

DEATH AT THE PALACE

The climax of the story is here, in Book 22. Although Odysseus is ready to reclaim his rightful kingdom, he must first confront more than a hundred hostile suitors. The first one he turns to is Antinous. All through the story, Antinous has been the meanest of the suitors and their ringleader. He hit Odysseus with a stool when the hero appeared in the hall as a beggar, and he ridiculed the disguised king by calling him a bleary vagabond, a pest, and a tramp.

B

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest fighter of the islands leapt and stood on the broad doorsill, his own bow in his hand.

He poured out at his feet a rain of arrows from the quiver and spoke to the crowd:

“So much for that. Your clean-cut game is over.

1225 Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before, if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo.”^o

He drew to his fist the cruel head of an arrow for Antinous just as the young man leaned to lift his beautiful drinking cup,

1230 embossed, two-handled, golden: the cup was in his fingers, the wine was even at his lips, and did he dream of death? How could he? In that revelry amid his throng of friends who would imagine a single foe—though a strong foe indeed—

could dare to bring death’s pain on him and darkness on his eyes?

1235 Odysseus’ arrow hit him under the chin and punched up to the feathers through his throat.

Backward and down he went, letting the wine cup fall from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted crimson runnels,^o a river of mortal red, and one last kick upset his table

1240 knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood. Now as they craned to see their champion where he lay the suitors jostled in uproar down the hall, everyone on his feet. Wildly they turned and scanned the walls in the long room for arms; but not a shield,



1221–1303. As you read this action scene, imagine it as a film. After you finish reading, choose one part of the scene, and sketch it in your notebook. Make a list of the props you would need if you were filming the battle.

1226. Help me, Apollo: Odysseus prays to Apollo because this particular day is one of the god’s feast days. Apollo is also the god of archery.

1238. runnels (run’əlz) *n.*: streams.

Vocabulary

revelry (rev’əl·rē) *n.*: merrymaking; festivity.

1245 not a good ashen spear was there for a man to take and
throw.

All they could do was yell in outrage at Odysseus:

“Foul! to shoot at a man! That was your last shot!”

“Your own throat will be slit for this!”

“Our finest lad is down!

You killed the best on Ithaca.”

“Buzzards will tear your eyes out!”

1250 **A** For they imagined as they wished—that it was a wild shot,
an unintended killing—fools, not to comprehend
they were already in the grip of death.

But glaring under his brows Odysseus answered:

1255 “You yellow dogs, you thought I’d never make it
home from the land of Troy. You took my house to plunder,
twisted my maids to serve your beds. You dared
bid for my wife while I was still alive.

Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide
heaven,

contempt for what men say of you hereafter.

1260 Your last hour has come. You die in blood.”

As they all took this in, sickly green fear
pulled at their entrails, and their eyes flickered
looking for some hatch or hideaway from death.

Eurymachus alone could speak. He said:

1265 “If you are Odysseus of Ithaca come back,
all that you say these men have done is true.
Rash actions, many here, more in the countryside.
But here he lies, the man who caused them all.

1270 Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on
to do these things. He cared less for a marriage

B than for the power Cronion^o has denied him
as king of Ithaca. For that
he tried to trap your son and would have killed him.

1275 He is dead now and has his portion. Spare
your own people. As for ourselves, we’ll make
restitution of wine and meat consumed,
and add, each one, a tithe of twenty oxen
with gifts of bronze and gold to warm your heart.
Meanwhile we cannot blame you for your anger.”



Suitor hiding behind a table: The return of Odysseus. Limestone relief from Turkey (380 B.C.).

Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna, Austria.

1271. **Cronion** (krō'nē·ən): another name for Zeus, meaning “son of Cronus.”

1280 Odysseus glowered under his black brows
and said:

“Not for the whole treasure of your fathers,
all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold
put up by others, would I hold my hand.
There will be killing till the score is paid.

1285 You forced yourselves upon this house. Fight your way out,
or run for it, if you think you’ll escape death.
I doubt one man of you skins by.” . . .

Telemachus joins his father in the fight. They are helped by the swineherd and cowherd. Now the suitors, trapped in the hall without weapons, are struck right and left by arrows, and many of them lie dying on the floor.

