

H O M E R

The
Odyssey

TRANSLATED BY

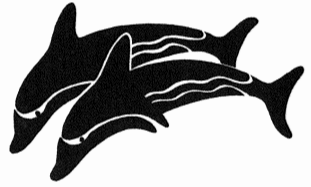
Robert Fagles

INTRODUCTION AND
NOTES BY

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Odysseus Strings His Bow

The time had come. The goddess Athena with her blazing eyes inspired Penelope, Icarius' daughter, wary, poised, to set the bow and the gleaming iron axes out before her suitors waiting in Odysseus' hall—to test their skill and bring their slaughter on. Up the steep stairs to her room she climbed and grasped in a steady hand the curved key—fine bronze, with ivory haft attached—and then with her chamber-women made her way to a hidden storeroom, far in the palace depths, and there they lay, the royal master's treasures: bronze, gold and a wealth of hard wrought iron and there it lay as well . . . his backsprung bow with its quiver bristling arrows, shafts of pain. Gifts from the old days, from a friend he'd met

10

in Lacedaemon—Iphitus, Eurytus' gallant son.
 Once in Messene the two struck up together,
 in sly Ortilochus' house, that time Odysseus
 went to collect a debt the whole realm owed him,
 for Messenian raiders had lifted flocks from Ithaca, 20
 three hundred head in their oarswept ships, the herdsmen too.
 So his father and island elders sent Odysseus off,
 a young boy on a mission,
 a distant embassy made to right that wrong.
 Iphitus went there hunting the stock that *he* had lost,
 a dozen mares still nursing their hardy suckling mules.
 The same mares that would prove his certain death
 when he reached the son of Zeus, that iron heart,
 Heracles—the past master of monstrous works—
 who killed the man, a guest in his own house. 30
 Brutal. Not a care for the wrathful eyes of god
 or rites of hospitality he had spread before him,
 no, he dined him, then he murdered him, commandeered
 those hard-hoofed mares for the hero's own grange.
 Still on the trail of these when he met Odysseus,
 Iphitus gave him the bow his father, mighty Eurytus,
 used to wield as a young man, but when he died
 in his lofty house he left it to his son.
 In turn, Odysseus gave his friend a sharp sword
 and a rugged spear to mark the start of friendship, 40
 treasured ties that bind. But before they got to know
 the warmth of each other's board, the son of Zeus
 had murdered Iphitus, Eurytus' magnificent son
 who gave the prince the bow.

That great weapon—

King Odysseus never took it abroad with him
 when he sailed off to war in his long black ships.
 He kept it stored away in his stately house,
 guarding the memory of a cherished friend,
 and only took that bow on hunts at home.

Now,

the lustrous queen soon reached the hidden vault 50
 and stopped at the oaken doorsill, work an expert

sanded smooth and trued to the line some years ago,
 planting the doorjambs snugly, hanging shining doors.
 At once she loosed the thong from around its hook,
 inserted the key and aiming straight and true,
 shot back the bolts—and the rasping doors groaned
 as loud as a bull will bellow, champing grass at pasture.
 So as the key went home those handsome double doors
 rang out now and sprang wide before her.

She stepped onto a plank where chests stood tall,
 brimming with clothing scented sweet with cedar.
 Reaching, tiptoe, lifting the bow down off its peg,
 still secure in the burnished case that held it,
 down she sank, laying the case across her knees,
 and dissolved in tears with a high thin wail
 as she drew her husband's weapon from its sheath . . .

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Then, having wept and sobbed to her heart's content,
 off she went to the hall to meet her proud admirers,
 cradling her husband's backsprung bow in her arms,
 its quiver bristling arrows, shafts of pain.

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Her women followed, bringing a chest that held
 the bronze and the iron axes, trophies won by the master.
 That radiant woman, once she reached her suitors,
 drawing her glistening veil across her cheeks,
 paused now where a column propped the sturdy roof,
 with one of her loyal handmaids stationed either side,
 and delivered an ultimatum to her suitors:

"Listen to me, my overbearing friends!

You who plague this palace night and day,
 drinking, eating us out of house and home
 with the lord and master absent, gone so long—

80

the only excuse that you can offer is your zest
 to win me as your bride. So, to arms, my gallants!
 Here is the prize at issue, right before you, look—
 I set before you the great bow of King Odysseus now!
 The hand that can string this bow with greatest ease,
 that shoots an arrow clean through all twelve axes—
 he is the man I follow, yes, forsaking this house
 where I was once a bride, this gracious house

so filled with the best that life can offer—
I shall always remember it, that I know . . .
even in my dreams.”

90

She turned to Eumaeus,
ordered the good swineherd now to set the bow
and the gleaming iron axes out before the suitors.
He broke into tears as he received them, laid them down.
The cowherd wept too, when he saw his master's bow.
But Antinous wheeled on both and let them have it:
“Yokels, fools—you can't tell night from day!
You mawkish idiots, why are you sniveling here?
You're stirring up your mistress! Isn't she drowned
in grief already? She's lost her darling husband.
Sit down. Eat in peace, or take your snuffling
out of doors! But leave that bow right here—
our crucial test that makes or breaks us all.
No easy game, I wager, to string *his* polished bow.
Not a soul in the crowd can match Odysseus—
what a man he was . . .
I saw him once, remember him to this day,
though I was young and foolish way back then.”

100

Smooth talk,

but deep in the suitor's heart his hopes were bent
on stringing the bow and shooting through the axes.
Antinous—fated to be the first man to taste
an arrow whipped from great Odysseus' hands,
the king he mocked, at ease in the king's house,
egging comrades on to mock him too.

110

“Amazing!”

Prince Telemachus waded in with a laugh:
“Zeus up there has robbed me of my wits.
My own dear mother, sensible as she is,
says she'll marry again, forsake our house,
and look at *me*—laughing for all I'm worth,
giggling like some fool. Step up, my friends!
Here is the prize at issue, right before you, look—
a woman who has no equal now in all Achaean country,
neither in holy Pylos, nor in Argos or Mycenae,

120

not even Ithaca itself or the loamy mainland.
 You know it well. Why sing my mother's praises?
 Come, let the games begin! No dodges, no delays,
 no turning back from the stringing of the bow—
 we'll see who wins, we will.

