

BOOK EIGHTEEN

Odysseus and Irus the Beggar

[Irus the beggar arrives at the palace and starts abusing Odysseus; the suitors encourage them to fight; in the scrap Odysseus knocks Irus out; Odysseus warns Amphinomus of trouble ahead; Athena makes Penelope want to appear before the suitors; Athena puts Penelope to sleep and makes her more beautiful; Penelope wakes up and goes downstairs to mix with the suitors; Telemachus and Penelope talk about the stranger; Penelope encourages the suitors to bring presents for her, and they do so; Odysseus talks to the female servants, criticizing them for assisting the suitors; Odysseus holds up the lamps for the suitors at their feast; Eurymachus makes fun of Odysseus, and Odysseus give him a heated reply; Eurymachus throws a stool at Odysseus but misses and hits the wine steward; Telemachus and Amphinomus restore order; the suitors continue feasting and then leave]

Then a vagrant from the community arrived,
who used to beg through all the town of Ithaca,
a man celebrated for his gluttonous stomach,
with an incessant appetite for food and drink.
He looked huge, but had little energy or strength.
He was called Arnaeus—his honoured mother
had given him that name when he was born, but now
all young men called him Irus, because he ran around
carrying messages for anyone who asked him.¹

[10] At this point he arrived and tried to drive Odysseus
away from his own home by shouting out abuse—
his words had wings:

“Get out of the door, old man,
or you’ll be dragged off by your feet. Don’t you see
how they’re all winking at me, telling me
to pull you out? As far as I’m concerned,
I’d be ashamed to do it. So get up,
or else we’ll fight this quarrel with our fists.”

Resourceful Odysseus frowned, looked at him, and said:

“My good man, I’m not doing you any harm

[20] or shouting insults at you. Nor do I care
if someone gives you something, even if

he takes a generous portion. This doorway
has room for both of us, and there's no need
to begrudge what someone else may get.
You seem to be a vagrant, just like me—
gods are supposed to give us happiness.
But don't provoke me too much with your fists,
in case you make me angry. Though I'm old,
I might stain your lips and chest with blood.
[30] If so, I'd enjoy more peace tomorrow,
for I don't think you'd come a second time
to Odysseus' home, son of Laertes."

That made the beggar Irus angry, so he said:
"Well, see how nicely this filthy beggar talks,
like an old woman from the baking ovens.
But I'll make trouble for him. I'll punch him
with both fists on the jaw, smash all his teeth
onto the ground, and treat him like a sow
who's been devouring the crop. Come now,
[40] tighten your belt, so all these people here
may recognize that we're about to fight.
How can you go against a younger man?"

So as their tempers heated up, they both grew angry
on the polished threshold by the lofty doors.
Strong and powerful Antinous observed them there,
and, laughing cheerfully, shouted to the suitors:
"My friends, here's something we've not seen before.
Some god has sent this house such entertainment!
Irus and the stranger are quarreling—
[50] they're going to fight each other with their fists.
Let's get them started right away!"

Antinous' words
made them all jump up laughing. They gathered there,
around the shabby beggars. Then Eupheithes' son,
Antinous, said to them:

“Listen to me,
you brave suitors. I’ve something to suggest.
We’ve got goats’ bellies lying by the fire,
stuffed full of fat and blood, our dinner meal.
Whichever of these two men wins this fight
and proves the better man, let him stand up
[60] and take the one he wishes for himself.
And he will always eat his meals with us.
Nor will we allow another beggar
to come into our group and ask for food.”

Antinous finished. They were pleased with what he said.
Then, resourceful Odysseus with his crafty mind
spoke to them:
“Friends, there’s no way an older man
weighed down with grief can fight a younger man.
But that trouble-making stomach of mine
urges me to do it, so he may beat me
[70] with his blows. But come now, let all of you
swear a binding oath that not one of you
supporting Irus will use his heavy fists
to strike at me unfairly, and by force
overpower me on Irus’ behalf.”

