BOOK TWENTY-ONE
The Contest with Odysseus' Bow

Penelope decides to set up the archery contest with the axes; she goes to a storeroom to fetch the bow, arrows, and axes; the story of how Odysseus got the bow from Iphitus; Penelope addresses the suitors, saying she will marry whoever succeeds in the competition; Eumaeus and Philoetius weep; Antinous upbraids them; Telemachus addresses the suitors, sets up the bows in line, and tries unsuccessfully to string the bow; Leiodes attempts to string the bow and fails; Antinous criticizes Leiodes, then suggests they rub fat on the bow by the fire to make it more supple; Odysseus reveals his identity outside to Eumaeus and Philoetius and gives them instructions; Eurymachus tries to string the bow and fails; Antinous proposes they postpone the contest for today; Odysseus suggests he be given a chance to succeed with the bow; Antinous objects; Penelope intervenes; Telemachus tells his mother to go upstairs; Eumaeus hands the bow to Odysseus and orders Eurycleia to lock the doors; Philoetius closes the courtyard gates; Odysseus inspects the bow, then fires an arrow through the holes in the axe heads; Telemachus arms himself and moves to stand with his father.]

Bright-eyed Athena then placed inside the heart
of wise Penelope, Icarius' daughter,
the thought that she should set up in Odysseus' halls
the bow and the gray iron axes for the suitors,
as a competition and the prelude to their deaths.
She climbed the lofty staircase to her chamber,
picked up in her firm grip a curved key made of bronze—
beautifully fashioned with an ivory handle.
With her attendants she went off to a storeroom
in a distant corner of the house, where they kept
her king's possessions—bronze and gold and iron,
all finely crafted work. His well-sprung bow was there,
and quivers, too, with lots of painful arrows,
gifts he had received from Iphitus, his friend,
son of Eurytus, a man like the immortals,
when they'd met in Lacedaemon, in Messene,
at the home of wise Ortilochus. Odysseus
had gone there to collect a debt the people owed—
Messenian men had run off with three hundred sheep
and seized the shepherds, too, leaving Ithaca

in their ships with many oars. Because of this,
Odysseus, who was just a boy, had been sent
a long way by his father and other senior men,
part of an embassy. Iphitus was searching
for twelve mares he'd lost and sturdy mules, as well,
still on the teat. Later on these animals
led him to a fatal destiny, the day he met
the mortal Hercules, Zeus' great-hearted son,
who knew all there was to know about great exploits.
Hercules slaughtered him, although he was a guest
in his own home—a cruel man who didn't care
about the anger of the gods or the dining table
he'd set before him. After their meal, he killed him
and kept the strong-hoofed mares with him at home
for his own use.1 While Iphitus was enquiring
about these horses, he got to meet Odysseus
and gave him the bow. In earlier days, this weapon
had been used by mighty Eurytus, and when he died,
he'd left it for his son in his high-roofed home.
Odysseus had given him a keen-edged sword
and a powerful spear, as well. This was the start
of their close friendship. But they never bonded
as mutual dinner guests—before that happened
Zeus' son had murdered Iphitus, son of Eurytus,
a man like the immortals, who gave Odysseus
that bow of his. Lord Odysseus never took it
whenever he went off to war in his black ships.
It lay there in his home as a memorial
to a dear friend. He carried it in his own land.
When fair Penelope came to the storage room,
she crossed the wooden threshold—a long time ago
a skilful craftsman planed it, set it straight and true,
then fitted doorposts and set shining doors in place.
She quickly took the looped thong from its hook,
put in the key, and with a push shoved back the bolt.2
Just as a bull grunts when it grazes in a meadow,
that how the key's force made the fine door creak,

and it quickly swung ajar. She stepped high up,
onto the planking where the storage trunks were placed
in which they kept their fragrant clothing. There she stretched
to take the bow in its bright case down from its peg.
She then sat down, placed the bow case on her knees,
and wept aloud, as she took out her husband's bow.
When she'd had enough of her laments and tears,
she went off to the hall, to join the noble suitors,
holding in her hands the well-sprung bow and quiver,
with many pain-inflicting arrows. And with her
came some servants carrying a chest which held
lots of iron and bronze, her husband's battle weapons.
Once the lovely lady reached the suitors, she stood there,
by the door post of the well-constructed hall,
with a bright veil on her face. On either side
stood loyal attendant women. Then Penelope
addressed the suitors with these words:
"Listen to me,
bold suitors, who've been ravaging this home
with your incessant need for food and drink,
since my husband's now been so long absent.
The only story you could offer up
as an excuse is that you all desire
to marry me and take me as your wife.
So come now, suitors, since I seem to be
the prize you seek, I'll place this great bow here
belonging to godlike Odysseus. And then,
whichever one of you can grip this bow
and string it with the greatest ease, then shoot
an arrow through twelve axes, all of them,
I'll go with him, leaving my married home,
this truly lovely house and all these goods
one needs to live—things I'll remember,
even in my dreams."

