

Adults Together

*Mares, Women, and the
Enduring Constraints on
Mature Multispecies Relations*

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Abstract: Americans who spend time with common mammalian companion animals do not typically spend much time around reproductively mature animals, as laws and cultures support the widespread spaying and neutering of pets (with some significant exceptions). However, one important population of humans and animals does not entirely match this trend: horse people. While male companion horses are very commonly castrated, or “gelded”, female horses are almost universally allowed to mature into fully reproductive individuals. For many animal enthusiasts, mares are the only reproductively mature mammals other than humans that they ever spend time with. This lack of experience with full animal maturity, in its physical and behavioural senses, has shaped human paradigms for relating to mares. The female body of the companion horse, then, because it is at once fully chaste and also fully sexualized unlike any other nonhuman body most humans are exposed to, is both a body to be managed and a uniquely effective screen on which to project complex cultural values and gendered anxieties.

Starting with an interdisciplinary examination of the veterinary practice of pharmaceutically regulating mares’ hormones, followed by an analysis of public discourses in art, literature, and social media that interpellate relationships between mares and women, this essay argues that contemporary techniques of disciplining the sexual maturity of mares have deep historical and cultural roots. This essay also expands a growing body of work that includes material multispecies relationships within sexuality studies. By attending to the strategies through which full adulthood and maturity are not afforded to companion animals, we can see how stubborn patriarchal patterns become persistently embedded in familial multispecies relationships.

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used to spend a lot of time with a wonderful horse who would frequently ask his closest humans to hold his tongue. He would look right at you, stick out his tongue, and gently place it right on your torso between your chin and your sternum. Not licking, mind, but just there. If you didn't respond by grasping it, he'd start to nudge your chest with increasing force. He didn't want to rest his tongue on you, he wanted you to hold it. Horse tongues are large, thick, and muscular, fitting their size and eating habits. It is an uncanny and disorienting part of the body to touch (who touches a tongue? Even your own tongue? With your hands?). This request was always funny, and always incredibly strange, but it was clear he derived great comfort from it. He would rest his eyes, stand stock still, and just breathe his big slow horse breaths. The gesture never failed to result in absolute stillness between human and horse, just breathing, for a few minutes. I would often find myself closing my own eyes, allowing myself to forget the strangeness of this odd intimacy, not trying to put words around it, and surrendering to the connection it fostered. I was a teenager then, and it felt both wrong and right, but many adolescent experiences felt both wrong and right, and I wonder now if I would have responded differently to this intimacy at other times in life. But interpretation aside, it felt good for horse and human in ways that neither of us—for different species-specific reasons—could speak about, and in that sense, it united us in those moments simply as two barn-bound beings with bodies and desires that extended into but also well beyond the realm of sex.

In the horse's case, sex was no stranger; he was a breeding stallion. His life was entirely shaped by the preservation of his body so he could safely produce and ejaculate semen. His living space and daily schedule prioritized his sexual labour in order to suit the desires of humans who wanted to create more horses. I was there as part of this professional management. I was paid to work at the barn, keeping his stall clean and giving him exercise, and taking care of the other horses who lived there. Several other humans were also intimately involved in the bodily functions of this commercial sex enterprise.¹ In this context,

1 For a more detailed account of the multispecies sexual labour of the breeding shed, see Vaught, "How to Make a Horse Have an Orgasm".

human contact with the stallion's sexual organs and human orchestration of his sexual behaviour were not seen as unseemly—it was work. But in this limited, circumscribed, highly controlled and sexualized life, his asking of a teenage girl to hold his tongue while she cleaned his living quarters seemed to be the more uncomfortably transgressive action. It was sensitive and personal. It could not be contained by the bounds of his commercial utility to humans. It had literally nothing to do with the sex that saturated his existence. Having his tongue held was a way for him to break from those constraints and be known, even if just for a little while before we had to go back to work.

