

Staying with Argos: Odysseus and His Dog

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Argos, the loyal dog of long-suffering, well-tanned, always-oiled Odysseus, appears only once in *The Odyssey*. At the sight of Odysseus, who returns to the island kingdom Ithaca after 20 years, Argos dies. Bam! Kaput. Struck down by a Zeusian thunderbolt. At this point in Book 17, no one other than the reader knows the true identity of the disguised and smelly Odysseus, who dresses like a beggar. Escorted by his loyal swineherd Eumaeus, Odysseus pauses to observe Argos from the distance of a few steps. But he can't even pet the pup before steering back toward his wife's suitors, whom he'll slaughter in due course. Argos dies almost immediately after Odysseus turns away. Though the encounter takes fewer than one hundred lines, its brevity should not trick us into thinking about Argos's death as a merely sad aside. A closer reading reveals how Homer manipulates his audience before the final act, using Argos to orient our empathy toward Odysseus. Moreover, if we stay with Argos a little longer, he reveals something essential about fiction's capacity to wrap epic emotions into even the tiniest moments.

To see a doggie's demise in any medium will always make us blubber. So too will reunions between pets and soldiers. Witness the strange phenomenon of YouTube compilations documenting first meetings between dogs and American troops returning home from Middle Eastern war zones. These clips depict pure cathartic joy. Fido or Georgie or Lady jump and drool all over their patriotic owners, howling with disbelief, filmed by someone holding an iPhone that trembles with the cinematographer's barely-constrained sobs. Music swells, the major cries, and before we have time to think about the trauma lurking in the background, we cut to another dog jumping into the arms of another deep-eyed master in fatigues. These are fragmented blips of pure joy. They don't ask us to think: They constitute a conveyor belt of emotive force.

Homer understood the emotional power of canine expirations well before YouTube. In Argos, he combines the death-of-dog and return-of-master tropes, producing what amounts to an emotional bomb. But to what end?

With remarkable narrative economy, Homer invests Argos with enough backstory for us to feel affection for the animal, telling us that Odysseus trained

him as a puppy. This conjures images of Argos and Odysseus in happier times. We picture the little furball nipping at his master's sandals and rolling around in the grass. When Argos was a sinewy youngster, "hunters loved to set [him] / coursing after the wild goats and deer and hares." We feel the joy of watching Argos in motion, and the animal happiness of fulfilling his purpose to chase and capture. Homer efficiently gets us to feel something like pleasure and nostalgia for a figure we met just a few lines before. He accomplishes this by filtering our affection for the dog through Odysseus's eyes. Our relationship with Odysseus—built over his entire journey—provides a foundation for our attachment to Argos.

We snap back to the present. That same long journey passes in an instant. "Now with his master gone he lay there, castaway, / on piles of dung from mules and cattle . . . Infested with ticks, half-dead from neglect." Two decades disappear in the space of two sentences (at least, in the Robert Fagles translation) and the time compression magnifies the immediacy of the image. In one moment, Argos is healthy and happy. In the next, he's lying on a bed of crap, sad and forsaken. It lands like a punch in the gut. My gods! How could this have happened? Who is responsible for this neglect? The animus we feel for his neglectful masters! We think of that puppy, growing under Odysseus's tutelage, before a thousand ships lurched out of their harbors toward Troy. We feel anger at the masters—those imposters occupying the palace in the absence of Odysseus.

Herein, of course, lies the kicker.

Homer uses the treatment of Argos as a final piece of evidence in a trial against the suitors. They've not only tried to steal Odysseus's wife. They've not just bled dry his stores of grain and wine, and tormented his son.

They've left his dog to die.

The visceral emotions that this produces bring us directly to the side of our hero, back in Ithaca to destroy his enemies. In advance of that rather unsettling scene of mass killing, Homer reminds us that the targets of our hero's rage have acted monstrously and deserve punishment. Homer uses the dog to rile us up. The treatment of Argos reaffirms our allegiance to even-handed Odysseus. At a neurological level, I don't know how this happens. But I have read the work of smart people who use fMRI machines or EKGs to measure the brain while research subjects read fiction. They spot concentrations of oxygen in cortices that process emotion, or measure electrical energy in the frontal lobe. I bet they cry out, "There! An emotion!" whenever they spot seismic tremors or blue tumors of grief on their screens. I don't know if emotions can be reduced to electric impulses or chemicals—that's a fight for philosophers and neuroscientists. But I do wish I could strap into some machine and watch the small patch of my brain that registers anger glow purple as I read about dying Argos, and as suitors gorge themselves on stolen lamb.

Let *me* at ‘em, I think, aligned with Odysseus in my anger.

