


1030 rose from the wells of longing in both men,
and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering
as those of the great taloned hawk,
whose nestlings^o farmers take before they fly.
1035 So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears,
and might have gone on weeping so till sundown. . . .

(from Book 16)

1033. **nestlings** (nest'linz) *n.*: young birds that are not ready to leave the nest.

 **1005–1035.** Which part of this recognition scene between father and son do you find most moving or most dramatic? Sum up the problems that now face father and son in the palace at Ithaca.

THE BEGGAR AND THE FAITHFUL DOG

Telemachus returns to the family compound and is greeted tearfully by his mother, Penelope, and his old nurse, Eurycleia. A soothsayer has told his mother that Odysseus is alive and in Ithaca. However, Telemachus does not report that he has seen his father. The suspense builds as Odysseus, once again disguised as a beggar, returns to his home, accompanied only by the swineherd. He has been away for twenty years. Only one creature recognizes him.

While he spoke

an old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears
and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argos,
trained as a puppy by Odysseus,
1040 but never taken on a hunt before
his master sailed for Troy. The young men, afterward,
hunted wild goats with him, and hare, and deer,
but he had grown old in his master's absence.
Treated as rubbish now, he lay at last
1045 upon a mass of dung before the gates—
manure of mules and cows, piled there until
field hands could spread it on the king's estate.
Abandoned there, and half destroyed with flies,
old Argos lay.

But when he knew he heard
1050 Odysseus' voice nearby, he did his best
to wag his tail, nose down, with flattened ears,
having no strength to move nearer his master.
And the man looked away,
wiping a salt tear from his cheek; but he
1055 hid this from Eumaeus. Then he said:

"I marvel that they leave this hound to lie
here on the dung pile;
he would have been a fine dog, from the look of him,



Laconian hound scratching his head. Detail from an Attic red-figured ceramic scyphus, or drinking cup, by the Euergides Painter (c. 500 B.C.).

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England.



1060 though I can't say as to his power and speed
when he was young. You find the same good build
in house dogs, table dogs landowners keep
all for style."

And you replied, Eumaeus:


1065 "A hunter owned him—but the man is dead
in some far place. If this old hound could show
the form he had when Lord Odysseus left him,
going to Troy, you'd see him swift and strong.
He never shrank from any savage thing
he'd brought to bay in the deep woods; on the scent
no other dog kept up with him. Now misery
1070 has him in leash. His owner died abroad,
and here the women slaves will take no care of him.
You know how servants are: without a master
they have no will to labor, or excel.
For Zeus who views the wide world takes away
1075 half the manhood of a man, that day
he goes into captivity and slavery."

1080 Eumaeus crossed the court and went straight forward
into the megaron^o among the suitors;
but death and darkness in that instant closed
the eyes of Argos, who had seen his master,
Odysseus, after twenty years. . . .

(from Book 17)

Odysseus is recognized by
Eurycleia when she washes his feet.
Roman relief.

Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome, Italy.

 1044–1071. Here again we
hear about people who mock the
sacred laws of respect and hospital-
ity. In showing us how the old dog
is treated, what is Homer telling us
about conditions in Ithaca?

1078. megaron (meg'ə·rān) *n.*: great
hall or central room.

The Epic Continues

In the hall the "beggar" is taunted by the evil suitors, but Penelope supports him. She has learned that the ragged stranger claims to have news of her husband. Unaware of who the beggar is, she invites him to visit her later in the night to talk about Odysseus.

In Book 18, Penelope appears among the suitors and reproaches Telemachus for allowing the stranger to be abused. She certainly must have warmed her husband's heart by doing this and by singing the praises of her lost Odysseus.

In Book 19, the suitors depart for the night, and Odysseus and Telemachus discuss their strategy. The clever hero goes as appointed to Penelope with the idea of testing her and her maids. (Some of the maids have not been loyal to the household and have been involved with the suitors.) The faithful wife receives her disguised husband. We can imagine the tension Homer's audience must have felt. Would Odysseus be recognized?

The "beggar" spins a yarn about his origins, pretending that he has met Odysseus on his travels. He cannot resist praising the lost hero, and he does so successfully enough to bring tears to Penelope's eyes. We can be sure that this does not displease her husband.

The storytelling beggar reveals that he has heard that Odysseus is alive and is even now sailing for home. Penelope calls for the old nurse and asks her to wash the guest's feet—a sign of respect and honor. As Eurycleia does so, she recognizes Odysseus from a scar on his leg.

Quickly Odysseus swears the old nurse to secrecy. Meanwhile, Athena has cast a spell on Penelope so that she has taken no notice of this recognition scene. Penelope adds to the suspense by deciding on a test for the suitors on the next day. Without realizing it, she has now given Odysseus a way to defeat the men who threaten his wife and kingdom.

