

Madeleine de Scudéry's Animal Sublime, or Of Chameleons

Anne E. Duggan

Wayne State University. United States

a.duggan@wayne.edu

Abstract



Drawing from Erica Harth's work, animal studies, and ecofeminism, I explore the ways in which Scudéry engages in the important seventeenth-century debates over animal reason. Her engagement in these debates is significant: it foregrounds the fact that René Descartes's conception of the animal-as-machine was immediately challenged by his contemporaries. In her "Story of Two Chameleons," Scudéry challenges early modern moral and especially scientific representations of the chameleon, which limit our understanding of the chameleon to a figure for negative human qualities or to an object of scientific experimentation. Scudéry does so in ways that parallel her career-long vindication of women as elevated beings endowed with reason. Scudéry's ethical stance towards the animal, attributing to it the capacity to reason and establishing a relation of friendship or *amitié* between the human and non-human animal, disrupts both negative metaphorical moral discourse, on the one hand; and the scientific domination and objectification of the animal exemplified by Claude Perrault's *Anatomical Description*, on the other. Her "Story of Two Chameleons" suggests that these creatures are sublime, in the late seventeenth-century sense of "pure," "refined," and "elevated." Through a process of sublimation that, for instance, transforms excrement into musk, an eyeball into a pearl, Scudéry metaphorically elevates the status of her chameleons. In effect, Scudéry suggests that, just like the human animal, the chameleon can (albeit problematically) dominate its "nature within."

Keywords: ecofeminism, chameleons, Madeleine de Scudéry, René Descartes, Claude Perrault.

Resumen

Inspirándose en la obra de Erica Harth, en los estudios de los animales y en el ecofeminismo, exploro las formas en que Scudéry se involucra en los debates importantes del siglo diecisiete sobre el razonamiento de los animales. Su implicación en estos debates es significativa: pone en primer plano el hecho de que la idea de que la idea de René Descartes del animal-como-máquina fue inmediatamente cuestionada por sus contemporáneos. En su "Historia de dos camaleones", Scudéry desafía la moral moderna y en especial las representaciones científicas del camaleón, que limitan nuestro entendimiento del camaleón a una figura para las cualidades humanas negativas, o a un objeto de experimentación científica. Scudéry hace esto de forma paralela a su defensa, a lo largo de su carrera, de las mujeres como seres elevados dotados de razonamiento. El posicionamiento ético de Scudéry hacia el animal, atribuyéndole la capacidad de razonar y estableciendo una relación de amistad o *amitié* entre el animal humano y el no-humano, perturba tanto el discurso moral metafórico negativo así como la dominación científica y la objetificación del animal ejemplificada por la *Descripción anatómica* de Claude Perrault. Su "Historia de dos camaleones" sugiere que estas criaturas son sublimes, en el sentido de "puro", "refinado" y "elevado" de finales del siglo XVII. Por medio de un proceso de sublimación que, por ejemplo, transforma el excremento en almizcle, un globo ocular en una perla, Scudéry eleva metafóricamente el estatus de sus camaleones. En efecto, Scudéry sugiere que, como el animal humano, el camaleón puede (aunque problemáticamente) dominar su "naturaleza interior".

Palabras clave: ecofeminismo; camaleones, Madeleine de Scudéry, René Descartes, Claude Perrault.

Scholars of animal studies continually have to grapple with the legacy of René Descartes's conception of the non-human animal as an automaton, a non-sentient, non-thinking being; his influence can still be felt in contemporary research laboratories.¹ While Descartes's problematic conception of the non-human animal often serves as a point of departure to rethink the non-human animal, it is important to be aware that his position was not uncontested in seventeenth-century France. As Peter Harrison argues, "[a]t no time... except perhaps our own, have such concerns [about the non-human animal] sparked the magnitude of debate which took place during the course of the seventeenth century" ("Virtues" 463).

The importance of the question in this period can be tied to the epistemological shift taking place in conceptions of the non-human animal, exemplified by the work of Descartes and his followers, including Nicolas Malbranche and Pierre Chanut.² Influential in the Renaissance and the early seventeenth century, the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle postulated distinctions between human and non-human animals that could be characterized in terms of a difference of degree: non-human animals were perceived to be inferior to human animals, but they shared certain qualities; they were viewed as being closer to matter, less spiritual, and endowed with less reason, than humans. Initiating a break with Antique tradition, Descartes insisted upon a very fundamental dualism between human and non-human animals, thus rejecting earlier models based on continuities between them.³ For Descartes, animals are machines, automata, lacking altogether a rational soul. Specifically contesting the more animal-friendly position of Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Charron, Descartes denies them speech or the power to decide, comparing their functioning to that of a clock.⁴ Val Plumwood emphasizes the repercussions of such conceptions of the non-human animal: "The machine image confirms the new confidence in control as well as the narrow and instrumental view of nature associated with a technological outlook. The machine's properties are contrived for its maker's benefit, and its canons of virtue reflect its users' interests... A machine is made to be controlled, and knowledge of its operation is the means to power over it" (*Feminism* 109). Not only does the image of the animal-machine serve to reiterate man's power over

¹ Many scholarly works in animal studies include a critique of Cartesianism, which significantly continues to influence perspectives on the non-human animal that deny them agency, sentience, or reason; see for instance Plumwood's chapter on "Descartes and the Dream of Power" (104-119); Weil 8 and 36; Waldau's chapter "Animals in Philosophy" (143-60); Steiner 79; and for an account of Descartes's own cruelty to animals that anticipates contemporary scientific practices, see Weisberg 95-96.

I would like to thank Elena Past for her thoughtful advice as I was developing this essay initially as a conference paper, and for her careful reading and suggestions for development as I worked it into an article.

² Harrison nuances Descartes's position on animals in "Descartes on Animals," and notes the somewhat more radical position some of his followers took, most notably Nicolas Malbranche, who asserts about animals that "[t]hey eat without pleasure, cry without pain, grow without knowing it; they desire nothing, fear nothing, know nothing" (219).

