

22

The Battle in the Hall

Book Twenty-Two

The disguise is gone and the doors are barred. Odysseus' first arrow takes Antinous in the throat, and there is no way out for any of them. Four men hold the hall against a hundred; a goddess raises her storm-shield, and the suitors fall like small birds under the vultures, heaped at last like fish spilled from a net. Then comes the harder justice – the traitor servants, the hanging of the maids, and fire and sulphur to cleanse a house drowned in blood.

NAME

SET

Translation by E. V. Rieu, revised by D. C. H. Rieu.

BOOK TWENTY-TWO

The Battle in the Hall

The great hall becomes a killing-floor. Odysseus and three companions cut down the suitors to the last man, then purge the house of its traitors.

WHAT HAPPENS

- Odysseus shoots Antinous, reveals himself, and rejects Eurymachus' offer of restitution.
- Telemachus arms the four defenders; the traitor Melanthius arms the suitors, but is caught and strung up.
- Athene, as Mentor and then a swallow, tests and then aids them, raising her aegis to rout the suitors.
- The suitors are slaughtered like netted fish; the bard Phemius and herald Medon are spared.
- The twelve disloyal maids are hanged, Melanthius mutilated, and the blood-stained hall purified with fire and sulphur.

WHO WE MEET

Odysseus

the avenger, terrible as a blood-stained lion

Telemachus · Eumaeus · Philoetius

the three who stand with him

Athene

who tests their courage before she strikes

Eurymachus & Melanthius

suitor and traitor, meeting their ends

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Book 22 is the climax the whole poem has moved towards: justice, vengeance and divine sanction. Note the reversal of the abused hospitality, Athene's testing before her aid, the great sequence of battle similes, and the troubling severity of the punishments. **Prescribed:** examined in context – know it closely.

The Battle In The Hall

— ODYSSEUS STRIKES

Throwing off his rags, the resourceful Odysseus leaped on to the great threshold with his bow and his full quiver, and poured out the swift arrows at his feet.

— THE DEATH OF ANTINOUS

‘The match that was to seal your fate is over,’ he called out to the
5 Suitors. ‘Now for another target which no man has yet hit – if I can hit it and Apollo grants my prayer.’ And with that he levelled a **deadly shaft straight at Antinous**.

Antinous had just reached for his fine cup to take a draught of wine, and the golden, two-handled beaker was balanced in his hands. No
10 thought of bloodshed entered his head. For who could guess, there in that festive company, that one man, however powerful he might be, would bring evil death and black doom on him against such odds? Odysseus took aim and shot him in the neck. The point passed clean through his tender throat. The cup dropped from his hand as he was
15 hit and he lurched over to one side. His life-blood gushed from his nostrils in a turbid jet. His foot lashed out and kicked the table from him; his food was scattered on the ground, and bread and meat lay there in the dirt.

When the Suitors saw the man collapse, there was uproar in the hall.
20 They sprang from their chairs and rushed in confusion about the room, searching the solid walls on every side. But not a shield or sturdy spear was there to lay hands on. They rounded in fury on Odysseus: ‘Stranger, men make a dangerous target; you have played your last match. Now you shall surely die. You have killed the greatest
25 nobleman in Ithaca: for that the vultures shall eat you.’ Each of them laboured under the delusion that he had killed the man by accident. It had not dawned upon the fools that the fate of all of them was sealed.

— THE MASK FALLS

The master-strategist Odysseus gave them a black look. ‘**You dogs!**’ he cried.

30 ‘You never thought to see me back from Troy. So you fleeced my household; you raped my maids; you courted my wife behind my back though I was alive – with no more fear of the gods in heaven than of the human vengeance that might come. One and all, your fate is sealed.’

LINES 6–7

deadly shaft straight at Antinous The reckoning opens. Odysseus’ first arrow kills **Antinous**, the ringleader, as he lifts a wine-cup to drink – struck through the throat before he even sees the danger.

LINE 28

You dogs Odysseus throws off his disguise and names their crimes: they wooed his wife, wasted his house and feared neither gods nor men. The suitors realise, far too late, who the beggar is.

