

The Challenge

Pressed by the suitors to choose a husband from among them, Penelope says she will marry the man who can string Odysseus' bow and shoot an arrow through twelve axhandle sockets. The suitors try and fail. Still in disguise, Odysseus asks for a turn and gets it.

And Odysseus took his time,
1360 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!"

1365 "Dealer in old bows!"

"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!"

1370 But the man skilled in all ways of contending,
satisfied by the great bow's look and heft,
like a musician, like a harper, when
with quiet hand upon his instrument
he draws between his thumb and forefinger
1375 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.

Reading Check

How does Penelope
decide she will choose a
suitor?



▲ Critical Viewing

Compare Odysseus' grace, described in line 1375, with the grace of the hunter pictured here [Compare and Contrast]

16. nocked set an arrow against the bow-string.

1380 In the hushed hall it smote the suitors
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 had flung that omen down.
He picked one ready arrow from his table
1385 where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still
in the quiver for the young men's turn to come.
He nocked¹⁶ 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.

1390 Now flashed
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.

1395 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—
1400 supper by daylight. Other amusements later,
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
1405 stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.

Review and Assess

Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** If you were Telemachus or Penelope, how would you react to the stranger's arrival?
2. (a) **Recall:** Who does Telemachus think Odysseus is when they first reunite? (b) **Compare and Contrast:** Compare Odysseus' emotions with those of Telemachus at their reunion.
3. (a) **Recall:** Who is Argus? (b) **Recall:** How does Argus react to Odysseus' return? (c) **Analyze:** Is it a coincidence that Argus dies just when Odysseus returns? Explain.
4. (a) **Recall:** Describe Antinous' treatment of Odysseus. (b) **Analyze Causes and Effects:** Why do you think Antinous treats Odysseus so badly?
5. (a) **Analyze:** How does Penelope feel about the suitors in her house? (b) **Compare and Contrast:** How might Odysseus' feelings about the suitors differ from Penelope's?
6. (a) **Recall:** What does Odysseus tell Penelope about himself? (b) **Infer:** Why do you think Odysseus chooses not to reveal his identity to his wife?
7. **Take a Position:** Is it wrong for Odysseus to deceive his wife? Explain.