³ For an overview of pre-Cartesian notions of the animal, see Plumwood 105-10.

⁴ For Descartes's critique of the position of Montaigne and Charron with respect to animal rationality, see his letters of 1646 and 1649 in *The Animals Reader* (59-62). For a French version of the 1646 letter, see his "Lettre au [Marquis de Newcastle]" in *Oeuvres de Descartes* (573-76). For a summary of the positions of Montaigne, Charron, and Descartes, see Clarke 71-74.

nature; it also takes away animal agency and treats it “as an instrument for the achievement of human satisfactions” (Plumwood, *Feminism* 111).

The Cartesian denial of an animal soul or animal reason was immediately challenged in seventeenth-century France by, among others, the feminist writer and salon woman Madeleine de Scudéry (1607-1701). Scudéry's important contributions to contemporary debates about animal reason have been recognized by Erica Harth (1992), and most recently, by Peter Sahlins (2015). Within these debates Scudéry's position is aligned to some degree with the theories of the *médecin du roi* Marin Cureau de la Chambre (c.1594-1669), who frequented Scudéry and her salon.⁵ Dedicating his *Treatise on the Knowledge of Animals* (*Traité de la connoissance des animaux*, 1643) to the to chancellor of France Pierre Séguier, Cureau de la Chambre presents the debate over animal reason to be “the greatest and most important affair that has ever been debated” (n.p.; emphasis in original).⁶ Arguing that animal foresight, craftiness, society, and communication all indicate actions based in reason, Cureau de la Chambre furthermore insists on a God-given “portion” of reasoning in animals that allows them to form general notions and draw conclusions.⁷ Clearly in agreement with Cureau de la Chambre with respect to these propositions, Scudéry arguably goes further than the king's doctor in her defense of animals by demonstrating the possibility of human and non-human animal “friendship” based in animal agency and reason, which is articulated extensively in her story of two chameleons, and by depicting the non-human animal as sublime.

Within seventeenth-century France, the chameleon in particular became central to scientific and literary reflections on and debates about non-human animals. As Nathalie Grande has argued, the chameleon was a popular animal in the late seventeenth century, “to the point of having inspired a veritable fashion in the beginning of the 1670s” (94). Since Antiquity, the chameleon served as a figure of inconstancy and hypocrisy due to its changing colors, a tradition that continued in the early modern period, when the chameleon became a metaphor for the ever-flattering courtier. This image was disseminated within the French literary field through, among other works, Andrea Alciato's *Emblematum libellus* (or *Emblèmes*), and Cesare Ripa's *Iconologie*, as it was known in French.⁸ The chameleon also was believed to have practical uses; its body parts and organs supposedly possessed medicinal and magical qualities. Surgeon to the Valois kings, Ambroise Paré claims to have observed that the eye of a chameleon cures cataracts in his *Book of Monsters and Prodigies* (*Livre des monstres et prodigies*, 1573), a work that

⁵ René Kerviler notes that Cureau de la Chambre frequented the salons of Madeleine de Scudéry and Madame de Sablé (83). In a letter to the comte de Nogent, Cureau de la Chambre mentions Scudéry (*Epistres* 141) to whom he addresses a letter as well (*Epistres* 218).

⁶ “la plus grande et la plus importante affaire qui ait jamais esté mise en contestation.” Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French are mine.

⁷ On animal foresight and communication in Cureau de la Chambre (2); on God's portioning of a small amount of reason to animals (245); on animals' ability to draw conclusions and form general notions (251-23).

⁸ Alciato's Latin works were published regularly throughout the sixteenth century, including his book on emblems. See for instance Pettegree and Walsby 23-32. Known as André Alciat in French, his emblems were translated into French as early as 1540 and continued to be republished until around 1616. The notion that the chameleon nourishes itself on air is associated with the flatterer's gossipy nature (Alciat 227). Ripa's *Iconologie*, which was “repeatedly published in Paris between 1636 and 1681” (Saunders 12), associates the chameleon with inconstancy due to its changing colors (see Baudoin 75).

continued to be published throughout the seventeenth century.⁹ Ancient and Modern notions of the chameleon co-existed until at least the end of the century, evident in Antoine Furetière's entry on the animal in his *Universal Dictionary (Dictionnaire universel, 1690)*. Alongside "modern" accounts of the chameleon by Claude Perrault and Madeleine de Scudéry, Furetière includes earlier associations of the chameleon with courtly flatterers, also making note of the sixteenth-century Italian doctor Pierandrea Matthioli's "superstitions" that the chameleon's tongue can help win a trial or protect a woman giving birth; its head and throat, burned in oak, can bring about rain; or its right jaw alleviates the fear of those who carry it.¹⁰

The emergence of Cartesian rationalism gave rise to a new way of viewing the animal in general and the chameleon in particular: it became the object of a modern form of scientific fascination, exemplified by the dissection. This new form of interest in the chameleon was embodied by the popularity of Claude Perrault's *Anatomical Description of a Chameleon, a Beaver, a Bear, and a Gazelle (Description anatomique d'un caméléon, d'un castor, d'un ours et d'une gazelle)*, published in 1669. During this period of the chameleon's rise in popularity, Madeleine de Scudéry received a male and a female chameleon from the French consul in Alexandria in 1672, and in 1688 she published her "findings" about her chameleons in *New Moral Conversations (Nouvelles Conversations de Morale)*. Harth notes that Scudéry's conversation, "The Story of Two Chameleons," "is presented as an actual alternative to Claude Perrault's *Description anatomique...* published under the auspices of the newly founded Académie des Sciences" (100). Scudéry's alternative description of the chameleon can be situated within seventeenth-century women's critiques of Cartesian rationalism, arguably anticipating ecofeminist conceptions of the non-human animal.

