

BOOK TWENTY

Odysseus Prepares for his Revenge

[Odysseus has trouble sleeping; Athena visits him and gives him reassurance; Penelope prays to Artemis, longing for her life to end; Odysseus asks Zeus for two omens; Zeus peals his thunder and a woman grinding grain prays aloud to Zeus; Telemachus asks Eurycleia about the treatment of his guest; Eurycleia organizes the clean up the house; Eumaeus arrives with some animals and talks to Odysseus; Melanthius insults Odysseus again; Philoetius arrives and talks to Eumaeus, then wishes Odysseus well; the suitors plan to kill Telemachus but are dissuaded by an omen; Telemachus tells Odysseus he'll protect him at the feast and speaks forcefully to the suitors; Ctesippus throws a piece of meat at Odysseus, but misses; Telemachus threatens him; Agelaus proposes that Penelope make up her mind; Pallas Athena makes the suitors laugh uncontrollably and sends images of disaster; Theoclymenus interprets them and warns the suitors; they all laugh at Telemachus; Penelope sits and listens to the conversations.]

So lord Odysseus went to the portico to sleep.

Underneath he spread an untanned hide and on top
fleeces from many sheep slaughtered for sacrifice
by the Achaeans. Eurynome spread a cloak on him,
once he lay down to rest. But he couldn't sleep.

His heart was hatching trouble for the suitors.

Then the women went out from the hall, the ones
who in earlier days had had sex with the suitors.

They were laughing, having fun with one another.

[10] Odysseus' spirit in his chest was stirred—mind and heart
engaged in fierce debate whether he should charge out
and put each one to death or let them and the suitors
have sex one last and final time. Inside him
his heart was growling. Just as a bitch stands snarling
above her tender pups when she sees anyone
she does not recognize and is prepared to fight,
that how in his anger the heart within him growled
at their disgraceful acts. But he struck his chest and said,
as a rebuke to his own heart:

“Hang on, my heart.

[20] You went through things worse than this that day
the Cyclops, in his frantic rage, devoured
your strong companions. You held out then,
until your cunning led you from that cave,

where you thought you would die.”

He said these words,
to hold down the heart within his chest, and his spirit
submitted, enduring everything with resolution.
But he still tossed back and forth. Just as a man
turns quickly to and fro on a blazing fire a stomach
stuffed with fat and blood when he’s keen to roast it fast,
[30] that how Odysseus tossed around, wondering
how he might get the shameless suitors in his grip,
one man against so many. Then Athena came,
moving down from heaven, looking like a woman.
She stood above his head and spoke to him, saying:
“Why now, you most ill-fated of all men,
are you awake? This is your home, and here,
inside this house, your wife and child, a man
whom anyone would pray for as a son.”

Resourceful Odysseus then answered her and said:
[40] “Yes, goddess, everything you say is true.
But the heart inside my chest is worried—
How can I handle the shameful suitors,
just a single man against so many.
And in the house they’re always in a group.
There’s something else my heart is thinking of—
it’s more important, too—if I do kill them,
with Zeus’ help and yours, how do I find
a way of making my escape? That’s something
I’d ask you to consider.”

Then the goddess,
bright-eyed Athena, gave him her reply:
[50] “You stubborn man,
men put their trust in weaker friends than me—
in a mortal man who lacks my wisdom.
I’m a god, and I’m there to protect you
to the end in all your troubles. I tell you—

to make things clear—if there were fifty groups
of mortal men taking a stand around us,
eager to slaughter us in war, even so,
you'd still drive off their cattle and fine sheep.
Let Sleep take hold of you. To stay awake,
[60] on guard all night, will make you weary.
You'll soon come out from under these bad times.”