When she'd said this,
she then told Eumaeus, the loyal swineherd,

to set the bow and gray iron axes for the suitors.
With tears in his eyes, Eumaeus picked them up
and laid them out. Philoetius, the goatherd,
was weeping, too, in another spot, once he saw
his master's bow. Then Antinous addressed them both
with this reproach:
"You foolish bumpkins,
who only think of what's going on today!
What a wretched pair! Why start weeping now?
Why stir the heart inside the lady's breast?
Her spirit lies in pain, now that she's lost
the man she loves. So sit and eat in silence,
or go outside and weep. Leave the bow here.
The contest will decide among the suitors.
I don't think it will be an easy feat
to string that polished bow. Of all men here,
no one is like Odysseus used to be.
I saw him for myself, and I remember,
though at the time I was a little child."

Antinous spoke. In his chest his heart was hoping
he would string the bow and then shoot an arrow
through the iron.3 But, in fact, he'd be the first
to taste an arrow from brave Odysseus' hands—
the very man he was disgracing shamefully,
as he sat in the hall, inciting all his comrades.
Then among them all Telemachus spoke out
with royal authority:
"Well now, Zeus,
son of Cronos, must have made me foolish—
my dear mother, although quite sensible,
says she'll be leaving with another man,
abandoning this home, and I just laugh.
My witless heart finds that enjoyable.
So come, suitors, since your prize seems to be
a woman who throughout Achaean land
has no equal, not in sacred Pylos,

Argos, or Mycenae, not on the mainland,
or in Ithaca itself. But you yourselves
know this. Why should I praise my mother?
So come on. Don't delay this competition
with excuses or use up too much time
diverting your attention from this bow string.
Then we'll see. I might try the bow myself.
If I can string it and shoot an arrow
through the iron, I won't get so upset
when my royal mother has to leave here
with another man. I'd be left behind,
as someone capable of picking up
fine prizes from my father in a contest."

After he'd said this, Telemachus threw off
the purple cloak covering his back, jumped up,
and removed the sharp sword from his shoulders.
First, he set up the axes. He dug a trench,
one long ditch for all of them, in a straight line.
Then he stamped the earth down flat around them.
Amazement gripped all those observing him
to watch him organize those axes properly,
although before that time he'd never seen them.
Then, going and standing in the threshold, he tried
to test the bow. Three times he made it tremble,
as he strove to bend it, and three times he relaxed,
hoping in his heart he'd string that bow and shoot
an arrow through the iron. On his fourth attempt,
as his power bent the bow, he might have strung it,
but Odysseus shook his head, motioning him to stop,
for all his eagerness. So Telemachus spoke out,
addressing them once more with royal authority:
"Well, I suppose I'll remain a coward,
a weak man, too, in future days, or else
I'm still too young and cannot yet rely
on my own strength to guard me from a man
who gets angry with me first. But come now,

you men who are more powerful than me,
test this bow. Let's end this competition."

Once he'd said this, Telemachus placed the bow
down on the ground away from him, leaning it
against the polished panels of the door, and set
a swift arrow there beside the bow's fine tip,
then sat down again in the chair from which he'd stood.
Then Antinous, Eupeithes' son, addressed them:
"All you comrades, get up in order now,
from left to right, beginning from the place
where the steward pours the wine."

Antinous spoke,
and what he'd just proposed they found agreeable.
The first to stand up was Leiodes, son of Oenops,
their soothsayer. He always sat furthest away,
beside the lovely mixing bowl—the only man
hostile to their reckless acts—he was angry
with the suitors, all of them. That was the man
who first picked up the bow and the swift arrow.
After moving to the threshold and standing there,
he tried the bow, but couldn't string it. His hands,
which were delicate and weak, grew weary,
before he could succeed in stringing up the bow.
He then spoke out among the suitors:
"My friends,
I'm not the man to string this bow. So now,
let someone else take hold of it. This bow
will take away from many excellent men
their lives and spirits, since it's far better
to die than live and fail in the attempt
to have what we are gathered here to get,
always waiting in hope day after day.
Now every man has feelings in his heart—
he desires and hopes to wed Penelope,
Odysseus' wife. But when he's tried this bow

and observed what happens, then let him woo
another of Achaea's well-dressed women,
seeking to win her with his bridal gifts,
and then Penelope can wed the man
who offers her the most, whose fate it is
to be her husband."