Drawing from Harth's work, animal studies, and ecofeminism, in this essay I explore the ways in which Scudéry's description of her chameleons challenges early modern moral and especially scientific representations of the chameleon, which limit our understanding of the creature to a figure for negative human qualities, medicinal or magical uses, or to an object of scientific experimentation. Scudéry does so in ways that parallel her career-long vindication of women as elevated beings endowed with reason.¹¹ Scudéry's ethical stance towards the animal, attributing to it the capacity to reason and establishing a relation of friendship or *amitié* between the human and non-human animal, disrupts negative metaphorical moral discourse (i.e., the chameleon-as-courtier); instrumental medicinal or magical uses; and the modern scientific domination and objectification of the animal exemplified by Perrault's *Anatomical Descriptions*. Her "Story of Two Chameleons" suggests that these creatures are *sublime*, in the late seventeenth-

⁹ After citing Matthioli regarding the use of chameleon eyes to heal cataracts, Paré notes: "I observed this description in the one [chameleon] I have at home" ("J'ay observe cette description en celui que j'ay en mon logis," 698)

¹⁰ The *Commentaries (Commentaires)* of Mattioli or "Matthioli" were republished in French numerous times in the late sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century.

¹¹ Constructed as so many first-person speeches or harangues, Scudéry's *Illustrious Women (Femmes Illustres, 1642)*, for instance, not only and quite literally gives voice to illustrious women of Antiquity, it also demonstrates women's capacity to reason. Harangues are a form of juridical eloquence, whose foundation, as Marc Fumaroli has shown, is built upon the fusion between Ratio and Oratio, between reason and speech (see 477 and 510). The very act of giving a harangue, then, can be construed as a performance of one's reason through speech. Both the form of the harangue and its content—the logical argument constituting the case—together legitimate women as rational subjects throughout the text.

century sense of “pure,” “refined,” and “elevated.”¹² Moreover, Scudéry’s account carries out the work of *sublimation*—of purification and elevation—of the defective and physical attributes and properties attributed to chameleons in Antique and early modern narratives. Through a process of sublimation that, for instance, transforms excrement into musk, or an eyeball into a pearl, Scudéry metaphorically elevates the status of her chameleons. In effect, Scudéry suggests that, just like the human animal, the chameleon can (albeit problematically) dominate its “nature within.”¹³

By representing the chameleon as a sublime creature, Scudéry contests first its traditional associations with inconstancy and flattery; second, medicinal and utilitarian uses of the chameleon; and third, the Cartesian denial of the animal soul. Her observations suppress or deny the “reptilian” of the reptile, and the “bêtise” (“stupidity” or “beastliness”) of the beast, transforming it into a higher, sublime creature who lives on air, and whose body parts and organs carry no vulgar utilitarian functions; instead, they have an inherent, transcendent value of their own. In the same way that women writers sought to undo the hierarchy between men and women by embracing the notion that “the mind has no sex”—which includes a process of sublimating the physical body that marks women as different from men—Scudéry extends this strategy to validate her chameleons as thinking, feeling, and loving beings. Again, while such a process of sublimation indeed can be viewed as problematic in its devalorization of the material body, it nevertheless was a strategy Scudéry had already employed to legitimate women as thinking subjects.

At the outset, I would like to lay out some problematic areas within Scudéry’s narrative. Despite the ecocritical reading I will carry out here, I acknowledge that Scudéry’s chameleons were not given a choice to leave Alexandria and make their way to Paris. They were objectified in the very idea of offering them as “gifts,” but Scudéry and her entourage will construct them as if they chose to travel to France. Forced to live in the human environment of the French salon, the chameleons’ very real vulnerability is exemplified by the way in which one of Scudéry’s guests mishandles and mortally wounds one of the chameleons. Nevertheless, Scudéry’s works do point to ecofeminist possibilities in her approach to non-human animals. Although recognizing some of the problematic aspects of Scudéry’s account of her chameleons, I will set these aside for the most part to foreground the ecofeminist possibilities to which her writings lend themselves.

Animal Amitié

Scudéry’s “Story of Two Chameleons” reads like a tale of love and friendship or *amitié*. The character Bérénice recites to a group of salon goers “the account of my friend whom you all know”¹⁴ (295), implicitly referring to Madeleine de Scudéry. Thus the story is related through the voice of Scudéry, who claims that “I won’t meddle in speaking about

¹² As Ann Delehanty has argued, in this period “the sublime moves from being an effect of rhetoric [. . .] to a means to describe the transcendental in art, the divinity of the king, and the inexplicable grandeur of nature” (79). Indeed, while Longinus focuses on the sublime as it relates to aesthetic expression, René Rapin displaces Longinus’s notion of the sublime into the domain of morality in *Du grand ou du sublime dans les moeurs et dans les différentes conditions des hommes*.

¹³ Plumwood explains that within Platonic and Christian thought, one must dominate the “nature within,” and it is not until the Cartesian turn that humans sought to dominate “nature without” (106).

¹⁴ “la relation de mon amie que vous connoissez tous.”

them [the chameleons] either as a Doctor or as a Philosopher” (296),¹⁵ the two discursive modes that dominate in early modern representations of the chameleon. Instead, hers will be a hybrid text that, while integrating certain aspects of previous moralistic/philosophical and scientific discourses, foregrounds the fact that she will indeed relate a story or *histoire*.

The tale begins like a *relation de voyage* or travel account, a popular genre in the period.¹⁶ We learn that the two animals journeyed from their homeland in Alexandria, Egypt to Marseilles, then Lyon, finally arriving in Paris. Upon their arrival in her home, Scudéry not only observes the chameleons’ behavior—finding them able to judge, reason, and love—but she also engages with them, becoming a character with the chameleons in the central narrative thread of this *histoire*. She observes “an extreme friendship between them... They always held each others’ little hands” (304).¹⁷ But “a man of quality” who mishandles the female chameleon accidentally rips off her leg. She survives the injury for eight to ten days, and when she dies, “The [male] chameleon was so surprised and afflicted to see his [female] chameleon die that he hastily and with transport climbed to the top of the windowsill, from which he fell down three times” (304).¹⁸ The text reads like a melodrama in which Scudéry works to console the broken-hearted chameleon, who has lost his true love:

I became accustomed to holding him in my hand, and I named him Méléon . . . he came to love me, to know me, to understand his name, and to distinguish my voice: in such a way that I can assure you that those who have said that chameleons cannot hear are mistaken, for I clearly saw that this one could hear me, knew me, and distinguished my voice. (305)¹⁹

Like Claude Perrault’s scientific representation of the chameleon in his *Anatomical Description*, Scudéry’s text moves from external observation to, eventually, a post-mortem dissection.²⁰ However, Scudéry draws on the tropes of the novel or novella to urge her readers to empathize with two creatures endowed with reason and capable of *amitié*, and to whom she effectively gives agency and arguably “voice” in her ability to communicate their reactions and feelings to her readers.