After Athena spoke, she poured sleep on his eyelids.
Then the lovely goddess went back to Olympus.
While Sleep, who relaxes troubled human hearts,
relaxed his mind, his faithful wife woke up and cried,
sitting there on her soft bed. But when her heart
had had its fill of crying, the lovely lady
began by saying a prayer to Artemis:
“Artemis,
royal goddess, Zeus' daughter, how I wish
[70] you'd shoot an arrow in my chest right now
and take my life or a storm wind would come,
lift me up, carry me away from here,
across the murky roads, and cast me out
in Ocean's backward-flowing stream, just as
storms snatched up Pandareus' daughters,
whose parents the gods killed, thus leaving them
orphans in their home. Fair Aphrodite
looked after them with cheese, sweet honey,
and fine wine, while Hera offered them
[80] beauty and wisdom beyond all women.
Chaste Artemis made them tall, and Athena
gave them their skills in famous handicrafts.
But when fair Aphrodite went away
to high Olympus, petitioning Zeus,
who hurls the thunderbolt, that the girls
could find fulfillment in a happy marriage,
for Zeus has perfect knowledge of all things,
what each man's destiny will be or not,
that's when storm spirits snatched away the girls

[90] and placed them in the care of hateful Furies.¹

How I wish those gods who hold Olympus
would do away with me like that, or else
that fair-haired Artemis would strike at me,
so with Odysseus' image in my mind

I could descend beneath this hateful earth
and never bring delight of any kind
into the heart of some inferior man.

But when a man laments all day, his heart
thick with distress, and sleep holds him at night,

[100] that evil can be borne—sleep makes one forget
all things good and bad, once it settles down
across one's eyelids. But some god sends me
bad dreams as well. This very night again
a man who looked like him lay down beside me,
just as he was when he went with the troops.
My heart rejoiced—I thought it was no dream,
but finally the truth.”

Penelope finished.

Then Dawn came on her golden throne. As she wept,
lord Odysseus heard her voice and lost himself in thought.

[110] To his heart it seemed she knew him and was standing there,
beside his head. He gathered up the cloak and blankets
he was lying on and placed them on a chair
inside the hall. He took an ox-hide from the house,
set it on the ground, and, lifting up his hands,
made this prayer to Zeus:

“O Father Zeus,
if you wished to bring me over land and sea
to my own land, when you had given me
so much distress, let someone in the house
wake up and say something in there for me,

[120] a word of omen, and here outside the house
let there appear another sign from Zeus.”

That's what he prayed. And Counselor Zeus heard him.

At once he thundered down from glittering Olympus,
from high beyond the clouds. Lord Odysseus rejoiced.
And then some woman grinding on the stones close by
sent out a word of omen from inside the place
where the shepherd of his people placed his millstones.²
At these grinding stones twelve women used to work,
making barley meal and flour, which feed men's marrow.
[130] The other women had already ground their wheat
and were asleep, but this one, weaker than the rest,
had not yet finished. She stopped her grinding stone
and said these words, an omen for her master:
"Father Zeus, who rules both gods and men,
you've thundered loud up in the starry sky,
and yet there's not a single cloud up there.
You must be offering a sign to someone.
I'm a poor wretch, but what I have to say,
oh, make that happen. May these suitors here
[140] for the last and final time this very day
have a pleasant dinner in Odysseus' home.
Those men have hurt my knees with this hard work
grinding flour—may this meal be their last."

She spoke. That word of omen and Zeus' thunder
made lord Odysseus happy—he thought he'd be revenged
on those malicious men.
Inside Odysseus' lovely home,
other women slaves were up and making tireless fire
inside the hearth, and then godlike Telemachus
got out of bed, put on his clothes, and from his shoulders
[150] slung a keen-edged sword. Under his shining feet he tied
his lovely sandals. He picked up a sturdy spear,
with a sharp bronze point, then went out to the threshold,
stood there, and said to Eurycleia:
"My dear nurse,
have you shown our guest respect inside our home
with bed and food, or is he still lying there
unattended to? That's how my mother is,

although she's wise. She seems to deal with men
at random—some inferior mortal man
she'll honour, while some finer person
[160] she'll send away with no respect at all."

Wise Eurycleia then answered him:
"My child,
don't blame her now about such things. That man
sat here drinking wine as long as he could wish.
He said he had no appetite for food.
She asked him. When he thought of going to bed
to get some sleep, she told the women slaves
to spread out bedding, but like a wretched man
familiar with hard times, he had no wish
to lie down under blankets on a bed.
[170] So he stretched out on the portico to sleep
on sheep fleeces and an untanned ox-hide,
and then we threw a cloak on top of him."