Odysseus spoke. They all promised, as he’d asked.
After they had sworn and finished with the oath,
Telemachus spoke up with strength and confidence,
so all could hear:
“Stranger, if your proud spirit
and your heart urge you on to beat this man,
[80] don’t fear a single one of these Achaeans.
Whoever strikes at you will have to fight
with many more as well. I am your host,
and the two princes here agree with me,
Antinous and Eurymachus, both men
who understand things well.”

Telemachus spoke,
and everyone endorsed his words. Then Odysseus,
while hitching up the rags around his private parts,
exposed his fine large thighs, and they could also see
his wide shoulders and his chest and powerful arms.
[90] Athena came up close beside that shepherd of his people
and enlarged his limbs. Each suitor, quite astonished,
would glance at the man beside him and then mutter
words like these:
“Irus will soon be in trouble,
something he brought on himself—he won’t be
Irus any more, judging from the thighs
that old man shows under those rags of his.”

That’s how they talked. Irus’ heart was badly shaken.
But the servants girded up his clothes and led him up.
He was afraid—his flesh quivering on every limb—
[100] but they forced him forward. Antinous sneered at him,
addressing him right to his face:
“You bragging fool,
if you’re afraid and tremble at this man,
you should not exist or ever have been born.
He’s a old man worn down by misfortunes
that have overcome him. I’ll tell you this,
and what I say will happen—if this man
beats you and proves himself the better man,
I’ll throw you in a black ship, then take you
over to the mainland to king Echetus,
[110] who tortures everyone.² With pitiless bronze
he’ll cut off your nose and ears, then slice away
your cock and balls and throw them to the dogs,
raw meat for them rip to pieces.”

Antinous spoke. An even greater trembling seized
the beggar’s legs, as they led him to the middle.
Both men raised their fists. At that point lord Odysseus,
who had endured so much, was of two minds—Should he

hit Irus so his life would leave him where he fell,
or should he strike him a less punishing blow
[120] and stretch him on the ground? As he thought about it,
this seemed the better choice—to hit him with less force,
so Achaeans wouldn't look at him too closely.
Once their fists were up, Irus hit Odysseus
on his right shoulder, but Odysseus then struck him
on the neck, below his ear, and crushed the bones.
Immediately red blood came flowing from his mouth.
He fell down moaning in the dirt, grinding his teeth.
His feet kept kicking at the ground. The noble suitors
threw up their hands and almost died of laughter.
[130] Odysseus grabbed Irus by the foot and dragged him
through the doorway until he reached the courtyard
and the portico gate. There he left him, leaning
against the courtyard wall with his stick in his hands.
Odysseus then addressed him—his words had wings:
“Sit there and scare away the pigs and dogs.
And do not, in your miserable state,
try to boss around strangers and beggars,
in case you end up in even worse distress.”

As he spoke, he threw his tattered bag full of holes
[140] across his shoulders, hanging by a twisted strap.
Then he went back into the doorway and sat down.
The suitors moved inside, laughing uproariously,
and threw him words of greeting as they went.
One of the arrogant young men said something like:
“May Zeus and the other eternal gods
give you, stranger, the thing you most desire,
what fills your heart—since you've now stopped
this greedy vagrant begging in this place.
We'll soon take him over to the mainland,
[150] to king Echetus, who mutilates all men.”

That's how they talked. Lord Odysseus was happy
at such welcome words. Then Antinous set down by him

the huge goat stomach stuffed with blood and fat,
and Amphinomus picked two loaves from the basket,
placed them before Odysseus, and then toasted him
with a golden cup, saying:

“Greetings, honoured stranger,
though right now you’ve got many miseries,
may happiness be yours in future days.”