— EURYMACHUS PLEADS

35 Fear drained the colour from their cheeks and each man cast round to find some sanctuary from sudden death. **Eurymachus alone found his tongue**: ‘If you really are Odysseus of Ithaca home again, then what you say of all the unforgivable outrages the Achaeans have committed, here in your house and on your lands, is justified. But the
40 man who was responsible for everything lies dead already, Antinous there, the prime mover in these misdeeds, inspired not so much by any wish or need to marry as by a very different aim, in which Zeus Son of Cronos has thwarted him. And that was to make himself King of the fair city and land of Ithaca, after ambushing your son and
45 murdering him. But he has got his deserts now and been killed. So spare us, who are your own people. And afterwards we will make amends to you by a public levy for all the food and drink that has been consumed in your house. We will each bring a contribution to the value of twenty oxen, and repay you in bronze and gold, till your
50 heart softens. Meanwhile, no one could blame you for your anger.’

The shrewd Odysseus gave him a black look and said: ‘Fury- machus, not if you made over all your patrimony to me, everything you possess, and anything else that may come your way, would I keep my hands from killing until you Suitors had paid for all your
55 transgressions. The choice now lies before you, either to face me and fight, or else to run and see if you can escape death and doom, though I do not think any of you will get away alive.’

When they heard this, their hearts quaked and their knees shook underneath them. But once again Eurymachus spoke up. ‘My friends,’
60 he said, ‘this man will not refrain from using his unconquerable hands. He has got the polished bow and the quiver and will shoot from the threshold floor till he has killed us all. Let’s stand and fight! Draw your swords; hold up the tables to keep off his murderous shots, and advance on him all together. That way we may drive him from the
65 threshold and the door, retreat through the town, and quickly raise the alarm. This man would soon find out that his shooting days were over.’

As he spoke, he drew his sharp two-edged sword of bronze, and leapt at Odysseus with a blood-curdling shout. But at the same moment
70 the good Odysseus let an arrow fly, which struck him on the breast by the nipple with such force that it pierced his liver. The sword dropped from his hand. He doubled up and fell sprawling over the table, hurling the food and wine-cup to the floor. In his agony he beat his forehead on the ground; his feet lashed out and rocked the chair,
75 and mist closed over his eyes.

Amphinomus was the next to attack the illustrious Odysseus,

LINES 36–37

Eurymachus alone found his tongue

Eurymachus tries to save the rest by piling all the blame on the dead Antinous and offering full restitution. Odysseus refuses – nothing but their lives will do. Eurymachus then rallies the suitors to fight, and is shot down.

making straight at him, sword in hand, to force him somehow from the doors. But before he could close, Telemachus hit him from behind, midway between the shoulders, with a spear that pierced his
 80 breast. He fell with a crash and struck the ground with his forehead. Telemachus leapt back, leaving the long spear planted in Amphinomus' body, because he was terrified that one of the enemy might dash in and strike him with a sword as he pulled at the long shaft or stooped above the corpse. So he ran off quickly to rejoin
 85 Odysseus and, standing at his side, spoke words that flew: 'Listen, father, I am going to fetch you a shield now and a couple of spears and a bronze helmet to fit round your temples. I shall arm myself too when I come back, and do the same for the swineherd and the cowherd. It would be better to be armed.'

— ARMING FOR BATTLE

90 'Run,' said the resourceful Odysseus, 'and **bring the arms while I have arrows left** for my defence, or they may drive me from the doorway while I'm alone.'

Telemachus obeyed his father and hurried off to the storeroom where they kept their weapons. There he picked out no four shields, eight
 95 spears, and four bronze helmets topped with horsehair plumes, and carrying these made all haste to his father's side, where he at once proceeded to arm himself. The two servants did the same and took their stand by the masterly, resourceful Odysseus.

As long as he had arrows to fight with, Odysseus kept shooting the
 100 Suitors one by one in the hall till the dead lay in piles. Eventually the archer had used up all the arrows. He then propped his bow between one of the door-posts of the great hall and the burnished side of the porch, slung a shield of fourfold hide over his shoulder, put a strong helmet on his heroic head, with the horsehair plume nodding
 105 menacingly above, and finally picked up two stout spears tipped with gleaming bronze.

