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Regressive Evolution? Animal/Human Relationships in Homer and Today

By Debbi Hoepner

Civilization is reaching ahead. Humans never stop changing; changing their world, that is. We want more, better, and quicker advancements: flights to far planets; cures for all diseases; cheap, synthetic replacements; and computers and robots to work for us. All these inventions seem to suggest evolutionary progress, but is there an area where evolution is halting, or even regressing?

Human relationships may fall into this area. I am speaking not only of human-to-human interactions, but also the generally overlooked interaction between humans and animals. Animals play a part in all human lives, whether as food, pets, spectacles in zoos, or economic possessions. Although there are some conservationists and other enlightened individuals who respect animals, it appears the majority of humans have shown regression, not evolution in their attitudes toward animals.

In attempting to show this negative evolution in human-to-animal relationships, an examination of one of the oldest known texts can be used as a comparison to today: Homer's *The Odyssey*. Homer's epic shows a rich interplay between the animal species and the human race. Three forms of relationships exist in *The Odyssey*: humans dominating animals, equality between humans and animals, and animals dominating humans. These three relationships can be compared to modern interplay to examine whether changes have occurred in human and animal relationships.

Human domination of animals appears frequently in Homer's epic and also today. In each case these roles involve occupations such as farming, herding, transporting, and hunting animals (for food and sport). Odysseus, the main character in *The Odyssey*, exemplifies hunting for sport and for food when he sees a buck above Kirkê's cabin.

*I hit him
square in the spine midway along his back*

I set one foot against him, pulling hard

*to wrench my weapon from the wound, then left it
butt-end on the ground. I plucked some withies
and twined a double strand into a rope—
enough to tie the hocks of my huge trophy* (170)

Animals performed the same tasks in *The Odyssey* as today, but animals were more important in Greek times because they were generally the only resource available. Today there are many inventions that take the place of animal labor, such as machinery for farming, gathering, and transporting. One area, however, in which modern humans appear to have maintained or even increased dominance is hunting for sport. Odysseus calls his kill a “trophy,” indicating victory: victory by domination. The method of killing was for sport, yet the purpose of the kill was to provide food for his starving men.

Aside from conservationists, in today’s society many humans kill for sport, but rarely for any purpose but to kill. Animal “trophies” can be hides, heads, antlers, or hoofs, with the carcass discarded. Ironically, a world dedicated to improving and modernizing is showing itself more wasteful than Homer’s ancient civilization. Animal lives currently are taken for a less useful form of “victory.”

In the area of humans dominating animals, it appears that ancient humans and modern humans both dominate, yet modern humans generally dominate more extensively and for seemingly less purpose. Modern humans have less reason to dominate animals; there are other means of food for existence, but many humans display an inner, emotional desire to rule. An emotion, not a need, appears to drive modern man into dominating more than the earlier civilizations.

A second level of interaction in *The Odyssey* is equality between animals and humans. In Homer’s time, there were generally only two socio-economic classes: the peasant or worker and royalty or upper class. Once either in the upper or lower classes as determined by birth, people knew that they would most likely live their lives at the same level; therefore, they were not as status-conscious as many people are today. They had no need to dominate creatures more helpless than themselves. Humans could delegate responsibility and credit to animals without feeling as though they were harming themselves in the eyes of others.

One way in which Homer shows the equality of humans and animals is by the use of epithets which ascribe animal qualities to humans. *Lionhearted* Akhilleus and *snake-like* Kirkê are animal-related epithets endowing humans with animal qualities. Another equality relationship can be seen in Homer’s characterization of Odysseus’s wife, Penélopê, during her lament over her husband’s absence and her son’s journey to find his father: “[Penélopê’s] mind turning at bay, like a cornered

lion / in whom fear comes as hunters close the ring" (76). Similes related to emotional states are also found, like, "quick as a cat [Kirkê] opened the door" (174), and, "[Odysseus] came out rustling like a mountain lion" (103). These animal metaphors vividly portray an abstract emotion and to Homer and his listeners in no way diminished his characters.

Another illustrating passage is when Odysseus and his men are trapped in the Kyclope's cave and the monster is threatening to kill and eat them. Odysseus's responsibility is to save as many of his men as possible, however he can. The only way that he can think to accomplish this is to form a symbiotic linkage with the animals:

*I tied [the sheep] silently together, twining
cords of willow from the ogre's bed;
then slung a man under each middle one
to ride there safely, shielded left and right.
So three sheep could convey each man. I took
the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,
and hung myself under his kinky belly,
pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep
in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.*
(158)

Odysseus relied upon animals who everyday relied on humans for their existence. The two were equal.