Then resourceful Odysseus answered him and said:

[160] “Amphinomus, you seem to be a man
with true intelligence. Your father, too,
had the same quality. I’ve heard about
his noble name—Nisus of Dulichium,
a brave and wealthy man. And people say
you come from him, and you do seem discreet.
So I’ll tell you something. You should note this
and listen. Of all the things that breathe
and move along the ground, Earth does not raise
anything more insignificant than man.

[170] He thinks he’ll never suffer any harm
in days to come, as long as gods provide
prosperity and his knees stay supple.
But when blessed gods bring on misfortunes,
he bears those, too, though much against his will.
The father of gods and men brings men the days
which shape the spirit of earth’s inhabitants.
Among men I was set to be successful, too,
but, yielding to my strength and power,
I did many reckless things. I trusted

[180] my father and my family. So no man
should ever practise any lawlessness.
He should hold his gifts from gods in silence,
whatever they give. I see suitors here
planning desperate acts, wasting the wealth
and dishonouring the wife of a man who,
I think, will not remain away for long,
not from his family and his native land.

He is close by. May some god lead you home,
and may you not have to confront the man
[190] whenever he comes back to his own place.
For I don't believe, once he comes here,
under his own roof, he and the suitors
will separate without some blood being spilled."

Odysseus spoke, and after pouring a libation,
drank some honey wine, then handed the cup back
to the leader of the people. Amphinomus
went through the house, head bowed, with foreboding
in his heart, for he had a sense of troubles
yet in store. Still, he did not escape his fate.
[200] Athena had bound even him to be destroyed
by a spear in the strong hand of Telemachus.
He sat back down on the chair from which he'd risen.
Then goddess Athena with the gleaming eyes
put an idea in the mind of wise Penelope,
Icarius' daughter—to appear before the suitors,
so she might really get their hearts excited
and win more honour from her son and husband
than she'd had before.³ With an unnatural laugh
she spoke out and said:

"Eurynome, though my heart
[210] was never keen before to show myself
to these suitors, it is so now, disgraceful
though they are. And I've got words to say
to my own son—it would be better for him
not to mingle with those arrogant suitors.
They may say nice things, but they're making plans
for nasty schemes in future."

Then her housekeeper,
Eurynome, answered her and said:
"Indeed, my child,
all these things you say make sense. So you must go
and say that to your son. Do not hide it.

[220] But first of all, you should wash your body
and put ointment on your face. Don't leave here
showing both cheeks stained with tears like this.
It's wrong to go on suffering grief for ever
and never stop. Your son is old enough
to grow a beard—and you prayed very hard
to gods that you would see him reach that age.”

Then wise Penelope replied and said:
“Eurynome, although you care for me,
don't tell me I should rinse my body off
[230] or rub my skin with oil. Gods on Olympus
have ravaged all my beauty, since the day
Odysseus went off in his hollow ships.
But tell Hippodameia and Autonoe
to come in here—they can stand beside me
in the hall. For I won't go in there alone
among the men. I'd be ashamed.”

Once Penelope said this,
the old woman went through the chamber to instruct
the women and urge them to appear. Then once again,
Athena, bright-eyed goddess, thought of something else.
[240] She poured sweet sleep over Icarius' daughter,
who leaned back and fell asleep. Lying on the couch,
all her limbs relaxed. Meanwhile, the lovely goddess
gave her immortal gifts, so those Achaean men
would be enchanted with her. First, with an ointment
made from ambrosia she cleaned her lovely face,
like the balm well-crowned Cytherea rubs on herself
when she goes to the joyful dancing of the Graces.⁴
She made her taller, too, and changed her figure,
so it looked more regal. Then she made her whiter
[250] than fresh-cut ivory. After she'd done all this,
the lovely goddess left, and white-armed servants came,
chattering as they moved there from their chambers.
Sweet sleep then released Penelope. With her hands

she rubbed her cheeks and said:
“In spite of heavy pain,
a deep sweet sleep has held me in its arms.
I wish pure Artemis would quickly bring
a gentle death to me right now, so I
no longer waste my life away, mourning
in my heart and craving my dear husband,
[260] a man with every form of excellence,
the finest of Achaeans.”