Méléon is the dedicated lover, physically affected by the loss of his *amie* (or friend) in ways that recall the heroes of Scudéry’s novels, whose relations are characterized in terms of *amitié*, inclination, tenderness, respect, and constancy.²¹ As such, the “Story of

¹⁵ “je ne me mêleray point d’en parler (des caméléon) ni en Médecin, ni en Philosophe.”

¹⁶ Sara Melzer notes that many of the *Relations* “were best-sellers” (36) and “there were more than 1300 *Relations* in print according to Furetière” (37).

¹⁷ “une amitié extrême entre eux... Ils tenoient toûjours l’un et l’autre avec quelqu’une de leurs petites mains.”

¹⁸ “Le Caméléon fut si surpris et si affligé de voir mourir sa Caméléone, qu’il monta avec grande hâte et avec transport au haut du chassis, d’où il retomba jusques à trois fois.”

¹⁹ “je m’accoûtumay à le tenir dans ma main, et à le nommer Méléon [...] il vint à m’aimer, à me connoître, à entendre son nom, et à distinguer ma voix: de sorte que je puis asseûrer que ceux qui ont dit que les Caméléons n’entendoient pas, se sont trompez, car j’ay veû clairement que celui-ci m’entendoit, me connoissoit, et distinguoit ma voix.”

²⁰ It should be noted that Scudéry received the chameleons as pets and not as animals to dissect or study in the rationalist scientific sense of the word.

²¹ Scudéry’s *Map of Tenderness (Carte du Tendre)* interestingly lays out the key concepts that traverse all of her works. *Amitié* or friendship is based on following the positive precepts of the Map of Tenderness such as “probity,” “respect,” “sincerity,” “goodness,” and avoiding the negative ones

Two Chameleons” challenges the traditional association between the chameleon and inconstancy; indeed, Méléon proves to be the ideal lover and friend. The fact that Scudéry uses the term “amitié” to characterize Méléon’s relation to the female chameleon and to Scudéry herself furthermore suggests that he is a reasonable animal who can move one to empathy. As I have argued elsewhere, “Traditionally ideal friendship was viewed as a relation between equals endowed with reason” (Duggan 105). Within humanist thought, women were excluded from the domain of friendship because they were not believed to possess reason. In *La Coche* (1541), Marguerite de Navarre proposes a model of female friendship that challenged *amitié’s* male prerogative, while Scudéry took her model of friendship a step further to characterize both same-sex and hetero-sex conceptions of friendship.²² It is important to note that Scudéry’s conception of friendship and its relationship to reason does not translate into relations lacking in emotion; instead, reason tempers potentially violent passions (sometimes detrimental to her female characters), channeling them into more “tender” forms of affection or *amitié*.²³

In “The Story of Two Chameleons” Scudéry further broadens her conception of friendship to encompass relations between human and non-human animals, presupposing animals’ capacity to choose friends and thus to reason. In a letter to Catherine Descartes, the niece of the philosopher, Scudéry discusses human and non-human animal friendship and its connection to reason:

My belief in favor of my dog takes nothing away from the infinite esteem I hold for your deceased uncle. It isn’t the friendship [*amitié*] that I have for animals that disposes me to their advantage, it the friendship that they have for me that inclines me in their favor. For one cannot love anything by choice without some sort of reason. (*Correspondance* 395)²⁴

To some degree, Scudéry’s conception of friendship between human and non-human animals anticipates the theories of ecofeminist Val Plumwood, who argues that an “ethics of nature” should be based on “less dualistic, moral concepts such as respect, sympathy, care, concern, compassion, gratitude, friendship, and responsibility” (“Nature” 8). Indeed, Plumwood’s ethics align with the ethical precepts inscribed in Scudéry’s Map of Tenderness, or *Carte de Tendre*—which include goodness, respect, generosity, integrity, and *amitié*—that define ideal friendship and love between two individuals.²⁵ With respect specifically to relations between women and men, I have noted that the map “redefines male-female relations in terms of negotiation and reciprocity, and not conquest or domination” (Duggan 64). Scudéry’s conception of reciprocity necessarily implies a relation between two thinking subjects or agents who acknowledge and care for each

such as “perfidy,” “indifference,” and “negligence.” Méléon proves to be the perfect lover or *ami* in his adherence to the precepts of the Map of Tenderness.

²² On friendship among women in Navarre, see Skemp.

²³ In her *Clélie, Histoire Romaine*, Scudéry includes an account of the rape of Lucretia that equates political tyranny with rape. Male characters unable to control their violent emotions can turn to rape; violent passion leads to the inability to *respect* the other (i.e., a female character). Scudéry’s Map of Tenderness marks an attempt to channel that violent desire.

²⁴ “Ma croyance en faveur de mon chien n’ôte rien de l’estime infinie que j’ai pour feu monsieur votre oncle. Ce n’est pas l’amitié que j’ai pour les animaux qui me prévient à leur avantage, c’est celle qu’ils ont pour moi qui me prévient en leur faveur; car on ne peut rien aimer par choix sans quelque sorte de raison.”

²⁵ On the Map of Tenderness, see note 12.

other, thus undoing dichotomies upholding male domination over women. By redirecting *amitié* to qualify relations between human and non-human animals, then, Scudéry challenges the dualism legitimating the domination of humans over non-human animals.

