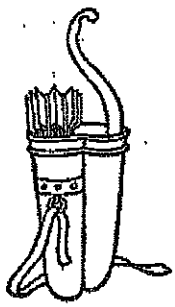
BOOK XXI



But now the goddess, gray-eyed Athene, put it in the mind
of the daughter of Ikarios, circumspect Penelope,
to set the bow before the suitors, and the gray iron,
in the house of Odysseus: the contest, the beginning of the slaughter.
So she ascended the high staircase of her own house,
and in her solid hand took up the beautiful, brazen
and artfully curved key, with an ivory handle upon it.
With her attendant women she went to the inmost recess
of the chamber. There were stored away the master's possessions.
Bronze was there, and gold, and difficulty wrought iron,
and there the backstrung bow was stored away, and the quiver
to hold the arrows. There were many painful shafts inside it.
These were gifts from a friend whom he met in Lakedaimon,
Iphitos, son of Eurytos, one like the immortal
gods.

- Don't worry—Homer tells you the story:

- Odysseus met Iphitos in Messene, where he (Odysseus) had come claiming the natives owed Ithaka for having stolen some sheep way back when. Iphitos was also there on the account of livestock; he was tracking some stray mares that apparently wandered to Messene themselves.

- But these mares ended up being the death of Iphitos, since he later wandered to the house of Herakles (Hercules), who promptly killed him (*gasp*not a guest!) so he could have the mares.
- The point is, Odysseus became friends with Iphitos; he gave him a sword and spear, and Iphitos in return gave him the bow that Penelope is now taking off the wall. Point is, Odysseus uses his sharp sword on voyages, and his curved bow at home.

Then she went up to the high platform, where there were standing
chests, and in these were stored fragrant pieces of clothing.
From there she reached, and took the bow from its peg, where it hung,
in its own case, a shining thing that covered it. Thereupon
she sat down, and laid the bow on her dear knees, while she
took her lord's bow out of its case, all the while weeping
aloud. But when she had sated herself with tears and crying,
she went on her way to the hall to be with the lordly suitors,
bearing in her hand the backstrung bow, and the quiver
to hold the arrows, with many sorrowful shafts inside it.
Her serving women carried the box for her, and there lay
much iron and bronze, prizes that had been won by the master.
When she, shining among women, came near the suitors,

she stood by the pillar that supported the roof with its joinery,
holding her shining veil in front of her face, to shield it,
and a devoted attendant was stationed on either side of her.
Now at once she spoke and addressed a word to the suitors:
'Hear me now, you haughty suitors, who have been using
this house for your incessant eating and drinking, though it
belongs to a man who has been gone for a long time; never
have you been able to bring any other saying before me,
but only your desire to make me your wife and marry me.
But come, you suitors, since here is a prize set out before you;
for I shall bring you the great bow of godlike Odysseus.
And the one who takes the bow in his hands, strings it with the greatest
ease, and sends an arrow clean through all the twelve axes,
shall be the one I go away with, forsaking this house
where I was a bride, a lovely place and full of good living.
I think that even in my dreams I shall never forget it.'
So she spoke, and told the noble swineherd, Eumaios,
to put the bow and the gray iron in front of the suitors.
Eumaios accepted it, in tears, and put them before them,
and the oxherd also wept, when he saw the bow of his master,
but Antinoös scolded the two of them, and spoke out and named them:
'You foolish countrymen, who never think of tomorrow,
poor wretches, why are you streaming tears, and troubling the lady
now, and stirring her heart, when she has enough already
of sadness her heart rests on, now she has lost a dear husband.
Go and sit in silence and eat, or else take your crying
out of the door and begone, but leave the bow where you put it,
a prize for the suitors to strive for; a terrible one; I do not think
that this well-polished bow can ever be strung easily.
There is no man among the lot of us who is such a one
as Odysseus used to be. I myself have seen him,
and I remember well, though I was still young and childish.'
So he spoke, but the spirit inside his heart was hopeful
that he would be able to string the bow and shoot through the iron;
but he was to be the first to get a taste of the arrow
from the hands of blameless Odysseus, to whom he now paid no attention
as he sat in Odysseus' halls and encouraged all his companions.
Now the hallowed prince, Telemachos, spoke his word to them:
'Ah, how Zeus, the son of Kronos, has made me witless.