Now let into the solid masonry of the wall **there was a side door**, on the same level as the raised threshold of the hall, that gave access to a passage. It was usually kept firmly shut with close-fitting doors.
 110 Odysseus told the swineherd to stand on guard by this side door, to which there was only one approach. But Agelaus shouted out for all to hear: 'Friends, can't somebody climb to the side door and tell the people and quickly raise the alarm? We could have help in no time and our friend here would soon find his shooting days were over!'

115 'Impossible, my lord Agelaus,' answered the goatherd Melanthius. 'The big door into the courtyard is alarmingly near, and the mouth of the passage is dangerously narrow: one strong man could keep us all back single-handed. But let me fetch you some armour to put on

LINES 90–91

bring the arms while I have arrows left

Telemachus fetches shields, spears and helmets from the store: Odysseus, his son and the two loyal herdsmen arm themselves – four men against a hall full of enemies.

LINE 107

there was a side door A crucial tactical detail: a small **side door** off the hall. Odysseus posts Eumaeus to guard it, so the trapped suitors cannot slip out or fetch help.

from the store-room. I have an idea that Odysseus and his famous
120 son have hidden the arms in the house and nowhere else.'

So Melanthius the goatherd went up by devious ways through the
palace to Odysseus' store-room, where he helped himself to a dozen
shields and spears and a dozen bronze helmets topped with horsehair
plumes. He returned at once and had soon handed them over to the
125 Suitors. When Odysseus saw them putting on armour and
brandishing great spears in their hands, his knees quaked and his
heart failed him. He realized the peril of the situation. He spoke to
Telemachus with words that flew: 'Telemachus, I am certain that one
of the household women here is responsible for this dangerous turn
130 in the battle. Or else it's Melanthius' work.'

'Father,' the sensible Telemachus admitted, 'the mistake was mine,
and no one else is to blame. I left the tightly fitting door of the
strong-room open and they kept a sharper lookout than we did.
Quick, good Eumaeus, go and shut the store-room door and see
135 whether it's one of the women who is doing this, or Melanthius,
Dolius' son, as I suspect.'

As they were talking, Melanthius the goatherd set out once more for
the store-room to fetch more fine armour. But the worthy swineherd
spied him and at once said to Odysseus, who was close at hand:
140 'Heaven-born son of Laertes, resourceful Odysseus, that same
scoundrel we suspected is off to the storeroom again. What are your
orders? If I can overpower him, shall I kill him or shall I bring him to
you here to pay for all his crimes in your palace?'

To this shrewd Odysseus replied: 'Telemachus and I will keep these
145 arrogant Suitors penned up in the hall, however hard they fight. The
two of you must bind Melanthius' hands and feet behind his back,
throw him into the store-room, strap him to a plank, tie a rope round
his body and hoist him up a pillar to the roof, to torture him for a
while.'

150 His words fell on willing ears, and they set out at once for the store-
room. Melanthius was already there but did not see them come, as he
was hunting around for arms in a corner of the room. The two men
stood by the door-posts on either side and waited. The goatherd
came out across the threshold with a fine helmet in one hand and in
155 the other a large and ancient shield spotted with mildew. It had
belonged to the heroic Laertes in his prime, but had been lying there
for some time with the seams of its straps rotted. The two men
pounced upon him, dragged him in by the hair and threw him,
terrified, on the floor, where they tied his hands and feet together
160 with agonizing knots, relentlessly forcing the limbs till they met
behind him, as Laertes' son, the long-suffering good Odysseus, had

ordered. Finally, they tied a rope round his body and hauled him aloft up a pillar right up to the rafters. Then you, Eumaeus the swineherd, jeered at him.

— MELANTHIUS' TREACHERY

165 'A long, long watch for you, Melanthius, reclining all night on the soft bed that you deserve. And you'll be sure to see the young Dawn ascending her golden throne from Ocean's Stream, about the time when you usually drive in the goats for the Suitors' table in the palace.' And there Melanthius was left, racked in the grip of those
170 murderous cords, while the pair put their armour back on, closed the polished door, and returned to Odysseus, their shrewd and capable master.