In her 1991 essay “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism,” Plumwood repeatedly evokes the concepts of “self-in-representation” (as opposed to an instrumentalist approach), “relationships of kinship and friendship,” and “connectedness and caring for others” as ways of reconceiving relations between human and non-human animals in ethical ways.²⁶ Scudéry’s expansion of the conception of friendship to include Méléon as well as her dog not only presupposes their ability to “choose” Scudéry as a friend, thus implying reason. It also invests them with agency: they are not simply passive machines that humans can manipulate or control. It is precisely because non-human animals have agency and reason that Scudéry is able to engage and connect with them in ways that imply reciprocity and mutual respect characteristic of the social relations she aspired to establish within her salon.

Agency is precisely what is lacking in Claude Perrault’s account of chameleons in his *Anatomical Description*. Indeed, one might think of Perrault’s representation of the animal as being “monologic” (in the sense of a subject dominating, constructing, or exploiting a “passive” object) whereas Scudéry’s is “dialogic” (that is, two subjects engaged in a reciprocal relationship based on mutual respect).²⁷ While still attached to Antique and Renaissance allegorical and magical conceptions of the chameleon from which he is trying to move away, Perrault predominantly presents his chameleon in scientifically “objective” terms: “The Chameleon is of the kind of animals with four feet and who lay eggs, like the tortoise, the crocodile, and the lizard, which it resembles” (“Le Caméleon est du genre des animaux à quatre pieds et qui font des oeufs, comme la Tortuë, le Crocodile et le Lezard à qui il ressemble assez,” 4). Perrault experiments on the chameleon to determine why it changes color, and discovers upon dissection that it has “a kind of Glottis that is a transversal rather than a vertical slit as in animals that have some kind of voice, of which our chameleon was entirely deprived” (27).²⁸ Perrault’s relationship to the animal resides in him measuring and experimenting on it, first while alive—providing its size, weight, and natural functions—then when dead, through dissection.

Although he differed with Descartes regarding the idea that animals were simply automatons, Perrault nevertheless follows a very Cartesian procedure of measuring each body part of the chameleon and carrying out experiments to disprove previous theories about its properties. As Perrault’s treatise moves from external observation of the living animal to the dissection of the dead one, there seems to be no transition: the chameleon always appears “dead.” While the dissection suggests that it has no voice, given the structure of its glottis (speech being one indicator of reason), the text itself further takes all voice or agency away from the animal.²⁹ Unlike Scudéry’s representation of Méléon, the

²⁶ See for instance Plumwood, “Nature” 8-9, 16, 20, and 21.

²⁷ I am drawing very generally here from the work of Richard Johannesen, whose notions of ethical communication are inspired by the work of Martin Buber and his “I-Thou” and “I-It” models of communication. See Johannesen.

²⁸ “une espece de Glotte, qui estoit une fente transversale et non droite comme elle est aux animaux qui ont quelque espece de voix, dont nostre Caméleon estoit entierement privé.”

²⁹ Richard Serjeantson discusses the relation between speech and reason in early modern debates about animal reason, situating Cartesians such as Chanet on the extreme of denying the non-human animal conventional speech and thus reason.

reader never gets a sense of how—or even if—the nameless chameleon feels. In Perrault's text, the chameleon is simply a thing to be measured, observed, and analyzed within a scientific context in which empathy plays no role, and in which the non-human animal analyzed is reduced to the status of pure object.

In Scudéry's narrative, however, the chameleons never quite seem to die. As long as the two chameleons are alive, they have agency: they interact with each other and with the narrator, who is surprised by and who values their singularity and dignity. Describing their gait, Scudéry expresses her admiration: "This animal has a slow, grave, and majestic gait. He never places his foot on the ground without first having considered where he will place it" (298).³⁰ The passage suggests that the chameleon thinks or reflects even while walking, the description itself evoking the style of moralist writers like Jean de La Bruyère, rather than "objective" scientific observation.³¹ Scudéry also gives the male a name, *Méléon*, a further means of endowing him with subjectivity.

Sahlins relates that after their dissection, Scudéry had the remains of her two chameleons preserved, remarking: "her preservation of their remains was an enduring sentimental attachment and a belief in the moral, if not metaphysical, immortality of the chameleon's body" (26). Just as Scudéry preserves their physical bodies, so she preserves their memory, not only through the "Story of Two Chameleons," but also by publishing the texts written by her *salonniers* celebrating *Méléon* for posterity:

I sing of an Animal as gallant as rare,
A handsome Chameleon who adorned Africa
Who, coming for Palmis from the end of the Universe
Faced obstacles, and crossed Seas [...]
All of Paris was charmed by this noble Animal
Who renounced for her his homeland [...] (318)³²

Through life and after death, the relation between Scudéry and the chameleon is not simply one between scientific observer and object of investigation. It is a dialogic, empathetic relation between a human and non-human animal that survives even death, a relation memorialized through rituals binding the living with the dead. By recognizing the agency of non-human animals and broadening her concept of *amitié* to characterize relations between human and non-human animals, Scudéry indeed develops an ethics towards non-human animals based on the notion of self-in-relationship that anticipates the work of Plumwood.

The Animal Sublime

Such representational strategies elevate the chameleon, giving it the possibility of being *sublime*; that is, of inspiring noble emotion, of serving as an example of what Père René Rapin refers to as "the Sublime in faithfulness that makes these miraculous friends

³⁰ "Cét animal a le marche lent, grave, et majestueux. Il ne pose jamais son pied sans avoir considéré auparavant où il le place."

³¹ In his description of individual "characters" of Parisian society, La Bruyère often linked physical appearance and demeanor with their psychology.

