

So he said. His proposal pleased them all.  
 And gallant Mulius, a herald of Dulichion,  
 a friend-in-arms of lord Amphinomus too,  
 mixed the men a bowl and, hovering closely,  
 poured full rounds for all. They tipped cups  
 to the blissful gods and then, libations made,  
 they drank the heady wine to their hearts' content  
 and went their ways to bed, each suitor to his house.

## BOOK XIX

## [Penelope and Her Guest]

That left the great Odysseus waiting in his hall  
 as Athena helped him plot the slaughter of the suitors.  
 He turned at once to Telemachus, brisk with orders:  
 "Now we must stow the weapons out of reach, my boy,  
 all the arms and armor—and when the suitors miss them  
 and ask you questions, put them off with a winning story:  
 'I stowed them away, clear of the smoke. A far cry  
 from the arms Odysseus left when he went to Troy,  
 fire-damaged equipment, black with reeking fumes.  
 And a god reminded me of something darker too.  
 When you're in your cups a quarrel might break out,  
 you'd wound each other, shame your feasting here  
 and cast a pall on your courting.  
 Iron has powers to draw a man to ruin.'"

Telemachus did his father's will at once,  
 calling out to his old nurse Eurycleia: "Quick,  
 dear one, close the women up in their own quarters,  
 till I can stow my father's weapons in the storeroom.  
 Splendid gear, lying about, neglected, black with soot  
 since father sailed away. I was only a boy then.  
 Now I must safeguard them from the smoke."

"High time, child," the loving nurse replied.  
 "If only you'd bother to tend your whole house  
 and safeguard *all* your treasures. Tell me,  
 who's to fetch and carry the torch for you?  
 You won't let out the maids who'd light your way."

"Our friend here will," Telemachus answered coolly.  
 "I won't put up with a man who shirks his work,  
 not if he takes his ration from my stores,  
 even if he's miles away from home."

That silenced the old nurse.  
 She barred the doors that led from the long hall—  
 and up they sprang, Odysseus and his princely son,  
 and began to carry off the helmets, studded shields  
 and pointed spears, and Pallas Athena strode before them,

lifting a golden lamp that cast a dazzling radiance round about.  
 "Father," Telemachus suddenly burst out to Odysseus,  
 "oh what a marvel fills my eyes! Look, look there—  
 all the sides of the hall, the handsome crossbeams,  
 pinewood rafters, the tall columns towering—  
 all glow in my eyes like flaming fire!  
 Surely a god is here—  
 one of those who rule the vaulting skies!"

"Quiet," his father, the old soldier, warned him.  
 "Get a grip on yourself. No more questions now.  
 It's just the way of the gods who rule Olympus.  
 Off you go to bed. I'll stay here behind  
 to test the women, test your mother too.  
 She in her grief will ask me everything I know."

Under the flaring torchlight, through the hall  
 Telemachus made his way to his own bedroom now,  
 where he always went when welcome sleep came on him.  
 There he lay tonight as well, till Dawn's first light.  
 That left the great king still waiting in his hall  
 as Athena helped him plot the slaughter of the suitors . . .

Now down from her chamber came reserved Penelope,  
 looking for all the world like Artemis or golden Aphrodite.  
 Close to the fire her women drew her favorite chair  
 with its whorls of silver and ivory, inlaid rings.  
 The craftsman who made it years ago, Icmalius,  
 added a footrest under the seat itself,  
 mortised into the frame,  
 and over it all was draped a heavy fleece.  
 Here Penelope took her place, discreet, observant.  
 The women, arms bared, pressing in from their quarters,  
 cleared away the tables, the heaped remains of the feast  
 and the cups from which the raucous lords had drunk.  
 Raking embers from the braziers onto the ground,  
 they piled them high again with seasoned wood,  
 providing light and warmth.

And yet again  
 Melanthe lashed out at Odysseus: "You still here?—  
 you pest, slinking around the house all night,  
 leering up at the women?  
 Get out, you tramp—be glad of the food you got—  
 or we'll sling a torch at you, rout you out at once!"

A killing glance, and the old trooper countered,  
 "What's possessed you, woman? Why lay into me? Such abuse!  
 Just because I'm filthy, because I wear such rags,  
 roving round the country, living hand-to-mouth.  
 But it's fate that drives me on:  
 that's the lot of beggars, homeless drifters.  
 I too once lived in a lofty house that men admired;

rolling in wealth, I'd often give to a vagabond like myself, whoever he was, whatever need had brought him to my door. And crowds of servants I had, and lots of all it takes to live the life of ease, to make men call you rich. But Zeus ruined it all—god's will, no doubt. So beware, woman, or one day you may lose it all, all your glitter that puts your work-mates in the shade. Or your mistress may just fly in a rage and dress you down or Odysseus may return—there's still room for hope! Or if he's dead as you think and never coming home, well there's his son, Telemachus . . . like father, like son—thanks to god Apollo. No women's wildness here in the house escapes the prince's eye. He's come of age at last."

