

18

The Beggar in the Palace

Book Eighteen

A brawl at the door, a queen on the stair. When a bully of a beggar tries to throw Odysseus off his own threshold, the suitors gleefully set them fighting – and one measured blow lays the braggart flat. Then Penelope, her beauty heightened by a goddess, comes down among her suitors and plays them like a harp, wringing gifts from the men who are eating her house bare. Insult piles on insult, a second stool flies, and only Telemachus' new-found voice sends the revellers home.

NAME

SET

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BOOK EIGHTEEN

The Beggar in the Palace

The great hall. A beggars' brawl, a wife's cunning appearance, and a mounting tide of insolence, as the suitors sport with the disguised Odysseus and heap gifts on Penelope.

WHAT HAPPENS

- The beggar Irus tries to eject Odysseus; the suitors make sport of a boxing match, and Odysseus floors him with one careful blow.
- He warns the decent Amphinomus to flee – but Athene has already doomed him.
- Athene beautifies Penelope, who appears before the suitors and cunningly extracts gifts from them.
- The maid Melantho jeers at the beggar and is rebuked; Eurymachus, sneered at in turn, hurls a stool.
- Telemachus, with new authority, sends the drunken suitors home for the night.

WHO WE MEET

Odysseus

the beggar who wins a fight but keeps his strength hidden

Irus

the greedy vagrant, humbled

Penelope

playing a double game with her suitors

Eurymachus & Melantho

the insolence of the household's enemies

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Book 18 heightens the suitors' guilt and the tension before the reckoning. Note the comic-but-pointed Irus fight and Odysseus' restraint, the doomed Amphinomus and the theme of fate, Penelope's ambiguous cunning, and the sorting of loyal and faithless women. **Prescribed:** examined in context – know it closely.

The Beggar In The Palace

— THE BEGGAR IRUS

There now appeared a common vagrant who used to beg in the town of Ithaca and was notorious for his insatiable greed and his ability to eat and drink all the time. He was a big fellow, yet in spite of appearances he had no stamina or muscle. **Arnaeus was the name**

⁵ **his lady mother had given him** at his birth, but all the young men nicknamed him Irus, as he ran errands for anyone who asked. This was the man who now came along, intent on chasing Odysseus from his own house. He began to abuse him, and his words flew:

‘Get away from the porch, old man, or you’ll find yourself dragged off
¹⁰ by the foot. Can’t you see they’re all tipping me the wink to haul you out – though I’m reluctant to? Get up now, or you and I will soon come to blows.’

Odysseus of the nimble wits gave him a black look. ‘What’s got into you?’ he replied, ‘I’m not doing or saying anything to hurt you; I don’t
¹⁵ grudge what anyone may give you, however much it is. This threshold will hold us both and you shouldn’t mind if people give me things since, I take it, you are a tramp like myself and we are both dependent on the gods for a living. Think twice before you challenge me; or once you have roused me, old as I am I’ll dye your lips and
²⁰ breast with your own blood. That would also give me a quieter day tomorrow, for I don’t think that you’d ever come back to this palace of Laertes’ son Odysseus.’

At this the beggar Irus lost his temper. ‘Well, I’ll be – !’ he cried. ‘How glibly the swine talks, like an old hag at the oven! But I’ve a nasty
²⁵ trick in store for him, a right and left that’ll smash all the teeth from his jaws on to the ground, **like a sow caught eating the crops**. Tuck up your clothes, and let all these gentlemen here see how we fight. How can you dare to match yourself against a younger man?’

— A FIGHT ARRANGED

In this way they **lashed each other into a fury**, there on the polished
³⁰ threshold in front of the high doors. The great Antinous, hearing them, laughed gleefully and called out to the rest of the Suitors: ‘My friends, this beats everything. What a treat some god has laid on for us here in the palace. The stranger and Irus are challenging each other to a fight. Let’s make a match of it, quick!’

³⁵ They all jumped up laughing, and as they crowded round the ragged beggars, Antinous, Euphithes’ son, continued: ‘Gentlemen, listen to me, I have a suggestion. We have some goats’ paunches roasting there at the fire, which we stuffed with fat and blood and planned to

LINES 4–5

Arnaeus was the name his lady mother had given him The newcomer is **Irus** – really named Arnaeus, but nicknamed ‘Irus’ (after Iris, the gods’ messenger) because he ran errands for anyone who’d feed him. A greedy, cowardly beggar, he tries to drive Odysseus from his own door.