Once she'd said this,
she moved down from her shining upper chambers.
She was not alone—two attendants went with her.
When the noble lady reached the suitors, she stood
beside a pillar holding up the well-made roof,
with a bright veil before her face. Loyal servants
stood with her, one on either side. The suitors
in their hearts felt immediately overwhelmed
with sexual desire, and their legs grew weak.
[270] Each of them prayed that he could go to bed with her.
But she addressed her dear son Telemachus:
“Telemachus, your wit and understanding
are not as steady as they used to be.
While still a child, the way you used to think
was more astute. But now you're fully grown,
on the verge of being a man, and anyone
from somewhere far away who looked at you
and only saw your beauty and your size
might well observe that you're a rich man's son.
[280] Yet your mind and thoughts are no longer wise.
What sort of actions are going on in here,
in this house, when you allow a stranger
to be mistreated in this way? And now,
what if this stranger, sitting in our home,
should suffer harm from such severe abuse?
You'd be disgraced among all men and shamed.”

Shrewd Telemachus then answered her and said:

“Mother, I don’t take issue with you now
for being angry. I know about these things.

[290] My heart understands them, all the details,
good and bad. I was still a child before.
But I can’t think through everything correctly,
with these men sitting round me on all sides—
they strike at me and hatch their wicked plans.
And I’ve no one here to guard me. But still,
this battle between Irus and the stranger
did not turn out the way the suitors wished.
The stranger’s strength made him the better man.
By Father Zeus, Athena, and Apollo,

[300] I wish these suitors now inside our home
could be overpowered, just as Irus was,
their heads drooping down inside the courtyard
and inside the hall, with each man’s limbs
gone limp—that’s how Irus is now sitting
beside the courtyard gate, nodding his head,
like some drunken fool. He can’t stand upright
or wander home, wherever his home is,
because his precious limbs have all gone slack.”

As they were talking to each other in this way,

[310] Eurymachus spoke to Penelope and said:
“Daughter of Icarius, wise Penelope,
if all the Argives in Iasian Argos
could see you, more suitors would be feasting
in your home from tomorrow on, since you
excel all women for your form, your stature,
and for the wisdom you have in your heart.”⁵

Wise Penelope then answered him:

“Eurymachus,
what’s excellent about my form and beauty
the gods destroyed when Argives left for Troy
[320] and Odysseus, my husband, went with them.

If he would come and organize my life,
then I'd be more beautiful and famous.
But now I'm grieving. A god has sent me
so much trouble! You know, when he went off
and left his native land, he held the wrist
on my right hand and said:

‘Wife,
I don't believe all well-armed Achaeans
will make it safely back from Troy unharmed.
For Trojans, people say, are fighting men,
[330] who can hurl their spears and draw their arrows
and control swift-footed horses, those things
which soon decide the outcome of the fight
in an impartial war. So I don't know
if god will get me back or I'll be killed
over there in Troy. So you must care for
everything back here. When I'm away,
think of father and mother in the home,
the way you do right now, but even more.
But when you see our son has grown a beard,
[340] then marry who you wish, and leave the house.’

“That's what he said. Now it's all happening.
The night will come when some hateful marriage
will be my lot, now that I've been cursed,
for Zeus has taken away my happiness,
and painful grief has come into my heart,
into my spirit. The way you men behave
was not appropriate for suitors in the past.
Those who wish to court a noble lady,
daughter of a wealthy man, and compete
[350] against each other, bring in their cattle,
their own rich flocks, to feast the lady's friends.
They give splendid presents and don't consume
another's livelihood and pay him nothing.”