So he warned, and alert Penelope heard him, wheeled on the maid and tongue-lashed her smartly: "Make no mistake, you brazen, shameless bitch, none of your ugly work escapes me either—you will pay for it with your life, you will! How well you knew—you heard from my own lips—that I meant to probe this stranger in our house and ask about my husband . . . my heart breaks for him."

She turned to her housekeeper Eurynome and said, "Now bring us a chair and spread it soft with fleece, so our guest can sit and tell me his whole story and hear me out as well. I'd like to ask him questions, point by point."

Eurynome bustled off to fetch a polished chair and set it down and spread it soft with fleece. Here Odysseus sat, the man of many trials, as cautious Penelope began the conversation: "Stranger, let me start our questioning myself. . . . Who are you? where are you from? your city? your parents?"

"My good woman," Odysseus, master of craft, replied, "no man on the face of the earth could find fault with you. Your fame, believe me, has reached the vaulting skies. Fame like a flawless king's who dreads the gods, who governs a kingdom vast, proud and strong—who upholds justice, true, and the black earth bears wheat and barley, trees bow down with fruit and the sheep drop lambs and never fail and the sea teems with fish—thanks to his decent, upright rule, and under his sovereign sway the people flourish. So then, here in your house, ask me anything else but don't, please, search out my birth, my land, or you'll fill my heart to overflowing even more as I bring back the past . . . I am a man who's had his share of sorrows.

It's wrong for me, in someone else's house, to sit here moaning and groaning, sobbing so—it makes things worse, this grieving on and on. One of your maids, or you yourself, might scold me, think it's just the wine that had doused my wits and made me drown in tears."

"No, no, stranger," wise Penelope demurred, "whatever form and feature I had, what praise I'd won, the deathless gods destroyed that day the Achaeans sailed away to Troy, my husband in their ships, Odysseus—if he could return to tend my life the renown I had would only grow in glory. Now my life is torment . . .

look at the griefs some god has loosed against me! All the nobles who rule the islands round about, Dulichion, Same, and wooded Zacynthus too, and all who lord it in sunny Ithaca itself—they court me against my will, they lay waste my house. So I pay no heed to strangers, suppliants at my door, not even heralds out on their public errands here—I yearn for Odysseus, always, my heart pines away. They rush the marriage on, and I spin out my wiles. A god from the blue it was inspired me first

to set up a great loom in our royal halls and I began to weave, and the weaving finespun, the yarns endless, and I would lead them on: 'Young men, my suitors, now that King Odysseus is no more, go slowly, keen as you are to marry me, until I can finish off this web . . .

so my weaving won't all fray and come to nothing. This is a shroud for old lord Laertes, for that day when the deadly fate that lays us out at last will take him down. I dread the shame my countrywomen would heap upon me, yes, if a man of such wealth should lie in state without a shroud for cover.'

My very words, and despite their pride and passion they believed me. So by day I'd weave at my great and growing web—by night, by the light of torches set beside me, I would unravel all I'd done. Three whole years I deceived them blind, seduced them with this scheme. Then, when the wheeling seasons brought the fourth year on and the months waned and the long days came round once more, then, thanks to my maids—the shameless, reckless creatures—the suitors caught me in the act, denounced me harshly. So I finished it off. Against my will. They forced me. And now I cannot escape a marriage, nor can I contrive a deft way out. My parents urge me to tie the knot and my son is galled as they squander his estate—he sees it all. He's a grown man by now, equipped to tend to his own royal house and tend it well:

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honor . . .  
 Zeus grants my son that hid me who you are.  
 But for all that—now tell me? You've hardly sprung  
 Where do you come from? Come old man of legend."  
 from a rock or oak like son

answered, slowly,  
 "The master improviser answers' son, Odysseus,  
 "My lady . . . wife of Laertes' my family never end?  
 will your questions about my story. Even though  
 All right then. Here's my story. Even though  
 it plunges me into deeper grief than I feel now.  
 But that's the way of the world, when one has been  
 so far from home, so long away as I, roving over  
 many cities of men, enduring many hardships.

Still,  
 my story will tell you all you need to know.

