The Irish Odyssey

Ulysses’ dog, Argos, & the Song of the Sirens
A retelling in late Middle Irish (c.1200) of the story of the Odyssey,

It is well known that the matter of Rome, the romance of antiquity, had been turned into Irish at the end of the twelfth century [including] the Merugud Uilix Maic Leirtis (“The Wandering of Ulysses, Son of Laertes.”) There is plenty of the Irish element in the Merugud. Every page has the traditional “stock in trade” of the Irish storyteller. One thing is certain: some waifs and strays of the Homeric story had reached Ireland before the twelfth century. The source of the story is an oral one.

Ulysses and his dog, Argos

The recognition of Ulysses by his dog [Argos] after an absence of twenty years a-warring and a-wandering is well described. They loved their dogs, these Irishmen, and the description of the dog—“It has white sides and a light purple back and a jet-black belly and a green tail” (Il. 298 f.)—is not so far from the description of a famous dog in one of the medieval versions of the Tristan. “And when it heard the sound of Ulysses’ voice, it gave a tug at the chain so that it laid four men flat all over the house behind it, and jumped at Ulysses’ breast and licked his face.” *
Song of the Sirens

The poem entitled *The Yew of the Disputing Son* contains a reference to the Sirens. The elves did not like the intrusion of ordinary mortals upon their grazing grounds. They came back year after year to herd their cattle. The complaint was that they “were singing such lovely music that it would put the race of Adam to sleep”.

“If they are singing a soft elfin strain,” said Ferchas, son of Comman, “let us go no nearer until we put melted wax into our ears.” They did not hear the lovely music when they had put wax into their ears.

As to the origin of this version of the *Odyssey*, a former editor and literary historians alike confess their complete ignorance. Kuno Meyer*: “I have not succeeded in discovering in any medieval literature, Latin, French, or English, a text from which it had been translated.” Robin Flower [great Blasket Island scholar] mentions that there is an Irish prose retelling of the *Odyssey* which is not paralleled elsewhere. De Blacam quotes Flower but adds that ‘incidents of Irish invention are substituted for the original events and a moving new tale, not without Homerica flavor, is created.” As recently as 1934 one of these international tales was taken orally from unlettered peasants in the Blasket Island.


**Meyer died Oct 11, 1919, German philologist, without whose work, much of early Irish and Celtic literature would be lost or unreadable.