Can a Chameleon Grieve?  
Lynn Hunt

Heads of owls, crown, and men resembling crows; drawing by Charles Le Brun, circa 1660–1678

Not surprisingly, then, Sahlin argues that Descartes’s views on animals, though first published in 1637, only prompted serious public debate many years later, in 1664. The choice of 1664 is not arbitrary and has its advantages. A beautifully drawn cuneiform inscription at Versailles, the ultimate symbol of Louis XIV’s absolutist style of rule. Although the pavilion took shape in 1664, four years were required to fill the courtyards with a largely avian crowd. Many birds were immobilized by clipped wings, a perfect metaphor for Louis’s endeavor to domesticate his previously headstrong nobles. An occasional deer, camel, or even bear could no more compete with the “royal bird,” the crown-crested crane, than nobles could match Louis, who made himself the star attraction at court festivals. The bigger animals plausibly carried actors on their backs in allegorical pageants. Like any good taxidermist, Louis believed that repetition ensured learning. Visitors to the menagerie viewed birds and rare animals through windows, but on the walls they could see a series of forty-six paintings commissioned in 1664 from the Flemish artists Frans Snyders and Jan van Kessel. Although known for his renderings of nature red in tooth and claw, here the artist presented the creatures in supposedly natural bucolic settings. Serving as moral exemplars, these depictions advanced a new and progressive view of “theriophilia” (love of animals). Two of the most prominent writers of the time, the novelists Madame de Scudéry and the poet Jean de La Fontaine, described the civilizing effect of the graceful, delicate birds in their accounts of the menagerie. Yet even while claiming to pay homage to the king, both writers got in their digs, in Scudéry’s case by referring to the cranes as chickens. In 1668 La Fontaine published the first volume of his famous animal fables, which many subsequently read as coded criticisms of the king and his court. Still, for the days are not far off when our cuneiform characters are disappearing; paintings, engravings, and even amateur poetry now celebrated the softening effects of a peaceable kingdom, whether of animals or aristocrats.

The year 1668 was early in Louis XIV’s reign (he ruled for another

May 10, 2018

of thousands of gallons of jet fuel, as was feidlishly projected by the plot’s mastermind, Osama bin Laden, who had a degree in civil engineering. Although the World Trade Center fully conformed to fire-safety standards at the time of its completion, there were misgivings during the planning phase about whether the super-wide Vierendeel trusses that enabled the open-floor spaces, a new concept at the time, were sufficiently fireproofed to withstand such an eventuality. It was the melting of those elegantly elongated supports that caused the Twin Towers’ concrete floors to collapse onto one another, after which the outer perimeter gave way. By that time Yamasaki had been dead for nearly fifteen years and was spared a loss that surely would have been infinitely more painful to him than even his unjustly maligned Pruitt-Igoe.
Scientific debate was not limited to the schools, academies, or courts. The Paris salons followed every new development, and in bers Madeleine de Scudéry led the resistance to the Cartesian denigration of animals. Not that she was anti-Cartesian in other respects. Among her closest friends were many prominent Cartesianes. Scudéry encouraged conversations about the new science and even undertook her own investigations, yet she came to very different conclusions about animals. The French consul in Alexandria sent her two chameleons in 1672, four years after the king's own chameleon had perished following a mere six weeks in royal care; it promptly underwent disembowelment by the Royal Academy of Sciences. Scudéry's chameleons were admired, observed, and written about at length. When the female died at the hands of a visiting gentleman who tore off her leg, Scudéry insisted that the surviving male was so devastated that he tried to commit suicide. He was saved by her own ministrations: "He came to love me," she wrote, "to know me, to bear his name and to distinguish my voice." Nothing could have been farther from an automation than her little Mélon.

To save the endangered argument about devalorization of animals, Sahlin returned to his point of departure, the gardens of Versailles, where a labyrinth was constructed in 1674 with sculptures of Aesopian animals that spouted the water of thirty-nine fountains. Although La Fontaine's Fables, warlike, he himself admits that visitors were MRERM was meant to first visit the labyrinth before going to the gardens; this may have been a passage from the bestial to the civilized, but it was certainly both poetic and political. Not only by their placement in the progression, the living, muralized and otherworldly animals were captured in polychromatic lead. How are we to be sure of the meaning of the labyrinth's structure? That even the myth that both garden became less fashio- 

Here cultural history is caught in traps of its own making. There are three different perlats at issue: mistak- ing the representations of high culture for general opinion, succumbing to the lure of fitting everything together, and overlooking the need for causal explana- tion. These pitfalls are especially hard to avoid when one year is meant to carry so much significance. There is no one year of the animal and no single moment when the pendulum swings toward the devalorization of animals in Western culture. Paintings, engrav- ings, tapestries, sculptures, poems, and gardens must necessarily be deceptive witnesses because they all rely on aesth- etic devices; they are beautiful even when they render roosters as unruly. Their moral message is necessarily ambivalent; and for every Cartesian dis- ciple who espied an automation crying without feeling pain, there could have been ten Scudérians imagining a hu- manoid emotion.

Things hardly ever fit together as neatly as we might like, and this is perhaps even more true of human-animal relations than most historical subjects. For example, despite the rela- tively recent industrialization of the production of animals for human con- sumption—whether to be eaten or wor- shipped as pets—it is far from obvious that attitudes toward animals can be placed along a neat chronological arc. The industrial production of animals developed at the same time as govern- ments and reform-minded elites began to root out bear-baiting, bull-baiting, and the wholesale torture of cats for fun. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in England in 1824, and the first law against cruelty to animals was passed in 1835, whereas abuse of children was only explicitly criminalized in England in 1879. One reformer of the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children complained, "If wretched children are fate, I think the world would fall into their doomed and dis- mal lives.

So, cats, animals have been deni- grated, but perhaps no more after 1668 than before and maybe in the long run less. Most of us no longer find hunting cats alive funny, even if we are perfectly content to suspend our knowledge of chicken cages or cow slaughterhouses while we eat. Although many blame Descartes for the objectification of animals, he loved his pet, a dog named Mister Scratch. Explaining our changing attitudes toward animals ultimately requires a broader and much broader and longer view than a few years in seventeenth-century France, however inter- esting that moment was. Still, the vir- tue of Sahlin's account is that he shows how culture, politics, and science can be permeated with animal concerns. For to be human is to be an animal of some sort.