

Introduction

WHEN, AFTER AN ABSENCE THAT LASTED THE BETTER PART of two decades, Odysseus finally finds his way home to Ithaca and his wife Penelope, he discovers an unruly bunch of aristocrats squatting in his palace. They are, quite literally, feasting off his assets, wining and dining as they please. They are seeking to win his wife, Penelope, and power over Ithaca. With the help of the goddess Athena, the cunning hero first checks out the situation disguised as an old beggar, draped in animal hides.

On approaching his palace, he encounters his old dog Argos ('the swift'), a puppy when Odysseus departed for Troy some twenty years before (Figure 0.1).

Odysseus is immediately struck by its presence: 'And a dog that lay there raised his head and pricked up his ears, Argos, steadfast Odysseus' dog, whom of old he had himself bred, but had no joy of him, for before that he went to sacred Ilium.'¹ Even though the old and neglected dog is in poor shape, it does not take him long to recognize his old master: 'There lay the dog Argos, full of dog ticks. But now, when he became aware that Odysseus was near, he wagged his tail and dropped both ears, but nearer to his master he had no longer strength to move.'² The whole scene stirs deep sentiments in the returning hero: 'Then Odysseus looked aside and wiped away a tear.'³

Argos does not live to see his master's final return to Ithaca. While Odysseus eventually confronts the suitors, reinstalls himself at Ithaca, and reunites with Penelope, the dog's life comes to a sudden end. Almost as soon as man and dog lock eyes, the animal passes away.⁴ Argos' death is

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0.1 Louis Frederic Schutzenberger, *Retour d'Ulysse* (1884).

the ultimate token of devotion to Odysseus, and a final, endearing twist in the story of their encounter.

In the figure of Argos, Homer has created the archetypal member of a species that, unlike any other, lends itself to associations of domesticity and belonging. Argos provides a strong example of the quality most often associated with dogs in the ancient and the modern worlds: unconditional and unquestioning loyalty.⁵ Dogs, this scene shows, in particular companion dogs, have always counted among man's closest and most beloved non-human friends.

But is there more? Is there anything in this scene beyond the touching and endearing? Can this tale ever be more than a trivial footnote to what some may well regard as the more serious objects of historical, cultural, and literary inquiry? After all, we may wonder: why should we care about Argos, an animal, when we have Odysseus, Achilles, and Hector – not to mention the ever-inscrutable Penelope – in all their *human* complexity to consider?

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And yet, to dismiss the presence of Argos as of little consequence would be to suggest that animals cannot be worthy objects of critical inquiry in their own right: they already are. More importantly, perhaps, it would disregard what is at stake in this particular story and how it relates to the larger one of which it is part. The final encounter between Argos and Odysseus is not tangential to the broader themes of the *Odyssey*; rather, it goes right to the core of the questions and problems raised by Odysseus' return to Ithaca.⁶

Odysseus' encounter with the dog conjures memories of youthfulness and vitality: 'In days past the young men were accustomed to take the dog to hunt the wild goats, and deer, and hares; but now he lay neglected, his master gone, in the deep dung of mules and cattle.'⁷ These memories bring out just how much time has passed since Odysseus left Ithaca. The passing of time becomes tangible in the gap between the here and now and the long ago. Referring to the dog, the swineherd Eumaios tells the beggar (Odysseus): 'If he were but in form and action such as he was when Odysseus left him and went to Troy, you would soon be amazed at seeing his speed and his strength.'⁸ The once-swift Argos is no longer agile, just as Odysseus himself has aged since he left Ithaca. In the image of the frail canine, Odysseus faces the time that has passed since he left home – time now irrevocably gone in all but memory.

It matters that Argos is not just any kind of dog, but a hunting dog.⁹ In the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, dogs played important roles in tracking down and trapping wild animals, such as deer, hares, and wild boars. The ancient literature on hunting gives strong evidence of the close and intimate bonds between hunters and their dogs.¹⁰ Through Argos' presence, the *Odyssey* mobilizes the image of the hunt as an important initiatory stage in a young man's life. Like a hunter, young Odysseus once left Ithaca in order to prove himself out in 'the wild'. And like a successful hunter he is now returning home to reclaim his rightful place at its core.