In Book 20, Odysseus, brooding over the shameless behavior of the maidservants and the suitors, longs to destroy his enemies but fears the revenge of their friends. Athena reassures him. Odysseus is told that the suitors will die.





Penelope with the Suitors (c. 1509) by Pinturicchio.

THE TEST OF THE GREAT BOW

In Book 21, Penelope, like many unwilling princesses of myth and fairy tale, proposes an impossible task for those who wish to marry her. By so doing, she causes the bloody events that lead to the restoration of her husband. The test involves stringing Odysseus's huge bow, an impossible feat for anyone except Odysseus himself. Odysseus had left his bow home in Ithaca twenty years earlier.

Now the queen reached the storeroom door and halted.
Here was an oaken sill, cut long ago
and sanded clean and bedded true. Foursquare
1085 the doorjambs and the shining doors were set
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
1090 as those bright doors the key had sprung gave way—
a bellow like a bull's vaunt^o in a meadow—

1091. vaunt (vònt) *n.*: boast.

1095 followed by her light footfall entering
over the plank floor. Herb-scented robes
lay there in chests, but the lady's milk-white arms
went up to lift the bow down from a peg
in its own polished bow case.

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.
1100 Then back she went to face the crowded hall
tremendous bow in hand, and on her shoulder hung
the quiver spiked with coughing death. Behind, her
maids bore a basket full of ax heads, bronze
and iron implements for the master's game.
1105 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:

1110 "My lords, hear me:
suitors indeed, you recommended this house
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:
1115 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,^o twelve in line?
I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home,
1120 my rich and beautiful bridal house, forever
to be remembered, though I dream it only." . . .

*Many of the suitors boldly try the bow, but not one man can even
bend it enough to string it.*

Two men had meanwhile left the hall:
swineherd and cowherd, in companionship,
one downcast as the other. But Odysseus
1125 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?"



Odysseus slaying the suitors. Detail from an Attic red-figured scyphus, or drinking cup, by the Penelope Painter, from Tarquinii, an ancient city in central Italy (c. 440 B.C.).

Antikensammlung Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz.

1118. **ax-helve sockets:** An ax helve is an ax handle; a socket is a hollow piece lined with iron at the end of the handle. Shooting an arrow through a line of ax-helve sockets would be a task possible only for a superhero like Odysseus.

No, not speak,

1130 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!

1135 Father Zeus, grant our old wish! Some courier^o
guide him back! Then judge what stuff is in me
and how I manage arms!"


1135. **courier** (koo'r'e-er) n. guide
or messenger.

Likewise Eumaeus

fell to praying all heaven for his return,
so that Odysseus, sure at least of these,
told them:

1140 "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
1145 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
1150 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^o — ..."

 1122–1140. How does
Odysseus test the loyalty of the
swineherd and the cowherd? How
do they prove that they can be
trusted?

Shifting his rags

1155 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—

1160 "Break off, no more of this.
Anyone at the door could see and tell them.
Drift back in, but separately at intervals
after me.

1154. **Parnassus** (par-nas'as) n. As a
young man, Odysseus had gone
hunting on Parnassus, his mother's
home, and was gored above the knee
by a boar.

Now listen to your orders:

when the time comes, those gentlemen, to a man,
will be dead against giving me bow or quiver.
1165 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
1170 must show her face, but keep still at her weaving.
Philoeteus, run to the outer gate and lock it.
Throw the crossbar and lash it." . . .

Now Odysseus, still in his beggar's clothes, asks to try the bow. The suitors refuse to allow a mere beggar to try where they have failed, but Penelope insists that the stranger be given his chance. The suspense is very great—by this act, Penelope has accepted her husband as a suitor.

Eumaeus, the swineherd, hands Odysseus the bow and tells the nurse to retire with Penelope and the maids to the family chambers (the harem) 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,
1175 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!"

1180 "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!"

1185 But the man skilled in all ways of contending,
satisfied by the great bow's look and heft,

Vocabulary

disdainful (dis·dān'fəl) *adj.*: scornful; regarding someone as beneath you.

 1174–1220. As you read this scene, make notes about how you **visualize** it. Where are various characters placed? How are they reacting? It might help to draw a picture of the great hall and indicate where various actions take place.

like a musician, like a harper, when
with quiet hand upon his instrument
he draws between his thumb and forefinger
1190 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
1195 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
1200 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
1205 arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle
through every socket ring, and grazed not one,
to thud with heavy brazen head beyond.

Odysseus said: Then quietly

“Telemachus, the stranger
you welcomed in your hall has not disgraced you.
1210 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,
1215 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
1220 stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.


(from Book 21)

Vocabulary

adorn (ə·dôrn') v.: add beauty to; decorate.

1198. Cronus (krō'nəs): father of Zeus, called crooked-minded because of his schemes to destroy his children.

1202. nocked (năkt) v.: fitted to the bowstring.

 **1220.** What do you predict will happen next? Review the episode, looking for clues in what Odysseus says and does.