I'd even take a crack at the bow myself . . . 130
 If I string it and shoot through all the axes,
 I'd worry less if my noble mother left our house
 with another man and left me here behind—man enough
 at last to win my father's splendid prizes!"

With that

he leapt to his feet and dropped his bright red cloak,
 slipping the sword and sword-belt off his shoulders.
 First he planted the axes, digging a long trench,
 one for all, and trued them all to a line
 then tamped the earth to bed them. Wonder took
 the revelers looking on: his work so firm, precise, 140
 though he'd never seen the axes ranged before.

He stood at the threshold, poised to try the bow . . .
 Three times he made it shudder, straining to bend it,
 three times his power flagged—but his hopes ran high
 he'd string his father's bow and shoot through every iron
 and now, struggling with all his might for the fourth time,
 he would have strung the bow, but Odysseus shook his head
 and stopped him short despite his tensing zeal.

"God help me," the inspired prince cried out,
 "must I be a weakling, a failure all my life? 150
 Unless I'm just too young to trust my hands
 to fight off any man who rises up against me.
 Come, my betters, so much stronger than I am—
 try the bow and finish off the contest."

He propped his father's weapon on the ground,
 tilting it up against the polished well-hung doors
 and resting a shaft aslant the bow's fine horn,
 then back he went to the seat that he had left.

"Up, friends!" Antinous called, taking over.
 "One man after another, left to right, 160

starting from where the steward pours the wine.”

So Antinous urged and all agreed.

The first man up was Leodes, Oenops' son,
a seer who could see their futures in the smoke,
who always sat by the glowing winebowl, well back,
the one man in the group who loathed their reckless ways,
appalled by all their outrage. His turn first . . .

Picking up the weapon now and the swift arrow,
he stood at the threshold, poised to try the bow
but failed to bend it. As soon as he tugged the string
his hands went slack, his soft, uncallused hands,
and he called back to the suitors, “Friends,
I can't bend it. Take it, someone—try.

170

Here is a bow to rob our best of life and breath,
all our best contenders! Still, better be dead
than live on here, never winning the prize
that tempts us all—forever in pursuit,
burning with expectation every day.

If there's still a suitor here who hopes,
who aches to marry Penelope, Odysseus' wife,
just let him try the bow; he'll see the truth!

180

He'll soon lay siege to another Argive woman
trailing her long robes, and shower her with gifts—
and then our queen can marry the one who offers most,
the man marked out by fate to be her husband.”

With those words he thrust the bow aside,
tilting it up against the polished well-hung doors
and resting a shaft aslant the bow's fine horn,
then back he went to the seat that he had left.

But Antinous turned on the seer, abuses flying:
“Leodes! what are you saying? what's got past your lips?
What awful, grisly nonsense—it shocks me to hear it—
'here is a bow to rob our best of life and breath!'
Just because *you* can't string it, you're so weak?
Clearly your genteel mother never bred her boy
for the work of bending bows and shooting arrows.

190

We have champions in our ranks to string it quickly.
 Hop to it, Melanthius!"—he barked at the goatherd—
 "Rake the fire in the hall, pull up a big stool,
 heap it with fleece and fetch that hefty ball 200
 of lard from the stores inside. So we young lords
 can heat and limber the bow and rub it down with grease
 before we try again and finish off the contest!"

The goatherd bustled about to rake the fire
 still going strong. He pulled up a big stool,
 heaped it with fleece and fetched the hefty ball
 of lard from the stores inside. And the young men
 limbered the bow, rubbing it down with hot grease,
 then struggled to bend it back but failed. No use—
 they fell far short of the strength the bow required. 210
 Antinous still held off, dashing Eurymachus too,
 the ringleaders of all the suitors,
 head and shoulders the strongest of the lot.

But now

the king's two men, the cowherd and the swineherd,
 had slipped out of the palace side-by-side
 and great Odysseus left the house to join them.
 Once they were past the courtyard and the gates
 he probed them deftly, surely: "Cowherd, swineherd,
 what, shall I blurt this out or keep it to myself?
 No, speak out. The heart inside me says so. 220
 How far would you go to fight beside Odysseus?
 Say he dropped like *that* from a clear blue sky
 and a god brought him back—
 would you fight for the suitors or your king?
 Tell me how you feel inside your hearts."

"Father Zeus," the trusty cowherd shouted,
 "bring my prayer to pass! Let the master come—
 some god guide him now! You'd see my power,
 my fighting arms in action!"

Eumaeus echoed his prayer to all the gods 230

that their wise king would soon come home again.
 Certain at least these two were loyal to the death,
 Odysseus reassured them quickly: “I’m right here,
 here in the flesh—myself—and home at last,
 after bearing twenty years of brutal hardship.
 Now I know that of all my men you two alone
 longed for my return. From the rest I’ve heard
 not one real prayer that I come back again.
 So now I’ll tell you what’s in store for *you*.

If a god beats down the lofty suitors at my hands,
 I’ll find you wives, both of you, grant you property,
 sturdy houses beside my own, and in my eyes you’ll be
 comrades to Prince Telemachus, brothers from then on.
 Come, I’ll show you something—living proof—
 know me for certain, put your minds at rest.

240

This scar,
 look, where a boar’s white tusk gored me, years ago,
 hunting on Parnassus, Autolycus’ sons and I.”

With that,
 pushing back his rags, he revealed the great scar . . .
 And the men gazed at it, scanned it, knew it well,
 broke into tears and threw their arms around their master—
 lost in affection, kissing his head and shoulders,
 and so Odysseus kissed their heads and hands.
 Now the sun would have set upon their tears
 if Odysseus had not called a halt himself.