³² Je chante un Animal aussi galand que rare,/ Un beau Caméléon dont l'Afrique se pare/ Qui venant pour/ Palmis du bout de l'Univers,/ Affronta les ecueils, et traversa les Mers [. . .]/ Tout Paris fut charmé de ce noble Animal/ Qui renonçoit pour elle à son païs natal [. . .]

so rare in society" (21).³³ The sublime and sublimation come together in Clayton Crockett's definition of "sublimation" as an attempt to surmount material reality. He remarks: "sublimation has to do with the redemption of material reality that in itself is seen as fallen, depressing, or meaningless" (841). Indeed, Scudéry raises her chameleons from the status of "reptile" and assimilates them to "man," arguing:

It is wrong that some have called it a reptile. Its belly never touches the ground, neither while walking nor while sleeping, leaning on its feet and its tail. Its feet resemble little open hands given the number of fingers, and its legs also have something about them that resembles the bones and muscles of the arms of a man. (298)³⁴

Just as the figure of the salon woman or *précieuse* sublimates women's association with matter, with Eve, and with the Fall, so Scudéry's representation of the chameleon sublimates the animal's association with matter and the Biblical Serpent in that the chameleon's belly never touches the earth.³⁵ Moreover, her external observation has the function not of objectifying the chameleon to study it for her own purposes or to further science, but rather to legitimate it as a dignified being worthy of respect in and of itself.

Scudéry further demonstrates the chameleon's superior, sublime nature in her physical description of the animal's natural functions and internal organs. While Perrault insists in his treatise that chameleons eat flies, evident in their excrement, thus rejecting Antique and Renaissance notions that chameleons live on air, Scudéry selectively retains certain earlier notions of chameleons, only to rehabilitate their image. First she notes that "It normally seeks out the Sun, whose rays I believe provide it with food just as air does" (300).³⁶ As Harth has argued, "In the *conversation* on the chameleons, the animal that lives on air becomes an image of the spirituality that Cartesian mechanism denied it" (104). Its transcendent nature is further revealed in its bodily functions and organs.

Scudéry claims to have observed that the female died "making a little bit of excrement without odor" (305).³⁷ She goes on to further describe their bodily waste in the following terms: "This excrement was yellow, musk colored, and a little tiny white brownish-yellowish stone. It had no odor and was fairly firm, which does not contradict the notion that air is the chameleon's natural food, for hail and snow are nothing more, in some ways, than thickened air" (312-13).³⁸ While Grande expresses surprise at the *précieuse* Scudéry's description of excrement, the description itself sublimates anything filthy or abject about it. By stating it is odorless yet associating it with musk, Scudéry

³³ "le Sublime dans la fidelité qui fait ces miracles d'amis si rares en la société."

³⁴ C'est à tort que quelques-uns l'ont appelé réptile. Il ne touche jamais du ventre en terre, ni en marchant, ni même en dormant, s'appuyant sur ses pieds et sur sa queue. Ses pieds ressemblent à de petites mains entre-ouvertes par le nombre des doigts, et ses jambes ont aussi quelque chose qui ressemble à l'os et aux muscles des bras d'un homme.

³⁵ Denis Lopez characterizes the general conception of the animal in seventeenth-century France: "Affection for the animal, for example, is suspect. It distances man from God and bogs him down in matter" (19).

³⁶ "Il cherche ordinairement le Soleil, dont je crois que les rayons lui servent de nourriture aussi-bien que l'air."

³⁷ "en faisant un peu d'excrément sans odeur."

³⁸ "Cét excrément étoit jaune, couleur de musc, et une petite pierrette blanche entre le brun et le jaune. Cela étoit sans odeur et assez ferme, et ne contredit pas que l'air est la plus naturelle nourriture du Caméléon, car la grêle et la neige ne sont en quelque sorte qu'un air épaisi."

“purifies” chameleon excrement, suggesting an affiliation with white snow and even perfume.

Moreover, things found within the body upon dissection are described like precious gems. Inside the “little” female chameleon were found “many eggs as big as peas, and of the most beautiful golden yellow in the world” (313).³⁹ Their eyes resemble pearls: “The body of the eye looked like a pearl, perfect in roundness, in whiteness, and in luster, the little tiny black and lively pupil surrounded by its little circle of the most beautiful gold in the world, and this golden circle surrounded by another little rose-colored circle” (315).⁴⁰ These descriptions of the dissection transform the chameleon’s organs into something quite marvelous and precious; indeed, they are aesthetically pleasing to contemplate.

As such, Scudéry’s representation of the dissection strategically works against the traditional utilitarian view of chameleon body parts and organs, in which they served the purpose of curing cataracts, winning trials, protecting birthing women, or inducing rain. Her account also challenges modern scientific usage, in which the study and dissection of animals furthered human knowledge. By transforming animal organs into precious gems, into something aesthetically pleasing, Scudéry can emphasize the value *in itself* of the chameleon, freeing it from the status of trafficable object, whose value resides purely in its use-value, subject to human whims.⁴¹ Although one could argue that precious gems are in fact trafficable objects, Scudéry represents the precious gems that are the chameleon’s body parts as aesthetically pleasing, as something to be appreciated for its beauty and marvel, rather than something to be exchanged.

Scudéry’s characterization of her chameleons raises their value to the status of the sublime as they inspire admiration and empathy—through their inner and outer beauty—in those with whom they come into contact. Not only are the two chameleons able to engage in relations of *amitié* with each other and with a human animal, thus demonstrating their ability to reason. They also display moral and physical attributes that Scudéry characterizes as being “marvelous” and “délicat,” inspiring *étonnement*, all of which can only happen when they are given agency, represented as subjects and not objects, as transcendent beings with inherent value.

Scudéry the Ecofeminist

In some ways, we might describe Scudéry as being “ecofeminist” *avant la lettre*. Carol Adams characterizes ecofeminism in terms of the breakdown of dichotomies that subject nature to culture, and non-human animals to human animals:

many contemporary feminist theories address a variety of conceptual sets that are historically characterized by these opposing terms: subject/object; self/other; domination/agency; culture/nature, sameness/difference; male/female; white/nonwhite; human/animal. We have seen how these dualisms mediate

³⁹ “beaucoup d’oeufs gros comme de petits pois, et du plus beau jaune doré du monde.”