— ATHENE AS MENTOR

It was at this point, when the two parties were breathing defiance at each other, the four on the threshold facing the large and formidable
175 body in the hall, that Zeus' daughter Athene, *assuming Mentor's voice and appearance*, approached them. Odysseus hailed her with joy. 'Help us, Mentor, or all is lost!' he cried. 'Remember your old friend and the good things I've done for you in the past. You and I grew up together!'

180 He had a shrewd idea, when he said this, that he was addressing the warrior goddess, Athene. The Suitors opposite greeted her with a chorus of abuse. Agelaus, son of Damastor, was the first to react, calling out with a menacing voice: 'Mentor, don't let Odysseus talk you round and make you fight for him against the Suitors. I'll tell you
185 just how we intend to finish this affair. When we have killed both father and son, you too shall die for what you are so eager to do. With your own life you shall pay the price. And when our swords have repelled the violent assaults of you all, we shall combine all you possess – your house and lands – with Odysseus' estate. We shan't
190 allow sons of yours to live in your house, and your daughters and good wife won't dare to show themselves in the streets of Ithaca.'

These threats infuriated Athene, who rounded on Odysseus and rebuked him scathingly: 'Where is your spirit, Odysseus? Where has your prowess gone? You are not the man you were when for nine
195 relentless years you fought the Trojans for royal Helen of the white arms, killed your man in the bitter struggle time and time again, and planned the stratagem that captured Priam's town with its broad streets. So how can it be that now, when you are in your very own home, and amongst your own possessions, you whine about your
200 lack of courage in face of the Suitors? Come, my old friend, stand by my side and watch me in action, to learn how Mentor son of Alcimus the Courageous repays past kindness in the thick of battle.'

LINE 165

A long, long watch for you, Melanthius The traitor goatherd **Melanthius** smuggles armour from the store to the suitors. Caught on a second trip, he is trussed up and hauled to the rafters.

LINES 175–176

assuming Mentor's voice and appearance

Athene arrives in the shape of Mentor, Odysseus' old friend. She heartens him, but deliberately holds back her full help – she means to test the courage of father and son before she settles the fight.

In spite of these words Athene did not yet grant him decisive victory, but continued to put the strength and courage of both
 205 Odysseus and his noble son to the test, but she herself, **taking the shape of a swallow**, darted aloft to perch on the smoky main beam of the hall.

The Suitors were now rallied by Agelaus son of Damastor, Euronymus, Amphimedon, Demoptolemus, Peisander son of
 210 Polyctor, and the able Polybus, who stood out as the bravest among those surviving to fight for their lives, many having already succumbed to the arrows that had showered on them from the bow. It was Agelaus who took command and called out to them all: 'Comrades, this man's unconquerable hands are weakening at last!'
 215 See how Mentor deserted him after his idle boast, and the four of them are left alone in front of the doors. Don't cast your long spears all together, but let us six throw first in the hope that Zeus will allow us to hit Odysseus and cover ourselves with glory. The others won't count, once he has fallen.'

220 The six did as he ordered and threw with all their might. But Athene made the whole volley miss. One man hit the door-post of the great hall, another the solid door, and the massive bronze point of the ash-wood spear of a third struck the wall. Unscathed by this volley from the Suitors, patient Odysseus' men now heard him say: 'My friends, I
 225 will now give the word for us to aim into the thick of the Suitors, who are adding to their other crimes by this attempt to butcher us.'

They all took careful aim and four sharp lances left their hands. Odysseus killed Demoptolemus; Telemachus killed Euryades; the swineherd Elatus; and the cowherd Peisander. Four men had bitten
 230 the dust of the wide floor together. The Suitors retreated to the far corner of the hall, and Odysseus' party dashed in and withdrew their weapons from the bodies.