250

“No more weeping. Coming out of the house
 a man might see us, tell the men inside.
 Let’s slip back in—singly, not in a pack.
 I’ll go first. You’re next. Here’s our signal.
 When all the rest in there, our lordly friends,
 are dead against my having the bow and quiver,
 good Eumaeus, carry the weapon down the hall
 and put it in my hands. Then tell the serving-women
 to lock the snugly fitted doors to their own rooms.
 If anyone hears from there the jolting blows
 and groans of men, caught in our huge net,
 not one of them show her face—

260

sit tight, keep to her weaving, not a sound.
 You, my good Philoetius, here are your orders.
 Shoot the bolt of the courtyard's outer gate,
 lock it, lash it fast."

With that command 270
 the master entered his well-constructed house
 and back he went to the stool that he had left.
 The king's two men, in turn, slipped in as well.

Just now Eurymachus held the bow in his hands,
 turning it over, tip to tip, before the blazing fire
 to heat the weapon. But he failed to bend it even so
 and the suitor's high heart groaned to bursting.
 "A black day," he exclaimed in wounded pride,
 "a blow to myself, a blow to each man here!
 It's less the marriage that mortifies me now— 280
 that's galling too, but lots of women are left,
 some in seagirt Ithaca, some in other cities.
 What breaks my heart is the fact we fall so short
 of great Odysseus' strength we cannot string his bow.
 A disgrace to ring in the ears of men to come."

"Eurymachus," Eupithes' son Antinous countered,
 "it will never come to that, as you well know.
 Today is a feast-day up and down the island
 in honor of the Archer God. Who flexes bows today?
 Set it aside. Rest easy now. And all the axes, 290
 let's just leave them planted where they are.
 Trust me, no one's about to crash the gates
 of Laertes' son and carry off these trophies.
 Steward, pour some drops for the god in every cup,
 we'll tip the wine, then put the bow to bed.
 And first thing in the morning have Melanthius
 bring the pick of his goats from all his herds
 so we can burn the thighs to Apollo, god of archers—
 then try the bow and finish off the contest."

Welcome advice. And again they all agreed. 300

Heralds sprinkled water over their hands for rinsing,
 the young men brimmed the mixing bowls with wine,
 they tipped first drops for the god in every cup,
 then poured full rounds for all. And now, once
 they'd tipped libations out and drunk their fill,
 the king of craft, Odysseus, said with all his cunning,
 "Listen to me, you lords who court the noble queen.
 I have to say what the heart inside me urges.
 I appeal especially to Eurymachus, and you,
 brilliant Antinous, who spoke so shrewdly now. 310
 Give the bow a rest for today, leave it to the gods—
 at dawn the Archer God will grant a victory
 to the man he favors most.

For the moment,
 give me the polished bow now, won't you? So,
 to amuse you all, I can try my hand, my strength . . .
 is the old force still alive inside these gnarled limbs?
 Or has a life of roaming, years of rough neglect,
 destroyed it long ago?"

Modest words

that sent them all into hot, indignant rage,
 fearing he just might string the polished bow. 320
 So Antinous rounded on him, dressed him down:
 "Not a shred of sense in your head, you filthy drifter!
 Not content to feast at your ease with us, the island's pride?
 Never denied your full share of the banquet, never,
 you can listen in on our secrets. No one else
 can eavesdrop on our talk, no tramp, no beggar.
 The wine has overpowered you, heady wine—
 the ruin of many another man, whoever
 gulps it down and drinks beyond his limit.
 Wine—it drove the Centaur, famous Eurytion, 330
 mad in the halls of lionhearted Pirithous.
 There to visit the Lapiths, crazed with wine
 the headlong Centaur bent to his ugly work
 in the prince's own house! His hosts sprang up,
 seized with fury, dragged him across the forecourt,
 flung him out of doors, hacking his nose and ears off

with their knives, no mercy. The creature reeled away,
still blind with drink, his heart like a wild storm,
loaded with all the frenzy in his mind!

And so

the feud between mortal men and Centaurs had its start. 340
But the drunk was first to bring disaster on himself
by drowning in his cups. You too, I promise you
no end of trouble if you should string that bow.
You'll meet no kindness in our part of the world—
we'll sail you off in a black ship to Echetus,
the mainland king who wrecks all men alive.
Nothing can save you from his royal grip!
So drink, but hold your peace,
don't take on the younger, stronger men."

"Antinous," watchful Penelope stepped in, 350
"how impolite it would be, how wrong, to scant
whatever guest Telemachus welcomes to his house.
You really think—if the stranger trusts so to his hands
and strength that he strings Odysseus' great bow—
he'll take me home and claim me as his bride?
He never dreamed of such a thing, I'm sure.
Don't let that ruin the feast for any reveler here.
Unthinkable—nothing, nothing could be worse."

Polybus' son Eurymachus had an answer: 360
"Wise Penelope, daughter of Icarus, do we really
expect the man to wed you? Unthinkable, I know.
But we do recoil at the talk of men and women.
One of the island's meaner sort will mutter,
'Look at the riffraff courting a king's wife.
Weaklings, look, they can't even string his bow.
But along came this beggar, drifting out of the blue—
strung his bow with ease and shot through all the axes!
Gossip will fly. We'll hang our heads in shame."

"Shame?" alert Penelope protested—

"How can you hope for any public fame at all? 370
 You who disgrace, devour a great man's house and home!
 Why hang your heads in shame over next to nothing?
 Our friend here is a strapping, well-built man
 and claims to be the son of a noble father.
 Come, hand him the bow now, let's just see . . .
 I tell you this—and I'll make good my word—
 if he strings the bow and Apollo grants him glory,
 I'll dress him in shirt and cloak, in handsome clothes,
 I'll give him a good sharp lance to fight off men and dogs,
 give him a two-edged sword and sandals for his feet 380
 and send him off, wherever his heart desires."

"Mother,"

poised Telemachus broke in now, "my father's bow—
 no Achaean on earth has more right than I
 to give it or withhold it, as I please.
 Of all the lords in Ithaca's rocky heights
 or the islands facing Elis grazed by horses,
 not a single one will force or thwart my will,
 even if I decide to give our guest this bow—
 a gift outright—to carry off himself.