[200] When Leiodes had finished,
he set the bow away from him, leaning it
against the polished panels of the door
and placing a swift arrow by the fine bow-tip.
Then he sat again on the chair he'd risen from.
But Antinous took issue with what he'd just said,
talking directly to him:
"Leiodes,
that speech that passed the barrier of your teeth,
what wretched, sorry words! As I listened,
it made me angry—as if this bow would,
[210] in fact, take away the lives and spirits
of the very finest men, just because
you couldn't string it. Your royal mother
did not produce in you the sort of man
who has sufficient strength to draw a bow
and shoot an arrow. But some other men
among these noble suitors will soon string it."

This said, Antinous called out to Melanthius,
the goatherd:
"Come now, Melanthius,
light a fire in the hall. Set beside it
[220] a large chair with a fleece across it.
And bring a hefty piece of fat—there's some
inside the house—so the young men here
can warm the bow and rub grease into it,
then test the bow and end this contest."

When he'd said this, Melanthius quickly lit

a tireless fire. Then he brought a large chair up,
draped a fleece on it, set it down beside the fire,
and from inside the house fetched a large piece of fat.
Then the young men warmed the bow and tested it.
But they couldn't string it—whatever strength they had
was far too little. Antinous and godlike Eurymachus,
the suitors' leaders, still remained—the two of them
with their abilities, were the finest men by far.
Now, the cattle herder and the keeper of the swine
belonging to godlike Odysseus had gone out,
both together, so lord Odysseus himself
walked from the house to follow after them. And then,
when they'd gone beyond the gates and courtyard,
he spoke, addressing them with reassuring words:
"You there, cattleman and swineherd, shall I
tell you something or keep it to myself?
My spirit tells me I should speak to you.
If Odysseus were to come back suddenly,
brought from somewhere by a god, would you two
be the sort of men who would defend him?
Would you support the suitors or Odysseus?
Answer as your heart and spirit prompt you."

Then the cattle herder answered him:
"O Father Zeus,
would that you might fulfill this very wish—
may that man come, and led on by some god.
Then you would know the kind of strength I have
and how my hands can show my power."

And then Eumaeus, too, made the same sort of prayer
to all the gods that wise Odysseus would come back
to his own home. Once Odysseus had clearly seen
how firm their minds were, he spoke to them again,
saying these words:
"Well, here I am in person—
after suffering much misfortune, I've come home,

back in the twentieth year to my own land.
Of those who work for me, I recognize
that you're the only two who want me back.
Among the rest, I've heard no one praying
that my return would bring me home again.
I'll tell you both how this is going to end—
and I'll speak the truth—if, on my behalf
some god will overcome those noble suitors,
I'll bring you each a wife, and I'll provide
possessions and a house built near my own.
Then you'll be my companions—and kinsmen
of Telemachus. Come, I'll show you something,
a sure sign, so you will clearly know it's me
and trust me in your hearts—here's the old scar
I got from a boar's white tusk, when I'd gone
to Parnassus with Autolycus' sons."

As he said this, Odysseus pulled aside his rags,
exposing the great scar. Once those two had seen it
and noted every detail, they threw their arms
around the wise Odysseus, burst into tears,
and welcomed him, kissing his head and shoulders.
Odysseus did the same—he kissed their heads and hands.
They would have kept on crying until sunset,
if Odysseus himself hadn't called a halt and said:
"Stop these laments. Let's have no more crying.
Someone might come out from the hall, see us,
and tell the people in the house. Let's go in,
one by one, not all together. I'll go first.
You come later. And let's make this our sign.
All those other men, the noble suitors,
will not allow the quiver and the bow
to be given to me. But, good Eumaeus,
as you're carrying that bow through the house,
put it in my hands, and tell the women
to lock their room—bolt the close-fitting doors.
If any of them hears the noise of men

groaning or being hit inside our walls,
she's to stay quiet, working where she is,
and not run off outside. Now, as for you,
good Philoetius, I want you to lock
the courtyard gates. Bolt and lash them shut.
Do it quickly."

After he'd said this,
Odysseus went into the stately home and sat down
on the chair from which he'd risen. The two men,
godlike Odysseus' servants, then went in as well.
Eurymachus already had the bow in hand,
warming it here and there in the firelight.
But even doing that, he could not string it.
Then his noble heart gave out a mighty groan,
and he spoke to them directly—he was angry.
"It's too bad. I'm frustrated for myself
and for you all. I'm not that unhappy
about the marriage, though I am upset.
There are many more Achaean women—
some here in sea-girt Ithaca itself,
others in different cities. But if we are
so weak compared to godlike Odysseus
that we can't string his bow, it's a disgrace
which men will learn about in years to come."