Once she'd finished, Telemachus went through the hall,
spear in hand, with two swift dogs accompanying him.
He went to join the group of finely dressed Achaeans.
Then that good woman Eurycleia, daughter of Ops,
Peisenor's son, called out, summoning female slaves:
"Come on, some of you get busy here—
sweep the hall and sprinkle it. Then spread out
[180] purple covers on these well-fashioned chairs.
You others, wipe down all those tables
with sponges, clean up the mixing bowls,
those finely crafted double-handled cups.
And you others, get water from the spring.
Carry it back here. And do it quickly—
the suitors won't be absent from this hall
for very long. They'll be back really soon.
Today's a banquet day for everyone."

As Eurycleia spoke, they all listened carefully,

[190] then acted on her words. Twenty of the women
went to the dark-water spring. The others stayed there,
busy working expertly throughout the house.
Then the men who served Achaean lords arrived.
While they were chopping wood skillfully and well,
the women slaves who'd gone off to the spring returned.
Behind them came the swineherd, leading in three hogs,
the best of all he had. He turned them loose to feed
inside the lovely yard, while he talked to Odysseus,
with words of reassurance:
"Stranger, these Achaeans—

[200] do they have any more regard for you?
Or in these halls are they dishonouring you,
they way they did before?"

Shrewd Odysseus
then answered him and said:
"Well, Eumaeus,
I hope the gods pay back the injuries
arrogant men so recklessly have planned
in someone else's home, with no sense of shame."

As these two were saying these words to one another,
Melanthius, the goatherd, came up close to them,
leading the very finest she-goats in his flocks,
[210] part of the suitors' feast. Two herdsmen came with him.
He tied the goats up by the echoing portico,
then started hurling his insults at Odysseus:
"Stranger, are you still bothering us here,
inside the house, begging from the people?
Why don't you get out? I think it's clear
the two of us won't say goodbye, until
we've had a taste of one another's fists.
The way you beg is not appropriate.
Achaeans do have feasts in other places."

[220] Melanthius spoke, but shrewd Odysseus said nothing.

He shook his head in silence. Deep in his heart
he was planning trouble. Then a third one joined them,
Philoetius, an outstanding man, bringing in
a sterile heifer and plump she-goats for the suitors.
Ferryman, who transport other men across,
whoever comes to them, had brought them over
from the mainland. He tied these animals with care
below the echoing portico, walked up to the swineherd,
and questioned him in person:

“Swineherd,

[230] who’s the man who’s just come to this house?

What people does he claim to come from?

Where are his family and his native land?

He’s had bad luck, but in his appearance

he seems to be a royal king. But still,

the gods bring miseries to wandering men,

whenever they spin their threads of trouble,

even though those men are royalty.”

Once he’d said this, he walked up to Odysseus,
held his right hand out in greeting, and spoke to him—
his words had wings:

[240] “Greetings, honoured stranger.

Though you’re facing many troubles now,

may you find happiness in future days.

O Father Zeus, none of the other gods

is more destructive than you are. For men,

once you yourself have given birth to them,

you have no pity. You get them involved

with misery and painful wretchedness.

When I recall Odysseus and think of him,

I start to sweat. My eyes fill up with tears.

[250] For he, too, I think, is dressed in rags like these,

wandering among men somewhere, if indeed

he’s still alive, looking at the sunlight.

If he’s already dead in Hades’ home,

then I grieve for excellent Odysseus,

who, when I was still a boy, put me in charge
of cattle in the Cephallenians' land.³

Their numbers now are more than one can count—
this breed of broad-faced cattle has increased
more than it could in any other way

[260] for a different man. Now strangers tell me
to drive the cattle in for their own meals.
They don't care about the son inside the house
or tremble at the vengeance of the gods.
Now they're keen to share amongst themselves
my master's goods—he's been away so long.
As for me, the heart here in my chest
keeps turning over many things—it's bad,
really bad, while his son is still alive,
for me to leave here with the cattle herds

[270] and head off to some other district,
to a group of strangers. But it's even worse
to stay here, putting up with so much trouble,
to herd these cattle going to other men.
In fact, I would have run off long ago
to one of the other high-minded kings—
for things are now unbearable—but still,
that unlucky man is always on my mind.
Perhaps he might come home from somewhere
and send the suitors packing from his home."

[280] Resourceful Odysseus then answered him and said:

"Herdsman, you don't appear to be a man
who's bad or one who lacks intelligence.
I see for myself your understanding heart.
And so I'll swear a powerful oath to you.
I'll speak the truth—let Zeus be my witness,
first among the gods, and this guest table,
and the hearth of excellent Odysseus,
to which I've come—While you are present here
Odysseus will come home. With your own eyes,

[290] you'll see the suitors killed, if that's your wish,

those men who act as if they own the place.”