LINE 26

like a sow caught eating the crops A coarse **simile**: Irus threatens to drag the old man out by the ear ‘like a sow caught eating the crops’.

LINE 29

lashed each other into a fury The suitors, delighted, set the two beggars to box for their amusement, with a goat’s-stomach pudding for a prize.

have for supper. Whoever wins and proves himself the better man
 40 shall come up and take his pick of them. And not only that, he shall
 join us regularly at dinner, and we'll allow no other tramp to beg in
 this company.'

They all approved Antinous' idea, and the wily Odysseus now made a
 crafty suggestion. 'Friends,' he said, 'there's no way in which an old
 45 fellow broken down by hardships can take on a younger man. Yet this
 mischievous belly of mine eggs me on to take my thrashing. So now I
 ask you all to take an oath. No one must side with Irus: I don't want to
 lose to him through an unfair blow from one of you.'

At this they all took the oath he asked of them, and when they had
 50 sworn the full oath, the great Telemachus put in his word: 'Stranger, if
 you have the heart and pluck to match yourself against this man, you
 need not be afraid of any of these gentlemen. Whoever strikes you
 will have to face the rest. I am the host here; and the Lords Antinous
 and Eurymachus, good judges both, support me.'

— THE MATCH

55 They all approved his words, so Odysseus tucked up his rags round
 his loins and bared his fine massive thighs. His broad shoulders, and
 his chest and brawny arms were now revealed – Athene herself stood
 by and filled out the limbs of this shepherd of the people. As a result,
 all the Suitors were lost in amazement, and significant glances and
 60 comments were exchanged:

'Under those rags of his, **what a thigh the old fellow has!** Irus is
 going to be un-Irused. He was looking for trouble and he'll find it.'

Irus was badly shaken by these comments. But in spite of that the
 servants hitched up his clothes and dragged him forcibly to the front,
 65 though he was in such a state of panic that the flesh quivered on all
 his limbs. And now Antinous burst out with a tirade of abuse.

'You great ox! It would be better for you if you were dead or hadn't
 been born, if you're going to stand quaking there in mortal terror of
 an old man broken down by the hardships he's endured. I'll tell you
 70 this, and it will happen. If this fellow beats you and shows himself the
 better man, I'll throw you into a black ship and send you over to the
 mainland to King Echetus the Destroyer, who'll have your nose and
 ears off with his cruel knife and rip away your privy parts to give
 them as raw meat to the dogs.'

— IRUS BEATEN

75 At these words Irus' limbs trembled all the more. However, they
 dragged him into the ring, and the pair raised their fists. The patient,
 good Odysseus considered carefully whether he should fell him with

LINE 61

what a thigh the old fellow has As Odysseus strips for the fight, **Athene** quietly fills out his limbs, and his powerful frame shows through the rags – the suitors gasp. He then floors Irus with a single measured blow, careful not to hit hard enough to kill and so give himself away.

a mortal blow or knock him to the ground with a gentler punch. In the end he decided on the lighter blow, so that the Achaeans would not suspect him. Then they both drew themselves up. Irus aimed a blow at Odysseus' right shoulder, but Odysseus struck Irus' neck below the ear and smashed in the bones so that the red blood gushed up through his mouth and he fell down in the dust with a scream, grimacing and drumming on the earth with his feet. At this the noble Suitors threw up their hands and died of laughing. Odysseus seized Irus by the foot and dragged him out through the entrance across the courtyard to the portico gate. There he propped him against the courtyard wall, put his stick in his hand and said in words that flew: 'Sit there now and scare the pigs and dogs away. You're a worthless fellow, so don't try to lord it over strangers and beggars, or something worse will happen to you.' Then he slung the strap of his worn and shabby knapsack over his no shoulder and, returning to the threshold, sat down again.

The haughty Suitors flocked back into the hall laughing gleefully and congratulated Odysseus. 'Stranger,' they said, 'may Zeus and the other gods grant you your dearest wish and your heart's desire for having stopped that glutton from roaming about the land. Now we'll soon pack him off to the mainland, to King Echetus the Destroyer.'

