

150 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:

“Ho! Where
do you think you are taking that, you smutty slave?”

153-157 How would you describe
the way the suitors treat the old
swineherd?

155 “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,
160 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
165 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!”

162-172 As Penelope did earlier,
Telemachus stands up to the sui-
tors. He wishes that he had as
much power over them as he
has, despite his youth, over the
servant Eumaeus. The suitors just
laugh at Telemachus, but as they
do, Eumaeus is able to deliver the
bow safely to Odysseus.

Telemachus’ frenzy struck someone as funny,
and soon the whole room roared with laughter at him,
170 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:

173-178 Eumaeus orders Eurycleia
to lock the women’s room. Why
does he say that the orders came
from Telemachus rather than from
Odysseus?

“Telemachus

trusts you to take care of the women’s doorway.
175 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

WORDS
TO
KNOW

dithering (dīth’er-īng) *n.* acting in a nervous or uncertain way **dither** *v.*
frenzy (frēn’zē) *n.* a wildly excited state of mind

180 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,
185 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.
190 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.”

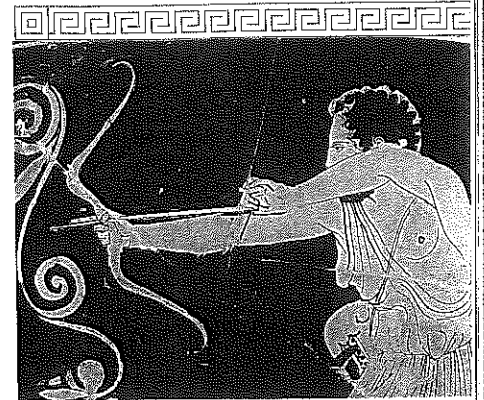
“See how he handles it, the sly old buzzard!”

195 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
200 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,
205 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



198 heft: weight.

199–203 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?

206 smote: struck; affected sharply.

207–208 The thunder, a sign from Zeus, indicates that the gods are on Odysseus' side.

210 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,
215 and drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow,
aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

210 Cronus (krō'nēs): Zeus' father.

214 nocked it: placed the arrow's
feathered end against the bow-
string.

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.

219 brazen: made of brass.

220 Odysseus said:

Then quietly

“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.
225 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
Telemachus, true son of King Odysseus,
230 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.

228–232 Book 21 ends with the
image of father and son standing
side by side facing more than 100
enemies.

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