There is a land called Crete . . .  
 ringed by the wine-dark sea with rolling whitecaps—  
 handsome country, fertile, thronged with people  
 well past counting—boasting ninety cities,  
 language mixing with language side-by-side.  
 First come the Achaeans, then the native Cretans,  
 hardy, gallant in action, then Cydonian clansmen,  
 Dorians living in three tribes, and proud Pelasgians last.  
 Central to all their cities is magnificent Cnossos,  
 the site where Minos ruled, and each ninth year  
 conferred with almighty Zeus himself. Minos,  
 father of my father, Deucalion, that bold heart.  
 Besides myself Deucalion sired Prince Idomeneus,  
 who set sail for Troy in his beaked ships of war,  
 escorting Atreus' sons. My own name is Aethon.  
 I am the younger-born; my older brother's a better  
 man than I am.  
 Now, it was there in Cnossos that I saw him . . .  
 Odysseus—and we traded gifts that I saw him . . .  
 A heavy gale had landed him on our coast,  
 driven him way off course, him on our coast,  
 when he was bound for Troy, rounding Malea's cape  
 hard by the goddess' cave. He anchored in Amnisus,  
 that rough harbor—barely ve of childbirth and labor,  
 He came into town at once, riding out the storm.  
 claiming to be my brother, asking for Idomeneus.  
 Too late. Ten or eleven days' close, respected friend.  
 since he set sail for Troy, days had already passed.  
 So I took Odysseus back to my own house,  
 gave him a hero's welcome in his beaked ships.  
 stores in our palace made to my own house,  
 he, treated him in style—  
 for princely entertainment.

7. It is impossible to extract historical fact from the following confused account of Crete be the inhabitants of the western end of the island; Dorians were the people who, according to modern scholars, invaded Greece and destroyed the Mycenaean civilization. Cnossos is the site of a Bronze Age palace. 8. The goddess Eileithyia. The cave where she was worshipped has been excavated at Amnisus, which is on the coast near

As for his comrades, all who'd shipped with him,  
 I dipped into public stock to give them barley,  
 ruddy wine and fine cattle for slaughter,  
 beef to their hearts' content. A dozen days  
 they stayed with me there, those brave Achaeans,  
 penned up by a North Wind so stiff that a man,  
 even on dry land, could never keep his feet—  
 some angry spirit raised that blast, I'd say.  
 Then on the thirteenth day the wind died down  
 and they set sail for Troy."

Falsehoods all,  
 but he gave his falsehoods all the ring of truth.  
 As she listened on, her tears flowed and soaked her cheeks  
 as the heavy snow melts down from the high mountain ridges,  
 snow the West Wind piles there and the warm East Wind thaws  
 and the snow, melting, swells the rivers to overflow their banks—  
 so she dissolved in tears, streaming down her lovely cheeks,  
 weeping for him, her husband, sitting there beside her.  
 Odysseus' heart went out to his grief-stricken wife  
 but under his lids his eyes remained stock-still—  
 they might have been horn or iron—  
 his guile fought back his tears. And she,  
 once she'd had her fill of grief and weeping,  
 turned again to her guest with this reply:  
 "Now, stranger, I think I'll test you, just to see  
 if there in your house, with all his friends-in-arms,  
 you actually entertained my husband as you say.  
 Come, tell me what sort of clothing he wore,  
 what cut of man was he?  
 What of the men who followed in his train?"

"Ah good woman,"  
 Odysseus, the great master of subtlety, returned,  
 "how hard it is to speak, after so much time  
 apart . . . why, some twenty years have passed  
 since he left my house and put my land behind him.  
 Even so, imagine the man as I portray him—  
 I can see him now.

King Odysseus . . .  
 he was wearing a heavy woolen cape, sea-purple  
 in double folds, with a golden brooch to clasp it,  
 twin sheaths for the pins, on the face a work of art:  
 a hound clenching a dappled fawn in its front paws,  
 slashing it as it writhed. All marveled to see it,  
 solid gold as it was, the hound slashing, throttling  
 the fawn in its death-throes, hoofs flailing to break free.  
 I noticed his glossy tunic too, clinging to his skin  
 like the thin glistening skin of a dried onion,  
 silky, soft, the glint of the sun itself.  
 Women galore would gaze on it with relish.  
 And this too. Bear it in mind, won't you?  
 I've no idea if Odysseus wore these things at home  
 or a comrade gave him them as he boarded ship.

or a host perhaps—the man was loved by many.  
There were few Achaeans to equal him . . . and I?  
I gave him a bronze sword myself, a lined cloak,  
elegant, deep red, and a fringed shirt as well,  
and I saw him off in his long benched ship of war  
in lordly style.