The noble Odysseus was glad of their **unconsciously prophetic word**. Antinous now presented him with a large paunch stuffed with fat and blood, and Amphinomus picked out two loaves from a bowl, put them down beside him and drank to him from a golden cup. 'Your health, my ancient friend!' he said. 'You are having a hard time now; but here's to your future happiness!'

— WARNING AMPHINOMUS

'**Amphinomus, the resourceful Odysseus answered him**, 'you seem to be sensible, like your father, Nisus of Dulichium – I have heard of his great reputation as a good man and a rich one. You are his son, they say, and seem to be intelligent, so I am going to say something important to you. Listen and take it to heart.

'Of all the creatures that breathe and creep about on Mother Earth **there is none so helpless as man**. As long as the gods grant him prosperity and health he imagines he will never suffer misfortune in the future. Yet when the blessed gods bring him troubles he has no choice but to endure them with a patient heart. The reason is that the view we mortals take of this earthly life depends on what Zeus, the Father of gods and men, sends us day by day.

'There was a time when I was marked out as successful in my dealings with men, but I abandoned myself to a life of looting and violence, and committed many wicked crimes, under the delusion

LINES 99–100

unconsciously prophetic word Dramatic

irony: a suitor cheerfully wishes that Zeus may grant the beggar his dearest wish – not knowing the beggar is Odysseus, and that his dearest wish is their own deaths.

LINE 105

Amphinomus, the resourceful Odysseus answered him

Odysseus warns the decent **Amphinomus** to slip away home before the master returns and blood is shed. It is useless: Homer tells us **Athene** has already marked Amphinomus for death at Telemachus' hands.

LINE 111

there is none so helpless as man A famous, brooding speech: 'of all creatures that breathe... there is none so helpless as man.' Human fortune, Odysseus says, rises and falls entirely at the gods' whim.

120 that my father and brothers would stand by me. Let that be a lesson to every man never to live a lawless life, but quietly to enjoy whatever the gods may give him. Yet what I see here are suitors plotting these outrages, wasting a man's property and treating his wife with disrespect – a man who will not be away much longer from
 125 his friends and his own country. In fact he is very near; and I hope that some power may guide you away to your own home and that you will not have to face him on the day he returns to his native land. Once he is under his own roof I have an idea that blood will be spilt before he and the Suitors are parted.'

130 As he finished, Odysseus made his libation and drank the mellow wine; then returned the cup into the young nobleman's hands. But Amphinomus went back through the hall with a heavy heart, shaking his head; for he was filled with a foreboding of disaster. Not that it saved him from his fate, for Athene had already marked him out to fall
 135 to a spear from Telemachus' hand. Meanwhile, he went back and sat down again on the chair he had just left.

— PENELOPE APPEARS

It was now that Athene, goddess of the flashing eyes, put it into the head of Icarius' wise daughter Penelope **to appear before the Suitors**, with the idea of opening their hearts and enhancing her value in the
 140 eyes of her husband and her son. So with a forced laugh she said: 'Eurynome, my heart moves me, as it never has before, to show myself to my Suitors – much as I detest them. I should also like to have a word with my son for his own good and warn him not to spend too much time with these unruly Suitors, whose words are friendly
 145 but whose intentions are evil.'

'My child,' said the housekeeper Eurynome, 'everything you say is quite right. Go and speak frankly to your son; tell him what is in your mind. But first wash yourself and anoint your cheeks. You mustn't go like this, with your face stained with tears. It's a bad thing to be
 150 endlessly weeping, and your son is quite grown-up now – it was always your special prayer to the gods to see him with a beard.'

'Eurynome,' said the sagacious Penelope, 'I know your concern for me, but don't encourage me in this way to wash myself and anoint my cheeks. The gods of Olympus robbed me of my looks on the day
 155 my husband took ship and sailed away. However, tell Autonoe and Hippodameia to come here to attend me in the hall. I am not going to face that masculine company alone: modesty forbids.'