Conversely, Homer uses Argos to humanize our hero, attempting to win our empathy before the carnage (lest we remember that Odysseus has been anything but loyal to his wife, while murdering, lying, and plundering his way across the Mediterranean). Odysseus and Argos recognize each other in the same second. But Argos can hardly move and Odysseus cannot yet reveal his identity. Instead, he watches as Argos “thumped his tail, nuzzling low, and his ears dropped / though he had no strength to drag himself an inch toward his master.” After two decades of waiting, he can’t get closer to Odysseus. The King of Ithaca “flick[s] away a tear,” hoping Eumaeus does not notice his grief. “What handsome lines!” Odysseus observes. He struggles to keep his composure and feigns that he cannot recognize Argos: “I can’t say for sure / if he had the running speed to match his looks / or he was only the sort that gentry spoil at table.” He plays coy, pretending not to recall the puppy he raised. Resourceful Odysseus, blameless and patient-hearted sacker of cities, seems overcome.

Odysseus cries throughout *The Odyssey*, but this is very recognizable here: a master laments the loss of his dog. Nested within the ancient equivalent of a massive summer blockbuster (with a Cyclops, vengeful gods, ladies singing in their undies, disobedient dudes turning into pigs, sea monsters, etc.), the death of Argos trims the scale of the epic to that of an ordinary relationship. This recognizable dynamic domesticates—if only for an instant—a myth whose premise feels anything but domestic. Homer turns up the emotion precisely by narrowing our focus to a sadness with which we can easily and powerfully identify.

Feelings run so high that the narrative voice itself stammers. The next line begins with a hitch—specifically, a lapse into the second person—that Homer reserves for Eumaeus: “*You* told the stranger, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd, / ‘Here—it’s all too true—here’s the dog of a man / who died in foreign parts.’” Eumaeus counts as the only character Homer addresses directly. The move demonstrates intimacy between the poet and Eumaeus, while inviting the reader into the narrative. To address the audience constitutes one of the most narratively manipulative things that a poet can do. Like our tenth-grade English teacher, who catches us daydreaming, Homer uses “you” to make us sit straighter and admit that we weren’t paying attention. Direct address breaks down boundaries between the text and reader. We feel thrust into the action. Are *we* Eumaeus? Is this scene meant for *us*? As Eumaeus, *we* confirm Argos’s identity together. *We* speak as one in the swineherd’s voice. *We* are all here, watching in unison. *We* play along. *We* tell Odysseus of Argos’s bad luck: “poor fellow . . . / his master’s dead and gone, so far from home.” Then again, only *we* know the true identity of Odysseus.

Odysseus and Eumaeus turn away.

But we the readers, separated from them, stay with Argos. Homer lets the

two men wander off and affixes his audience's attention back on the loyal mutt.

To recap: Homer has told us exactly how to feel about this dog. We know we are supposed to feel anger toward his suitor-masters and to empathize with Odysseus. Homer's final move in this brief scene now becomes—I think—the most significant for our understanding of the emotional capacity of fiction. Here, with an investment of imaginative attention, this worn-out dog reveals an entire life, hiding just beneath the surface of the text.

In dog-years, Argos waits more than a century for his master's return, enduring a trillion moments of unrewarded anticipation: impossibly dull, ordinary days. He buries sticks in the yard, and scans Ithaca's harbor. He pees on cypresses during strolls with Telemachus. He sits at Penelope's feet, listening to her complain about suitors. Penelope asks, "Oh Argos. What's wrong with me? Why am I talking to you?"

Argos waits years. He chases squirrels. He gets into the onions. A skunk sprays him. More years. He sniffs the breeze. Gets old. Loses a little hope. Then hears a familiar whistle in the garden. But finds only Telemachus, taking out the trash. Argos gets arthritis. No one pats his belly. He can't run anymore. At night, the crickets make him wistful. He thinks about his life. About walks with Odysseus. He waits. And his hope becomes an old companion. Something that has been with him a very long time. He no longer resents it. Or Odysseus. Younger dogs nip at him and lick his butt. He sleeps in the shade of olive trees. A shadow gathers around the edges of his vision.

Another ordinary day.

A Tuesday, maybe.

A day on which the ticks bite and the sun rises over the harbor. Around midday, the gate opens. In comes Eumaeus talking to—it seems almost impossible at first—Odysseus. Gray-bearded, wearied, dressed in tatters. But bright-eyed, handsome, and still powerful.

As in those YouTube videos, the music swells and the warrior cries. But we don't look away or get a next clip. Instead, the euphoric culmination of a lifetime in wait kills Argos. We watch as "the dark shadow of death closed down on Argos's eyes." He has lived his doggy life in an endless stream of ordinary days given purpose by loyalty. We stay with Argos to watch Zeus drop the curtain on him. Only we see it. Only we mourn him.

Only we stay with him.

Homer models a second emotional function of literature, not by controlling us, but by *surrendering* control to us. In fiction, we have a choice when it comes to how deeply we want to feel something. We can merely watch Argos die (so sad!). Or we can get to work. We can craft an epic just for Argos that reveals heroism that isn't about storms, sea monsters, or the anger of the gods. We can confront, not just Argos's climactic encounter with his maker, but also the deep

commitment embedded in the sum total of life's boredom, drudgery, disappointments, hopes, and smallest moments. To stay with Argos is to have fidelity to a central purpose of fiction itself: to allow us to sit with emotion a little longer, to feel something more deeply, and to find entire worlds in between the lines.