Something else. He kept a herald  
beside him, a man a little older than himself.  
I'll try to describe him to you, best I can.  
Round-shouldered he was, swarthy, curly-haired.  
His name? Eurybates. And Odysseus prized him  
most of all his men. Their minds worked as one."

His words renewed her deep desire to weep,  
recognizing the strong clear signs Odysseus offered.  
But as soon as she'd had her fill of tears and grief,  
Penelope turned again to her guest and said,  
"Now, stranger, much as I pitied you before,  
now in my house you'll be my special friend,  
my honored guest. I am the one, myself,  
who gave him the very clothes that you describe.  
I brought them up from the storeroom, folded them neatly,  
fastened the golden brooch to adorn my husband,  
Odysseus—never again will I embrace him,  
striding home to his own native land.  
A black day it was  
when he took ship to see that cursed city . . .  
*Destroy,*<sup>9</sup> I call it—I hate to say its name!"

"Ah my queen," the man of craft assured her,  
"noble wife of Laertes' son, Odysseus,  
ravage no more your lovely face with tears  
or consume your heart with grieving for your husband.  
Not that I'd blame you, ever. Any woman will mourn  
the bridegroom she has lost, lain with in love  
and borne his children too. Even though he  
was no Odysseus—a man like a god, they say.  
But dry your tears and take my words to heart.  
I will tell you the whole truth and hide nothing:  
I have heard that Odysseus now, at last, is on his way,  
he's just in reach, in rich Thesprotian country—  
the man is still alive  
and he's bringing home a royal hoard of treasure,  
gifts he won from the people of those parts.  
His crew? He's lost his crew and hollow ship  
on the wine-dark waters off Thrinacia Island.  
Zeus and Helios raged, dead set against Odysseus  
for his men-at-arms had killed the cattle of the Sun,  
so down to the last hand they drowned in crashing seas.  
But not Odysseus, clinging tight to his ship's keel—

9. Literally, "Evil-illum."

the breakers flung him out onto dry land, on Scheria,  
the land of Phaeacians, close kin to the gods themselves,  
and with all their hearts they prized him like a god,  
showered the man with gifts, and they'd have gladly  
sailed him home unscathed. In fact Odysseus  
would have been here beside you long ago  
but he thought it the better, shrewder course  
to recoup his fortunes roving through the world.  
At sly profit-turning there's not a man alive  
to touch Odysseus. He's got no rival there.  
So I learned from Phidon, king of Thesprotia,  
who swore to me as he poured libations in his house,  
"The ship's hauled down and the shipmates set to sail,  
to take Odysseus home to native land."

But I . . .  
he shipped me off before. A Thesprotian cutter  
chanced to be heading for Dulichion rich in wheat.  
But he showed me all the treasure Odysseus had amassed,  
enough to last a man and ten generations of his heirs—  
so great the wealth stored up for *him* in the king's vaults!  
But Odysseus, he made clear, was off at Dodona then  
to hear the will of Zeus that rustles forth  
from the god's tall leafy oak: how should he return,  
after all the years away, to his own beloved Ithaca,  
openly or in secret?

And so the man is safe,  
as you can see, and he's coming home, soon,  
he's close, close at hand—  
he won't be severed long from kin and country,  
no, not now. I give you my solemn, binding oath.  
I swear by Zeus, the first, the greatest god—  
by Odysseus' hearth, where I have come for help:  
all will come to pass, I swear, exactly as I say.  
True, this very month—just as the old moon dies  
and the new moon rises into life—Odysseus will return!"

"If only, my friend," reserved Penelope exclaimed,  
"everything you say would come to pass!  
You'd soon know my affection, know my gifts.  
Any man you meet would call you blest.  
But my heart can sense the way it all will go.  
Odysseus, I tell you, is never coming back,  
nor will you ever gain your passage home,  
for we have no masters in our house like him  
at welcoming in or sending off an honored guest.  
Odysseus. There was a man, or was he all a dream?  
But come, women, wash the stranger and make his bed,  
with bedding, blankets and lustrous spreads to keep him warm  
till Dawn comes up and takes her golden throne.  
Then, tomorrow at daybreak, bathe him well  
and rub him down with oil, so he can sit beside  
Telemachus in the hall, enjoy his breakfast there."

