and the shining door were set  
5 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  
As those bright doors the key had sprung gave way--  
10 A bellow like a bull's vaunt in a meadow--  
Followed by her light football entering  
Over the plank floor. Herb-scented robes  
Lay there in chests, but the lady's milkwhite arms  
Went up to life the bow down from a peg  
15 In its own polished bowcase.

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,  
20 tremendous bow in hand, and on her shoulder hung  
The quiver spiked with coughing death. Behind her  
Maids bore a basket full of axeheads, bronze  
And iron implements for the master's game.  
Thus in her beauty she approached the suitors,  
25 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:  
Suitors indeed, you commandeered this house  
30 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.  
35 Here is my Odysseus' hunting bow.  
Bend and string it if you can. Who sends an arrow  
Through iron axe-helve sockets, twelve in line?  
I join my life with his, and leave this place my home,  
My rich and beautiful bridal house, forever  
40 To be remembered, though I dream it only..”

*Despite heating and greasing the bow, the lesser suitors prove unable to string it. The most able suitors, Antinous and Eurymachus, hold off. While the suitors are busy with the bow, Odysseus--still disguised as an old beggar--goes to enlist the aid of two of his trusted servants, Eumaeus, the swineherd, and Philoetius, the cowherd.*

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,  
45 And coming up said gently:

“You, herdsman,  
And you too, swineherd, I could say a thing to you,  
Or should I keep it dark?

No, no; speak,  
My heart tells me. Would you be men enough  
To stand by Odysseus if he came back?  
50 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  
55 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.  
60 I bore adversities, but in the twentieth year  
I am ashore in my own land. I find  
The two of you, along among my people,  
Longed for my coming. Prayers I never heard  
Except your own that I might come again.  
65 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  
Brothers-in-arms of my Telemachus.  
70 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  
75 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---

80 “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 aman,  
85 Will be dead against giving me bow or quiver.  
Defy them. Eumaeus, bring the bow  
And put it in my hands there are the door.  
Tell the women to lock their own door tight.  
Tell them if someone hears the shock of arms  
90 Or groans of men, in hall or court, not one  
Must show her face, but keep still at her weaving.  
Philoetius, run to the outer gate and lock it.  
Throw the crossbar and lash it.”...

*Odysseus the beggar asks the suitor if he might try the bow. Worried that the old man may show them up, they refuse, but Penelope urges them to let Odysseus try. At Telemachus' request, Penelope leaves the men to settle the question of the bow among themselves. Two trusted servants lock the doors of the room, and Telemachus orders the bow be given to Odysseus.*

And Odysseus took his time,  
95 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!"

100 "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!"

105 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  
110 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  
115 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  
120 Where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still  
In quiver for the young men's turn to come.  
He nocked it, let it rest across the handgrip,  
And drew it string and grooved butt of the arrow,  
Aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

Now flashed  
125 Arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle  
Through every socket ring, and grazed not one,  
To thud with heavy brazed head beyond.

Then quietly Odysseus said:

"Telemachus, the stranger  
You welcomed in your hall has not disgraced you.  
130 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 house has come to cook their lordships' mutton--  
Supper by daylight. Other amusement later,  
135 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  
140 Stood by his char, in the forefront near his father.