The cattle herder answered him:

“Ah stranger,
how I wish Cronos’ son might bring about
what you’ve just said. Then you’d find out
how strong I am and what my hands can do.”

Eumaeus also prayed like that to all the gods
for wise Odysseus to return to his own home.
As they were talking in this way to one another,
the suitors were making plans against Telemachus,
[300] scheming to bring him to a fatal destiny.
But then a bird went soaring past them, on their left,
an eagle flying up high, gripping a trembling dove.
So Amphinomus addressed them all and said:
“My friends, this plan to kill Telemachus
will not proceed the way we want it to.
We should instead prepare to have our feast.”

Amphinomus spoke, and they agreed with him.
So they went inside godlike Odysseus’ home,
threw their cloaks on stools and chairs, and sacrificed
[310] big sheep and fattened goats. They killed plump swine, as well,
and the heifer from the herd. They roasted entrails,
passed them round, and blended wine in mixing bowls.
The swineherd handed out the cups. Philoetius,
an outstanding man, served bread in a fine basket.
Melanthius poured their wine. And then their hands
reached out to take the fine food set before them.
Thinking it would work to his advantage, Telemachus
sat Odysseus down inside the well-constructed hall,
beside the entrance made of stone, then set for him
[320] a modest stool and tiny table. He placed before him
a share of inner organs and poured out some wine
into a golden cup. Then he said:
“Sit here for now,

among these men and drink your wine. I myself
will protect you from all suitors' insults
and their fists—this is not a public house
but a home belonging to Odysseus,
and he acquired this place for me. You suitors,
make sure your hearts do not encourage you
to gibes and blows, so that no arguments
or fights will happen here.”

[330] Once he'd finished speaking,
all the suitors bit their lips. They were astonished
Telemachus had talked to them so forcefully.
Then Antinous, Euphithes' son, spoke out to them:
“Achaean, what Telemachus has said
is challenging, but let's accept his words,
although his speech is a bold threat to us.
For Zeus, son of Cronos, has not given
his permission, or here within these halls
by this time we'd have put a stop to him,
for all his clear-voiced talk.”

[340] Antinous spoke.
But Telemachus ignored what he'd just said.
Meanwhile, as heralds led offerings sacred to the gods
down through the city, long-haired Achaeans gathered
underneath archer god Apollo's shadowy grove.
They cooked the outer flesh and pulled away the spits,
then shared the meat and had a splendid banquet.⁴
The servers placed beside Odysseus a portion
matching what they received themselves—Telemachus,
godlike Odysseus' son, had given them those orders.

[350] But there was no way Athena would permit
those proud suitors to hold back their bitter insults,
so that Odysseus, Laertes' son, would suffer
still more heartfelt pain. Now, among the suitors
there was man who had a lawless heart. His name
was Ctesippus, and he made his home in Same.

Relying on his prodigious wealth, he courted
the wife of Odysseus, who'd been away so long.
He now addressed the overbearing suitors:

“You noble suitors, listen to me now—

[360] I've got something to say. This stranger here
has for some time had an equal portion,
as is right, since it's by no means proper,
nor is it just, for Telemachus' guests
to go without—no matter who it is
who shows up at the house. So now I, too,
will provide a gift to welcome him.
Then he, for his part, can pass it along
to some bath attendant or some other slave
here in the home of godlike Odysseus.”

[370] As he said this, his strong hand picked up an ox hoof
from the basket where it lay, and then he hurled it.
But by quickly pulling his head back, Odysseus
dodged the throw. In his heart he smiled with bitter scorn.
The gristle hit the solid wall. Telemachus
then went at Ctesippus and said:

“Ctesippus,
in your heart you understand what's good for you—
that's must be why you didn't hit the stranger.
He escaped your throw all on his own.
Otherwise, I'd have taken my sharp spear

[380] and rammed you in the chest. Then your father
would be here planning for your funeral
and not a wedding feast. So none of you
make any show of trouble in my house.
For now I am observing every detail—
both good and bad—I know what's going on.
Before now, I was still a foolish child.
But we must still look on and bear these things—
the slaughtered sheep, the wine and bread consumed.
It's hard for one man to restrain so many.