So the old woman went off through the house to take this message to the maids and send them to their mistress. The bright-eyed goddess
 160 Athene now had another idea. She shed sweet drowsiness on Penelope so that her whole body relaxed and she leant back and fell

LINE 138

to appear before the Suitors Athene prompts Penelope to show herself to the suitors, and enhances her beauty with sleep and divine cosmetics while she rests. She means to inflame them, wring gifts from them, and raise her worth in the eyes of husband and son.

asleep on the couch where she was sitting. The great goddess then endowed her with immortal gifts to make the Achaeans marvel at her beauty. First she cleansed her fair cheeks with a divine ointment
165 used by Aphrodite when she puts on her lovely crown to join the Graces in their charming dance. Then she made her taller and fuller in appearance, and her skin whiter than newly sawn ivory. When her work was done the goddess withdrew, and the white-armed maids came up from another part of the house, chattering. Penelope woke
170 up, rubbed her cheeks with her hands and exclaimed: 'What a wonderful sleep, in spite of all my troubles! I wish holy Artemis would grant me a death as gentle as that this very moment, and save me from wasting my life in anguish and longing for my dear husband, who had all the virtues, and was the finest man in all Achaea.'

175 Then she left her bright room and went downstairs, not by herself, but with the two waiting-women. When she came near to her Suitors the great lady drew a fold of her shining veil across her cheeks and took her stand by a pillar of the massive roof, with a faithful maid on either side.

180 The Suitors went weak at the knees. Their hearts melted with desire, and every man among them voiced a prayer that he might sleep with her. But Penelope turned to her dear son. 'Telemachus,' she said, 'your sense and judgement aren't what they were. As a boy you used to have much greater shrewdness, but now that you are grown-up and
185 have entered on manhood, and anyone from the outside world, seeing how tall and hand-some you are, would take you for a rich man's son, you no longer show the same sense and judgement. Look what has just happened in this hall, how you allowed this visitor of ours to be so shamefully treated. What if our guest sitting quietly in
190 our home were to suffer serious harm from such rough handling? It is on you that people would lay the blame and the disgrace.'

'Mother,' the sensible Telemachus replied, 'I don't resent your indignation at what happened. But I do note and understand everything they do, the good and the bad – I am not the child I was.

195 But it is impossible for me always to take the sensible line. I am being harassed by these mischief-makers who surround me here: and there's no one to support me. However, this fight between the stranger and Irus did not go as the Suitors wished, and the stranger won. Ah, Father Zeus, Athene and Apollo, how I should love, this very
200 day in our palace, to see these Suitors beaten men, scattered about in the courtyard and in our halls with their heads lolling on their shoulders and the strength knocked out of all their limbs, just like Irus sitting out there at the courtyard gate, his head lolling like a drunkard's and unable to stand up on his feet and find his way home
205 to his own place – a broken man!'

These were the words that passed between them. Then Eurymachus said to Penelope: ‘Daughter of Icarius, wise Penelope, if all the Achaeans in Ionian Argos could set eyes on you, even more Suitors would be feasting in your halls tomorrow, for in loveliness of face and
 210 form, and in wisdom, you are supreme among women.’

‘Ah, Eurymachus,’ the prudent Penelope replied, ‘the gods destroyed my loveliness of face and form and my pre-eminence when the Argives embarked for Ilium and my husband Odysseus went with them. If he could return and devote himself to me, my good name
 215 would indeed be embellished and enhanced. But I am left to my misery: a power above has heaped so many troubles on my head. When he left this land of his, he gently took me by the wrist of my right hand and said: “Wife, I do not think all the Achaean soldiers will return from Troy unhurt. For they say the Trojans are good fighters
 220 too, both with javelin and bow, and as charioteers, who can tip the scales in an evenly matched battle more quickly than anything. So I cannot say whether the gods will let me come back or whether I shall fall there on Trojan soil. But I leave everything here in your charge. Look after my father and mother in the house as you do now, or with
 225 even greater care when I am gone. And when you see a beard on our boy’s chin, marry whom you want to and leave your home.” That is what he said; and now it is all coming true. I see approaching me the night when I must accept a detestable union. It will be the end of me; Zeus has destroyed my happiness.

‘Meanwhile here is something that is causing me the utmost distress. Yours is by no means the right and time-honoured way for rivals to conduct their suit for a lady of good family and a rich man’s daughter! Such suitors bring in their own cattle and sheep to make a banquet for the lady’s friends, and also give her valuable presents.
 235 They do not enjoy free meals at her expense.’

The noble, patient Odysseus was delighted at her words, because **she was extorting gifts from her suitors** and bewitching them by her persuasive words, while all the time her heart was set on something quite different.