So, mother,

go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks, 390
 the distaff and the loom, and keep the women
 working hard as well. As for the bow now,
 men will see to that, but I most of all:
 I hold the reins of power in this house."

Astonished,

she withdrew to her own room. She took to heart
 the clear good sense in what her son had said.
 Climbing up to the lofty chamber with her women,
 she fell to weeping for Odysseus, her beloved husband,
 till watchful Athena sealed her eyes with welcome sleep.

And now the loyal swineherd had lifted up the bow, 400
 was taking it toward the king, when all the suitors
 burst out in an ugly uproar through the palace—

brash young bullies, this or that one heckling,
 “Where on earth are you going with that bow?”

“You, you grubby swineherd, are you crazy?”

“The speedy dogs you reared will eat your corpse—”

“Out there with your pigs, out in the cold, alone!”

“If only Apollo and all the gods shine down on us!”

Eumaeus froze in his tracks, put down the bow,
 panicked by every outcry in the hall. 410

Telemachus shouted too, from the other side,
 and full of threats: “Carry on with the bow, old boy!
 If you serve too many masters, you’ll soon suffer.
 Look sharp, or I’ll pelt you back to your farm
 with flying rocks. I may be younger than you
 but I’m much stronger. If only I had that edge
 in fists and brawn over all this courting crowd,
 I’d soon dispatch them—licking their wounds at last—
 clear of our palace where they plot their vicious plots!”

His outburst sent them all into gales of laughter, 420
 blithe and oblivious, that dissolved their pique

against the prince. The swineherd took the bow,
 carried it down the hall to his ready, waiting king
 and standing by him, placed it in his hands,
 then he called the nurse aside and whispered,
 “Good Eurycleia—Telemachus commands you now
 to lock the snugly fitted doors to your own rooms.
 If anyone hears from there the jolting blows
 and groans of men, caught in our huge net,
 not one of you show your face— 430
 sit tight, keep to your weaving, not a sound.”

That silenced the old nurse—
 she barred the doors that led from the long hall.

The cowherd quietly bounded out of the house
to lock the gates of the high-stockaded court.
Under the portico lay a cable, ship's tough gear:
he lashed the gates with this, then slipped back in
and ran and sat on the stool that he'd just left,
eyes riveted on Odysseus.

Now *he* held the bow
in his own hands, turning it over, tip to tip, 440
testing it, this way, that way . . . fearing worms
had bored through the weapon's horn with the master gone abroad.
A suitor would glance at his neighbor, jeering, taunting,
"Look at our connoisseur of bows!"

"Sly old fox—
maybe he's got bows like it, stored in *his* house."

"That or he's bent on making one himself."

"Look how he twists and turns it in his hands!"

"The clever tramp means trouble—"

"I wish him luck," some cocksure lord chimed in,
"as good as his luck in bending back that weapon!" 450

So they mocked, but Odysseus, mastermind in action,
once he'd handled the great bow and scanned every inch,
then, like an expert singer skilled at lyre and song—
who strains a string to a new peg with ease,
making the pliant sheep-gut fast at either end—
so with his virtuoso ease Odysseus strung his mighty bow.
Quickly his right hand plucked the string to test its pitch
and under his touch it sang out clear and sharp as a swallow's cry.
Horror swept through the suitors, faces blanching white,
and Zeus cracked the sky with a bolt, his blazing sign, 460
and the great man who had borne so much rejoiced at last
that the son of cunning Cronus flung that omen down for *him*.
He snatched a winged arrow lying bare on the board—
the rest still bristled deep inside the quiver,

soon to be tasted by all the feasters there.
Setting shaft on the handgrip, drawing the notch
and bowstring back, back . . . right from his stool,
just as he sat but aiming straight and true, he let fly—
and never missing an ax from the first ax-handle
clean on through to the last and out
the shaft with its weighted brazen head shot free!

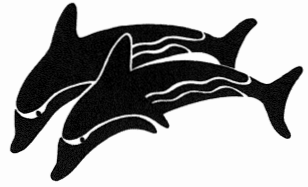
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“My son,”

Odysseus looked to Telemachus and said, “your guest,
sitting here in your house, has not disgraced you.
No missing the mark, look, and no long labor spent
to string the bow. My strength’s not broken yet,
not quite so frail as the mocking suitors thought.
But the hour has come to serve our masters right—
supper in broad daylight—then to other revels,
song and dancing, all that crowns a feast.”

He paused with a warning nod, and at that sign
Prince Telemachus, son of King Odysseus,
girding his sharp sword on, clamping hand to spear,
took his stand by a chair that flanked his father—
his bronze spearpoint glinting now like fire . . .

480



Slaughter in the Hall

Now stripping back his rags Odysseus master of craft and battle vaulted onto the great threshold, gripping his bow and quiver bristling arrows, and poured his flashing shafts before him, loose at his feet, and thundered out to all the suitors: “Look—your crucial test is finished, now, at last! But another target’s left that no one’s hit before—we’ll see if *I* can hit it—Apollo give me glory!”

With that he trained a stabbing arrow on Antinous . . . just lifting a gorgeous golden loving-cup in his hands, just tilting the two-handed goblet back to his lips, about to drain the wine—and slaughter the last thing on the suitor’s mind: who could dream that one foe in that crowd of feasters, however great his power, would bring down death on himself, and black doom?

10

But Odysseus aimed and shot Antinous square in the throat
and the point went stabbing clean through the soft neck and out—
and off to the side he pitched, the cup dropped from his grasp
as the shaft sank home, and the man's life-blood came spurting
out his nostrils—

thick red jets—

a sudden thrust of his foot—

he kicked away the table—

food showered across the floor,

20

the bread and meats soaked in a swirl of bloody filth.

The suitors burst into uproar all throughout the house
when they saw their leader down. They leapt from their seats,
milling about, desperate, scanning the stone walls—
not a shield in sight, no rugged spear to seize.