My own beloved mother, though she is sensible, tells me
that she will forsake this house and go away with another;
105 and then, in the witlessness of my heart, I laugh and enjoy it.
But come, you suitors, since here is a prize set out before you,
a woman; there is none like her in all the Achaian country,
neither in sacred Pylos nor Argos nor in Mykene,
nor here in Ithaka itself, nor on the dark mainland.
110 You yourselves also know this; then why should I praise my mother?
But come, no longer drag things out with delays, nor turn back
still from the stringing of the bow, so that we may see it.
I myself am also willing to attempt the bow. Then,
if I can put the string on it and shoot through the iron,
115 my queenly mother would not go off with another, and leave me
sorrowing here in the house; since I would still be found here
as one now able to take up his father's glorious prizes.'
He spoke, and sprang upright, laying aside from his shoulders
the red cloak, and from his shoulders too took off the sharp sword.
120 He began by setting up the axes, digging
one long trench for them all, and drawing it true to a chalkline,
and stamped down the earth around them; wonder seized the onlookers
at how orderly he set them up. He never had seen them
before. He went then and tried the bow, standing on the threshold.
125 Three times he made it vibrate, straining to bend it, and three times
he gave over the effort, yet in his heart was hopeful
of hooking the string to the bow and sending a shaft through the iron.
And now, pulling the bow for the fourth time, he would have strung it,
but Odysseus stopped him, though he was eager, making a signal
130 with his head. The hallowed prince, Telemachos, said to them:
'Shame on me. I must be then a coward and weakling,
or else I am still young, and my hands have yet no confidence
to defend myself against a man who has started a quarrel.
Come then, you who in your strength are greater than I am,
135 make your attempts on the bow, and let us finish the contest.'
So he spoke, and put the bow from him, leaning it
on the ground, and against the compacted and polished door leaves,
and in the same place leaned the swift shaft against the fine handle,
and went back and sat in the chair from which he had risen.
140 Now Antinoös the son of Eupeithes said to them:
'Take your turns in order from left to right, my companions

all, beginning from the place where the wine is served out.'
So spoke Antinoös, and his word was pleasing to all of them.
Leodes was the first to arise: the son of Oinops,
145 who was a diviner among them, and sat always in the corner
beside the fine mixing bowl. To him alone their excesses
were hateful, and he disapproved of all of the suitors.
He was the first to take up the bow and the swift arrow
now. He went then and tried the bow, standing on the threshold,
150 and could not string it; before that he ruined his soft, uncalloused
hands, pulling at the string, and now he spoke to the suitors:
'Friends, I cannot string this; let one of the others take it.
Here is a bow such that it will sunder many of the princes
from life and soul, since truly it is far better to die
155 than go on living and fail of that for whose sake we forever
keep on gathering here, all our days in expectation.
Now a man may be hopeful and in his heart desirous
of marrying Penelope, the wife of Odysseus.
But when the bow has been attempted, and all is made plain,
160 then one must court some other fair-robed Achaian woman,
and strive to win her with gifts of courtship; she will then marry
the man she is fated to have and who brings her the greatest presents.'
So he spoke, and put the bow from him, leaning it
on the ground, and against the compacted and polished door leaves,
165 and in the same place leaned the swift shaft against the fine handle,
and went back and sat in the chair from which he had risen.
But now Antinoös scolded him, and spoke out and named him:
'Leodes, what sort of word escaped your teeth's barrier?
A terrible and shameful word. I am outraged to hear it;
170 if this is to be such a bow that will sunder the princes
from life and soul, because you are unable to string it.
You were not such a one, when the lady your mother bore you,
as ever to be able to manage the bow and the arrows.
But presently the other lordly suitors will string it.'
175 So he spoke, and now urged Melanthios the goatherd:
'Come now, Melanthios, light us a fire inside the palace,
and set beside it a great chair with fleeces upon it,
and bring out from the inside stores a great wheel of tallow,
so that we young men, having heated the bow and rubbed it
180 with fat, can then attempt to bend it, and finish the contest.'

So he spoke, and Melanthios quickly kindled the weariless
fire, and brought out the chair, and laid the fleeces upon it,
and brought out from the inside stores a great wheel of tallow.
The young men heated the bow and tried it, but were not able
185 to string it. They were not nearly strong enough. All this time
Antinoös still held back, as did godlike Eurymachos,
those lords of the suitors, out and away the best men among them.

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Beggar Odysseus notices Eumaios and Philoitios leaving the hall. He rushes after them again if they would fight for
195 Odysseus (he's a little insecure), and asks them if they can keep a secret. They say they can, then they pinky-promise.