And anyone who offends our guest beyond endurance—  
 he defeats himself; he's doomed to failure here,  
 no matter how raucously he raves and blusters on.  
 For how can you know, my friend, if I surpass  
 all women in thoughtfulness and shrewd good sense,  
 if I'd allow you to take your meals at hall  
 so weatherbeaten, clad in rags and tatters?  
 Our lives are much too brief . . .  
 If a man is cruel by nature, cruel in action,  
 the mortal world will call down curses on his head  
 while he is alive, and all will mock his memory after death.  
 But then if a man is kind by nature, kind in action,  
 his guests will carry his fame across the earth  
 and people all will praise him from the heart."

"Wait, my queen," the crafty man objected,  
 "noble wife of Laertes' son, Odysseus—  
 blankets and glossy spreads? They're not my style.  
 Not from the day I launched out in my long-oared ship  
 and the snowy peaks of Crete went fading far astern.  
 I'll lie as I've done through sleepless nights before.  
 Many a night I've spent on rugged beds afield,  
 waiting for Dawn to mount her lovely throne.  
 Nor do I pine for any footbaths either.  
 Of all the women who serve your household here,  
 not one will touch my feet. Unless, perhaps,  
 there is some old retainer, the soul of trust,  
 someone who's borne as much as I have borne . . .  
 I wouldn't mind if she would touch my feet."

"Dear friend,"  
 the discreet Penelope replied, "never has any man  
 so thoughtful—of all the guests in my palace  
 come from foreign parts—been as welcome as you . . .  
 so sensible, so apt, is every word you say.  
 I have just such an old woman, seasoned, wise,  
 who carefully tended my unlucky husband, reared him,  
 took him into her arms the day his mother bore him—  
 frail as the woman is, she'll wash your feet.  
 Up with you now, my good old Eurycleia,  
 come and wash your master's . . . equal in years.  
 Odysseus must have feet and hands like his by now—  
 hardship can age a person overnight."

At that name  
 the old retainer buried her face in both hands,  
 burst into warm tears and wailed out in grief,  
 "Oh my child, how helpless I am to help you now!  
 How Zeus despised you, more than all other men,  
 god-fearing man that you were . . .  
 Never did any mortal burn the Old Thunderer  
 such rich thighbones—offerings charred and choice—  
 never as many as *you* did, praying always to reach  
 a ripe old age and raise a son to glory. Now,

you alone he's robbed of your home-coming day!  
 Just so, the women must have mocked my king,  
 far away, when he'd stopped at some fine house—  
 just as all these bitches, stranger, mock you here.  
 And because you shrink from their taunts, their wicked barbs,  
 you will not let them wash you. The work is mine—  
 Icarius' daughter, wise Penelope, bids me now  
 and I am all too glad. I will wash your feet,  
 both for my own dear queen and for yourself—  
 your sorrows wring my heart . . . and why?  
 Listen to me closely, mark my words.  
 Many a wayworn guest has landed here  
 but never, I swear, has one so struck my eyes—  
 your build, your voice, your feet—you're like Odysseus . . .  
 to the life!"

"Old woman," wily Odysseus countered,  
 "that's what they all say who've seen us both.  
 We bear a striking resemblance to each other,  
 as you have had the wit to say yourself."

The old woman took up a burnished basin  
 she used for washing feet and poured in bowls  
 of fresh cold water before she stirred in hot.  
 Odysseus, sitting full in the firelight, suddenly  
 swerved round to the dark, gripped by a quick misgiving—  
 soon as she touched him she might spot the scar!  
 The truth would all come out.

Bending closer  
 she started to bathe her master . . . then,  
 in a flash, she knew the scar—

that old wound  
 made years ago by a boar's white tusk when Odysseus  
 went to Parnassus,<sup>1</sup> out to see Autolycus and his sons.  
 The man was his mother's noble father, one who excelled  
 the world at thievery, that and subtle, shifty oaths.  
 Hermes<sup>2</sup> gave him the gift, overjoyed by the thighs  
 of lambs and kids he burned in the god's honor—  
 Hermes the ready partner in his crimes. Now,  
 Autolycus once visited Ithaca's fertile land,  
 to find his daughter's son had just been born.  
 Eurycleia set him down on the old man's knees  
 as he finished dinner, urging him, "Autolycus,  
 you must find a name for your daughter's darling son.  
 The baby comes as the answer to her prayers."

"You,  
 my daughter, and you, my son-in-law," Autolycus replied,  
 "give the boy the name I tell you now. Just as I

1. The mountain range above Apollo's oracular shrine at Delphi, on the Greek mainland. 2. Not only the messenger of the gods and the god who guided the dead down to the lower world but also the god of the marketplace and so of trickery and swindling.

have come from afar, creating pain<sup>3</sup> for many—  
men and women across the good green earth—  
so let his name be *Odysseus* . . .  
the Son of Pain, a name he'll earn in full.  
And when he has come of age and pays his visit  
to Parnassus—the great estate of his mother's line  
where all my treasures lie—I will give him enough  
to cheer his heart, then speed him home to you.”