They wheeled on Odysseus, lashing out in fury:

"Stranger, shooting at men will cost your life!"

"Your game is over—you, you've shot your last!"

"You'll never escape your own headlong death!"

"You killed the best in Ithaca—our fine prince!"

30

"Vultures will eat your corpse!"

Groping, frantic—

each one persuading himself the guest had killed
the man by chance. Poor fools, blind to the fact
that all their necks were in the noose, their doom sealed.
With a dark look, the wily fighter Odysseus shouted back,
"You dogs! you never imagined I'd return from Troy—
so cocksure that you bled my house to death,
ravished my serving-women—wooed my wife
behind my back while I was still alive!

No fear of the gods who rule the skies up there,
no fear that men's revenge might arrive someday—
now all your necks are in the noose—your doom is sealed!"

40

Terror gripped them all, blanched their faces white,

each man glancing wildly—how to escape his instant death?
 Only Eurymachus had the breath to venture, “If you,
 you’re truly Odysseus of Ithaca, home at last,
 you’re right to accuse these men of what they’ve done—
 so much reckless outrage here in your palace,
 so much on your lands. But here he lies,
 quite dead, and he incited it all—Antinous—
 look, the man who drove us all to crime! 50
 Not that he needed marriage, craved it so;
 he’d bigger game in mind—though Zeus barred his way—
 he’d lord it over Ithaca’s handsome country, king himself,
 once he’d lain in wait for your son and cut him down!
 But now he’s received the death that he deserved.
 So spare your own people! Later we’ll recoup
 your costs with a tax laid down upon the land,
 covering all we ate and drank inside your halls,
 and each of us here will pay full measure too— 60
 twenty oxen in value, bronze and gold we’ll give
 until we melt your heart. Before we’ve settled,
 who on earth could blame you for your rage?”

But the battle-master kept on glaring, seething.
 “No, Eurymachus! Not if you paid me all your father’s wealth—
 all you possess now, and all that could pour in from the world’s end—
 no, not even then would I stay my hands from slaughter
 till all you suitors had paid for all your crimes!
 Now life or death—your choice—fight me or flee
 if you hope to escape your sudden bloody doom! 70
 I doubt one man in the lot will save his skin!”

His menace shook their knees, their hearts too
 but Eurymachus spoke again, now to the suitors: “Friends!
 This man will never restrain his hands, invincible hands—
 now that he’s seized that polished bow and quiver, look,
 he’ll shoot from the sill until he’s killed us all!
 So fight—call up the joy of battle! Swords out!
 Tables lifted—block his arrows winging death!
 Charge him, charge in a pack—

try to rout the man from the sill, the doors, 80
 race through town and sound an alarm at once—
 our friend would soon see he's shot his bolt!"

Brave talk—

he drew his two-edged sword, bronze, honed for the kill
 and hurled himself at the king with a raw savage cry
 in the same breath that Odysseus loosed an arrow
 ripping his breast beside the nipple so hard
 it lodged in the man's liver—
 Out of his grasp the sword dropped to the ground—
 over his table, head over heels he tumbled, doubled up,
 flinging his food and his two-handed cup across the floor— 90
 he smashed the ground with his forehead, writhing in pain,
 both feet flailing out, and his high seat tottered—
 the mist of death came swirling down his eyes.

Amphinomus rushed the king in all his glory,
 charging him face-to-face, a slashing sword drawn—
 if only he could force him clear of the doorway, now,
 but Telemachus—too quick—stabbed the man from behind,
 plunging his bronze spear between the suitor's shoulders
 and straight on through his chest the point came jutting out—
 down he went with a thud, his forehead slammed the ground. 100
 Telemachus swerved aside, leaving his long spearshaft
 lodged in Amphinomus—fearing some suitor just might
 lunge in from behind as he tugged the shaft,
 impale him with a sword or hack him down,
 crouching over the corpse.

He went on the run, reached his father at once
 and halting right beside him, let fly, "Father—
 now I'll get you a shield and a pair of spears,
 a helmet of solid bronze to fit your temples!
 I'll arm myself on the way back and hand out 110
 arms to the swineherd, arm the cowherd too—
 we'd better fight equipped!"

"Run, fetch them,"

the wily captain urged, "while I've got arrows left
 to defend me—or they'll force me from the doors

while I fight on alone!”

Telemachus moved to his father’s orders smartly.
 Off he ran to the room where the famous arms lay stored,
 took up four shields, eight spears, four bronze helmets
 ridged with horsehair crests and, loaded with these,
 ran back to reach his father’s side in no time. 120
 The prince was first to case himself in bronze
 and his servants followed suit—both harnessed up
 and all three flanked Odysseus, mastermind of war,
 and he, as long as he’d arrows left to defend himself,
 kept picking suitors off in the palace, one by one
 and down they went, corpse on corpse in droves.
 Then, when the royal archer’s shafts ran out,
 he leaned his bow on a post of the massive doors—
 where walls of the hallway catch the light—and armed:
 across his shoulder he slung a buckler four plies thick, 130
 over his powerful head he set a well-forged helmet,
 the horsehair crest atop it tossing, bristling terror,
 and grasped two rugged lances tipped with fiery bronze.

Now a side-door was fitted into the main wall—
 right at the edge of the great hall’s stone sill—
 and led to a passage always shut by good tight boards.
 But Odysseus gave the swineherd strict commands
 to stand hard by the side-door, guard it well—
 the only way the suitors might break out.
 Agelaus called to his comrades with a plan: 140
 “Friends, can’t someone climb through the hatch?—
 tell men outside to sound the alarm, be quick—
 our guest would soon see he’d shot his last!”

The goatherd Melanthius answered, “Not a chance,
 my lord—the door to the courtyard’s much too near,
 dangerous too, the mouth of the passage cramped.
 One strong man could block us, one and all!
 No, I’ll fetch you some armor to harness on,
 out of the storeroom—there, nowhere else, I’m sure,

the king and his gallant son have stowed their arms!"