Once more the Suitors threw their sharp spears with all their might, but Athene made the whole volley miss. One man hit the door-post
 235 of the great hall, another the solid door, and the massive bronze point of the ash-wood spear of a third struck the wall. But Amphimedon succeeded in catching Telemachus on the wrist – a glancing blow, the bronze just grazed the skin. And a long spear from Ctesippus, flying over Eumaeus' shield, scratched his shoulder before it passed
 240 beyond and fell to the ground. Again the men under Odysseus' shrewd and capable command hurled their spears into the thick of the enemy. This time Eurydamas fell to Odysseus, sacker of cities, Amphimedon to Telemachus, Polybus to the swineherd, and finally the cowherd struck Ctesippus in the breast and exulted over his foe:
 245 'You foul-mouthed son of that braggart Polytherses! Now control your fatuous tongue and don't talk so big, but entrust your speaking

LINES 205–206

taking the shape of a swallow Athene flits up 'in the shape of a swallow' to watch from a roof-beam – present and directing, but leaving the killing to Odysseus until the decisive moment.

to the gods, who are far stronger than you. Take that in return for the cow's hoof you gave godlike Odysseus when he begged in the hall.' So spoke the herdsman of the cows with the twisted horns.

— THE AEGIS

250 Next, Odysseus stabbed Agelaus with his great spear at close range, and Telemachus struck Euenor's son Leocritus right in the flank with a spear, driving the point clean through the man, who fell face down and struck the ground full with his forehead. And now, high in the roof above their heads, **Athene raised her deadly aegis**. The Suitors
255 were scared out of their senses. They scattered through the hall like a herd of cattle that a darting gadfly has attacked and stampeded, in the spring-time when the long days come in. But the others swooped down on them **just as vultures from the hills**, with curving claws and crooked beaks, swoop down upon the smaller birds, who
260 though they shun the upper air and hug the ground find no help there and no escape. The vultures pounce on them and kill, and men enjoy the hunting. So did Odysseus' party chase the Suitors headlong through the hall and hack them down. Ghastly screams rose up as men's heads were smashed in, and the whole floor ran with blood.

265 Leodes now rushed forward, clasped Odysseus' knees and appealed to him with words that flew: 'I am at your knees, Odysseus. Respect your suppliant, have mercy on me. I swear to you that never, by word or deed, have I done wrong to any woman in the house. I even did my best to stop other Suitors from behaving like that. But they wouldn't
270 listen when I told them to keep their hands from mischief, and their own outrageous behaviour has brought them to this hideous fate. But I was only their priest; I did nothing. And now I am to share their fate! This is all the thanks one gets for good deeds.'

Shrewd Odysseus looked at him with a scowl. 'You say you were their
275 priest,' he answered. 'How often, then, you must have prayed in this hall that the happy day of my return might be long delayed and that my dear wife might follow you and bear your children. For that, nothing shall save you from the bitterness of death.' And with his great hand he picked up the sword dropped on the ground by Agelaus
280 as he died, and with it struck Leodes full in the neck, so that his head fell in the dust even before he had stopped speaking.

— THE BARD AND HERALD SPARED

The minstrel Phemius, Terpius' son, who served unwillingly as their bard, was still hoping to escape the black hand of death. He stood now close to the side door, the tuneful lyre in his hands, debating in
285 his mind whether to slip out of the hall and seat himself at the massive altar of mighty Zeus, Protector of the Court, on which Laertes and Odysseus had made so many burnt offerings, or to run

LINE 254

Athene raised her deadly aegis At last **Athene** raises her **aegis**, the terrifying storm-shield of Zeus. The suitors' nerve breaks completely and they scatter in panic – the fight becomes a rout.

LINE 258

just as vultures from the hills A savage **simile**: the four fall on the fleeing suitors like **vultures** swooping from the mountains on smaller birds.

LINE 282

The minstrel Phemius Two men are spared: **Phemius** the bard and, at Telemachus' word, **Medon** the herald. Poets and heralds are protected by the gods and serve under compulsion, so they count as innocent – unlike Leodes the soothsayer, whose plea Odysseus rejects before killing him.

forward and clasp Odysseus' knees in supplication. He weighed the two courses and decided to clasp the knees of Laertes' son, Odysseus. So he laid the hollow instrument on the ground half-way between the mixing-bowl and the silver-studded chair, ran up to Odysseus, clasped him by the knees and appealed to him with words that flew.