[390] So come, no longer show me such ill will

or give me so much trouble. If you're keen
to kill me with your swords, that's what I'd choose—
it would be far better to meet my death
than constantly to watch these shameful deeds,
strangers being abused and female servants
dragged through this lovely home. It's a disgrace."

Telemachus finished. They all sat in silence,
saying nothing. At last Agelaus, Damastor's son,
addressed them:

"My friends, no man could answer
[400] what's been so justly said and in his rage
respond with words provoking enmity.
So don't insult the stranger any more
or any of the servants in this home
belonging to godlike Odysseus. Still,
to Telemachus and to his mother
I have some reassuring things to say,
which both their hearts should find agreeable.
As long as you had in your hearts some hope
that wise Odysseus would return back home,
[410] no blame attached itself to you by waiting,
holding off the suitors in your house.
This was the better choice, if Odysseus
had returned and come back to his palace.
But surely it's already clear by now
he won't be coming back, not any more.
So come, sit down beside your mother. Tell her
to marry whoever is the finest man
and offers the best bridal gifts. And then,
you can enjoy all your paternal goods
[420] as yours to keep, all the food and wine,
while she looks after someone else's home."

Shrewd Telemachus then answered him and said:
"I swear to you, Agelaus, by Zeus
and by the sufferings of my father,

who's perished or is wandering around
somewhere far from Ithaca, there's no way
I'm trying to delay my mother's marriage.
I tell her to marry any man she wants,
and I'll give her innumerable gifts.

[430] But I'm ashamed to drive her from the home
against her wishes, to give an order
which forces her to leave. I hope the god
will never bring about something like that."

Once Telemachus had spoken, Pallas Athena
roused them all to laugh with no sense of control.
She unhinged their minds, so laughter from their mouths
came from an alien source, and the meat they ate
became blood-spattered. Their eyes filled up with tears.⁵
Their hearts were crammed with thoughts of lamentation.

[440] Then godlike Theoclymenus addressed them all:

"O you miserable men, what troubles
are you suffering now? Your heads, your faces,
your lower limbs are shrouded in the night.
You're on fire with grief, faces wet with tears,
fine pedestals and walls have gobs of blood,
the porch is full of ghosts, so is the yard—
ghosts rushing in the dark to Erebus.
Up in the sky the sun has disappeared—
an evil mist is covering everything."

[450] Theoclymenus finished. But they all laughed,
enjoying themselves at his expense. The first to speak
was Eurymachus, son of Polybus:

"He's mad,
this stranger who's just recently arrived
from some foreign land. Come on, young men,
hurry and carry him outside the house,
so he can make his way to the assembly,
since he thinks it's like the night in here."

Godlike Theoclymenus then said in reply:
“Eurymachus, I’m not requesting you
[460] to furnish me with guides. I’ve got my eyes
and my two feet. And in my chest
I’ve got a mind that’s not made for a fool.
I’ll go outside with these, for I can see
you’re headed for disaster—no suitors
who, in the home of godlike Odysseus,
mistreat others and plan their reckless schemes
will be able to avoid it or escape.”

After he’d said this, he left the stately palace
and went to Peiraeus, who gladly welcomed him.
[470] But all the suitors looked around at one another
and tried to hurt Telemachus with mockery,
laughing at his guests. Some arrogant young man
would make a comment using words like these:
“Telemachus,
no one is more unlucky with his guests
than you are. You have a man like this one,
a dirty tramp in need of food and wine,
with no work skills or strength, just a burden
on the land. Then some other man stood here
and made a prophecy. You’d be better off
[480] to follow what I say. Let’s throw these guests
onboard a well-decked ship and send them off
to the Sicilians. You’d get good prices there.”

That’s what the suitors said. But Telemachus
paid no attention to their words. He kept quiet,
looking at his father, always watching him
to see when his hands would fight the shameless suitors.
But wise Penelope, Icarius’ daughter,
had set in place a lovely chair across from them.
She heard what each man in the hall was saying.
[490] While they kept laughing, the men prepared a meal,
something sweet to satisfy their hearts, slaughtering

many beasts. But there would never be another meal
more sorrowful than the one the mighty warrior
and the goddess would set before them very soon.
With their shameful plans, the suitors brought this on.