150

With that the goatherd clambered up through smoke-ducts high on the wall and scurried into Odysseus' storeroom, bundled a dozen shields, as many spears and helmets ridged with horsehair crests and, loaded with these, rushed back down to the suitors, quickly issued arms. Odysseus' knees shook, his heart too, when he saw them buckling on their armor, brandishing long spears—here was a battle looming, well he knew. He turned at once to Telemachus, warnings flying: "A bad break in the fight, my boy! One of the women's tipped the odds against us—or could it be the goatherd?"

160

"My fault, father," the cool clear prince replied, "the blame's all mine. That snug door to the vault, I left it ajar—they've kept a better watch than I. Go, Eumaeus, shut the door to the storeroom, check and see if it's one of the women's tricks or Dolius' son Melanthius. He's our man, I'd say."

And even as they conspired, back the goatherd climbed to the room to fetch more burnished arms, but Eumaeus spotted him, quickly told his king who stood close by: "Odysseus, wily captain, there he goes again, the infernal nuisance—just as we suspected—back to the storeroom. Give me a clear command! Do I kill the man—if I can take him down—or drag him back to you, here, to pay in full for the vicious work he's plotted in your house?"

170

Odysseus, master of tactics, answered briskly, "I and the prince will keep these brazen suitors crammed in the hall, for all their battle-fury. You two wrench Melanthius' arms and legs behind him, fling him down in the storeroom—lash his back to a plank and strap a twisted cable fast to the scoundrel's body,

180

hoist him up a column until he hits the rafters—
 let him dangle in agony, still alive,
 for a good long time!”

They hung on his orders, keen to do his will.
 Off they ran to the storeroom, unseen by him inside—
 Melanthius, rummaging after arms, deep in a dark recess
 as the two men took their stand, either side the doorposts, 190
 poised till the goatherd tried to cross the doorsill . . .
 one hand clutching a crested helmet, the other
 an ample old buckler blotched with mildew,
 the shield Laertes bore as a young soldier once
 but there it lay for ages, seams on the handstraps split—
 Quick, they rushed him, seized him, haled him back by the hair,
 flung him down on the floor, writhing with terror, bound him
 hand and foot with a chafing cord, wrenched his limbs
 back, back till the joints locked tight—
 just as Laertes’ cunning son commanded— 200
 they strapped a twisted cable round his body,
 hoisted him up a column until he hit the rafters,
 then you mocked him, Eumaeus, my good swineherd:
 “Now stand guard through the whole night, Melanthius—
 stretched out on a soft bed fit for *you*, your highness!
 You’re bound to see the Morning rising up from the Ocean,
 mounting her golden throne—at just the hour you always
 drive in goats to feast the suitors in the hall!”

So they left him, trussed in his agonizing sling;
 they clapped on armor again, shut the gleaming doors 210
 and ran to rejoin Odysseus, mastermind of war.
 And now as the ranks squared off, breathing fury—
 four at the sill confronting a larger, stronger force
 arrayed inside the hall—now Zeus’s daughter Athena,
 taking the build and voice of Mentor, swept in
 and Odysseus, thrilled to see her, cried out,
 “Rescue us, Mentor, now it’s life or death!
 Remember your old comrade—all the service
 I offered you! We were boys together!”

So he cried

yet knew in his bones it was Athena, Driver of Armies. 220
 But across the hall the suitors brayed against her,
 Agelaus first, his outburst full of threats:
 “Mentor, never let Odysseus trick you into
 siding with *him* to fight against the suitors.
 Here’s our plan of action, and we will see it through!
 Once we’ve killed them both, the father and the son,
 we’ll kill you too, for all you’re bent on doing
 here in the halls—you’ll pay with your own head!
 And once our swords have stopped your violence cold—
 all your property, all in your house, your fields, 230
 we’ll lump it all with Odysseus’ rich estate
 and never let your sons live on in your halls
 or free your wife and daughters to walk through town!”

Naked threats—and Athena hit new heights of rage,
 she lashed out at Odysseus now with blazing accusations:
 “Where’s it gone, Odysseus—your power, your fighting heart?
 The great soldier who fought for famous white-armed Helen,
 battling Trojans nine long years—nonstop, no mercy,
 mowing their armies down in grueling battle—
 you who seized the broad streets of Troy 240
 with your fine strategic stroke! How can you—
 now you’ve returned to your own house, your own wealth—
 bewail the loss of your combat strength in a war with *suitors*?
 Come, old friend, stand by me! You’ll see action now,
 see how Mentor the son of Alcimus, that brave fighter,
 kills your enemies, pays you back for service!”

Rousing words—

but she gave no all-out turning of the tide, not yet,
 she kept on testing Odysseus and his gallant son,
 putting their force and fighting heart to proof.
 For all the world like a swallow in their sight 250
 she flew on high to perch
 on the great hall’s central roofbeam black with smoke.

But the suitors closed ranks, commanded now by Damastor’s son

Agelaus, flanked by Eurynomus, Demoptolemus and Amphimedon,
 Pisander, Polyctor's son, and Polybus ready, waiting—
 head and shoulders the best and bravest of the lot
 still left to fight for their lives,

now that the pelting shafts had killed the rest.

Agelaus spurred his comrades on with battle-plans:

"Friends, at last the man's invincible hands are useless!

260

Mentor has mouthed some empty boasts and flitted off—

just four are left to fight at the front doors. So now,

no wasting your long spears—all at a single hurl,

just six of us launch out in the first wave!

If Zeus is willing, we may hit Odysseus,

carry off the glory! The rest are nothing

once the captain's down!"

At his command,

concentrating their shots, all six hurled as one

but Athena sent the whole salvo wide of the mark—

one of them hit the jamb of the great hall's doors,

270

another the massive door itself, and the heavy bronze point

of a third ashen javelin crashed against the wall.

Seeing his men untouched by the suitors' flurry,

steady Odysseus leapt to take command:

"Friends! now it's for *us* to hurl at them, I say,

into this ruck of suitors! Topping all their crimes

they're mad to strip the armor off our bodies!"