⁴⁰ “Tout le corps de l’oeil parut comme une perle, parfait en rondeur, en blancheur, et en lustre, la petite prunette noire et vive environnée de son petit cercle, du plus bel or du monde, et ce cercle d’or bordé d’un autre petit cercle de couleur de rose.”

⁴¹ See Adam’s chapter on “The Feminist Traffic of Animals,” which plays on Irigaray’s notion of the traffic in women. Adam remarks: “By choosing the word *traffic* I imply that similarities in the treatment of ‘disposable’ or ‘usable’ bodies exist” (111).

power and value hierarchies of domination: man dominates woman; culture dominates nature; whites dominate people of color . . . a subject dominates an object; humans dominate animals. The eradication of a logic of domination as it is sustained, perpetuated, and enacted through these cultural sets becomes one of the goals of ecofeminism. (132)

Arguably, Scudéry's representation of her two chameleons—and of animals in general—works to undo precisely the dichotomies that subject the non-human animal to the human. In the same vein that Scudéry challenged the male domination of women, freeing up women's voices and proposing women as ideal, sublime models to be valued for themselves (and not on the marriage market), so she challenges here the human domination of the non-human animal by endowing her chameleons with reason, dignity, and the possibility of cross-species *amitié*.

Scudéry will continue to defend the cause of animals in *Moral Conversations* (*Entretiens de Morale*), published in 1692, in which the character Clarice deplores the killing of animals for human sustenance: "nothing is more horrible than to kill animals to live, natural reason would not go that far, and if I had not found this practice established, I would never have dared thought that one should inhumanely kill so many beasts that do us no harm at all" (171).⁴² Interestingly, it is the male *salonnier*, Polidore, who invokes the Bible and political economy to counter Clarice's condemnation of the killing of animals. Clarice concedes Polidore's point (perhaps out of *politesse*) but adds: "We have great sheepfolds constructed, we provide the herds with a shepherd and a dog to protect them from wolves, and we take them to good pastures to feed them well, and then all of this care leads to killing them in order to eat them" (171-72).⁴³ Clarice gets the last word here, foregrounding the inherent contradictions and cruelty of animal husbandry, in which caring for non-human animals proves to be completely instrumental, ultimately subjecting the sheep to the needs of humans.

Interestingly, Descartes himself realized the potential cruelty of killing animals if we accept that they are reasonable creatures. In a 1649 letter to Henry More, the philosopher explains that his opinion about the lack of reason or thought in animals "is not so much cruel to animals as indulgent to men—at least to those who are not given to the superstitions of Pythagoras [who advocated for vegetarianism and whom Scudéry admired] since it absolves them from the suspicion of crime when they eat or kill animals" (*Animals Reader* 62). While Descartes seeks to legitimate the consumption of animals by denying them reason—thus being able to insist upon their instrumentality—Scudéry challenges the practice of eating meat, which is in line with her understanding of and relations to non-human animals.

Scudéry's interest in animals as thinking, feeling beings spans her career. As early as *The Illustrious Women* (*Les Femmes illustres*), published in 1642, Scudéry uses examples taken from the animal kingdom to propose the possibility that women may be endowed with more reason than men. In Sappho's harangue to her friend Erinna, she states:

⁴² "rien n'est si horrible, que de tuer des animaux pour vivre, la raison naturelle n'iroit pas là, et si je n'avois pas trouvé cét usage établi, je ne me serois jamais avisée, qu'il fallust tuer inhumainement tant de bestes qui ne nous font point de mal."

⁴³ "On fait bastir de grandes bergeries, on donne aux troupeaux un berger et un chien pour les garder des loups, et les mener dans de bons paturages pour les bien nourrir, et puis tous ces soins aboutissent à les tuer pour les manger."

For consider, Erinna, this almost universal order that we see among all animals who live in the woods and in caverns: you will see, that those who are born with strength and courage are often not very dexterous, and not very intelligent: and that the [physically] weak ordinarily have a stronger instinct and are closer to reason than those to whom Nature gave other advantages. You can well judge that according to this order, Nature having given more strength and courage to men than women, also must have given us more wit and more judgment. (429-30)⁴⁴

Here Scudéry draws from observations of non-human animals to validate the intellectual merits of women; later she will use the strategies she employed to legitimate women as reasonable beings to rehabilitate the chameleon, as well as other animals. Although some might criticize Scudéry for anthropomorphizing, her association of human and non-human animals ends up fostering empathy towards the latter and in fact moves away from anthropocentrism. As Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman have argued, “if humans were correct in their anthropomorphic assumption that, *grosso modo*, animals thought and felt as humans did, for that very reason humans would no longer be justified in using animals as stage props to act out certain ways of being human—no more than other humans may be used as a means to serve the ends of others” (4-5). The fact that Scudéry argues against an instrumentalist conception of the non-human animal indeed complements Daston and Mitman’s nuanced view of anthropomorphism.

By depicting Méléon as an exemplary *ami*, recognizing his agency, and representing the chameleon as endowed with reason, emotion, and beauty, Scudéry promotes the chameleon to the position of the animal sublime. As such, her account of chameleons constitutes one of the most striking examples—a culmination of sorts—of her career-long attempts to formulate an alternative narrative to the Cartesian, scientific discourse of her day. In many ways her prescient defense of the chameleon’s inherent, non-instrumental value announces future developments in animal rights, just as she offers a very early expression of future ecofeminist concerns in her ability to link the instrumental objectification of non-human animals to the power structures that keep women in socially subordinate roles. Indeed, Scudéry proposes an early modern animal ethics that acknowledges the reason, agency, and feelings of non-human animals.

Submission received 1 July 2015

Revised version accepted 26 January 2016

Works Cited

Adams, Carol J. *Neither Man nor Beast: Feminism and the Defense of Animals*. New York: Continuum, 1994. Print.

Alciat, André. *Les Emblemes de M. André Alciat*. Cologne: Jean de Tournes, 1616. Print.