This essay is not about that horse, or even about stallions, but about mares and women. It has been pointed out to me that it is perhaps counterproductive to the aims of this essay to begin an essay about mares with a story about a stallion—a critique to which I concede. But I nevertheless begin with this anecdote because it is a key origin point for the kinds of questions this essay pursues about what affinities are possible between sexually mature humans and horses, and how human attention to the constraints we erect around gender, and around human and animal sexuality, can help excavate and expand better possibilities to build horse–human relationships in ways that are not often thought to be possible given these constraints. The kind of relating I describe above was made possible in part by the fact that the horse in question was a stallion, whose gentle transgressions could be accepted in a way that a mare's might not have been. This essay explores how forging and maintaining human–horse affinities often replicates and imposes harmful limits on what kinds of relationships are possible, particularly with mares. And for many women and other humans who might otherwise define themselves somewhere along the feminist spectrum, these relationships expose how quickly one reaches the limits of feminist praxis when it comes to relationships with animals, particularly ones who are mature.²

2 I would argue this is an issue of particular relevance to white feminism, which tracks both with the whiteness of mainstream European/Euro-American horse cultures, and with the much longer traditions among feminists of colour to pursue expansive, relational, more-than-human feminisms.

In prior essays on the equine breeding shed, I have foregrounded the shared experiences of humans and breeding stallions, in part because this is where my own lived experience in these spaces came from. I learned a lot about stallions because of the proximity of our workspaces and the centring and protection of their semen as the literal well from which breeding businesses spring. Thinking memories, practices, and experiences through the interdisciplinary lenses of multispecies ethnography, animal history, and gender and sexuality studies has opened up space to grapple openly with contemporary social, narrative, and technical structures that police the intermingling of human and equine bodies. Writing about equine cloning, however, showed me how even the management of a nonsexual process can be heavily influenced by human sexual anxieties, and the material realities of that practice can be shaped by—even created by—its narrative interpretation.³ In turn, this led me to think about the management of equine sexual lives beyond the breeding shed, where sexual behaviours and activities are excised out of human–horse and horse–horse relationships. It struck me that human–animal relationships in which sex is present are quite rare compared to those where it is not. But sexuality is of course present in all. So, in terms of sexuality, what are humans doing with the horses who are *not* having sex?

Human–horse affinities, along with those between humans and other nonhuman companions, must invariably define and enforce parameters around sex and sexual maturity. However, for the last half-century or so, as Susan McHugh has shown, contending with sexual maturity in companion animals in the United States has been largely a one-way street leading towards near-total human control of animal sexuality. This has been accomplished through the human removal of nonhuman sexual organs and behaviours from shared spaces and public view.⁴ Sexual maturity in companion animals generally exists at one of these human-controlled extremes: it is either surgically removed, or it is the defining feature of a commodity-producing human / nonhuman labour structure. Desexing surgeries are a key technology for creating permissible conditions for humans and

3 Vaught, “A Question of Sex”, 98–132.

4 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 115–26.

companion animals to live together, effectively excising sexuality as a dimension to their relationships. For breeding animals, whether those on factory farms or stallions like my tongue-wielding friend, their sexuality remains intact only to be commercially appropriated for human use. In both cases, their bodies, behaviours, and sex acts are kept segregated from most public human and nonhuman shared spaces, and sexual choices and expressions are directed by humans.

As animal reproduction has consistently been outsourced to professional and commercial domains hidden from public view, “humane” relationships between humans and nonhumans have come to be distinguished by a strong deterrence of sex and sexual behaviours. Welfare activism on behalf of farmed animals, for example, has a powerful focus on the reproductive abuses of animal bodies and the intersectional abuses of vulnerable humans and animals who, in the name of food production, get roped together into exploitative forms of sexual labour.⁵ Over time, an oppositional binary has come to describe profit-driven reproduction on one side and care-driven companionship on the other. Yet companionship, which appears to be the “humane” side of this binary, is no less constructed and enforced through human control of reproductive potential.

Such “humane” companion relationships are in large part predicated on managing sexual maturity by erasing the sexual lives of animals and withholding human affection from animals whose sexual behaviours distract from human pursuits. McHugh reminds us that the management of affection is a key feature of the de-sexing rhetoric that functions alongside rhetorics of human responsibility for an animal’s safety and comfort. In the logic of desexing, which precludes a companion animal having sex with a member of its own species, “affection,” McHugh writes, “is conceived of as not prevented (among animals) so much as aided (between pets and people) by veterinary surgery.”⁶ Humans tend to care much less about the first part of this logic — the subjective consequences of

5 See, for example, Blanchette, “Herding Species”, and artist lynn mowson’s “Speaking Meat” and “Boobscape” projects at lynnmowson.com.