Antinous, Eupeithes' son, then answered him:
"Eurymachus, that's not going to happen.
You yourself know it. At this moment,
in the country there's a feast day, sacred
to the god. So who would bend the bow? No,
set it to one side without saying anything.
As for the axes, what if we let them
just stand there. I don't think anyone
will come into the home of Odysseus,
Laertes' son, and carry them away.
So come, let the steward begin to pour

wine in the cups, so we can make libations.
[330] Set the curved bow aside. In the morning,
tell Melanthius the goatherd to bring in
the finest goats by far from all the herds,
so we can set out pieces of the thigh
for Apollo, the famous archer god.
Then we'll test the bow and end the contest."

Antinous finished. They were pleased with what he'd said.
Heralds poured water on their hands, and young men
filled the mixing bowls up to the brim with drink
and served them all, pouring a few drops in the cups
[340] to start the ritual. Once they'd poured libations
and drunk wine to their heart's content, Odysseus,
a crafty man who had a trick in mind, spoke out:
"Suitors of the splendid queen, listen to me,
so I can say what the heart inside my chest
is prompting me to state. It's a request,
a plea, especially to Eurymachus
and godlike Antinous, since what he said
was most appropriate—that for the moment
you should stop this business with the bow
[350] and turn the matter over to the gods.
In the morning a god will give the strength
to whoever he desires. But come now,
give me the polished bow, so here among you
I can test my power and arms and see
if I still have strength in my supple limbs
the way I used to have, or if my travels
and my lack of food have quite destroyed it."

Odysseus finished. They were all extremely angry,
afraid that he might string the polished bow.
[360] Then Antinous, speaking to him directly,
took Odysseus to task:
"You wretched stranger,
your mind lacks any sense—you've none at all.

Aren't you content to share a feast with us,
such illustrious men, without being disturbed
or lacking any food, and then to hear
what we say to one another as we speak?
No other beggar or stranger listens in
on what we say. The wine, so honey sweet,
has injured you, as it harms other men,
when they gulp it down and drink too much.
Wine befuddled even great Eurytion,
the centaur, in brave Perithous' house,
when he'd gone to the Lapiths. Afterwards,
when his heart went blind from drinking wine,
in a mad fit he committed evil acts
in Perithous' home. Grief seized the heroes.
They jumped up and hauled him out of doors,
through the gate, then cut off his ears and nose
with pitiless bronze. His wits were reckless,
and he went on his way, bearing madness
in his foolish heart. And that's the reason
the fight between centaurs and men began.
But he first discovered evil in himself,
when loaded down with wine.4 And so I say
if you string the bow, you'll face great trouble.
You'll not get gentle treatment anywhere,
not in this land. We'll ship you off at once
in a black ship over to king Echetus,
who likes to kill and torture everyone.
You won't escape from him. So drink your wine
in peace, and don't compete with younger men."

Wise Penelope then answered him and said:
"Antinous, it's neither good nor proper
to deny guests of Telemachus a chance,
no matter who it is comes to this house.
And if, trusting in his strength and power,
the stranger strings Odysseus' great bow,
do you think he'll take me to his home

and make me his wife? I'm sure he himself
carries no such hope in that chest of his.
So none of you should be at dinner here
with sorrow in his heart because of him.
That would be undignified."

Then Eurymachus,
son of Polybus, answered her:
"Wise Penelope,
daughter of Icarius, we do not think
this man will take you home. That would be wrong.
But we would be ashamed by public gossip
from both men and women if later on
some low-born Achaean said something like
'Those men wooing the wife of that fine man
are far worse than him—they can't even string
his polished bow, and yet another man,
a beggar who came here on his travels,
did so with ease and then shot through the iron.'
That's what men will say, and it would be
a slur on us."

Then wise Penelope replied:
"Eurymachus, there is no way at all
there will be in this district good reports
of those dishonouring and eating up
a noble's home. Why turn the matter now
into a slur? This stranger's very large
and strongly built. Furthermore, he claims
he comes by birth from a good father.
So come now, give him the polished bow,
and let us see. I will say this to you—
and it will happen—if he strings the bow
and Apollo grants him glory, I'll dress him
in some lovely clothes, a cloak and tunic,
and give him a sharp spear, as a defence
from dogs and men, and a two-edged sword.

I'll give him sandals for his feet and send him
wherever his heart and spirit tell him."