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205 But when Odysseus had recognized the infallible temper
of these men, then he spoke to them again and answered them:
'I am he. I am here in my house. After many sufferings
I have come home in the twentieth year to the land of my fathers.
And now I see that of all my men it was only you two
210 who wanted me to come; I have not heard one of the others
praying that I should return again and come to my own house.
Therefore I will tell you the truth, and so it shall be;
if by my hand the god overmasters the lordly suitors,
then I shall get wives for you both, and grant you possessions
215 and houses built next to mine, and think of you in the future
always as companions of Telemachos, and his brothers.
But come now, let me show you a proof that shall be manifest,
so that you may know me for sure and trust my identity;
that scar, which once the boar with his white tooth inflicted

220 on me, when I went to Parnassos with the sons of Autolykos.'
So he spoke, and pushed back the rags that covered his great scar.
When these two had examined it and recognized everything,
they burst out weeping and threw their arms around wise Odysseus,
and made much of him, and kissed him on his head and his shoulders,
225 and so Odysseus also kissed their heads and hands. Now
the sun would have gone down while they were still thus clamoring,
had not Odysseus stayed them from it and said a word to them:
'Now stop your lamentation and wailing, or someone may come out
from the hall and see us, and tell about it inside. So rather
230 let us go in severally, not all together,
I first, you after me, but let us have this as a signal
arranged; for all the others there, who are lordly suitors,
will not say that you can give me the bow and the quiver;
but you must carry the bow through the house, noble Eumaios,
235 and put it into my hands, and then you must tell the women
to bar the tightly fitted doors that close the hall; tell them,
if any of them hears from inside the crash and the outcry,
of men who are caught within our toils, that they must not peep in
from outside, but simply sit still at their work, in silence.
240 Noble Philoitios, your task is to make fast the courtyard
door with the bolt, and tie the fastening quickly upon it.'
So he spoke, and went into the established palace,
and went back and sat in the chair from which he had risen,
and after him the two thralls of godlike Odysseus entered.
245 Eurymachos by now had taken the bow, and handled it,
turning it round and round by the blaze of the fire, but even
so he could not string it, and his proud heart was harrowed.
Deeply vexed he spoke to his own great-hearted spirit:
'Oh, my sorrow. Here is a grief beyond all others;
250 it is not so much the marriage I grieve for, for all my chagrin.
There are many Achaian women besides, some of them close by
in seagirt Ithaka, and some in the rest of the cities;
but it is the thought, if this is true, that we come so far short
of godlike Odysseus in strength, so that we cannot even
255 string his bow. A shame for men unborn to be told of.'
Then in turn Antinoös, son of Eupeithes, answered:
'It will not happen that way, Eurymachos. You yourself know this.
Now there is a holy feast in the community

for the god. Who could string bows then? Put it away now
for our good time; but we shall leave all the axes standing
where they are. I do not believe anyone will come in
and steal them away from the halls of Odysseus, son of Laertes.
Come, let the wine steward pour a round of wine in the goblets,
so we can make a libation and put away the curved bow;
then at dawn instruct Melanthios, who is the goatherd,
to bring in goats, those far the best in all of his goatflocks,
so that, dedicating the thighs to the glorious archer
Apollo, we can attempt the bow and finish the contest.'
So spoke Antinoös, and his word was pleasing to all of them.
The heralds poured water over their hands to wash with,
and the young men filled the mixing bowls with wine for their drinking,
and passed to all, after they had offered a drink in the goblets.
But when they had poured, and drunk, each as much as he wanted,
resourceful Odysseus spoke to them in crafty intention:
'Hear me now, you who are suitors of our glorious queen,
while I speak out what the heart within my breast urges.
Above all I entreat Eurymachos and the godlike
Antinoös, since what he said also was fair and orderly.
Let the bow be for the time, give it over to the divinities,
and tomorrow the god will give success to whomever he wishes;
but come now, give me the well-polished bow, so that among you
I may try out my strength and hands, to see if I still have
force in my flexible limbs as there has been in time past,
or whether my wandering and lack of good care have ruined me.'
So he spoke, but all of them were wildly indignant,
and feared that he might take the well-polished bow and string it.
Now Antinoös scolded him and spoke out and named him:
'Ah, wretched stranger, you have no sense, not even a little.
Is it not enough that you dine in peace, among us, who are violent
men, and are deprived of no fair portion, but listen
to our conversation and what we say? But there is no other
vagabond and newcomer who is allowed to hear us
talk. The honeyed wine has hurt you, as it has distracted
others as well, who gulp it down without drinking in season.
It was wine also that drove the Centaur, famous Eurytion,
distracted in the palace of great-hearted Peirithoös
when he visited the Lapiths. His brain went wild with drinking,