Taking aim at the ranks, all four let fly as one

and the lances struck home—Odysseus killed Demoptolemus,

Telemachus killed Euryades—the swineherd, Elatus—

280

and the cowherd cut Pisander down in blood.

They bit the dust of the broad floor, all as one.

Back to the great hall's far recess the others shrank

as the four rushed in and plucked up spears from corpses.

And again the suitors hurled their whetted shafts

but Athena sent the better part of the salvo wide—

one of them hit the jamb of the great hall's doors,

another the massive door itself, and the heavy bronze point

of a third ashen javelin crashed against the wall.
 True, Amphimedon nicked Telemachus on the wrist— 290
 the glancing blade just barely broke his skin.
 Ctesippus sent a long spear sailing over
 Eumaeus' buckler, grazing his shoulder blade
 but the weapon skittered off and hit the ground.
 And again those led by the brilliant battle-master
 hurled their razor spears at the suitors' ranks—
 and now Odysseus raider of cities hit Eurydamas,
 Telemachus hit Amphimedon—Eumaeus, Polybus—
 and the cowherd stabbed Ctesippus
 right in the man's chest and triumphed over his body: 300
 "Love your mockery, do you? Son of that blowhard Polytherses!
 No more shooting off your mouth, you idiot, such big talk—
 leave the last word to the gods—they're much stronger!
 Take this spear, this guest-gift, for the cow's hoof
 you once gave King Odysseus begging in his house!"

So the master of longhorn cattle had his say—
 as Odysseus, fighting at close quarters, ran Agelaus
 through with a long lance—Telemachus speared Leocritus
 so deep in the groin the bronze came punching out his back
 and the man crashed headfirst, slamming the ground full-face. 310
 And now Athena, looming out of the rafters high above them,
 brandished her man-destroying shield of thunder, terrifying
 the suitors out of their minds, and down the hall they panicked—
 wild, like herds stampeding, driven mad as the darting gadfly
 strikes in the late spring when the long days come round.
 The attackers struck like eagles, crook-clawed, hook-beaked,
 swooping down from a mountain ridge to harry smaller birds
 that skim across the flatland, cringing under the clouds
 but the eagles plunge in fury, rip their lives out—hopeless,
 never a chance of flight or rescue—and people love the sport— 320
 so the attackers routed suitors headlong down the hall,
 wheeling into the slaughter, slashing left and right
 and grisly screams broke from skulls cracked open—
 the whole floor awash with blood.

Leodes now—

he flung himself at Odysseus, clutched his knees,
 crying out to the king with a sudden, winging prayer:
 "I hug your knees, Odysseus—mercy! spare my life!
 Never, I swear, did I harass any woman in your house—
 never a word, a gesture—nothing, no, I tried
 to restrain the suitors, whoever did such things. 330
 They wouldn't listen, keep their hands to themselves—
 so reckless, so they earn their shameful fate.
 But I was just their prophet—
 my hands are clean—and I'm to die their death!
 Look at the thanks I get for years of service!"

A killing look, and the wry soldier answered,
 "Only a priest, a prophet for this mob, you say?
 How hard you must have prayed in my own house
 that the heady day of my return would never dawn—
 my dear wife would be yours, would bear your children! 340
 For that there's no escape from grueling death—you die!"

And snatching up in one powerful hand a sword
 left on the ground—Agelaus dropped it when he fell—
 Odysseus hacked the prophet square across the neck
 and the praying head went tumbling in the dust.

Now one was left,
 trying still to escape black death. Phemius, Terpis' son,
 the bard who always performed among the suitors—
 they forced the man to sing . . .

There he stood, backing into the side-door,
 still clutching his ringing lyre in his hands, 350
 his mind in turmoil, torn—what should he do?
 Steal from the hall and crouch at the altar-stone
 of Zeus who Guards the Court, where time and again
 Odysseus and Laertes burned the long thighs of oxen?
 Or throw himself on the master's mercy, clasp his knees?
 That was the better way—or so it struck him, yes,
 grasp the knees of Laertes' royal son. And so,
 cradling his hollow lyre, he laid it on the ground
 between the mixing-bowl and the silver-studded throne,

then rushed up to Odysseus, yes, and clutched his knees, 360
 singing out to his king with a stirring, winged prayer:
 "I hug your knees, Odysseus—mercy! spare my life!
 What a grief it will be to you for all the years to come
 if you kill the singer now, who sings for gods and men.
 I taught myself the craft, but a god has planted
 deep in my spirit all the paths of song—
 songs I'm fit to sing for you as for a god.
 Calm your bloodlust now—don't take my head!
 He'd bear me out, your own dear son Telemachus—
 never of *my* own will, never for any gain did I 370
 perform in your house, singing after the suitors
 had their feasts. They were too strong, too many—
 they forced me to come and sing—I had no choice!"

The inspired Prince Telemachus heard his pleas
 and quickly said to his father close beside him,
 "Stop, don't cut him down! This one's innocent.
 So is the herald Medon—the one who always
 tended me in the house when I was little—
 spare him too. Unless he's dead by now,
 killed by Philoetius or Eumaeus here— 380
 or ran into *you* rampaging through the halls."

The herald pricked up his anxious ears at that . . .
 cautious soul, he cowered, trembling, under a chair—
 wrapped in an oxhide freshly stripped—to dodge black death.
 He jumped in a flash from there, threw off the smelly hide
 and scuttling up to Telemachus, clutching his knees,
 the herald begged for life in words that fluttered:
 "Here I am, dear boy—spare me! Tell your father,
 flushed with victory, not to kill me with his sword—
 enraged as he is with these young lords who bled 390
 his palace white and showed you no respect,
 the reckless fools!"

Breaking into a smile
 the canny Odysseus reassured him, "Courage!
 The prince has pulled you through, he's saved you now

so you can take it to heart and tell the next man too:
 clearly doing good puts doing bad to shame.
 Now leave the palace, go and sit outside—
 out in the courtyard, clear of the slaughter—
 you and the bard with all his many songs.
 Wait till I've done some household chores
 that call for my attention."