Shrewd Telemachus then answered her:
"Mother,
among Achaeans, no man has a right
stronger than my own to give the bow
to anyone I wish or to withhold it—
none of those who rule in rocky Ithaca
or in the islands neighbouring Elis,
where horses graze. Among these men, no one
will deny my will by force, if I wish
to give the bow, even to this stranger
as an outright gift to take away with him.
But you should go up to your own chamber
and keep busy with your proper work,
the loom and spindle, and tell your women
to go about their tasks. The bow will be
a matter for the men, especially me,
since the power in this house is mine."

Penelope, astonished, went back to her rooms,
taking to heart the prudent words her son had said.
With her servant women she walked up to her room
and then wept for Odysseus, her dear husband,
till bright-eyed Athena cast sweet sleep on her eyes.
The worthy swineherd had picked up the curving bow
and was carrying it. But all the suitors cried out
in the hall. One of those arrogant young men
then said something like:
"What are you doing,
you wretched swineherd, carrying that bow,
you idiot? You'll soon be with the swine
all alone, with no men around, being eaten
by those swift dogs you yourself have raised,
if Apollo and other immortal gods
act with graciousness to us."

That's what they said.
So, though he was carrying the bow, he put it down,
afraid because inside the hall so many men
were yelling at him. But then from across the room
Telemachus shouted out a threat:
"Old man,
keep on moving up here with that bow. You'll soon
regret obeying them all. I'm younger than you,
but I might force you out into the fields
and throw rocks at you. I'm the stronger man.
I wish my hands had that much strength and power
over all the suitors in the house. I'd send
some of them soon enough on their way home,
out of this house, and they'd be miserable.
For they keep coming up with wicked plans."

Telemachus finished speaking. But the suitors
all had a hearty laugh at his expense, relaxing
their bitter anger at Telemachus. Meanwhile,
the swineherd kept on going through the hall,
carrying the bow. He came to shrewd Odysseus
and placed it in his hands. Then he called the nurse,
Eurycleia, and said to her:
"Wise Eurycleia,
Telemachus is telling you to lock up
the closely fitted doorway to this hall.
If anyone hears groans inside this room
or any noise from men within these walls,
she's not to run out, but stay where she is,
carrying out her work in silence."5

After he'd said this, her words could find no wings.
So she locked the doors of that well-furnished hall.
And Philoetius, without a word, slipped outside
and locked the courtyard gates inside the sturdy walls.
A cable from a curved ship was lying there,

under the portico, made of papyrus fibres.
With that he lashed the gates, then went inside,
sat down again on the seat where he'd got up,
and observed Odysseus, who already had the bow.
He was turning it this way and that, testing it
in different ways to see if, while its lord was gone,
worms had nibbled on the horns. One of the men,
with a glance beside him, would say something like:
"This man knows bows—he must be an expert.
Either he has bows like this stored at home
or else he wants to make one. That's why
he's turning it around in all directions.
That beggar's really skilled in devious tricks."

And then another of those arrogant young men
would make some further comment:
"Well, I hope
the chance that this brings him some benefit
matches his ability to string this bow."

That's how the suitors talked. But shrewd Odysseus,
once he'd raised the bow and looked it over
on all sides, then—just as someone really skilled
at playing the lyre and singing has no trouble
when he loops a string around a brand-new peg,
tying the twisted sheep's gut down at either end—
that's how easily Odysseus strung that great bow.
Holding it in his right hand, he tried the string.
It sang out, resonating like a swallow's song,
beneath his touch. Grief overwhelmed the suitors.
The skin on all of them changed colour. And then Zeus
gave out a sign with a huge peal of thunder.
Lord Odysseus, who had endured so much, rejoiced
that crooked-minded Cronos' son had sent an omen.
Then he picked up a swift arrow lying by itself
on the table there beside him—the other ones,
which those Achaeans soon would be familiar with—

were stored inside the hollow quiver. He set it
against the bow, on the bridge, pulled the notched arrow
and the bow string back—still sitting in his seat—
and with a sure aim let the arrow fly. It did not miss,
not even a single top on all the axe heads.
The arrow, weighted with bronze, went straight through
and out the other end. And then Odysseus
called out to Telemachus:
"Telemachus, the stranger
sitting in your halls has not disgraced you.
I did not miss my aim or work too long
to string that bow. My strength is still intact,
in spite of all the suitors' scornful gibes.
Now it's time to get a dinner ready
for these Achaeans, while there's still some light,
then entertain ourselves in different ways,
with singing and the lyre. These are things
which should accompany a banquet."

As he spoke, he gave a signal with his eyebrows.
Telemachus, godlike Odysseus' dear son,
cinched up his sword, closed his fist around a spear,
moved close beside his father, right by his seat,
and stood there, fully armed with glittering bronze.