And so,  
in time, Odysseus went to collect the splendid gifts.  
Autolycus and the sons of Autolycus warmed him in  
with eager handclaps, hearty words of welcome.  
His mother's mother, Amphithea, hugged the boy  
and kissed his face and kissed his shining eyes.  
Autolycus told his well-bred sons to prepare  
a princely feast. They followed orders gladly,  
herded an ox inside at once, five years old,  
skinned it and split the carcass into quarters,  
deftly cut it in pieces, skewered these on spits,  
roasted all to a turn and served the portions out.  
So all day long till the sun went down they feasted,  
consuming equal shares to their hearts' content.  
Then when the sun had set and night came on  
they turned to bed and took the gift of sleep.

As soon  
as young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more  
they all moved out for the hunt, hounds in the lead,  
Autolycus' sons and Prince Odysseus in their ranks.  
Climbing Parnassus' ridges, thick with timber,  
they quickly reached the mountain's windy folds  
and just as the sun began to strike the plowlands,  
rising out of the deep calm flow of the Ocean River,  
the beaters came to a wooded glen, the hounds broke,  
hot on a trail, and right behind the pack they came,  
Autolycus' sons—Odysseus out in front now,  
pressing the dogs, brandishing high his spear  
with its long shadow waving. Then and there  
a great boar lay in wait, in a thicket lair so dense  
that the sodden gusty winds could never pierce it,  
nor could the sun's sharp rays invade its depths  
nor a downpour drench it through and through,  
so dense, so dark, and piled with fallen leaves.  
Here, as the hunters closed in for the kill,  
crowding the hounds, the tramp of men and dogs  
came drumming round the boar—he crashed from his lair  
his razor back bristling, his eyes flashing fire  
and charging up to the hunt he stopped, at bay—  
and Odysseus rushed him first,  
shaking his long spear in a sturdy hand,

3. In Greek, *odynomenos* (one who is angry and gives cause for anger), close in sound to *Odysseus*. Athena uses a different form of the same word when she asks to Odysseus. Giving and receiving anger, and therefore pain, is thus one of Odysseus's

wild to strike but the boar struck faster,  
lunging in on the slant, a tusk thrusting up  
over the boy's knee, gouging a deep strip of flesh  
but it never hit the bone—

Odysseus thrust and struck,  
stabbing the beast's right shoulder—

a glint of bronze—  
the point ripped clean through and down in the dust he dropped,  
grunting out his breath as his life winged away.

The sons of Autolycus, working over Odysseus,  
skillfully binding up his open wound—  
the gallant, godlike prince—

chanted an old spell that stanching the blood  
and quickly bore him home to their father's palace.

There, in no time, Autolycus and the sons of Autolycus  
healed him well and, showering him with splendid gifts,  
sped Odysseus back to his native land, to Ithaca,

a young man filled with joy. His happy parents,  
his father and noble mother, welcomed him home  
and asked him of all his exploits, blow-by-blow:

how did he get that wound? He told his tale with style,  
how the white tusk of a wild boar had gashed his leg,  
hunting on Parnassus with Autolycus and his sons' . . .

That scar—  
as the old nurse cradled his leg and her hands passed down  
she felt it, knew it, suddenly let his foot fall—

down it dropped in the basin—the bronze clanged,  
tipping over, spilling water across the floor.  
Joy and torment gripped her heart at once,  
tears rushed to her eyes—voice choked in her throat

she reached for Odysseus' chin and whispered quickly,  
“Yes, yes! you are *Odysseus*—oh dear boy—  
I couldn't know you before . . .

not till I touched the body of my king!”

She glanced at Penelope, keen to signal her  
that here was her own dear husband, here and now,  
but she could not catch the glance, she took no heed,

Athena turned her attention elsewhere. But Odysseus—  
his right hand shot out, clutching the nurse's throat,  
with his left he hugged her to himself and muttered,

“Nurse, you want to kill me? You suckled me yourself  
at your own breast—and now I'm home, at last,  
after bearing twenty years of brutal hardship,

home, on native ground. But now you know,  
now that a god has flashed it in your mind,  
quiet! not a word to anyone in the house.

