



The Odyssey is one of two major ancient Greek epic poems attributed to Homer. It is, in part, a sequel to the Iliad, the other work ascribed to Homer. It is also about the long return of a warrior to his home. It takes Odysseus ten years to reach Ithaca after the ten-year Trojan War.[3] In his absence, it is assumed he has died, and his wife Penelope and son Telemachus must deal with a group of unruly suitors, who compete for Penelope's hand in marriage (and for Odysseus's kingdom).

THE BENDING OF THE BOW

...Up the lofty floor
She stepped, where stood the coffer that contained
The perfumed garments. Reaching forth her hand,
The queen took down the bow, that hung within
Its shining case, and sat her down, and laid
The case upon her knees, and, drawing forth
The monarch's bow, she wept aloud. As soon
As that new gush of tears had ceased to fall,
Back to the hall she went, and that proud throng
Of suitors, bearing in her hand the bow
Unstrung, and quiver, where the arrows lay
Many and deadly. Her attendant maids
Brought also down a coffer, where were laid
Much brass and steel, provided by the king
For games like these. The glorious lady then,
In presence of the suitors, stood beside
The columns that upheld the stately roof.
She held a lustrous veil before her cheeks,
And while on either side of her a maid
Stood modestly, bespoke the suitors thus:—
“Hear, noble suitors! ye who throng these halls,
And eat and drink from day to day, while long
My husband has been gone; your sole excuse
For all this lawlessness the claim ye make
That I become a bride. Come then, for now
A contest is proposed. I bring to you
The mighty bow that great Ulysses bore.

Whoe'er among you he may be whose hand
Shall bend this bow, and send through these twelve rings
An arrow, him I follow hence, and leave
This beautiful abode of my young years....

[various people try it—it is given to the disguised Ulysses/Odysseus]

... The swineherd went
Forward along the hall, and, drawing near
The wise Ulysses, gave into his hands
The bow.

Then, as a singer, skilled to play the harp,
Stretches with ease on its new fastenings
A string, the twisted entrails of a sheep,
Made fast at either end, so easily
Ulysses bent that mighty bow. He took
And drew the cord with his right hand; it twanged
With a clear sound as when a swallow screams.
The suitors were dismayed, and all grew pale.
Jove in loud thunder gave a sign from heaven....

.....He took up
A winged arrow, that before him lay
Upon a table drawn; the others still
Were in the quiver's womb; the Greeks were yet
To feel them. This he set with care against
The middle of the bow, and toward him drew
The cord and arrow-notch, just where he sat,
And aiming opposite, let fly the shaft.
He missed no ring of all; from first to last
The brass-tipped arrow threaded every one.
Then to Telemachus Ulysses said:—
“Telemachus, the stranger sitting here
Hath not disgraced thee. I have neither missed
The rings, nor found it hard to bend the bow;
Nor has my manly strength decayed, as these
Who seek to bring me to contempt pretend;
And now the hour is come when we prepare
A supper for the Achaians, while the day
Yet lasts, and after supper the delights
Of song and harp, which nobly grace a feast.”

He spake, and nodded to Telemachus,
His well-beloved son, who girded on
His trenchant sword, and took in hand his spear,

And, armed with glittering brass for battle, came
And took his station by his father's seat.
Then did Ulysses cast his rags aside,
And, leaping to the threshold, took his stand
On its broad space, with bow and quiver filled
With arrows. At his feet the hero poured
The winged shafts, and to the suitors called:—
“That difficult strife is ended. Now I take
Another mark, which no man yet has hit.
Now I shall see if I attain my aim,
And, by the aid of Phoebus, win renown.”
He spake; and, turning, at Antinoüs aimed
The bitter shaft—Antinoüs, who just then
Had grasped a beautiful two-eared cup of gold,
About to drink the wine. He little thought
Of wounds and death; for who, when banqueting
Among his fellows, could suspect that one
Alone against so many men would dare,
However bold, to plan his death, and bring
On him the doom of fate? Ulysses struck
The suitor with the arrow at the throat.
The point came through the tender neck behind,
Sideways he sank to earth; his hand let fall
The cup; the dark blood in a thick warm stream
Gushed from the nostrils of the smitten man.
He spurned the table with his feet, and spilled
The viands; bread and roasted meats were flung
To lie polluted on the floor. Then rose
The suitors in a tumult, when they saw
The fallen man; from all their seats they rose
Throughout the hall, and to the massive walls....
.... The wise Ulysses looked on them, and said:—
“Dogs! ye had thought I never would come back
From Ilium's coast, and therefore ye devoured
My substance here, and offered violence
To my maid-servants, and pursued my wife
As lovers, while I lived. Ye dreaded not
The gods who dwell in the great heaven, nor feared
Vengeance hereafter from the hands of men;
And now destruction overhangs you all.”
He spake, and all were pale with fear, and each
Looked round for some escape from death.

Bryant's Translation, Books XXI., XXII.