6 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 128.

the removal of sex and sexuality from an animal's life— than they do about the second: the attention which they jealously guard.

It is this connection between desexing and affinity which pointed me towards mares for this essay. For horses as much as home-bound pets, sexual maturity appears to be a chief threat to the contemporary arrangements of multispecies sociality. As it happens, policing sexuality in non-breeding male horses has proven to be very effective and largely noncontroversial. Most male horses are castrated at a young age, and such horses, called geldings, generally integrate easily into the European and North American companion horse cultures that prize the absence of sexual features and behaviours. Despite the strong cultural preference for equine asexuality, however, mares are very rarely prevented from reaching reproductive maturity. Unlike most domestic animals of both sexes, especially cats and dogs, who routinely undergo surgical removal of reproductive organs in order to enter into human families, it is not routine to surgically alter female horses regardless of whether humans intend to breed the mare or not. In the twenty-first century, for many humans who are involved with animals for companionship, pleasure, and competition, mares are the only reproductively mature female mammals besides women that they spend time with.

Here we have a situation where the sexual behaviour of mares— primarily their oestrus cycles and the behaviours that accompany them— become seen as a disruption to a “norm” of nonsexuality. When the behaviour of sexually mature mares gets in the way of their relationships with humans, it is regularly maligned as a detriment of character and positioned as a problem to be solved. And for a large number of women whose companion horses are mares, the fact that they share ovulatory cycles and their accompanying discomforts has unfortunately not led to multispecies solidarity or a liberating interpretation of sexuality and its biological and social expressions. Women and people with ovaries and uteruses are generally just as likely to participate in the sexual degradation of mares as are men.⁷

7 Johnson, “Maritude”, 119–34.

Such a situation leaves little room to learn about or explore the actual sexuality of reproductively mature animals. The paucity of interpretive options means that the hierarchies of power that govern the relationships of sexually mature humans and nonhumans often go unmarked, unspoken, and therefore unchallenged and unchanged. This is where gender studies, queer studies, and animal studies together can help expose how current and historical rhetorics, representations, and practices reveal how often current norms replicate power relations that we might not think we believe in or support in other contexts. In this light, the severe restrictions imposed on the ability of many companion animals, including horses, to live full adult lives might seem antiquated, outdated, or even unjust. Hopefully shedding light on constrained sexuality as a complex site of multispecies relational analysis can expand the possibilities for ethical ways of living together for the benefit of both humans and horses.⁸

This essay explores how the bodies of non-breeding companion mares, who ostensibly live lives of utmost sexual chastity, are nevertheless subject to human sexual control, and furthermore how female sexual maturity writ large is interpreted through representation with horses. Because it is at once fully chaste and fully sexual, unlike any other nonhuman body most humans are exposed to, the female body of the companion horse is both a body to be managed and a uniquely effective screen onto which to project complex cultural values and gendered anxieties. This essay will trace historical and contemporary interventions that humans have constructed in order to blunt, disparage, or twist the bodies of mares into markers of unruly femininity and feminine sexuality. It will further show how both the literal and representational affections and affinities between humans and mares are built upon the prude blunting of their sexualities. Such interventions—whether they be pharmaceutical, representational, or digitally mediated, as each of the following sections of this essay takes on—expose the existence of unexplored subjective dimensions to our equine companions that have

8 Several authors are making brilliant inroads into queer and animal studies with an eye towards more ethical multispecies futures. See, for example, Chen, *Animacies*; Rosenberg, “How Meat Changed Sex”; Parreñas, *Decolonizing Extinction*.

been hidden by such constraints. The central project of this essay is to facilitate conditions under which we can ask, what other possibilities are there for relating to mares that have been foreclosed by our current norms? Can we envision a world in which these foreclosures are not seen as necessary? And what might it look like to create more space for animal sexuality in our shared lives outside of the unilaterally segregated boundaries that currently exist?

