her housekeeper, put in:

“He and no other?

If all we pray for came to pass, not one
would live till dawn!”

Her gentle mistress said:

“Oh, Nan, they are a bad lot; they intend
ruin for all of us, but Antinous
appears a blacker-hearted hound than any.

Here is a poor man come, a wanderer,
driven by want to beg his bread, and everyone
in hall gave bits, to cram his bag—only
Antinous threw a stool, and banged his shoulder!”

So she described it, sitting in her chamber
among her maids—while her true lord was eating.

Then she called in the forester and said:

“Go to that man on my behalf, Eumaeus,
and send him here, so I can greet and question him.
Abroad in the great world, he may have heard
rumors about Odysseus—may have known him!”

Penelope

In the evening, Penelope interrogates the old beggar.

“Friend, let me ask you first of all:
who are you, where do you come from, of what nation
and parents were you born?”

And he replied:

“My lady, never a man in the wide world
should have a fault to find with you. Your name
has gone out under heaven like the sweet
honor of some god-fearing king, who rules
in equity over the strong: his black lands bear
both wheat and barley, fruit trees laden bright,
new lambs at lambing time—and the deep sea
gives great hauls of fish by his good strategy,
so that his folk fare well.
O my dear lady,

this being so, let it suffice to ask me
of other matters—not my blood, my homeland.

Do not enforce me to recall my pain.
My heart is sore; but I must not be found
sitting in tears here, in another’s house:
it is not well forever to be grieving.
One of the maids might say—or you might think—
I had got maudlin over cups of wine.”

And Penelope replied:

“Stranger, my looks,
my face, my carriage, were soon lost or faded
when the Achaeans crossed the sea to Troy,
Odysseus my lord among the rest.

If he returned, if he were here to care for me,
I might be happily renowned!
But grief instead heaven sent me—years of pain.
Sons of the noblest families on the islands,
Dulichium, Same, wooded Zacynthus,
with native Ithacans, are here to court me,
against my wish; and they consume this house.
Can I give proper heed to guest or suppliant
or herald on the realm’s affairs?
How could I?
wasted with longing for Odysseus, while here
they press for marriage.

Ruses served my turn
to draw the time out—first a close-grained web
I had the happy thought to set up weaving
on my big loom in hall. I said, that day:
’Young men—my suitors, now my lord is dead,
let me finish my weaving before I marry,
or else my thread will have been spun in vain.
It is a shroud I weave for Lord Laertes
when cold Death comes to lay him on his bier.
The country wives would hold me in dishonor
if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.’
I reached their hearts that way, and they agreed.
So every day I wove on the great loom,
but every night by torchlight I unwove it;
and so for three years I deceived the Achaeans.

12. carriage (kar’ ij) n. posture.

13. Zacynthus (za sin’ thus)


Historical and Cultural Context
How do the ancient Greek ideas in Penelope’s speech about honoring the dead compare to modern ideas?

Comprehension
How was Penelope able to delay marriage for three years?
The Trial of the Bow from Homer’s *The Odyssey*, N.C. Wyeth, Brandywine River Museum.
But when the seasons brought a fourth year on, as long months waned, and the long days were spent, through impudent folly in the slinking maids they caught me—clamored up to me at night; I had no choice then but to finish it.

And now, as matters stand at last, I have no strength left to evade a marriage, cannot find any further way; my parents urge it upon me, and my son will not stand by while they eat up his property. He comprehends it, being a man full-grown, able to oversee the kind of house Zeus would endow with honor.

But you too confide in me, tell me your ancestry. You were not born of mythic oak or stone.”

Penelope again asks the beggar to tell about himself. He makes up a tale in which Odysseus is mentioned and declares that Penelope’s husband will soon be home.

“You see, then, he is alive and well, and headed homeward now, no more to be abroad far from his island, his dear wife and son. Here is my sworn word for it. Witness this, god of the zenith, noblest of the gods, and Lord Odysseus’ hearthfire, now before me: I swear these things shall turn out as I say. Between this present dark and one day’s ebb, after the wane, before the crescent moon, Odysseus will come.”

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 ax handle sockets. The suitors try and fail. Still in disguise, Odysseus asks for a turn and gets it.

And Odysseus took his time, 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!”

“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!”

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 
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.

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 
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.

16. **nocked** (näkt) set an arrow 
into the bowstring.
Critical Thinking

1. **Key Ideas and Details:**  
   (a) Who does Telemachus think Odysseus is when they first reunite?  
   **(b) Compare and Contrast:** Compare Odysseus’ emotions with those of Telemachus at their reunion.

2. **Key Ideas and Details:**  
   (a) Describe Antinous’ treatment of Odysseus.  
   **(b) Analyze Cause and Effect:** Why do you think Antinous treats Odysseus as he does?

3. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:**  
   (a) What does Odysseus tell Penelope about himself?  
   **(b) Infer:** Why do you think Odysseus chooses not to reveal his identity to his wife?  
   **(c) Take a Position:** Is it wrong for Odysseus to deceive Penelope? Explain your response.

4. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:**  
   (a) Which of Odysseus’ responsibilities are revealed in this section?  
   **(b) Do you think he manages them heroically? Explain your response.**  
   [Connect to the Big Question: Do heroes have responsibilities?]

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.

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—  
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  
stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.
Do heroes have responsibilities?
Odysseus’ Revenge

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest17 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. Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before, if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo.”

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, 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 revelry18 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?
Odysseus’ arrow hit him under the chin and punched up to the feathers through his throat.