At this moment that unmannin thundercloud,
the aegis, Athena’s shield,
took form aloft in the great hall.

1290 And the suitors mad with fear
at her great sign stampeded like stung cattle by a river
when the dread shimmering gadfly strikes in summer,
in the flowering season, in the long-drawn days.

After them the attackers wheeled, as terrible as falcons
from eyries^o in the mountains veering over and diving

1295 down
with talons wide unsheathed on flights of birds,
who cower down the sky in chutes and bursts along the
valley—

but the pouncing falcons grip their prey, no frantic wing
avails,

and farmers love to watch those beakèd hunters.

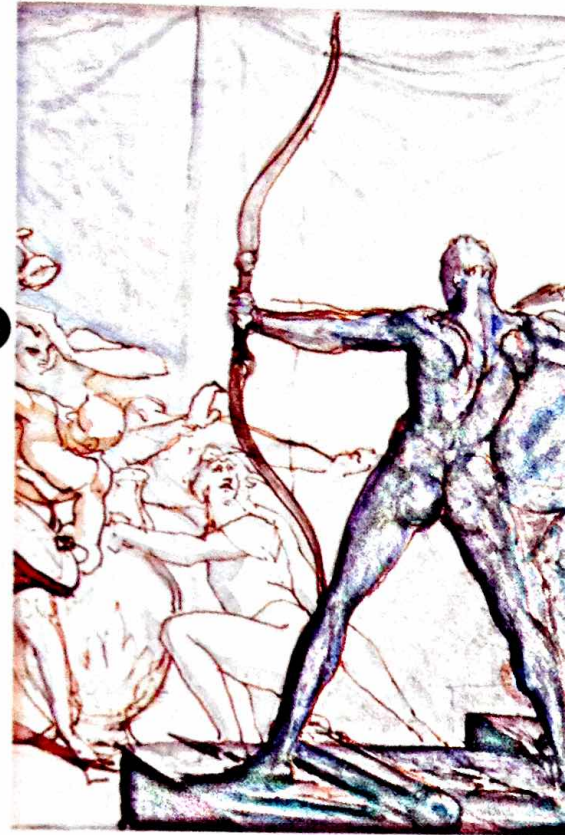
1300 So these now fell upon the suitors in that hall,
turning, turning to strike and strike again,
while torn men moaned at death, and blood ran smoking
over the whole floor. . . .

(from Book 22)

Vocabulary

glowered (glou’ərd) v.: glared; stared angrily.


avails (ə·vālz’) v.: is of use; helps.



Ulysses Slaying the Suitors (detail)
(1802) by Henry Fuseli.

© 2003 Kunsthau Zurich.

1295. **eyries** (er’ēz) *n.*: nests built in high places.

 1221–1303. How does this bloody episode relate to the epic’s **theme** about the value of hospitality and about what happens to people who mock divine laws?

ODYSSEUS AND PENELOPE

Odysseus now calls forth the maids who have betrayed his household by associating with the suitors. He orders them to clean up the house and dispose of the dead. Telemachus then “pays” them by hanging them in the courtyard.

Eurycleia tells Penelope about the return of Odysseus and the defeat of the suitors. The faithful wife—the perfect mate for the wily Odysseus—suspects a trick from the gods. She decides to test the stranger who claims to be her husband.

1305 Crossing the doorsill she sat down at once
in firelight, against the nearest wall,
across the room from the lord Odysseus.

There

leaning against a pillar, sat the man
and never lifted up his eyes, but only waited
for what his wife would say when she had seen him.

1310 And she, for a long time, sat deathly still
in wonderment—for sometimes as she gazed
she found him—yes, clearly—like her husband,
but sometimes blood and rags were all she saw.
Telemachus’s voice came to her ears:

“Mother,

1315 cruel mother, do you feel nothing,
drawing yourself apart this way from Father?
Will you not sit with him and talk and question him?
What other woman could remain so cold?
Who shuns her lord, and he come back to her
1320 from wars and wandering, after twenty years?
Your heart is hard as flint and never changes!”

Penelope answered:

“I am stunned, child.


I cannot speak to him. I cannot question him.
I cannot keep my eyes upon his face.

