The Odyssey - Part Two
Homer, translated by Robert Fitzgerald

The Test of the Great Bow

Now the queen reached the storeroom door and halted. Here was an oaken sill, cut long ago and sanded clean and bedded true. Foursquare the doorjambs and the shining doors were set by the careful builder. Penelope untied the strap around the curving handle, pushed her hook into the slit, aimed at the bolts inside, and shot them back. Then came a rasping sound as those bright doors the key had sprung gave way—a bellow like a bull’s vaunt in a meadow—followed by her light footfall entering over the plank floor. Herb-scented robes lay there in chests, but the lady’s milk-white arms went up to lift the bow down from a peg in its own polished bow case.

Now Penelope sank down, holding the weapon on her knees, and drew her husband’s great bow out, and sobbed and bit her lip and let the salt tears flow.

Then back she went to face the crowded hall tremendous bow in hand, and on her shoulder hung the quiver spiked with coughing death. Behind, her maids bore a basket full of ax heads, bronze and iron implements for the master’s game.

Thus in her beauty she approached the suitors, and near a pillar of the solid roof she paused, her shining veil across her cheeks, her maids on either hand and still, then spoke to the banqueters:

“My lords, hear me: suitors indeed, you recommended this house to feast and drink in, day and night, my husband being long gone, long out of mind. You found no justification for yourselves—none except your lust to marry me. Stand up, then:

we now declare a contest for that prize. Here is my lord Odysseus’ hunting bow. Bend and string it if you can. Who sends an arrow through iron ax-helve sockets, twelve in line?

I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home,
my rich and beautiful bridal house, forever to be remembered, though I dream it only." . . .
Two men had meanwhile left the hall: swineherd and cowherd, in companionship, one downcast as the other. But Odysseus followed them outdoors, outside the court, and coming up said gently:

“You, herdsman, and you, too, swineherd, I could say a thing to you, or should I keep it dark? No, no; speak, my heart tells me. Would you be men enough to stand by Odysseus if he came back? Suppose he dropped out of a clear sky, as I did? Suppose some god should bring him? Would you bear arms for him, or for the suitors?”

The cowherd said:

“Ah, let the master come! Father Zeus, grant our old wish! Some courier guide him back! Then judge what stuff is in me and how I manage arms!”

Likewise Eumaeus fell to praying all heaven for his return, so that Odysseus, sure at least of these, told them:

“I am at home, for I am he. I bore adversities, but in the twentieth year I am ashore in my own land. I find the two of you, alone among my people, longed for my coming. Prayers I never heard except your own that I might come again. So now what is in store for you I’ll tell you: If Zeus brings down the suitors by my hand I promise marriages to both, and cattle, and houses built near mine. And you shall be brothers-in-arms of my Telemachus. Here, let me show you something else, a sign that I am he, that you can trust me, look: this old scar from the tusk wound that I got boar hunting on Parnassus— . . .”

Shifting his rags he bared the long gash. Both men looked, and knew and threw their arms around the old soldier, weeping, kissing his head and shoulders. He as well took each man’s head and hands to kiss, then said—

Many of the suitors boldly try the bow, but not one man can even bend it enough to string it.
to cut it short, else they might weep till dark—
“Break off, no more of this.
Anyone at the door could see and tell them.
Drift back in, but separately at intervals
after me.

Now listen to your orders:
when the time comes, those gentlemen, to a man,
will be dead against giving me bow or quiver.
Defy them. Eumaeus, bring the bow
and put it in my hands there at the door.
Tell the women to lock their own door tight.
Tell them if someone hears the shock of arms
or groans of men, in hall or court, not one
must show her face, but keep still at her weaving.
Philoeteus, run to the outer gate and lock it.
Throw the crossbar and lash it.” . . .

Image 12.1 Test of Odysseus’ Bow

And Odysseus took his time,
turning the bow, tapping it, every inch,
for borings that termites might have made
while the master of the weapon was abroad.
The suitors were now watching him, and some
jested among themselves:
“A bow lover!”
“Dealer in old bows!”
“Maybe he has one like it
at home!”
“Or has an itch to make one for himself.”
“See how he handles it, the sly old buzzard!”
And one disdainful suitor added this:
“May his fortune grow an inch for every inch he bends it!”

But the man skilled in all ways of contending,
satisfied by the great bow’s look and heft,
like a musician, like a harper, when
with quiet hand upon his instrument
he draws between his thumb and forefinger
a sweet new string upon a peg: so effortlessly
Odysseus in one motion strung the bow.
Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it,
so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang
a swallow’s note.
In the hushed hall it smote the suitors
and all their faces changed. Then Zeus thundered
overhead, one loud crack for a sign.
And Odysseus laughed within him that the son
of crooked-minded Cronus had flung that omen down.

He picked one ready arrow from his table
where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still
in the quiver for the young men’s turn to come.
He nocked it, let it rest across the handgrip,
and drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow,
aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

Now flashed
arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle
through every socket ring, and grazed not one,
to thud with heavy brazen head beyond.

Then quietly
Odysseus said:
“Telemachus, the stranger
you welcomed in your hall has not disgraced you.
I did not miss, neither did I take all day
stringing the bow. My hand and eye are sound,
not so contemptible as the young men say.
The hour has come to cook their lordships’ mutton—
supper by daylight. Other amusements later,
with song and harping that adorn a feast.”

He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince
Telemachus, true son of King Odysseus,
belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear,
and with a clink and glitter of keen bronze
stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.

(from Book 21)