BOOK TWENTY-ONE: THE TEST OF THE BOW

With the help of King Alcinous, Odysseus finally returns home to the shores of Ithaca, where he is met by the goddess Athena. She warns him that his palace is overrun by more than 100 suitors who, believing Odysseus is dead, want to marry Penelope and take over his fortune. Following her advice, Odysseus disguises himself as a beggar and visits the palace. There he sees that two suitors in particular, Antinous and Eurymachus, are rude and demanding. Odysseus has a tearful reunion with his son, Telemachus, and together they discuss how to avenge their family honor. In the meantime, Penelope — who knows nothing of this and has given up hope for Odysseus’ return — 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 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\(^1\) spiked with coughing death. Behind, her maids bore a basket full of ax heads, bronze and iron implements for the master’s game\(^2\).

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: suitors indeed, you \textit{commandeered} this house to feast and drink in, day and night, my husband being long gone, long out of mind. You found no \textit{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’ hunting bow. Bend and string it if you can. Who sends an arrow through iron ax-helve sockets, 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.”

Then to Eumaeus:

“Carry the bow forward. Carry the blades.”

Tears came to the swineherd’s eyes

As he reached out for the big bow. He laid it down at the suitors’ feet. Across the room The cowherd sobbed, knowing the master’s weapon. Antinous growled, with a glance at both:

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\(^1\) a case in which arrows are carried
\(^2\) metal heads of axes (without handles) that Odysseus used to employ in a display of archery and skill
“Clods.

They go to pieces over nothing.

You two, there

why are you sniveling? To upset the woman

even more? Has she not pain enough

over her lost husband? Sit down.

Get on with dinner quietly, or cry about it

outside, if you must. Leave us the bow.

A clean-cut game, it looks to me.

Nobody bends that bowstave easily

in this company. Is there a man here

made like Odysseus? I remember him

from childhood: I can see him even now.”

That was the way he played it, hoping inwardly
to span the great horn bow with corded gut
and drill the iron with his shot – he, Antinous,
destined to be the first of all to savor
blood from a biting arrow at his throat,
a shaft drawn by the fingers of Odysseus
whom he had mocked and plundered, leading on
the rest, his boon companions.

Despite heating and greasing the bow, the lesser suitors prove unable to string it. The most able suitors, Antinous and Eury machus, hold off. While the suitors are busy with the bow, Odysseus – still disguised as an aold beggar – goes to enlist the aid 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,
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?

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:

3 jolly friends
“I am at home, for I am he.
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
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
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—

Autolycus’ sons and I.”

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, else 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.
Philoetius, run to the outer gate and lock it.
Throw the crossbar and lash it.”

He turned back
into the courtyard and the beautiful house
and took the stool he had before. They followed
one by one, the two hands loyal to him.

Eurymachus had now picked up the bow.
He turned it round, and turned it round
before the licking flame to warm it up,
but could not, even so, put stress upon it
to jam the loop over the tip
though his heart groaned to bursting.

What is the quality that Odysseus values so highly
in these two servants?

Why does Odysseus anticipate that the swineherd will get into a conflict
with the suitors?

Odysseus has a plan but reveals to the servants only the details they must
take care of. On the basis of the orders he gives, what do you think
Odysseus is planning?

4 a mountain in central Greece
5 Odysseus’ uncles (Autolycus was Odysseus’ grandfather on his mother’s side)
Then he said grimly:

“Curse this day.

What gloom I feel, not for myself alone,
and not only because we lose that bride.
Women are not lacking in Achaean,
in other towns, or on Ithaca. No, the worst
is humiliation – to be shown up for children
measured against Odysseus – we who cannot
even hitch the strong over his bow.
What shame to be repeated of us, after us!”

Then spoke Odysseus, all craft and gall:

“My lords, contenders for the queen, permit me:
A passion in me moves me to speak out.
I put it to Eurymachus above all
And to that brilliant prince, Antinous….
But let me try my hand at the smooth bow!
Let me test my fingers and my pull
To see if any of the oldtime kick is there,
or if thin fare and roving took it out of me.”

Now irritation beyond reason swept them all,
since they were nagged by fear that he could string it.
Antinous answered, coldly and at length:

“You bleary vagabond, no rag of sense is left you.
Are you not coddled here enough, at table
taking meat with gentlemen, your betters,
denied nothing, and listening to our talk?
When have we let a tramp hear all our talk?
The sweet goad of wine has made you rave!”

At this the watchful queen Penelope
interposed:

“Antinous, discourtesy
to a guest of Telemachus – whatever guest –
that is not handsome. What are you afraid of?
Suppose this exile put his back into it
and drew the great bow of Odysseus –
could he then take me home to be his bride?
You know he does not imagine that! No one
need let that prospect weigh upon his dinner!
How very, very improbable it seems.”

At Telemachus’ request, Penelope leaves the men to settle the question of the bow among themselves.

The swineherd had the horned bow in his hands
moving toward Odysseus, when the crowd
in the banquet hall broke into an ugly din,
shouts rising from the flushed young men:

“How! Where

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6 the Greek mainland
7 poor food and hard travel
Do you think you are taking that, you smutty slave?”

“What is this dithering?”

“We'll toss you back alone among the pigs, for your own dogs to eat, if bright Apollo nods and the gods are kind!”

He faltered, all at once put down the bow, and stood in panic, buffeted by waves of cries, hearing Telemachus from another quarter shout:

“Go on, take him the bow! Do you obey this pack?

You will be stoned back to your hills. Young as I am my power is over you! I wish to God I had as much the upper hand of these! There would be suitors pitched like dead rats through our gate, for the evil plotted here!”

Telemachus’ frenzy struck someone as funny, and soon the whole room roared with laughter at him, so that all tension passed. Eumaeus picked up bow and quiver, making for the door, and there he placed them in Odysseus’ hands. Calling Eurycleia to his side he said:

“Telemachus trusts you to take care of the women’s doorway. Lock it tight. If anyone inside should hear the shock of arms or groans of men in hall or court, not one must show her face, but go on with her weaving.”

The old woman nodded and kept still. She disappeared into the women’s hall, bolting the door behind her. Philoetius left the house now at one bound, catlike, running to bolt the courtyard gate. A coil of deck-rope of papyrus fiber lay in the gateway; this he used for lashing, and ran back to the same stool as before, fastening his eyes upon Odysseus.

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

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 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.”

He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince

8 weight
9 struck; affected sharply
10 the thunder, a sign from Zeus, indicates that the gods are on Odysseus’ side
11 Zeus’ father
12 placed the arrow’s feathered end against the bow-string
13 Made of brass

In this epic simile Odysseus’ stringing of the bow is compared to the stringing of a harp. What qualities of Odysseus does this comparison emphasize?

Discuss Odysseus’ intent in making the statement “neither did I take all day stringing the bow”.

Explain the irony in the lines about cooking the lordships’ meal.
Telemachus, true son of King Odysseus, 
belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear, 
and with a clink and glitter of keen bronze stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father. 

Book 21 ends with the image of father and son standing side by side facing more than 100 enemies.