

**W**ITH 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.



BOOK

THE TEST OF THE BOW

TWENTY-ONE



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.  
 5 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 axeheads, bronze  
 and iron implements for the master's game.  
 10 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:  
 15 suitors indeed, you commandeered 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:

Guide for Reading

1–4 Notice that Penelope still grieves for Odysseus, even after 20 years.

7 **quiver** (kwiv'er): a case in which arrows are carried. What do you think is meant by “the quiver spiked with coughing death”?

8–9 **axeheads . . . game**: metal heads of axes (without handles) that Odysseus used to employ in a display of archery skill.

WORDS  
 TO  
 KNOW

**commandeer** (kōm'an-dīr') v. to take control of by force  
**justification** (jūs'te-ff-kā'shen) n. an explanation or excuse for an action

20 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 axe-helve sockets, twelve in line?  
I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home,  
25 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  
30 down at the suitors' feet. Across the room  
the cowherd sobbed, knowing the master's weapon.  
Antinous growled, with a glance at both:

"Clods.

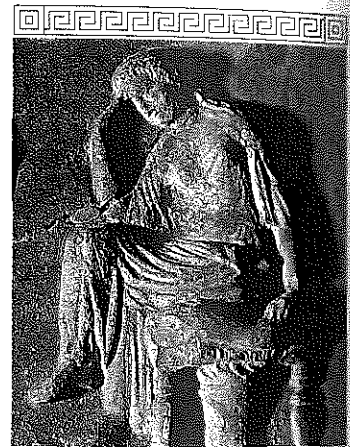
They go to pieces over nothing.

You two, there,  
why are you sniveling? To upset the woman  
even more? Has she not pain enough  
35 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.  
40 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  
45 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  
50 whom he had mocked and plundered, leading on  
the rest, his boon companions.

21–23 Note that the contest has two parts: first the suitor must bend the heavy bow and string it—a task that requires immense strength and skill—then he must shoot an arrow straight through the holes in 12 axe heads set up in a row.

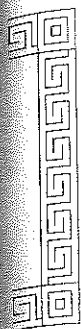
28–38 Notice the emotion expressed by the swineherd Eumaeus and the cowherd Philoetius when they are reminded of their master. Then notice how Antinous treats Odysseus' servants.



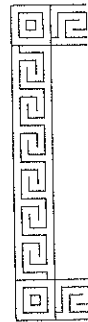
44–51 Antinous imagines himself winning Penelope's contest. Notice, however, that his death is foreshadowed here.

51 boon companions: jolly friends.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW     **plunder** (plūn'dər) v. to rob of property by force; steal from



**D**ESPITE 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  
55 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?

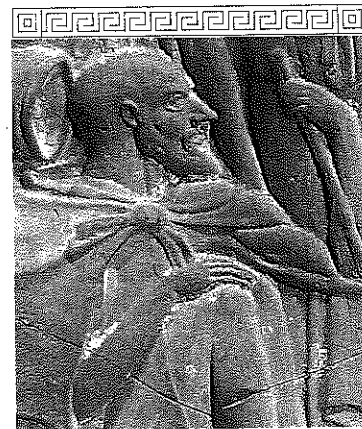
No, no; speak,  
my heart tells me. Would you be men enough  
60 to stand by Odysseus if he came back?  
Suppose he dropped out of a clear sky, as I did?  
Suppose some god should bring him?  
Would you bear arms for him, or for the suitors?”

The cowherd said:

“Ah, let the master come!  
65 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,  
70 told them:

“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  
75 except your own that I might come again.  
So now what is in store for you I’ll tell you:



72-75 What is the quality that Odysseus values so highly in these two servants?