But unlike a hunter, Odysseus had set out on his momentous journey without his dog. He has proven himself not side by side with loyal Argos, but side by side with his human comrades at Troy. Argos has been left behind to guard the threshold of the house and to greet Odysseus upon his return. His presence thus marks the real and symbolic boundary that

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Odysseus is about to cross.¹¹ It helps to depict Odysseus' return as the momentous transition that it is: back from battlefields and the twisty journey that followed into the *oikos* ('house', 'home') and the adoption of his rightful place at its core.

And yet, despite their long separation there is a deep sympathy between Argos and Odysseus in the literal sense of the ancient Greek *sympathein* ('to suffer together', 'to share in one's suffering'). Like Odysseus, Argos is displaced, barred from his rightful place at the master's hearth. And dog and master both are deprived of the privileges they once enjoyed.¹² In the moment of recognition, the conditions of human and animal align, one referencing the other in a 'metonymic relationship'.¹³ And the recognition is mutual and does not rely on tokens or persuasion.¹⁴ Indeed, Argos here features as a 'faithful *philos*' ('friend'), in analogy, perhaps, to Eumaios himself and in contrast to other figures including the unfaithful servants and Odysseus' son Telemachus, who will need convincing that Odysseus has indeed returned.¹⁵

In order to bring out such correspondences, the dog is humanized. In the *Odyssey* as a text not poor in dogs and dog-references, he is the only one which is named in the text, his death is referred to as *moira* ('fate'), and he is attributed with a *demas* ('body', 'frame') – a word that elsewhere in the *Odyssey* is reserved for the human body only.¹⁶ All this helps to align the condition of Argos and his owner. The dog reflects the situation and identity of Odysseus at this particular point in the story.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of human and non-human does not stop with Odysseus and Argos. The dog's extraordinary loyalty implicitly raises the question of the loyalty and capacity of another figure close to the returning hero: his wife Penelope. While the dog recognizes Odysseus instantly, the reunion of husband and wife is postponed until the hero and the reader alike have entertained the possibility that she may, after all, have given up. Odysseus cannot be certain whether Penelope is still waiting for his return or whether she has submitted to the suitors' demands. Ultimately, she too will prove to be loyal. But when Odysseus first arrives at Ithaca, it is not clear what exactly awaits.

So, the focus on the dog does not take away from the human protagonists in the story. Rather, human identities, sentiments, and relations are at centre stage in the moment of Argos' recognition of Odysseus.

TEN CREATURES THAT MAKE US HUMAN

By attributing to Argos such a powerful role, Homer acknowledges the fact that our humanity is invariably bound up with non-human creatures. With Darwin's theory of evolution, the animality of the human took centre stage.¹⁷ But, in many ways, Darwin's account of our descent from other animals merely placed on a scientific footing an observation that had long dominated thinking about the question of the human: that in order to understand who we really are, we have always looked to non-human creatures. It is through the way we relate to animals – not merely by comparing and contrasting ourselves with them but also by addressing, conversing with, and appropriating them in multiple ways – that we grapple with different aspects of our humanity, even those that we would rather keep concealed under a layer of deceptive animal clothing. In a nutshell: it is impossible to understand humanity's view of itself without acknowledging and appreciating the way the human animal defines itself in and against the animal realm.

This book sheds light on the ancient history of a conversation that revolves around various attempts to answer the question of what it means to be human. This conversation started in Greek and Roman antiquity (if not before) but is still going strong today. It involves the Greek and Roman philosophers who variously defined the human in relation to the animal, and, in doing so, anticipated many of the positions that are still evoked today; but it does not remain restricted to them. Over time the conversation came to feature numerous ancient voices that spoke to the question in a range of registers and pitches. Most notably, it drew on stories and the practice of storytelling to raise fundamental questions about our own humanity and animality – without necessarily always providing an answer to them.

TEN CREATURES THAT MAKE US HUMAN

The ten essayistic interventions that follow focus on ten ancient creatures which, like Argos, have an unnerving capacity to expose the kind of humans we really are. Some are domesticated, tame, and endearing; others are wild and ferocious. Some are noticeably Greek in origin; others are distinctly Roman. Most defy an easy attribution to

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a particular time and place. They roam the real and imaginary landscapes of the ancient world more widely, crossing, migrating, travelling among them. Some are – or at least could be – real; most are obviously imaginary. Many, but not all, come from the realm of mythology. Some (also) inhabit ancient observations about the natural world. At least one – the infamous Socratic gadfly – is merely a figure of speech.