Penelope finished. Long-suffering lord Odysseus
was pleased that she was getting them to give her gifts,
charming them with soothing words, her mind on other things.
Then Antinous, Euphemos' son, spoke to her:
"Daughter of Icarius, wise Penelope,
if one of the Achaeans wants to bring
[360] a gift in here, you should accept it.
It's not good if you refuse a present.
But we'll not be going back to our estates
or any other place, until you marry
whoever is the best of the Achaeans."

Antinous spoke. His comments pleased the suitors.
Each man sent a herald out to fetch some gifts.
One of them brought back, at Antinous' request,
a large and lovely robe with rich embroidery.
It had golden brooches on it, twelve in all,
[370] fitted with graceful curving clasps. Another man
brought in a chain made of gold for Eurymachus,
a finely crafted work strung with amber beads,
bright as the sun. Two attendants carried back
some earrings for Eurydamas, with three droplets
in a stylish shining cluster. For lord Peisander,
Polyctor's son, an attendant brought a necklace,
a splendid piece of jewelry. All Achaeans
presented her with some gorgeous gift or other.
Noble Penelope then left and went upstairs.
[380] Her servants carried up the lovely gifts for her.
Then the suitors turned to joyful songs and dances,
enjoying themselves, waiting for evening to arrive.
And as they entertained themselves, black evening came.
They then set up three braziers in the hall for light.
They put dry kindling round them, hard seasoned wood,
freshly split by axe. They set torches in between,
and brave Odysseus' servants held up the blazing flames.
Then Odysseus, born from Zeus, man of many schemes,
addressed those slaves in person, saying:

“Servants of Odysseus,
[390] your master, who’s been gone away so long,
go to the rooms the honoured queen lives in,
and twist the yarn beside her. Sit down there,
and make her happy, by staying in the room
or combing wool by hand. As for these lamps,
I’ll keep providing light for all these men.
Even if they wish to stay for fair-throned Dawn,
they cannot not wear me down, for I’m a man
who can endure much suffering.”

Odysseus spoke.

The servants looked at one another and burst out laughing.
[400] Then fair-cheeked Melanthe chastised him shamefully,
a child of Dolius, but Penelope had raised her,
treating her as her own daughter, providing toys,
whatever she desired. And yet, in spite of this,
her heart was never sorry for Penelope,
for she loved Eurymachus and had sex with him.
Now in abusive language she rebuked Odysseus:
“You idiotic stranger, you’re a man
whose mind has had all sense knocked out of it.
You’ve no wish to go into the blacksmith’s home
[410] or a public house somewhere to get some sleep.
No. You’re here, and you babble all the time.
Around these many men, you’re far too brash.
There’s no fear in your heart. In fact, it’s wine
that’s seized your wits, or else your mind
has always been that way and forces you
to prattle uselessly. Are you playing the fool
because you overcame that beggar Irus?
Take care another man, better than him,
doesn’t quickly come to stand against you.
[420] His heavy fists will punch you in the head,
stain you with lots of blood, and shove you out,
send you packing from this house.”

With an angry frown,
wily Odysseus then answered her and said:
“You bitch! Now I’ll go and tell Telemachus
the way you talk, so he can cut you up,
limb from limb, right here.”

Once Odysseus spoke,
his words alarmed the women, and they scattered,
moving off and fleeing through the hall. Each of them
felt her limbs grow slack with fear—they all believed
[430] he was telling them the truth. Then Odysseus stood
beside the flaming braziers, keeping them alight.
He looked at all the men. But in his chest his heart
was making other plans, which he would act upon.
There was no way Athena would allow the suitors,
those arrogant men, to stop behaving badly,
so that still more pain would sink into the heart
of Laertes’ son, Odysseus. So Eurymachus,
son of Polybus, began to shout to them,
insulting Odysseus, to make his comrades laugh.
[440] “Listen to me, those of you who’re courting
the splendid queen, so I may speak to you
of what the heart inside my chest is urging.
The gods were not unwilling this man came
into Odysseus’ home. In fact, I think
the torch light emanates from his own head
because he’s got no hair up there at all.”⁶

Once he’d said this, he then spoke to Odysseus,
destroyer of cities:
“Stranger, how’d you like to work?
What if I hired you for some distant farm—
[450] I guarantee I’d pay you—gathering stones
to build up walls and planting lofty trees?
I’d bring some food there for you all year round,
clothe you, and get some sandals for your feet.
But since you’ve only learned to misbehave,

you won't want to acquaint yourself with work.
No. You'd prefer to beg throughout the land,
collecting food for your voracious gut."