'I am at your knees, Odysseus. Respect your suppliant and have mercy. You will repent it later if you kill a minstrel like me, who sings for gods and men. I had no teacher but myself. The god has implanted in my heart all manner of songs; and I am worthy to sing for you as for a god. Therefore, in your fury do not cut my throat. Besides, your own son Telemachus could tell you that I never came to your house of my own free will or by choice to sing at the Suitors' banquets, but only because brute force and numbers dragged me there.'

The great Telemachus said to his father next to him: 'Wait! The man is innocent. Don't kill him. And Medon the herald, who always looked after me at home when I was a boy, is another we must spare, unless indeed he has already been killed by Philoetius or the swineherd, or met you as you stormed through the hall.'

His words reached the herald's ears. For Medon, that sensible man, had wrapped himself up in the newly flayed hide of an ox and lay cowering under a chair, trying to escape black death. He promptly emerged from this refuge and, throwing off the hide, made a dash for Telemachus, whom he clasped by the knees and appealed to him with words that flew: 'My dear lad, here I am. Spare me, and speak for me to your father. Don't let him kill me with that cruel sword, irresistible as he is and maddened by these Suitors who fleeced his home and hadn't even the sense to treat you with respect.'

The shrewd Odysseus smiled at the man and said: 'Dismiss your fears. My son has saved you so that you may know in your heart – and tell others – that doing right is a much better policy than doing wrong. Now leave the hall, you and the songful minstrel. Go into the courtyard away from this carnage, and sit there till I've done the work I have to do indoors.'

— THE SLAIN

The two made off at once out of the hall and seated themselves at the altar of mighty Zeus, peering about on every side and expecting to be killed at any moment. Odysseus looked round his house to see whether any survivors were hiding to escape black Death. But he found the whole company lying in heaps in the blood and dust, like fish that the fishermen have dragged out of the grey surf in the meshes of their net on to a curving beach, to lie in masses on the sand longing for the salt water, till the bright sun ends their lives. So

LINES 326–327

like fish that the fishermen have dragged out

The dead lie heaped, a **simile** tells us, 'like fish that fishermen have hauled from the grey surf in their nets', gasping on the sand – a whole shoal of men poured out on the floor.

330 there the Suitors lay in heaps, one upon another.

‘Telemachus,’ said the shrewd Odysseus to his son, ‘call the nurse Eurycleia here, so that I can tell her what I want.’

Telemachus obediently went off, rattled the door of the women’s quarters and called out to Eurycleia. ‘Get up, old woman, and come
335 here. You’re in charge of the serving-women of the household. My father is calling for you. He has something to say.’ Eurycleia made no reply, but immediately opened the door of the apartments, came out and hurried along behind Telemachus. She found Odysseus among the corpses of the dead, spattered with blood and gore, **like a lion**
340 **when he comes from feeding** on some farmer’s bullock, with the blood dripping from his breast and jaws on either side, a fearsome spectacle. That was how Odysseus looked, with the gore spattered on his legs and arms. But when Eurycleia saw the dead men and the sea of blood she felt like crying out in triumph at the mighty
345 achievement that confronted her. Odysseus, however, checked her exuberance with a sharp rebuke.

‘Restrain yourself old woman, and gloat in silence. I’ll have no cries of triumph here. It is an impious thing to exult over the slain. These men fell victims to the will of the gods and their own infamy. They
350 paid respect to no one on earth who came near them – good or bad. And now their own transgressions have brought them to this ignominious death. But what of the women-servants in the house? Tell me which have been disloyal to me and which are innocent.’

— THE GUILTY MAIDS

‘My child,’ his fond old nurse Eurycleia replied, ‘I’ll tell you the truth.
355 You have fifty women serving in your palace, whom we have trained in household duties like carding wool and to be willing servants. Of these there are **twelve all told who behaved shamelessly** and snapped their fingers at me and Penelope herself. Telemachus has only just grown up and his mother would not allow him to order the
360 maids about. But let me go upstairs now to your wife’s bright room and give her the news. Some god has sent her to sleep.’