and in his fury he did much harm in the house of Peirithoös.
Grief and rage then seized the heroes, they sprang up and dragged him
through the forecourt and outside, with the pitiless bronze severing
his ears and nose; and he, having had his brains bewildered,
knew what a disaster his unstable spirit had got him.
Since his time there has been a feud between men and Centaurs,
and he was the first who found his own evil in heavy drinking.
So I announce great trouble for you as well, if ever
you string this bow; you will meet no kind of courtesy
in our group, but we shall put you into a black ship
and take you over to King Echetos, one who mutilates
all men; there you will lose everything; sit and be quiet
and drink your wine, nor quarrel with men who are younger than you
are.'
Circumspect Penelope said to him in answer:
'Antinoös, it is neither fair nor just to browbeat
any guest of Telemachos who comes to visit him.
Do you imagine that if this stranger, in the confidence
of hands and strength, should string the great bow of Odysseus,
that he would take me home with him and make me his wife? No,
he himself has no such thought in the heart within him.
Let none of you be sorrowful at heart in his feasting
here, for such a reason. There is no likelihood of it.'
And now Eurymachos, the son of Polybos, answered:
'Daughter of Ikarios, circumspect Penelope,
we do not think he will take you away. That is not likely.
But we are ashamed to face the talk of the men and the women,
for fear some other Achaian, who is meaner than we are,
might say: "Far baser men are courting the wife of a stately
man. They are not even able to string his bow. Then
another, some beggar man, came wandering in from somewhere,
and easily strung the bow, and sent a shaft through the iron."
So they will speak; and that would be a disgrace on all of us.'
Circumspect Penelope said to him in answer:
'Eurymachos, there can be no glory among our people
in any case, for those who eat away and dishonor
the house of a great man. Why be concerned over reproaches?
But this stranger is a very big man, and he is built strongly,
and also he claims to be the son of a noble father.

Come then, give him the polished bow. Let us see what happens.
For I tell you this straight out, and it will be a thing accomplished.
If he can string the bow, and Apollo gives him that glory,
I will give him fine clothing to wear, a mantle and tunic,
340 and give him a sharp javelin, to keep men and dogs off,
and give him sandals for his feet, a sword with two edges,
and send him wherever his heart and spirit desire to be sent.'
Then the thoughtful Telemachos said to her in answer:
'My mother, no Achaian man has more authority
345 over this bow than I, to give or withhold, at my pleasure;
not one of those who are lords here in rocky Ithaka,
not one of those in the islands off horse-pasturing Elis;
no one can force me against my will; if I want, I can give it
to the stranger as an outright gift, to take away with him.
350 Go therefore back into the house, and take up your own work,
the loom and the distaff, and see to it that your handmaidens
ply their work also. The men shall have the bow in their keeping,
all men, but I most of all. For mine is the power in this household.'
Penelope went back inside the house, in amazement,
355 for she laid the serious words of her son deep away in her spirit;
and she went back to the upper story with her attendant
women, and wept for Odysseus, her beloved husband, until
gray-eyed Athene cast sweet slumber over her eyelids.

360 • After the beggar takes his time feeling the bow, Telemachos tells Eurykleia to shut all the women in their rooms and tell them not to come out until summoned, even if they hear sounds of battle. She "has no winged words in answer,"
365 which is good, because women are supposed to simply "sit still at [their] work, in silence."

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• As the beggar takes his time stringing the bow, the suitors shout insults at him...

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So the suitors talked, but now resourceful Odysseus,
405 once he had taken up the great bow and looked it all over,
as when a man, who well understands the lyre and singing,
easily, holding it on either side, pulls the strongly twisted
cord of sheep's gut, so as to slip it over a new peg,
so, without any strain, Odysseus strung the great bow.
410 Then plucking it in his right hand he tested the bowstring,
and it gave him back an excellent sound like the voice of a swallow.
A great sorrow fell now upon the suitors, and all their color
was changed, and Zeus showing forth his portents thundered mightily.

Odysseus shoots through the axes

Hearing this, long-suffering great Odysseus was happy
415 that the son of devious-devising Kronos had sent him a portent.
He chose out a swift arrow that lay beside him uncovered
on the table, but the others were still stored up inside the hollow
quiver, and presently the Achaians must learn their nature.
Taking the string and the head grooves he drew to the middle
420 grip, and from the very chair where he sat, bending the bow
before him, let the arrow fly, nor missed any axes
from the first handle on, but the bronze-weighted arrow passed through
all, and out the other end. He spoke to Telemachos:
'Telemachos, your guest that sits in your halls does not then
425 fail you; I missed no part of the mark, nor have I made much
work of stringing the bow; the strength is still sound within me,
and not as the suitors said in their scorn, making little of me.
Now is the time for their dinner to be served the Achaians
in the daylight, then follow with other entertainment,
430 the dance and the lyre; for these things come at the end of the feasting.'
He spoke, and nodded to him with his brows, and Telemachos,
dear son of godlike Odysseus, put his sharp sword about him
and closed his own hand over his spear, and took his position
close beside him and next the chair, all armed in bright bronze.