Resourceful Odysseus then answered him and said:
"Eurymachus, I wish the two of us

[460] could have a contest working in the spring,
when long days come, both mowing down the grass.
I'd have a curved scythe in my hands, and you
with one just like it. Then we'd test ourselves,
in lush grass, with no food to eat till dusk.
If we had oxen there, the best there are,
huge tawny beasts, both well fed on grass,
with strength that never tires, and in a field
measuring four acres and containing soil
which turns under the plough, then you'd see
[470] if I could cut a straight unbroken furrow.

If this very day Cronos' son stirred up
a battle somewhere and I had a shield,
two spears, and a helmet all of bronze,
well fitted to my temples, then you'd see
how I'd join in with fighters in the front.
And you'd not chatter on, insulting me
about my stomach. But you're much too proud,
and your mind's unfeeling. You really think
you're an important man, with real power,
[480] because you mingle with a few weak men.
But if Odysseus returned, got back here
to his native land, those doors over there,
although they're really wide, would quickly seem
too narrow for you as you fled outside."

Odysseus finished. Eurymachus in his heart
grew even angrier, and, with scowl, he spoke—
his words had wings:

"You miserable man,
I'll bring you trouble soon enough. You talk

brashly in this way among so many men,
[490] no fear in your heart! Wine has seized your wits,
or else your mind has always been like this,
and prattles vainly on. Have you gone mad
because you beat that beggar Irus?"

As he said this, he picked up a stool. But Odysseus
sat down beside the knee of Amphinomus
from Dulichium, in fear of Eurymachus.
So Eurymachus struck a person serving wine
on his right hand. The wine jug fell and hit the ground
with a resounding clang, and the server groaned,
[500] then toppled backwards in the dirt. The suitors
broke into an uproar in the shadowy halls,
and one man, glancing at the person next to him,
said something like these words:
"How I wish
that wandering stranger there had perished
somewhere else before he reached this place.
He'd not be making such a fuss among us.
Now we're brawling over beggars. This meal,
the splendid feast, will bring us no delight,
now that this trouble's got the upper hand."

[510] Telemachus then spoke to them with royal authority:
"You fools, you've gone insane, and in your hearts
no longer hide how much you eat and drink.
You must be being incited by some god.
So, now you've feasted well, return back home.
When the spirit bids, you can get some rest.
Still, I'm not chasing anyone away."

Telemachus spoke, and they all bit their lips,
astonished that he'd spoken out so boldly.
Then Amphinomus, splendid son of Nisus,
[520] son of lord Aretias, spoke to them and said:
"My friends, when a man says something just,

no one should get enraged and answer him
with hostile words. Don't abuse this stranger
or any slaves in lord Odysseus' home.
But come, let the wine server pour some drops
into our cups so we can make libations,
and then go home and rest. This stranger here,
we'll leave him in Odysseus' palace,
and Telemachus can cater to him—
[530] after all, it's his home which he came to."

Amphinomus finished. They were all delighted
with what he'd said. A herald from Dulichium,
lord Mulus, attending on Amphinomus,
mixed wine in a bowl for them and served it round,
coming to each man in his turn. They poured libations
to the sacred gods and drank wine sweet as honey.
Once they'd poured libations and had drinks of wine
to their heart's content, they all went on their way,
each man going to his own house to get some rest.