All these creatures come together in drawing on ideas of human and animal, embodying them, combining them, and stretching out between them in different ways. And yet, they do so by representing fundamentally different categories: the Socratic gadfly serves as a metaphor. The Trojan horse embodies the idea of a device that serves a certain purpose. The Sphinx, the Cyclops, and the Minotaur represent or relate to the category of the monstrous. Different notions and conceptions of the human become tangible within or between these categories.

In particular, the animal-natures of the creatures featured in this book matter in this respect. They represent different ways in which humans categorize non-human animals, between the domestic and wild, edible and inedible, notions of the sacred, the ferocious, and the disgusting (to mention just a few). So, by representing these and other categories, the creatures populating this book embody different ways in which human and animal, humanity and animality come together. Their role as ‘type specimens’ – prototypes that biologists use as points of reference for the description and identification of further members of their species – is acknowledged by the fact that they have been attributed with Latin binominals in their respective chapter headings.

Again, Argos, Odysseus’ dog, leads the pack here. Even though there is no doubt that he is fully a member of the canine species, he enacts values, experiences, and concerns that are ultimately human. He is thus a prototypical member of yet another category we have created for certain kinds of animals – that of the companion animal or pet – and the whole ratbag of human/animal intimacies that come with it. Throughout this book we join Argos in seeking to peer through all deceptive clothing and to sniff out the human within.

HUMANITIES PAST AND PRESENT

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The main focus is on Greek and Roman antiquity, but in each chapter, we track down and pursue the creature's trail into the present. This takes the form of a sustained discussion of individual strands of their reception. Or it comes in the form of brief comments on the persistence of the larger theme the creature in question represents in modern conceptions of the human. This is why we follow the Sphinx from Sophoclean drama into the works of Sigmund Freud, the Socratic gadfly from Plato into the writing of the modern political theorist Hannah Arendt, and the Minotaur from Greco-Roman mythology into the works of Pablo Picasso.

To take such a broader view is important because explaining the way in which the ancient creatures resonate in the here and now matters. It is this bigger picture which allows the ancient and modern worlds to converse. Freud, Arendt, and Picasso articulate modern conceptions of the human. But they do so in conversation with the ancient world through their adaptation and interpretation of these figures. Comprehensiveness is nowhere claimed or achieved. We merely illuminate strands in 'thinking the human' that reach from the ancient into the modern world.

But who is the 'we' speaking here? And to whom?

Throughout this book I offer a critical appreciation of certain moments in the history of ideas as they evolve in and out of Greco-Roman thought and literature. The 'we' addressed here includes – but is not limited to – all those who have their intellectual homes within this tradition. The purpose is to show the ancient dimension in Western thinking about human and non-human animals that all too frequently go unexplored.

Of course, the use of the animal for the sake of human self-definition is hardly specific to the West. Non-Western conceptions of the human also frequently draw on non-human creatures.¹⁸ Indeed, one of the central premises of this book – that it is impossible to understand conceptions of the human animal without understanding conceptions of the non-human animal – applies to numerous cultures, both past and present. Different worlds articulate themselves in parallel ways – all equally valuable, equally real, and equally true to themselves. Various cultural

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traditions draw on animals in thinking the human in ways that are both equally fascinating and fundamentally different from the material considered in this book. And while some of them also relate to categories such as the bestial that feature prominently in the Western tradition, they frequently conceive of them in radically different ways.¹⁹

The conception of the human under investigation here has proved invariably powerful. Not so long ago, many considered it superior to others. These days its claims to universality and dominance no longer stand unchallenged. Indeed, most recently, the study of the ancient world and its reception in the modern have been at the core of a much larger critical reckoning with Western colonialism and dominance and the intellectual traditions in which they are based. And yet, some of the ideas associated with the traditional Western conception of the human still prevail. The idea that humans differ from animals through the presence of *logos*, for example, still informs our thoughts, actions, and attitudes in many ways.