But clawing to the top at any cost seems to be the modern theme challenging Homeric equality. Today's humans are programmed to be independent and self-sufficient, so there is not much room left for sharing. Animals and humans are occasionally put on equal levels, but oddly enough primarily to derogate the humans. Such expressions as "low as a snake," "fat as an elephant," or "dirty as a dog" are common, but few today would think to describe someone favorably with Homer's metaphor "lion-hearted," or a simile such as "rustling like a mountain lion." The least admirable qualities of the animals are applied to humans to make other humans view them as equal to animals and, therefore, less than any other human. To admit equality to an animal would be degrading. Even if the person is comparing another to the admirable qualities of an animal (sly as a fox), association with that animal's savage qualities is often evoked in ways unthought of by Homer. In this sense, by making them equal, actually the human is still dominating below the surface.

Thus instructive differences appear between the equality of humans and animals in Homer's time and in the present. Ancient animals were considered equal to humans on many occasions, not only in times of need. But modern animals are most often evoked when a derogatory connotation is required.

Homer's third level of interaction between humans and animals, the domination of humans by animals, is almost absent in the modern, or post-modern world. In the ancient texts, animals surpass human beings when they act as "valuables," serve as protectors, deliver signs or messages, qualify as equals to gods, and complete a task humans left unfinished.

Statues and ornamentation made out of precious metals and jewels many times in *The Odyssey* depict animals, not humans. There is no mention of human statues, human ornamentation on clothing or war gear, or on basic household items such as staffs or furniture—all of which are in the design of animals quite frequently. When Penélopê is confronted by Odysseus disguised as a beggar, he tells her that he has recently seen Odysseus. In his recounting of the tale, he tells of a special brooch, a distinguishing mark, that depicted a hunting dog pinning a spotted fawn in agony between its forepaws. Penélopê cries as she recalls fastening the golden brooch on Odysseus. Sculpture, also, is presented as being in animal forms. Alkinoös's mansion is flanked by an entranceway of silver sculpted into hounds—hounds to guard the prince's house and cause him never to grow old.

When sacrificial animals are needed or desired, often precious ornamentation is used to make the animal's appearance more attractive to please or subdue the gods. Thus, not only are animals used for the sacrifice because they represent something admirable to please the gods, they are further embellished by being adorned with items the ancient people equate with wealth: "The smith now gloved each horn in pure foil / beaten out of the gold that Nestor gave him—/ a glory and delight for the goddess' eyes" (48).

Animals also give protection in *The Odyssey*. Sometimes this means physical protection, as in shielding the human's body with their own, but most often animal remains are used to make protective equipment and clothing. Odysseus wears a dogskin cap, shields are made from cow's hides, and Eidothea uses sealskins as a disguise for Menelâos to escape the Ancient Sea Salt. Beeswax shields Odysseus's men's ears from the Seirênês' songs, and Aiolos holds the intrepid storm winds for Odysseus's use in a bag sewn neck-to-tail from a bull's hide.

Whenever dreams or signs are sent from the gods to any of the characters in *The Odyssey*, they take the form of animals pursuing a task, and from these the humans put themselves in the animals' place and then interpret the dreams to fit their particular situation. Penélopê's dream occurs during the time when Odysseus is still disguised as a beggar, so unknowingly she asks him to help her explain a dream in

which she sees twenty fat geese feeding on grain near her house. Then a mountain eagle comes down and breaks the necks of the geese and strews the bodies across the yard. Odysseus tells her he feels certain this is a good sign that Odysseus will soon return and rid the house of suitors.

Since these signs and messages are sent by the gods in the form of animals, animals appear to be able to get closer to the gods than can the humans. Several passages reveal that special herds and flocks are overseen by the gods, and that these animals never die. Thus, they obtain immortality denied humans. One of the best examples of this special relationship is when Teirêsias warns Odysseus of the troubles waiting in his future. One of the specific stories that Odysseus is forewarned about concerns the sacred cattle of Hêlios on the island of Thrinakia:

*When you make landfall on Thrinakia first
and quit the violent sea, dark on the land
you'll find the grazing herds of Hêlios
by whom all things are seen, all speech is known.
Avoid those kine, hold fast to your intent,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaka.
But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction
for ship and crew. Though you survive alone,
bereft of all companions, lost for years,
under strange sail shall you come home, to find
your own house filled with trouble: insolent men
eating your livestock as they court your lady.*
(188)

From the evidence shown, today's world would appear to be slowly growing away from the rich, varying, and nourishing relationships between animals and humans found in ancient times: we have lost the perception of animal superiority over humans in the sense which it existed in *The Odyssey*. Our changing culture has narrowed our perception to the level of human dominance of animals at all times. For many modern people there is no justification for animals except to provide for humans in their struggle to be best.

In some modern instances animals enjoy a little pampered status, such as pets for companionship or animals as valuables to their owner. Yet often such behavior is subject to jokes and embarrassment revelatory of the fact today's world tends to place animals lower in rank than any human. They are but a stepping stone for human advancement.

In the area of human and animal relationships, a negative evolution seems to be occurring from ancient times. Animals played multiple roles in ancient Greece, and from then until present day, animals have lost

prestige and been pulled down by human dominance. Perhaps humans no longer have the huge need for animals that they experienced before. Inventions, especially technological advancements, emerge as the culprit which broke the animal/human relationship.

Work Cited

Homer, *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1963.