I do not have concrete answers. Here, I draw from multispecies, feminist, and queer possibilities of co-existing in order to interrogate norms of human prudishness about companion animal sexuality (with full respect to the fact that these norms differ from region to region, and are particularly potent in the United States), and to show, where they exist, how these norms are tied to the demand that companion animals relate most closely to the humans who claim them. The unique role of mares offers and opportunity to understand the overall limits of existing norms for mares, women, and feminine people. To be clear, in this and other essays I've written that explore the sexual dimensions of animal and human lives, I am not suggesting or advocating for a world in which humans and horses have sexual relations with each other. But the very fact that this has been suggested to me as a "logical conclusion" to my paths of inquiry reveals the extreme narrowness of knowledge and imagination that most people have about the myriad roles of sexuality in their own lives, not to mention its centrality to the experiences and subjectivities of nonhuman beings and the idea that nonhuman beings might pursue relations with other nonhumans.⁹ If the only response that some people can come up with to my question, "what does it look like if we do not unilaterally segregate and /or preclude animal sexuality as a category in human lives with animals?" is, "does that mean you are saying that people and animals should have sex?" this just proves to me that human and animal sexualities need to be all the more thoroughly

9 The essays contained in Indigenous anthropologist Kim TallBear's *Critical Polyamorist* blog offer many lessons in understanding why "Western" and scientific binaries erected between human/animal, male/female, and monogamy/non-monogamy contribute to this narrow worldview.

and unflinchingly examined.¹⁰ I am not asking us all to have sex. I am asking: what would it take, and what might it look like, for us all to live together, as adults?

Regu-Mate and the Mythology of the “Moody” Mare

In contemporary North American horse cultures, the human expectations for how to spend time with non-breeding horses are largely circumscribed by externally determined schedules. Regardless of their sex, horses in these structures are expected to behave the same way every day in order to conform to the schedules of humans: lesson horses need to be willing to be ridden at lesson time; horses owned by working amateurs need to be ready to ride when that human can make room in their schedule; humans who like to attend horse shows expect their horses to be ready to load on the trailer and be ridden when the show happens. As noted above, many of the horses in these roles are geldings. The surgical alterations they have undergone, provided they were gelded at a young age, arrest their sexual development. While their bodies are fully adult, their hormonal development is stunted so that they do not develop and exhibit the sexual behaviours of stallions. Individual exceptions abound, but on the whole desexing makes most geldings sexually immature, and thus generally compliant and human-schedule-friendly. Horses born with female sex organs, however, do not typically undergo surgical alteration. While removing testicles is often an uncomplicated, inexpensive outpatient surgery, removing ovaries is an expensive invasive surgery that comes with more risk to large equine bodies (in comparison to dogs and cats), and thus fewer veterinarians have the necessary surgical training or facilities. Mixed-sex companion horse barns are therefore often populated by sexually immature males and sexually mature mares, both living in utmost chastity.

In this context, the mares’ sexuality is often interpreted as a disruption. Like in women and any person with a uterus, oestrus cycles in

¹⁰ However, if you are interested in exploring ideas about shared sexualized intimacies with domestic companion animals, perhaps a good first stop is Carolee Schneemann’s video installation, “Infinity Kisses” (2008). Additionally, Kari Weil discusses the patriarchal dimensions of bestial taboos in “Miss Mazeppa and the Horse with No Name.”

horses can cause abdominal tenderness, internal pain, and changes in mood, including a strong desire for privacy. Pain and discomfort during oestrus causes mares to react negatively — understandably so — to grooming and riding, which requires abdominal exertion of painful muscles and also much human touching of sensitive equine flanks. Accompanying hormonal fluctuations can send mares into expansive desirous vocalizations, which can be extremely loud and frequent, and can be directed at every horse within range. Mares in oestrus will also frequently lift their tails towards other horses and urinate frequently to signal their sexual interest. Oestrus can also increase head tossing and leg striking behaviours, and some mares may aggressively lunge or kick at other horses who approach them. All of these behaviours, while perfectly explainable, leave many human handlers embarrassed and inconvenienced, if not outright angry, or even physically injured. These conditions tend to foster conflicts between humans and mares, which are couched in terms of the human's responsibility to control, even to punish, a mare's lusty expressions of sexuality in order to protect the safety of themselves and others. In much of the horse world, if a mare displays the hallmarks of sexual behaviour in public, it is commonly interpreted as a poor reflection on the human handler.