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

17. wiliest (wil` o a$t) adj. craftiest; slyest.
18. revelry (rev` al rë) n. noisy festivity.

Historical and Cultural Context
Does the manner in which Odysseus kills Antinous agree with your idea of a “fair fight”? Explain.

Comprehension
Whom does Odysseus kill first?
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:

“You yellow dogs, you thought I’d never make it home from the land of Troy. You took my house to plunder. . . 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. 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:

“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. Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on to do these things. He cared less for a marriage than for the power Cronion has denied him as king of Ithaca. For that he tried to trap your son and would have killed him. 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.”

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. 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."

They felt their knees fail, and their hearts—but heard Eurymachus for the last time rallying them. "Friends," he said, "the man is implacable.

Now that he's got his hands on bow and quiver he'll shoot from the big doorstone there until he kills us to the last man.

Fight, I say, let's remember the joy of it. Swords out! Hold up your tables to deflect his arrows.

After me, everyone: rush him where he stands. If we can budge him from the door, if we can pass into the town, we'll call out men to chase him. This fellow with his bow will shoot no more."

He drew his own sword as he spoke, a broadsword of fine bronze, honed like a razor on either edge. Then crying hoarse and loud he hurled himself at Odysseus. But the kingly man let fly an arrow at that instant, and the quivering feathered butt sprang to the nipple of his breast as the barb stuck in his liver. The bright broadsword clanged down. He lurched and fell aside, pitching across his table. His cup, his bread and meat, were spilt and scattered far and wide, and his head slammed on the ground. Revulsion, anguish in his heart, with both feet kicking out, he downed his chair, while the shrouding wave of mist closed on his eyes.

Amphinomus now came running at Odysseus, broadsword naked in his hand. He thought to make the great soldier give way at the door. But with a spear throw from behind Telemachus hit him between the shoulders, and the lancehead drove clear through his chest. He left his feet and fell forward, thudding, forehead against the ground. Telemachus swerved around him, leaving the long dark spear planted in Amphinomus. If he paused to yank it out...
someone might jump him from behind or cut him down with a sword at the moment he bent over. So he ran—ran from the tables to his father’s side and halted, panting, saying:

“Father let me bring you a shield and spear, a pair of spears, a helmet. I can arm on the run myself; I’ll give outfits to Eumaeus and this cowherd. Better to have equipment.”

Said Odysseus:

“Run then, while I hold them off with arrows as long as the arrows last. When all are gone if I’m alone they can dislodge me.”

Quick upon his father’s word Telemachus ran to the room where spears and armor lay. He caught up four light shields, four pairs of spears, four helms of war high-plumed with flowing manes, and ran back, loaded down, to his father’s side.

1510
1515
1520
1525
1530

He was the first to pull a helmet on and slide his bare arm in a buckler strap. The servants armed themselves, and all three took their stand beside the master of battle.

While he had arrows he aimed and shot, and every shot brought down one of his huddling enemies. But when all barbs had flown from the bowman’s fist, he leaned his bow in the bright entryway beside the door, and armed: a four-ply shield hard on his shoulder, and a crested helm, horsetailed, nodding stormy upon his head, then took his tough and bronze-shod spears. . . .

Aided by Athena, Odysseus, Telemachus, Eumaeus, and other faithful herdsmen kill all the suitors.

And Odysseus looked around him, narrow-eyed, for any others who had lain hidden while death’s black fury passed.
In blood and dust
he saw that crowd all fallen, many and many slain.

Think of a catch that fishermen haul in to a half-moon bay
in a fine-meshed net from the whitecaps of the sea:
how all are poured out on the sand, in throes for the salt sea,
twitching their cold lives away in Helios’ fiery air:
so lay the suitors heaped on one another.

Penelope’s Test

*Penelope tests Odysseus to prove he really is her husband.*

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
taller, and massive, too, with crisping 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
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,
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.”

Penelope
spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

“Strange man,
if man you are . . . This is no pride on my part

Epic Simile
Which aspects of the slain suitors’ appearance
does the epic simile
in lines 1535–1539 emphasize?

Epic Simile
Which details in the epic simile in lines 1547–1551
compare Odysseus’ hair
to a work of art?

20. Hephaestus (hē fē’ēs tōs)
god of fire and
metalworking.

Comprehension
Who helps Odysseus
defeat the suitors?
nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely.
I know so well how you—how he—appeared
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.”

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
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!

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.
Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,
hewed and shaped that 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.

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

Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees
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!
No one ever matched your caution! Think what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us 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, impostors who might come—and all those many whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . . But here and now, what sign could be so clear as this of our own bed? 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.”
Language Study

Vocabulary The italicized word in each sentence appears in the excerpt from the Odyssey, Part 2. Indicate whether each statement is usually true or usually false. Explain your answers. Then, revise false sentences to make them true.
1. An event that is common and predictable evokes incredulity.
2. If road signs are bemusing drivers, the signs are working perfectly.
3. A good judge is one with a strong sense of equity.
4. A marching band should play maudlin songs if it wants to excite fans.
5. Successful salespeople always show contempt for customers.

Word Study

PART A Explain how the Latin prefix dis- contributes to the meanings of dispute, dishevel, and disembark. Consult a dictionary if necessary.

PART B Use the context of the sentences and what you know about the Latin prefix dis- to explain your answer to each question.
1. If a reporter disclose the source of information, does she tell where she got the story?
2. If you are disheartened by some news, do you feel happy?