Or else, I warn you—and I mean business too—  
if a god beats down these brazen suitors at my hands,

4. Leaving human society for nature, hunting and killing a fierce animal, and receiving a wound conform to the pattern of male initiation rituals that helped boys make the transition to adulthood. Odysseus's scar seems to commemorate his surmounting of such an initiatory ordeal.

I will not spare you—my old nurse  
when I kill the other women in

nurse that you are—  
"Child," shrewd old Eurycle<sup>5</sup> in my house."  
"what nonsense you let slip through  
You know me—I'm stubborn, I'll protest,  
I'll keep still as solid rock or iron  
One more thing. Take it to her through your teeth!  
If a god beats down these braziers, never give an inch—  
I'll report in full on the women who are disloyal to you, who are  
heart, I tell you.  
seven suitors at your hands,

en in your house:  
"Nurse," the cool tactician are guiltless."  
"why bother to count them off  
I'll observe them, judge each one  
Just be quiet. Keep your tales  
Leave the rest to the gods." Odysseus said,  
"A waste of breath."

He alone myself.  
the old nurse went padding off to yourself.  
to fetch more water—her basin  
and once she'd bathed and ruffled so,  
Odysseus drew his chair up along the halls  
trying to keep warm, his sin had all spilled—  
but he hid his scar beneath his hooded him down with oil,  
as cautious Penelope resumed to hear the fire again,  
"My friend, I have only one more  
something slight, now the household is beggar's rags  
for those who can yield to sweetened their conversation:  
heartsick as they are. As for more question for you,  
some god has sent me pain through our draws on for welcome sleep—  
All day long I indulge myself in sweet repose, that is,  
as I see to my tasks, direct the myself, though,  
When night falls and the world that knows no bounds.  
I take to my bed, my heart thrives in sighs and tears  
anxieties swarming, piercing—the household women.  
Like Pandareus' daughter, the world lies lost in sleep,  
lifting her lovely song at the first robbing, about to break,  
perched in the treetops' rustling— I may go mad with grief.  
her music shifting, trilling and— I may go mad with grief.  
in grief for Itylus, her beloved the nightingale in the green woods  
whom she in innocence once first warm rush of spring,  
so my wavering heart goes shivering leaves and pouring forth  
Do I stay beside my son and kid sinking, rippling high to burst  
my lands, my serving-women, and boy, King Zethus' son  
true to my husband's bed, they cut down with bronze . . .  
Or do I follow, at last, the besetting, back and forth:  
here in the halls, who gives them keep all things secure—  
My son—when he was a boy, the grand high-roofed house—  
the people's voice as well?

5. The reference is to one of several stories of Pandareus, a Cretan king, was married to a sister-in-law Niobe, she tried to kill Niobe's children. Zeus changed her into a nightingale, who sang and lighthearted—

urged me not to marry and leave my husband's house.  
But now he has grown and reached his young prime,  
he begs me to leave our palace, travel home.  
Telemachus, so obsessed with his own estate,  
the wealth my princely suitors bleed away.

But please,  
read this dream for me, won't you? Listen closely . . .  
I keep twenty geese in the house, from the water trough  
they come and peck their wheat—I love to watch them all,  
But down from a mountain swooped this great hook-beaked eagle,  
yes, and he snapped their necks and killed them one and all  
and they lay in heaps throughout the halls while he,  
back to the clear blue sky he soared at once.  
But I wept and wailed—only a dream, of course—  
and our well-groomed ladies came and clustered round me,  
sobbing, stricken: the eagle killed my geese. But down  
he swooped again and settling onto a jutting rafter  
called out in a human voice that dried my tears,  
'Courage, daughter of famous King Icarus!  
This is no dream but a happy waking vision,  
real as day, that will come true for you.  
The geese were your suitors—I was once the eagle  
but now I am your husband, back again at last,  
about to launch a terrible fate against them all!'  
So he vowed, and the soothing sleep released me.  
I peered around and saw my geese in the house,  
pecking at their wheat, at the same trough  
where they always took their meal."

"Dear woman,"  
quick Odysseus answered, "twist it however you like,  
your dream can only mean one thing. Odysseus  
told you himself—he'll make it come to pass.  
Destruction is clear for each and every suitor;  
not a soul escapes his death and doom."