— GIFTS FROM THE SUITORS

240 It was Antinous, Euphithes’ son, who answered her. ‘Daughter of Icarius, wise Penelope,’ he said, ‘by all means accept every gift that any of us may wish to bring you. It would be ungracious not to give, but we will not return to our own estates nor go anywhere else till you marry the best man among us.’

245 The others agreed and each sent off his squire to fetch a gift. For Antinous they brought a long embroidered robe of the most beautiful material on which were fixed a dozen golden brooches, each fitted

LINE 237

she was extorting gifts from her suitors The disguised Odysseus is quietly delighted: **Penelope** is playing a double game, coaxing the suitors into showering her with gifts while her heart is set on something else entirely.

with a pin with a curved sheath; and for Eurymachus a golden chain of exquisite workmanship strung with amber beads that gleamed **like the sun**. For Eurydamas his two squires brought a pair of ear-rings, with clusters of three drops glowing with beauty; and from the house of Prince Peisander, Polyctor's son, there came a squire with a necklace – a lovely piece of jewellery. Thus each of the young lords contributed his own valuable gift, and presently the great lady Penelope withdrew to her upper apartment escorted by her waiting-women, carrying the magnificent presents.

From then till dusk the Suitors gave themselves up to the pleasures of dancing and the delights of song. Darkness found them still revelling. They set up three braziers in the hall to give them light, heaped them with dry fire wood thoroughly seasoned and newly split, and thrust some burning brands into each pile. The maids of the long-suffering Odysseus took it in turns to feed the flames. But it was Odysseus himself, the favourite of Zeus, the master-strategist, who now spoke to them.

'Maids of Odysseus, your long-absent master, go to the room where your mistress the Queen is, sit with her and cheer her spirits, spinning wool with her or carding it with your fingers. Meanwhile, I will provide light for the company, and even if they wish to carry on till Dawn arrives on her throne they won't exhaust me. I don't tire easily.'

— MELANTHO

The girls laughed and exchanged glances. But **Melantho of the pretty cheeks** jeered at him outrageously. She was a daughter of Dolius, whom Penelope had reared and looked after as tenderly as her own child, giving her all the toys she could desire. But in spite of this the girl had no sympathy for Penelope's woes; she was in love with Eurymachus and had become his mistress. It was she who now spoke insultingly to Odysseus.

'You still here? You must be soft in the head not to go for your night's lodging to the smithy or some other doss-house, instead of coming here and airing your views so boldly and disrespectfully before all these gentlemen. The wine has fuddled your wits, or perhaps you talk such rubbish only because you are always like this. Has the beating you gave the beggar Irus gone to your head? Look out, or before long a better man than Irus will stand up to punch your head in with his great fists and send you packing covered in blood.'

'You bitch!' retorted the ready-witted Odysseus, giving her a black look. 'I shall go straight over and tell Telemachus what you said, so he can hack you to pieces on the spot.'

LINES 249–250

like the sun The suitors send for lavish gifts – an embroidered robe 'bright as the sun', a gold brooch, ear-rings, a necklace – all paid for, in effect, out of Odysseus' own plundered wealth.

LINES 271–272

Melantho of the pretty cheeks Melantho is a disloyal maid (sister of the goatherd Melanthius), raised kindly by Penelope but now sleeping with Eurymachus and jeering at the beggar.

His words sent the women scuttling through the house, their knees
 290 trembling beneath them in alarm, for they were convinced he meant
 it. But Odysseus took his stand by the burning braziers, tending the
 lights and keeping an eye on them all, though his thoughts were busy
 elsewhere with schemes that were not doomed to come to nothing.

Athene meanwhile had no intention of allowing the insolent Suitors
 295 to abandon their caustic insults; she wished the anguish to bite
 deeper yet into the heart of Odysseus, Laertes' son. Eurymachus was
 the first to taunt the stranger and raise a laugh among his friends.
 'Listen, fellow Suitors of our noble Queen!' he cried. 'Something in
 me prompts me to speak. This fellow's coming to Odysseus' palace is
 300 a godsend. At any rate it seems to me that the torchlight comes from
 the man's head; there's not the slightest vestige of hair on it.'