1325 If really he is Odysseus, truly home,
beyond all doubt we two shall know each other
better than you or anyone. There are
secret signs we know, we two.”

A smile

1330 came now to the lips of the patient hero, Odysseus,
who turned to Telemachus and said:

“Peace: let your mother test me at her leisure.
Before long she will see and know me best.

 **1304.** Make notes about Penelope as you read this episode. What might she be thinking?



Penelope (1878) by Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys. Colored chalk on paper.

Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford, Bedfordshire, England.

These tatters, dirt—all that I'm caked with now—
make her look hard at me and doubt me still. . . .”

Odysseus orders Telemachus, the swineherd, and the cowherd to bathe and put on fresh clothing.

1335 Greathearted Odysseus, home at last,
was being bathed now by Eurynome
and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again
in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena
lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him
1340 taller, and massive, too, with cringing hair
in curls like petals of wild hyacinth
but all red-golden. Think of gold infused
on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art
Hephaestus taught him, or Athena: one
1345 whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished
beauty over Odysseus' head and shoulders.
He sat then in the same chair by the pillar,
facing his silent wife, and said:

“Strange woman,
the immortals of Olympus made you hard,
1350 harder than any. Who else in the world
would keep aloof as you do from her husband
if he returned to her from years of trouble,
cast on his own land in the twentieth year?
Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.
Her heart is iron in her breast.”

1355 Penelope
spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

“Strange man,
if man you are . . . This is no pride on my part
nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely.
I know so well how you—how he—appeared
1360 boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same . . .
Make up his bed for him, Eurycleia.
Place it outside the bedchamber my lord
built with his own hands. Pile the big bed
with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen.”

Vocabulary

lavished (lav'isht) v.: gave generously.

aloof (ə·lōōf') adj.: at a distance; unfriendly.



Penelope by John Roddam Spencer Stanhope.

The De Morgan Foundation, London, UK.

1365 With this she tried him to the breaking point,
and he turned on her in a flash, raging:

“Woman, by heaven you’ve stung me now!
Who dared to move my bed?
No builder had the skill for that—unless

1370 a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal
in his best days could budge it with a crowbar.
There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign,
built into that bed—my handiwork
and no one else’s!

1375 An old trunk of olive
grew like a pillar on the building plot,
and I laid out our bedroom round that tree,
lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof,
gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors.

A Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,
1380 hewed and shaped the stump from the roots up
into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve
as model for the rest, I planed them all,
inlaid them all with silver, gold, and ivory,
and stretched a bed between—a pliant web
of oxhide thongs dyed crimson.

1385 There’s our sign!
I know no more. Could someone else’s hand
have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?”

B Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees
1390 grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.
With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,
throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him,
murmuring:

“Do not rage at me, Odysseus!

C No one ever matched your caution! Think
what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us
1395 life together in our prime and flowering years,
kept us from crossing into age together.
Forgive me, don’t be angry. I could not
welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself
long ago against the frauds of men,
1400 impostors who might come—and all those many

Vocabulary

pliant (plī’ənt) *adj.*: flexible.

tremulous (trem’yōō·ləs) *adj.*: trembling; shaking.



1374–1384. This description of Odysseus and Penelope’s bed is famous—and complex. **Paraphrase** Odysseus’s description of the bed. What characteristics of the bed suggest the strength and endurance of their love?


whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . .
But here and now, what sign could be so clear
as this of our own bed?

1405 No other man has ever laid eyes on it—
only my own slave, Actoris, that my father
sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.
You make my stiff heart know that I am yours.”

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache
of longing mounted, and he wept at last,
1410 his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,
longed for

as the sun-warmed earth is longed for by a swimmer
spent in rough water where his ship went down
under Poseidon’s blows, gale winds and tons of sea.
Few men can keep alive through a big surf
1415 to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches
in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind:
and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,
her white arms round him pressed, as though forever. . . .

(from Book 23)

 1408–1418. The journey ends with an embrace. What simile helps you understand the joy Odysseus feels in the arms of his wife?



Penelope and Her Suitors (1912) by J. W. Waterhouse.