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Penelope with the Suitors (c. 1509) by Pinturicchio.

## THE TEST OF THE GREAT BOW

*In Book 21, Penelope, like many unwilling princesses of myth and fairy tale, proposes an impossible task for those who wish to marry her. By so doing, she causes the bloody events that lead to the restoration of her husband. The test involves stringing Odysseus's huge bow, an impossible feat for anyone except Odysseus himself. Odysseus had left his bow home in Ithaca twenty years earlier.*

Now the queen reached the storeroom door and halted.  
 Here was an oaken sill, cut long ago  
 and sanded clean and bedded true. Foursquare  
 1085 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  
 1090 as those bright doors the key had sprung gave way—  
 a bellow like a bull's vaunt<sup>o</sup> in a meadow—

1091. **vaunt** (vònt) *n.*: boast.

1095 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.

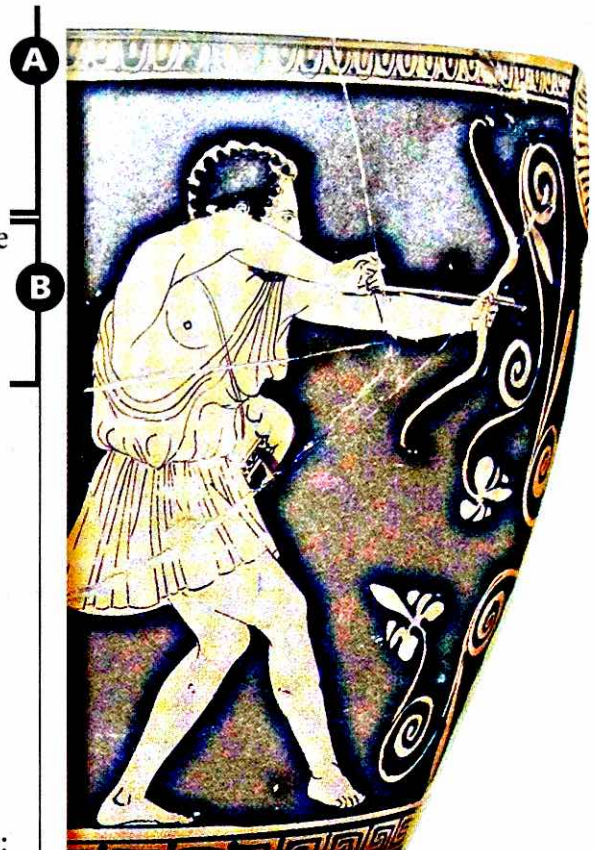
Now Penelope  
sank down, holding the weapon on her knees,  
and drew her husband's great bow out, and sobbed  
and bit her lip and let the salt tears flow.  
1100 Then back she went to face the crowded hall  
tremendous bow in hand, and on her shoulder hung  
the quiver spiked with coughing death. Behind, her  
maids bore a basket full of ax heads, bronze  
and iron implements for the master's game.  
1105 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:  
1110 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:  
1115 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,<sup>o</sup> twelve in line?  
I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home,  
1120 my rich and beautiful bridal house, forever  
to be remembered, though I dream it only.” . . .

*Many of the suitors boldly try the bow, but not one man can even  
bend it enough to string it.*

Two men had meanwhile left the hall:  
swineherd and cowherd, in companionship,  
one downcast as the other. But Odysseus  
1125 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?”



Odysseus slaying the suitors. Detail from an Attic red-figured scyphus, or drinking cup, by the Penelope Painter, from Tarquinii, an ancient city in central Italy (c. 440 B.C.).

Antikensammlung Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz.

**1118. ax-helve sockets:** An ax helve is an ax handle; a socket is a hollow piece lined with iron at the end of the handle. Shooting an arrow through a line of ax-helve sockets would be a task possible only for a superhero like Odysseus.

No, no; speak,

1130 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!

1135 Father Zeus, grant our old wish! Some courier<sup>o</sup>  
guide him back! Then judge what stuff is in me  
and how I manage arms!”

**1135. courier** (koo'r'e·ər) *n.*: guide or messenger.

Likewise Eumaeus


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

1140 “I am at home, for I am he.

I bore adversities, but in the twentieth year  
**A** 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  
1145 except your own that I might come again.

So now what is in store for you I'll tell you:

**B** 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  
1150 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<sup>o</sup>— . . .”

 **1122–1140.** How does Odysseus test the loyalty of the swineherd and the cowherd? How do they prove that they can be trusted?

Shifting his rags

1155 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—  
to cut it short, else they might weep till dark—

1160 “Break off, no more of this.  
Anyone at the door could see and tell them.  
Drift back in, but separately at intervals  
after me.

**1154. Parnassus** (pär·nas'əs): As a young man, Odysseus had gone hunting on Parnassus, his mother's home, and was gored above the knee by a boar.

Now listen to your orders:

1165 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  
1170 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.” . . .

*Now Odysseus, still in his beggar’s clothes, asks to try the bow. The suitors refuse to allow a mere beggar to try where they have failed, but Penelope insists that the stranger be given his chance. The suspense is very great—by this act, Penelope has accepted her husband as a suitor.*

*Eumaeus, the swineherd, hands Odysseus the bow and tells the nurse to retire with Penelope and the maids to the family chambers (the harem) and to bolt the doors. Odysseus had earlier told Telemachus to remove the suitors’ weapons from the great hall. Now he takes the bow.*

1175 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!”

1180 “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!”

1185 But the man skilled in all ways of contending,  
satisfied by the great bow’s look and heft,

### Vocabulary

**disdainful** (dis·dān’fəl) *adj.*: scornful; regarding someone as beneath you.

 1174–1220. As you read this scene, make notes about how you **visualize** it. Where are various characters placed? How are they reacting? It might help to draw a picture of the great hall and indicate where various actions take place.

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D

E

like a musician, like a harper, when  
 with quiet hand upon his instrument  
 he draws between his thumb and forefinger  
 1190 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  
 1195 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<sup>o</sup> had flung that omen down.

**A** He picked one ready arrow from his table  
 1200 where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still  
 in the quiver for the young men's turn to come.  
 He nocked<sup>o</sup> 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

1205 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.  
 1210 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,  
 1215 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  
 1220 stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.

(from Book 21)

**1198. Cronus** (krō'nəs): father of Zeus, called crooked-minded because of his schemes to destroy his children.

**1202. nocked** (nəkt) v.: fitted to the bowstring.

 **1220.** What do you **predict** will happen next? Review the episode, looking for clues in what Odysseus says and does.

### Vocabulary

**adorn** (ə·dɔrn') v.: add beauty to; decorate.