The equation of responsible companion human-animal stewardship with the control of nonhuman reproductive behaviours is quite familiar from the last half-century or so of spay/neuter campaigns directed toward domestic pets. Removing sex and sexual behaviours from the lives of animal companions has become a normative feature of human-animal relations that occur at close quarters. Spay and neuter surgeries had been available to companion pet owners since the early twentieth century, but campaigns to promote them in the US ramped up significantly in the 1970s, around the same time that some women gained the ability to control their own pregnancies through hormonal birth control. It was during this time period that the protection from sex and pregnancy which these surgeries offered became directly attached to larger discourses of animal welfare and

safety, and to definitions of responsible human care of animals.¹¹ The spectacular success of these campaigns has made spay and neuter surgeries nearly synonymous, for many, with responsible companion animal care. Indeed, it is almost a prerequisite for the acquisition of animal “personhood” that accompanies a move into a multispecies home, and whether or not they receive human affection is to a large degree dependent on the companion animal’s ability to behave “appropriately” — in that they seek nonsexual attention from other animals and nonsexual attention from us humans and the homes we provide (and, of course, our own human sexual sovereignty is uncontested in this formulation). In this framework, it is a very easy logical step to define companion horses’ sexual behaviours as unsafe, and not just in the sense of the bodily danger posed by the exuberant and energetic physicality of sexually mature mares. It is also unsafe for the relationship between human and horse — an affinity that is revealed, in these instances, to be held together by equine compliance with human expectations of “appropriate” behaviour.

Astute observers may note that the reproductive control of cats and dogs rests on a different issue than the control of horse reproduction. Cats and dogs can produce many offspring at a time, for one, and those living on the margins of domestic human lives have more opportunities to find sexual partners in ways that most companion horses do not. By contrast, horse people have never been able to lean on population-control reasoning to justify reproductive alterations. While the horse world has its share of equine population issues, widespread uncontrolled or “accidental” pregnancies are not among them in domestic settings.¹² Yet desexing surgeries in any historical context limit not only pregnancies but also the social relations between animals that would have included homospecific sex. Not only nonhuman populations but also behaviours are shaped to conform to human-defined domestic and social standards through desexing, and even the earliest pet desexing campaigns were tied directly to social control as much as biological

¹¹ McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 116.

¹² Feral horse populations in the western states, along with overbreeding of Thoroughbreds and Quarter Horses, are serious but separate issues.

control. “Gonadectomies”, McHugh reminds us, sprang from human eugenic policies, and “initially were implemented in order to control populations in ways that primarily served human self-interests.”¹³

Humans making these decisions for the animals they care for are thus cast as responsible for the health and safety of their pets, and also for the consequences of their pets’ “bad” sexual actions. The easiest resolution to this problem of responsibility, in McHugh’s analysis, has come to be “sexually altering the animals with whom we choose to share our lives.”¹⁴ This “responsible” human act of intervention into the shape and scope of their animals’ love lives and sexualities contributes to conceiving of pets as part of one’s “suburban furniture”, in McHugh’s evocative phrase — as a vital but also eminently controllable and inoffensive part of one’s domestic space.¹⁵ With the prospect of sex out of the picture, and animal desires physically blunted, humans and their companion animals can pursue heterospeciative forms of love and affinity between and around each other that do not threaten a surgically enforced sexual innocence. Such are the expected norms for human–animal companionship.

The recent vogue for referring to domestic pets as “fur children” reveals the extent to which domestic companions are expected to remain forever immature and permanently under human control in order to receive parental, not adult, love.¹⁶ The parent/child analogy of the term also deflects any potential for animal sexuality to poke through in this companion relationship: it facilitates and reinforces the necessity of non-sexual heterospeciative relations by situating sexuality alongside incest, effectively making it taboo. Population control is, under such conditions, at best a side effect of the social control that gonadectomies provide to pets and their companion humans. In this regard, companion horses find themselves roped into much the same logic as domestic pets. Despite the fact that companion horses, unlike most pet animals, live outside the human home and do not have

13 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 116.

14 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 115.

15 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 17.