‘Don’t wake her yet,’ said the subtle Odysseus. ‘But tell the women who have behaved disgracefully to come here.’

The old woman left the hall to tell the women and hurry them along,
365 while Odysseus called Telemachus, the cowherd and the swineherd to his side and gave them orders in words that flew: ‘Start carrying out the dead and make the women help you. Then clean the tables and our fine chairs here with sponges soaked in water. When the whole palace is restored to order take the women out of the hall
370 between the round-house and the great wall of the courtyard, and

LINES 339–340

like a lion when he comes from feeding

Eurycleia finds Odysseus among the corpses, spattered with blood ‘like a **lion** fresh from feeding on an ox’.

LINE 357

twelve all told who behaved shamelessly

Eurycleia names the twelve disloyal maids – those who slept with the suitors and mocked their mistress. They are made first to carry out the dead and scrub the blood from the hall.

set on them with your long swords till you have executed them all and they have forgotten their secret love-making in the arms of the Suitors.'

375 Wailing bitterly, with the tears streaming down their cheeks, the women all came in together. First they removed the bodies of the dead, which they laid under the portico of the walled courtyard, propping them one against the other. Odysseus himself took charge and urged them on: unwillingly they carried the bodies out.

380 Next they washed down the tables and the beautiful chairs with sponges and water, after which Telemachus and the two herdsmen scraped the floor of the great hall with spades, while the maids removed the scrapings and got rid of them outside. Finally, when the whole hall had been set in order, they took the women out of the building, and herded them between the round-house and the great
385 courtyard wall in a narrow space from which there was no escape. Then the thoughtful Telemachus spoke.

'I swear I will not give a decent death to women who have heaped insults on my head and on my mother's, and slept with the Suitors.'

— THEIR PUNISHMENT

390 With that he took a cable which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, and threw the other over the round-house, high up, so that their feet would not touch the ground. *As when long-winged thrushes or doves* get entangled in a snare, which has been set in a thicket – they are on their way to roost, but find a grim reception – so the women's heads
395 were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them

LINE 392

As when long-winged thrushes or doves The twelve are then hanged together, their feet twitching 'a little while, not long' – caught in a pitiful **simile**, 'like thrushes or doves tangled in a snare'.

to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched but not for very long.

Next they dragged Melanthius out through the hall entrance and across the court. There with a pitiless knife **they sliced his nose and ears off**; they ripped away his genitals as raw meat for the dogs, and in their fury they lopped off his hands and feet. Then, after washing their own hands and feet, they went back indoors to Odysseus and the business was finished.

Odysseus turned now to his fond nurse. ‘Eurycleia,’ he said, bring some sulphur to clean the pollution, and make a fire so that I can purify the house. Then ask Penelope to come here with her ladies-in-waiting and tell all the maids to come through into the hall.’

‘My child,’ said the fond nurse, Eurycleia, ‘all that you have said is right and proper. But let me bring you a cloak and tunic to put on, and don’t stand about like that in the house with only rags over your broad shoulders, or people will be shocked.’

— PURIFYING THE HALL

‘The first thing I want,’ the calculating Odysseus replied, ‘is a fire in this hall.’ The fond nurse Eurycleia did not disobey him. **She brought fire and sulphur**, with which Odysseus thoroughly purified the hall, the house and the courtyard outside.

Meanwhile the old woman went off through the royal palace to give the other women the news and tell them to come. Flocking out of their quarters torch in hand they embraced Odysseus in welcome, and took and kissed his shoulders, head and hands. A sweet longing came on him to weep and sob, as he remembered them every one.

LINES 399–400

they sliced his nose and ears off Melanthius
the goatherd is mutilated for his treachery.

LINES 413–414

She brought fire and sulphur Odysseus
cleanses the blood-polluted hall with **fire and sulphur** – a ritual purification. Bloodshed, even just bloodshed, leaves a stain that must be washed away before ordinary life can resume.

