

3.4. Homer / Odysseus and the Suitors

Odysseus has returned home to Ithaca after many long years of wandering only to find that his home is overrun by young noblemen courting Penelope (the chief of whom being Antinoös), who is patiently awaiting Odysseus's return. Odysseus first scouts out the situation in disguise as a beggar.

Hom. *Od.* 22. Source: Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. W. H. D. Rouse. New York: Mentor, 1946.

Now Odysseus stripped off his rags, and leapt upon the great doorstone, holding the bow and the quiver of arrows. He spread the arrows before his feet, and called aloud to the company:

“So the great game is played! and now for another mark, which no man has ever hit: I will see if Apollo will hear my prayer and let me strike it.”

Then he let fly straight at Antinoös: he was holding a large golden goblet in both hands, and was about to lift it for a drink. Bloodshed was not in his thoughts; who could imagine at the festal board, that one man amongst many, even if he were very strong, would bring certain death upon his own head? The arrow struck him in the throat, and the point ran through the soft neck. He sank to the other side, and the goblet dropt from his hands. In an instant a thick jet of blood spouted from his nostrils; he pushed the table away with a quick jerk of his feet, spilling all the vittles on the ground—meat and bread in a mess.

Then there was a great uproar all through the place as they saw the man fall; they leapt up from their seats in excitement and looked all round at the walls, but there was neither shield nor spear to be seen. They shouted angrily at Odysseus—

“You shall pay for shooting a man! No more games for you: now your death is a safe thing! You have killed the best fellow in Ithaca, and so the vultures shall eat you here!”

They were just guessing—they never dreamt that he intended to kill the man. Poor fools! they did not know that the cords of death were made fast about them all. But Odysseus said with a frowning face:

“Dogs! you thought would never come back from Troy, so you have been carving up my substance, forcing the women to lie with you, courting my wife before I was dead, not fearing the gods who rule the broad heavens, nor the execration of man which follows you for ever. And now the cords of death are made fast about you all!”

Then pale fear seized upon them. Eurymachos alone dared to answer:

“If you are really Ithacan Odysseus come back, what you have said is just and right. Plenty of wild doings here, plenty more on your farms! But there lies the guilty man, Antinoös, who is answerable for everything. He was the ringleader; a wife was not what he wanted, not so much as something else, which Cronion¹ has not allowed him to do. He wished to murder your son by a secret assault, and to be sole lord and master in this fine country of Ithaca.

“Now he has his deserts and lies dead. Sir, spare your own people! We will make it all good, all that has been consumed, all the wine that has been drunk in this hall; there shall be a public collection, and each man severally will pay twenty oxen in compensation, and bring gold and bronze to your heart's content. Till that is done no one could blame you for being angry.”

Odysseus answered with a frowning face:

“Eurymachos, not if you would give me your whole estates, all you now possess, and more if you could get it; not even so, would I stay my hand from killing until every man of you shall have paid in full for his outrageous violence. Now the choice lies before you, fight or flight, if you wish to save your lives; but I do not think any one of you will escape sudden death.”

As they listened, their knees gave way beneath them and despair entered their hearts. But Eurymachos once more spoke:

“My friends,” he cried out, “this man will not hold his hands—he thinks he is invincible. He has bow and arrows, and he will shoot from the doorway until he has killed us all! Let us fight for it! Draw your swords and put up the tables to fend off his arrows; have at him all together; see if we can't push away from the door, and get out and make a hue and cry in the town! Then this man will soon shoot his last shot!”

With this he drew a good sharp blade from his side, and leapt at Odysseus with a yell; but on the instant Odysseus let fly an arrow and struck him in the chest by the nipple. The sharp point pierced his liver; down fell the sword from his hand, he doubled up and fell sprawling over a table, vittles and cup went scattering over the floor; he beat his brow on the ground in agony, his feet kicked out and knocked over the chair, and a mist came over his eyes.

¹ Zeus, son of Cronos.