400

The two men scurried out of the house at once
 and crouched at the altar-stone of mighty Zeus—
 glancing left and right,
 fearing death would strike at any moment.

Odysseus scanned his house to see if any man
 still skulked alive, still hoped to avoid black death.
 But he found them one and all in blood and dust . . .
 great hauls of them down and out like fish that fishermen
 drag from the churning gray surf in looped and coiling nets
 and fling ashore on a sweeping hook of beach—some noble catch
 heaped on the sand, twitching, lusting for fresh salt sea
 but the Sungod hammers down and burns their lives out . . .
 so the suitors lay in heaps, corpse covering corpse.
 At last the seasoned fighter turned to his son:
 "Telemachus, go, call the old nurse here—
 I must tell her all that's on my mind."

410

Telemachus ran to do his father's bidding,
 shook the women's doors, calling Eurycleia:
 "Come out now! Up with you, good old woman!
 You who watch over all the household hands—
 quick, my father wants you, needs to have a word!"

420

Crisp command that left the old nurse hushed—
 she spread the doors to the well-constructed hall,
 slipped out in haste, and the prince led her on . . .
 She found Odysseus in the thick of slaughtered corpses,
 splattered with bloody filth like a lion that's devoured
 some ox of the field and lopes home, covered with blood,

his chest streaked, both jaws glistening, dripping red—
 a sight to strike terror. So Odysseus looked now, 430
 splattered with gore, his thighs, his fighting hands,
 and she, when she saw the corpses, all the pooling blood,
 was about to lift a cry of triumph—here was a great exploit,
 look—but the soldier held her back and checked her zeal
 with warnings winging home: “Rejoice in your heart,
 old woman—peace! No cries of triumph now.
 It’s unholy to glory over the bodies of the dead.
 These men the doom of the gods has brought low,
 and their own indecent acts. They’d no regard
 for any man on earth—good or bad— 440
 who chanced to come their way. And so, thanks
 to their reckless work, they met this shameful fate.
 Quick, report in full on the women in my halls—
 who are disloyal to me, who are guiltless?”

“Surely, child,”

his fond old nurse replied, “now here’s the truth.
 Fifty women you have inside your house,
 women we’ve trained to do their duties well,
 to card the wool and bear the yoke of service.
 Some dozen in all went tramping to their shame,
 thumbing their noses at me, at the queen herself! 450
 And Telemachus, just now come of age—his mother
 would never let the boy take charge of the maids.
 But let me climb to her well-lit room upstairs
 and tell your wife the news—
 some god has put the woman fast asleep.”

“Don’t wake her yet,” the crafty man returned,
 “you tell those women to hurry here at once—
 just the ones who’ve shamed us all along.”

Away the old nurse bustled through the house
 to give the women orders, rush them to the king. 460
 Odysseus called Telemachus over, both herdsmen too,
 with strict commands: “Start clearing away the bodies.
 Make the women pitch in too. Chairs and tables—

scrub them down with sponges, rinse them clean.
 And once you've put the entire house in order,
 march the women out of the great hall—between
 the roundhouse and the courtyard's strong stockade—
 and hack them with your swords, slash out all their lives—
 blot out of their minds the joys of love they relished
 under the suitors' bodies, rutting on the sly!"

470

The women crowded in, huddling all together . . .
 wailing convulsively, streaming live warm tears.
 First they carried out the bodies of the dead
 and propped them under the courtyard colonnade,
 standing them one against another. Odysseus
 shouted commands himself, moving things along
 and they kept bearing out the bodies—they were forced.
 Next they scrubbed down the elegant chairs and tables,
 washed them with sopping sponges, rinsed them clean.
 Then Telemachus and the herdsmen scraped smooth
 the packed earth floor of the royal house with spades
 as the women gathered up the filth and piled it outside.
 And then, at last, once the entire house was put in order,
 they marched the women out of the great hall—between
 the roundhouse and the courtyard's strong stockade—
 crammed them into a dead end, no way out from there,
 and stern Telemachus gave the men their orders:
 "No clean death for the likes of them, by god!
 Not from me—they showered abuse on my head,
 my mother's too!

480

You sluts—the suitors' whores!"

490

With that, taking a cable used on a dark-prowed ship
 he coiled it over the roundhouse, lashed it fast to a tall column,
 hoisting it up so high no toes could touch the ground.
 Then, as doves or thrushes beating their spread wings
 against some snare rigged up in thickets—flying in
 for a cozy nest but a grisly bed receives them—
 so the women's heads were trapped in a line,
 nooses yanking their necks up, one by one

so all might die a pitiful, ghastly death . . .
they kicked up heels for a little—not for long.

Melanthius?

500

They hauled him out through the doorway, into the court,
lopped his nose and ears with a ruthless knife,
tore his genitals out for the dogs to eat raw
and in manic fury hacked off hands and feet.

Then,

once they'd washed their own hands and feet,
they went inside again to join Odysseus.

Their work was done with now.

But the king turned to devoted Eurycleia, saying,

“Bring sulfur, nurse, to scour all this pollution—
bring me fire too, so I can fumigate the house.

510

And call Penelope here with all her women—
tell all the maids to come back in at once.”

“Well said, my boy,” his old nurse replied,
“right to the point. But wait,
let me fetch you a shirt and cloak to wrap you.
No more dawdling round the palace, nothing but rags
to cover those broad shoulders—it’s a scandal!”

“Fire first,” the good soldier answered.

“Light me a fire to purify this house.”

The devoted nurse snapped to his command,
brought her master fire and brimstone. Odysseus
purged his palace, halls and court, with cleansing fumes.

520

Then back through the royal house the old nurse went
to tell the women the news and bring them in at once.
They came crowding out of their quarters, torch in hand,
flung their arms around Odysseus, hugged him, home at last,
and kissed his head and shoulders, seized his hands, and he,
overcome by a lovely longing, broke down and wept . . .
deep in his heart he knew them one and all.