16 For a fascinating ethnography documents the precarity of companion animals as members of multispecies families, see Shir-Vertesh, “Flexible Personhood”.

the same potential to “overpopulate” as pets do, they are equally subject to the easiest available tools of reproductive control. Mares—lusty and intact, not succeeding in normative orientation to humans as either child or furniture—find themselves on the outs.

For mares, the enforced control and erasure of sex and sexuality is all too often a clear prerequisite for human affection. A 2017 article in *The Chronicle of the Horse*, one of the most widely read publications across the diverse professional and amateur equine industries, described the conflict in these terms: “Everybody knows a moody mare, the one who comes into heat at every show and can’t focus on her job because she’s whinnying and flirting with the boys.”¹⁷ Such is the language that passes for contemporary horse-world common sense about what sexually mature mares are doing and how it affects their human relationships. Putting aside the overtly anthropocentric and capitalist concept that companion horses have a human-determined “job”, in this formulation, sexually mature mares who are “moody” or “can’t focus” because they’re “whinnying and flirting with the boys” are violating the terms of contemporary human–animal companionships that equate heterospeciative companion relationships with the total absence of sexual identity and undivided attention only for human companions. The terms used in this article are terms of sexual degradation—ones historically directed at women in workplace contexts, moreover—and mate guarding that serve to malign the sexualized feminine body and enforce chastity as the only appropriate behaviour. The language surrounding sexually mature behaviours in mares can easily range into misogynist territory, such as calling mares “slutty”, or by warning people that a particular mare who has a history of displaying signs of oestrus is “mare-ish”. Stallions are also sometimes spoken of with this kind of warning when people call them “studdish”—and very often when mares or stallions display sexual behaviour in public, they will both be publicly reprimanded or restrained. Julia Johnson, in her exploration of misogynist characterization of mares in American stable culture highlights the term “maritude”.¹⁸ This particular portmanteau

17 Lieser, “USEF to Examine Rules”.

18 Johnson, “Maritude”.

further reinforces a heterospecific parent/child orientation by incorporating the common parental term for obstreperous behaviour in human toddlers and teenagers: “attitude.” In each of these examples, there is a lack of conceptual ability to account for a mare’s sexual maturity as anything but a threat to human companionship.

Unable to turn to spay surgeries as a tool to arrest the development of sexual maturity in mares, many humans have taken to hormonal methods. For the past thirty-odd years, there has been one FDA-approved drug on the market for repressing oestrus and its associated behaviours in mares. Sold through veterinary prescription under the brand name Regu-Mate®, this oral solution’s active drug is a steroidal progestin called altrenogest, and it is often marketed to and spoken of in barns as a necessary intervention in mares’ reproductive cycles. Regu-Mate was approved by the FDA in 1983 and was originally intended for use by commercial breeders to help chemically coordinate and control the timing of mares’ oestrus cycles for more efficient conception. Regu-Mate works by suppressing ovulation, much like a human birth control pill. This capability made Regu-Mate appealing to people outside of the breeding world who wanted to avoid mare oestrus altogether. Owners of broodmares who were primarily interested in smoothing out their mares’ breeding schedules—Regu-Mate’s intended users—were thus quickly joined, and perhaps even eclipsed, by owners of companion mares who never intended to breed their mare, but wanted to alter their mares’ “moods” and eliminate their “flirting” to smooth out their riding schedules and public behaviours. The *Chronicle of the Horse* article cited above described it as follows: “For many competitors altrenogest, aka Regu-Mate, is a lifesaver when it comes to showing this type of mare.”¹⁹ Despite the fact that this drug is easily absorbed into human skin and can significantly affect women’s hormonal and reproductive cycles through such exposure, Regu-Mate remains an easy prescription to obtain for behavioural control of mares in settings where they are not intended for breeding. Dr Paul McClellan, a prominent performance horse veterinarian, noted that the vast majority of Regu-Mate

¹⁹ Leiser, “USEF to Examine Rules”.

doses are given to companion mares year-round for their behavioural effects. Speaking as a prescriber, McClellan suggested that “many show mares are on it year-round and at a higher dose than the recommended amount”, a result of the long-term normalization of this drug off-label in barns across horse cultures.²⁰ The common practice of permanently over-administering altrenogest ultimately produces a similar effect on mares as a spay surgery would.