⁴⁴ “Car considerez Erinne, cét ordre presque Universel, que l’on voit entre tous les animaux, qui vivent dans les bois et dans les cavernes: vous verrez, que ceuz qui sont nez avec de la force et du coeur, sont bien souvent peu adroits, et peu intelligents: et que les foibles pour l’ordinaire, ont un instinct plus puissant, et sont plus près de la raison; que ceux à qui la Nature, a donné d’autres avantages. Vous jugez bien que selon cét ordre, la Nature ayant donné plus de force et plus de courage aux hommes qu’aux femmes; elle doit aussi nous avoir donné, et plus d’esprit, et plus de jugement.”

- Baudoin, Jean, trans. *Iconologie ou, explication nouvelle de plusieurs images, emblemes, et autres figures*. By Cesar Ripa. Paris: Matthieu Guillemot, 1644. Print.
- Clarke, Desmond M. *Descartes's Theory of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Print.
- Cureau de la Chambre, Marin. *Recueil des epistres, lettres, et prefaces de Monsieur de la Chambre*. Paris: Claude Barbin, 1664. Print.
- . *Traité de la connoissance des animaux*. Paris: Pierre Rocolet, 1643. Print.
- Crockett, Clayton. "On Sublimation: The Significance of Psychoanalysis for the Study of Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68.4 (2000): 837-55. Print.
- Delehanty, Ann. *Literary Knowing in Neoclassical France: From Poetics to Aesthetics*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2013. Print.
- Descartes, René. *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. Volume 4 Correspondance. Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1901. Print.
- Duggan, Anne E. *Salonnières, Furies, and Fairies: The Politics of Gender and Cultural Change in Absolutist France*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005. Print.
- Fumaroli, Marc. *L'âge de l'éloquence*. Genève: Droz, 1980. Print.
- Furetière, Antoine. *Dictionnaire universel*. La Haye: Arnout et Reinier Leers, 1690.
- Grande, Nathalie. "Une vedette des salons: le caméléon." *L'animal au XVIIe siècle*. Ed. Charles Mazouer. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2003. 89-102. Print.
- Harth, Erica. *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. Print.
- Harrison, Peter. "The Virtues of Animals in Seventeenth-Century Thought." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59.3 (1998): 463-84. Print.
- . "Descartes on Animals." *Philosophical Quarterly* 42.167 (1992): 219-27. Print.
- Johannesen, Richard L. "The Emerging Concept of Communication as Dialogue." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* XVII.4 (1971): 373-82. Print.
- Kalof, Linda, and Amy Fitzgerald, eds. *The Animals Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings*. Oxford: Berg, 2007. Print.
- Kerviler, René. *Marin et Pierre Cureau de la Chambre (1596-1693). Etude sur leur vie et leurs écrits*. Le Mans: Pellechat, 1877. Print.
- Longinus. *Aristotle, Horace, Longinus: Classical Literary Criticism*. New York: Viking, 1965. Print.
- Lopez, Denis. "L'animal du XVIIe siècle: fond de tableau théologique, mythologique, philosophique (quelques points d'ancrage)." *L'animal au XVIIe siècle*. Ed. Charles Mazouer. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2003. 11-25. Print.
- Mattioli, Pierandrea. *Les Commentaires de M. P. André Matthiöle sur les six livres de Pedacius Dioscoride*. Trans. Antoine du Pinet. Paris: Claude Rigaud and Claude Obert, 1628. Print.
- Melzer, Sara E. "The Relation de voyage: A Forgotten Genre of 17th-Century France." *Relations & Relationships in Seventeenth-Century French Literature*. Ed. Jennifer R. Perlutter. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2006. 33-52. Print.

- Paré, Ambroise. *Les oeuvres d'Ambroise Paré*. 12th edition. Lyon: Jean Grégoire, 1664. Print.
- Perrault, Claude. "Le caméléon." *Description anatomique d'un caméléon, d'un castor, d'un ours et d'une gazelle*. Paris: Frédéric Léonard, 1669. 3-48. Print.
- Pettegree, Andrew, and Malcolm Walsby, eds. *French Books II & IV. Books Published in France before 1601 in Latin and Languages other than French*. Boston: Brill, 2012. Print.
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- . "Nature, self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism." *Hypatia* 6.1 (Spring 1991): 3-27. Print.
- Rapin, René. *Du grand ou du sublime dans leus moeurs et dans les differentes conditions des hommes*. Amsterdam: Pierre Mortier, 1686. Print.
- Sahlins, Peter. "A Tale of Three Chameleons: The Animal between Science and Literature in the Age of Louis XIV." *French Thinking about Animals*. Ed. Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2015. 15-30. Print.
- Saunders, Alison, *The Seventeenth-Century French Emblem: A Study in Diversity*. Geneva: Droz, 2000. Print.
- Scudéry, Madeleine de. *Mademoiselle de Scudéry, sa vie et sa correspondance*. Ed. Rathery, Edme Jacques Benoît, and Boutron. Paris: Léon Techener, 1873. Print.
- . *Entretiens de morales*. 1692. 2 volumes. Paris: Jean Anisson, 1693. Print.
- . *Nouvelles Conversations de morale, dédiées au roy*. 1688. La Haye: n.p., 1692. Print.
- . *Les femmes illustres ou les harangues heroïques*. Paris: Sommaville, 1642. Print.
- Serjeantson, Richard. "The Passions and Animal Language, 1540-1700." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62.3 (2001): 425-44.
- Skemp, Mary L. "Reading a Woman's Story in Marguerite de Navarre's *La Coche*." *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 31.2 (Winter 2005): 279-303.
- Steiner, Gary. "Animals as Subjects and the Rehabilitation of Humanism." *Critical Animal Studies: Thinking the Unthinkable*. Ed. John Sorenson. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2014. 79-92. Print.
- Waldau, Paul. *Animal Studies: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Print.
- Weisberg, Zipporah. "The Trouble with Posthumanism: Bacteria Are People Too." *Critical Animal Studies: Thinking the Unthinkable*. Ed. John Sorenson. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2014. 93-116. Print.