This is because the idea of human exceptionalism was further energized by Christianity which propagated the idea that man was made in the image of god and the human the pinnacle of creation.²⁰ Even though the anthropomorphism of the Greco-Roman gods also made a connection between the human and the divine, it was Christianity that further disseminated the idea of a fundamental gulf that separated humans from other animals. The particulars of this development are beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to say here that this link not only explains how the anthropocentric perspective came to prevail in Western thinking but also accounts for why Darwin's theory of evolution received such an adverse response from some Christians: his insistence of a continuity between humans and animals fundamentally challenged the Christian account of creation and the idea that humans were fundamentally different from animals.

As this book will show, the Western concept of the human and the non-human as it emerged out of classical antiquity comes at a certain price which is not always evident and taken into account. And this price is paid not only by animals but by certain humans too. The point is that the very forces that came to separate the human from the animal in Greco-Roman antiquity have also led to the suppression of women, slaves, and

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foreigners. So, this book follows the current interest in grappling with the difficult legacies of this tradition and the way in which the classical past has been put to use in it.

We will return to the larger implications of the way in which the ancient world resonates in the modern in the conclusion to this book. At this point we merely reiterate that the ‘we’ imagined here is not meant to be exclusive. In its most general sense, it can also be taken to refer to me (as the author) and you (the reader) as human animals whose understanding of ourselves emerges through our interactions with and appropriations of non-human creatures.

THE HUMAN, THE HUMANITIES, AND THE ANIMAL

Over the last thirty-odd years, there has been a new wave of interest in the study of animals. There is now a sizeable interdisciplinary group of people who share a common interest in how humans relate to animals in a variety of ways as well as the motivations, values, and cultural assumptions underpinning these relations.²¹ The study of the ancient world has not been impartial to this trend even though it fully took off here later than in many other disciplines.²² In particular since the turn of the millennium, there has been a sharp rise in works that throw light on the manifold ways in which the ancient Greeks and Romans related to animals in a number of texts and contexts, historical, philosophical, literary, and material.²³

This interest has generated invaluable knowledge about the ways in which human and animal lives intersect in the ancient world. And yet, this knowledge has so far not been incorporated into the larger picture. *If* the modern debate references the ancient world at all, it mostly points to Aristotle. The reason for this is that people working on the ancient material do not always flag what is interesting about their material to other disciplines.²⁴ At the same time, the contemporary conversation is still heavily driven by philosophical perspectives on the question of the human and so is naturally drawn to the origins of their own discipline in classical antiquity.

Separating the human from the non-human animal was a major concern of the Greco-Roman philosophers. The notion that humans are

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separated from animals by a deep gulf gave rise to a line of reasoning that came to be known as ‘the man-only-*topos*’: the view that humans stand apart from all other animals through one or more distinctive features, capacities, or habits.²⁵ Among the Greek and Roman philosophers, this idea was fleshed out in ever new formulations: the human alone among all animals has reason, thought, or intellect (*logos, dianois*).²⁶ The human alone among all animals has speech.²⁷ The human alone among all animals can sit comfortably on his hipbones.²⁸ And, more curiously: the human alone has the capacity to mourn.²⁹ The human alone has hands that allow the building of altars to the gods and the crafting of their statues.³⁰ The human alone has the capacity to mate throughout the year and into old age.³¹ In order to prove that humans stand out, the ancient Greek philosophers drew on a range of observations that reach from the banal to the outlandish and absurd (to say nothing about their veracity).³² Throughout classical antiquity, some of the ancient philosophers sought to establish – or refute – the existence of an essential and irrevocable difference between the human and non-human animal.³³

We will return to the philosophical debate throughout this book. Suffice to say here that the quest to separate the human from all other animals extended well beyond the confines of the philosophical debate and into the realm of storytelling. There is much ancient evidence that relates directly to the conversation beyond the works of the major Greek and Roman philosophers. Thinking about the nature of the human (and the animal) started much earlier than the philosophical debate, with the first written texts and material evidence that have come down to us from classical antiquity. This evidence includes some of the most famous works of classical literature, such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, but it does not remain confined to them. The question of what makes us human implicitly plays into *all* genres of Greek and Roman literature: it informs mythography, animal lore, natural history, didactic poetry, and ancient fables. It has a major place in ancient drama (tragedy, comedy) as well as in ancient stories told in material form (such as paintings on pottery), to mention just a few examples. Unfortunately, this evidence is not always known beyond those with an explicit interest in the ancient world. It is brought together here for the first time in a broad account that puts the ancient and modern in