Regu-Mate made the suppression of sexual maturity in mares seem as easy and as normal as desexing other companion animals, but it is no longer the only pharmaceutical option. More recently, another hormone product has entered the companion and competitive equine market. Depo-Provera, known in human medicine as a birth-control drug for women and a form of chemical “castration” for male sex offenders, is injectable medroxyprogesterone acetate, also known as MPA. These are the only uses for which this drug is FDA approved and licensed. It made its way into the horse market through compounding pharmacies, who sell their own compounded form of this drug to veterinarians. As with Regu-Mate, the adoption of this drug for horses has been less than careful, and because Regu-Mate’s ubiquitous use makes hormone regulation seem easy and safe, off-label overuse of MPA was nearly instantaneous.²¹

Its injectability has helped MPA gain quick acceptance due to the (often ignored but ever-present) health concerns over women handling the liquid feed additive Regu-Mate, and many horse owners and barn managers regularly give intramuscular injections of common equine medications without much veterinary supervision. Additionally, MPA has become popular in no small part because its desired behavioural effects are reported to be more pronounced than those of Regu-Mate, even though, in horses, it does not reliably prevent ovulation. Recent studies are suggesting that such results are due to the powerful effect MPA has on the brain. Like Valium or Xanax, MPA works on the GABA receptors in the brain to create a profound sense of calm. Dr Kent Allen, a long-time equine competition veterinarian,

²⁰ Leiser, “USEF to Examine Rules”.

²¹ Leiser, “USEF to Examine Rules”.

testified to the USEF Drugs and Medications Committee that “when it seems to be working better than altrenogest for mares, it’s likely because it’s working on the GABA receptors in their brains rather than preventing them from suffering the discomfort of ovulating.” Another veterinarian put the matter plainly: “We’re not giving it [MPA] for therapeutic reasons. We’re not giving it necessarily to keep mares out of heat. We are specifically giving it to affect their behavior.”²² What these drugs do is blunt both the visible and behavioural manifestations of sexuality in sexually mature horses. The fact that residues of MPA have begun turning up in stallions and geldings—horses who decidedly do not ovulate—also points to its wider use as a tool to govern horses’ sexual behaviours, and really any strong emotional behaviour, to suit human desires.

The pharmaceutical alteration of companion mares thus performs a similar duty as desexing surgery for domestic pets. By suppressing sexual maturity and desire, it helps remove behaviours that humans interpret as oversexualized, embarrassing, and disruptive to a friendly relationship. But in this formulation, neither the human nor the horse is getting the fullest version of the other; each is bound tightly by heterosexual and patriarchal standards of behaviour. Here, as in domestic spaces, the underlying standards of heterospeculative companion relationships can most easily be enforced if homospeculative sexuality is taken out of the picture. The hormonal blunting of mare sexuality essentially positions equine companions as children in relation to the young and adult humans with whom they spend their time. While the “problem” of sexually mature mares can be “solved” in this way, doing so merely enforces gendered standards of control while leaving the roots of those standards unquestioned, and indeed not leaving any room to ask if mares (or, for that matter, women and femmes) are at all served by these standards. Such action forecloses the possibilities for exploring fuller, more expansive relationships between sexually mature beings that might exist beyond the confinements of scientific, social, and species authority over their bodies and behaviours.

²² Leiser, “USEF to Examine Rules”.

No Room for Noncompliance: Genealogies of Representations of Women and Horses

The pharmaceutical enforcement of desexualized femininity and a parent–child human–horse relationship structure conforms to long-standing cultural beliefs about women and domesticity. Hormonal alteration enlists the bodies of female horses in the enforcement of dominant gendered and sexual norms for human and equine behaviour and kinship. In this regard, recent pharmacology follows old and familiar narrative strategies that have long governed the literary and visual representations of girls, women, and horses. Pharmacology is simply a new tool to do an old job: constraining feminine sexuality in order to enforce compliant desexed feminine roles as a “responsible” social norm. In both new pharmacology and old narration, a prudishness where desire is concerned edges out queer possibilities for reimagining and reframing adult human–horse companionship. But historical representations also abound with stories of women and girls exploring the boundaries of their respective constraints, even if the end result of those stories is to resoundingly enforce such boundaries. These stories might help inform and encourage more current projects of exploration, perhaps envision different narratives, and ideally help us effect different real-life endings by refusing to repeat the process of uncritically falling back on corrupted logics of control, as we have done with hormonal management.