He then turned to Odysseus, the sacker of cities. 'Stranger,' he said, 'I
 wonder how you'd like to work for me if I hired you, at a proper wage
 of course, choosing stones for building walls and planting trees for
 305 timber on an outlying farm of mine? I would see that you had regular
 food and provide you with clothing and sandals. But you've got into
 bad ways, and work on a farm is the last thing you're looking for.
 You'd much rather fill your gluttonous belly by grovelling and begging
 round the town.'

— EURYMACHUS MOCKS HIM

310 'I **only wish, Eurymachus**,' replied the ready-witted Odysseus, 'that
 you and I could compete as labourers in the spring when the days are
 drawing out, in a hayfield, I with a curved reaping-hook and you with
 another, so that we could test each other at work, with nothing to eat
 till well after dusk and plenty of grass to cut. Or we might have a pair
 315 of oxen to drive, tawny great thoroughbreds, bursting with fodder,
 matched in age and strength, and champing with power, in a four-
 acre field with loam that yielded nicely to the ploughshare. You'd see
 then whether I could cut a furrow straight! Or I wish that Zeus would
 this very day stir up a war from somewhere, and that I had a shield
 320 and a couple of spears and a bronze helmet fitting round my temples.
 It would be out in the front line that you'd find me then, and you'd
 have no more quips to make at this paunch of mine. But you're just a
 braggart with the heart of a bully, who take yourself for a big man and
 a hero only because the people you meet are so few, and so
 325 undistinguished. Ah, if Odysseus could only return to his native land
 and come here, you'd soon find that doorway there, wide though it is,
 too narrow for you in your hurry to run away.'

— THE STOOL THROWN

Eurymachus' wrath boiled over. With a black look he rounded on
 Odysseus. 'You miserable creature,' he cried, 'Til soon make you pay

LINE 310

I only wish, Eurymachus Stung by
 Eurymachus' sneers, Odysseus challenges
 him to a contest of hard labour, or of battle.

LINE 328

Eurymachus' wrath boiled over Eurymachus
 loses his temper and hurls a stool at
 Odysseus. It misses, striking the wine-
 steward's hand – the second time a suitor
 has thrown furniture at the beggar, and the
 hall erupts.

330 for talking with such barefaced impudence in front of this company.
The wine must have got at your wits, or perhaps you talk such
rubbish only because you are always like this. Has the beating you
gave that beggar Irus gone to your head?' And as he spoke he seized a
stool. But Odysseus, fearing his attack, ducked down at the knees of
335 Amphinomus of Dulichium, and Eurymachus' missile struck the
wine-steward on the right hand so that his jug dropped with a clang
on the floor and he himself with a cry fell backwards in the dust.

The shadowy hall was at once filled with uproar. The Suitors looked at
each other, saying, 'If only the vagabond had died somewhere else
340 before he came here! Then he would never have caused such a
commotion. Here we are, at blows about beggars, and our pleasure in
this fine feast is going to be spoiled by this outburst of hooliganism.'

— TELEMACHUS SPEAKS

But now **the great Telemachus spoke out**: 'What's got into you? You
are out of your senses. It is obvious you can't hold your food and
345 wine. Some god must be stirring you up. Come now, you have dined
well; I suggest you go home to bed when you are ready, though of
course I am hustling no one out.'

At this they could only bite their lips and wonder that Telemachus
should have the nerve to address them so. At last Amphinomus, the
350 famous son of Aretias' son Lord Nisus, spoke up. 'My friends,' he said,
'when the right thing has been said, carping criticism and
resentment are out of place. Let nobody maltreat this stranger or
any of the servants of the noble Odysseus' household. Come, let a
wine-steward fill each man's cup so that we can make offerings and
355 go home to bed, leaving our visitor here in the palace to Telemachus'
care. For after all it is to his house that he has come.'

Everyone welcomed his suggestions. Mulius, a squire from
Dulichium in Amphinomus' retinue, mixed them a bowl of wine and
then went the rounds and served them all. They poured out their
360 offerings to the blessed gods before drinking up the mellow wine,
and when they had made their libations and drunk all they wanted
they dispersed for the night, each to his own home.

LINE 343

the great Telemachus spoke out Telemachus
steps in with real authority, ordering the
drunken suitors home for the night. They
'bite their lips', taken aback by the boy's new
command.