"Ah my friend," seasoned Penelope dissented,  
"dreams are hard to unravel, wayward, drifting things—  
not all we glimpse in them will come to pass . . .  
Two gates there are for our evanescent dreams,  
one is made of ivory, the other made of horn.  
Those that pass through the ivory cleanly carved  
are will-o'-the-wisps, their message bears no fruit.  
The dreams that pass through the gates of polished horn  
are fraught with truth, for the dreamer who can see them.  
But I can't believe my strange dream has come that way,  
much as my son and I would love to have it so.  
One more thing I'll tell you—weigh it well.  
The day that dawns today, this cursed day,  
will cut me off from Odysseus' house. Now,  
I mean to announce a contest with those axes,  
the ones he would often line up here inside the hall,  
twelve in a straight unbroken row like blocks to shore a keel,

then stand well back and whip ar  
 Now I will bring them on as a tri  
 The hand that can string the bow  
 that shoots an arrow clean throu  
 he's the man I follow, yes, forsak  
 where I was once a bride, this gr  
 so filled with the best that life ca  
 I shall always remember it, that I  
 even in my dreams." I know . . .

"Oh my que  
 Odysseus, man of exploits, urged  
 "royal wife of Laertes' son, Odys  
 don't put off this test in the halls  
 Before that crew can handle the  
 string it taut and shoot through a  
 Odysseus, man of exploits, will b

"If only, my friend," the wise P  
 "you were willing to sit beside m  
 indulging me in the comfort of y  
 sleep would never drift across m  
 But one can't go without his slee  
 The immortals give each thing it  
 in our mortal lives throughout the

So now I'm going back to my roots proper place  
 and lie down on my bed, the good green earth.  
 that bed of pain my tears have st  
 year out, from the day Odysseus  
 Destroy, I call it—I hate to say it,  
 There I'll rest, while you lie here  
 spreading your blankets somewh  
 or the women will prepare a dec

the queen went up to her lofty w  
 and not alone: her women follow  
 Penelope, once they reached the  
 fell to weeping for Odysseus, her  
 till watchful Athena sealed her  
 er beloved husband,  
 eyes with welcome sleep.

Off in the entrance-hall the grea  
 spreading out on the ground the  
 heaping over it fleece from shee  
 butchered day and night, then E  
 a blanket over him, once he'd ne  
 at king made his bed,  
 e raw hide of an ox,  
 ep the suitors  
 Eurynome threw  
 nestled down.

6. The nature of this archery contest has  
 double-headed, the aperture through which it  
 handle fit. If the twelve ax heads were fixed  
 that the empty sockets were perfectly aligned  
 an extremely successful shot to strike an arrow

And there Odysseus lay  
 plotting within himself the suitors' death—  
 awake, alert, as the women slipped from the house,  
 the maids who whored in the suitors' beds each night,  
 tittering, linking arms and frisking as before.  
 The master's anger rose inside his chest,  
 torn in thought, debating, head and heart—  
 should he up and rush them, kill them one and all  
 or let them rut with their lovers one last time?  
 The heart inside him growled low with rage,  
 as a bitch mounting over her weak, defenseless puppies  
 growls, facing a stranger, bristling for a showdown—  
 so he growled from his depths, hackles rising at their outrage.  
 But he struck his chest and curbed his fighting heart:  
 "Bear up, old heart! You've borne worse, far worse,  
 that day when the Cyclops, man-mountain, bolted  
 your hardy comrades down. But you held fast—  
 Nobody but your cunning pulled you through  
 the monster's cave you thought would be your death."

So he forced his spirit into submission,  
 the rage in his breast reined back—unswerving,  
 all endurance. But he himself kept tossing, turning,  
 intent as a cook before some white-hot blazing fire  
 who rolls his sizzling sausage back and forth,  
 packed with fat and blood—keen to broil it quickly,  
 tossing, turning it, this way, that way—so he cast about:  
 how could he get these shameless suitors in his clutches,  
 one man facing a mob? . . . when close to his side she came,  
 Athena sweeping down from the sky in a woman's build  
 and hovering at his head, the goddess spoke:  
 "Why still awake? The unluckiest man alive!  
 Here is your house, your wife at home, your son,  
 as fine a boy as one could hope to have."

"True,"  
 the wily fighter replied, "how right you are, goddess,  
 but still this worry haunts me, heart and soul—  
 how can I get these shameless suitors in my clutches?  
 Single-handed, braving an army always camped inside.  
 There's another worry, that haunts me even more.  
 What if I kill them—thanks to you and Zeus—  
 how do I run from under their avengers?  
 Show me the way, I ask you."

"Impossible man!"  
 Athena bantered, the goddess' eyes ablaze.  
 "Others are quick to trust a weaker comrade,  
 some poor mortal, far less cunning than I.  
 But I am a goddess, look, the very one who  
 guards you in all your trials to the last.  
 I tell you this straight out:  
 even if fifty bands of mortal fighters  
 closed around us, hot to kill us off in battle,