In literary representations, bonds between women and horses do not often have much to do with the sex of the horse in question, because it is the woman whose sexuality will be policed, not the horse’s. Sally Mitchell’s classic analysis of women in nineteenth century English fiction points to the emergence of “sensation” novels in the 1860s as a literary space where writers and readers worked out the “enlarged possibilities for a woman of less than immaculate purity” that accompanied rapid changes in middle- and upper-class women’s education, mobility, and social expectations.²³ In such novels, associations with horses wave a red flag over young women characters who will throw the story for a sexual loop. While

²³Mitchell, *Fallen Angel*, 73.

such representations are often thrilling, depicting the liberated and unchaperoned movement away from confined domestic spaces that a horse could provide to a woman, such depictions as a rule do not narratively glorify riding women. “Aside from the new plots she creates,” Mitchell argues, referring to the numerous ways in which a woman and a horse can get into tricky social situations together, “the figure of the woman riding gives clear evidence of conservative reaction to a new social phenomenon. When a woman is introduced in a riding habit—or even more dangerously, on the foxhunting field—we can be virtually certain that trouble and impropriety will follow.”²⁴ In Mitchell’s analysis, women riders in sensation novels were often pursuing societal freedoms that were afforded to men only. The women escaped domestic confinement; they used “men’s language”; they pursued sexual aims with men inside and outside of their class; and they had ambitions to participate in public life, even just by riding in public without chaperones. Horses, by providing a fast and independent mode of transportation, were key facilitators of women’s challenges to the male prerogative to masculine social privileges (or, their “mannishness”, in less accepting terms). In assigning riding women masculine traits, sensation novelists could then punish these figures in order to re-inscribe the feminized values of class, chastity, and domesticity back onto their bodies. Riding women could find themselves far from safety, encountering dangerous weather, dangerous men, or even danger from their horse in the form of a bolt or a fall. In each of these scenarios, her return to the domestic sphere is paramount, and rescue by a man is a common feature. “Before a riding heroine can reach a happy ending,” Mitchell makes clear, “she must suffer enough weakness, illness, and humiliation to melt her down into chastened femininity.”²⁵

While Mitchell does not explicitly say so, the conservative reconstitution of riding women *as* women in these novels is entirely predicated on giving up horses for “chastened” domestic heterosexuality—there is no other alternative if the women want to live. Across the numerous sensation novels that Mitchell points to, riding women

²⁴ Mitchell, *Fallen Angel*, 75.

²⁵ Mitchell, *Fallen Angel*, 75.

who refuse this humiliation and choose to keep their horses and their shared freedoms are killed. Domesticity or death, it seems. This formula positions the horse, regardless of his or her own sex, as a navigational tool for exploring the boundaries of women's sexuality. With the mobility a horse provides, riding women can access the dangers that accompany sexual maturity, both social and physical (ostracism; rape; injury; death). But before those consequences are delivered, the horse can help women characters and readers envision a different world: they link her to her mobility, her agency, and her ability to escape the physical and social confinements that make it difficult to challenge gendered expectations of chastity and domesticity. In the novels in which riding women are punished, the horse is thus positioned as a betrayer — in its promise of impossible freedom, the horse is ultimately responsible for the fate that befalls her. Such a formula precludes any cross-species kinship unless a woman is willing to give up her social value.²⁶ Women, in these examples, are being subjected to the same physical domestication that mares are subject to pharmaceutically now. The historical purpose of this move was to protect geographic, economic, and reproductive freedom as masculine domains. Despite the obvious contextual differences, in both examples femininity and mature sexuality together are coded as “wrong”.

Real-life late-nineteenth-century women did carve out spaces to ride, and many formed relationships and even livelihoods with horses — though they could not fully escape being narrativized within this impossible death-or-domesticity framework. If a “safe” place could be described as a place where women were not liable to lose their class status, their femininity, or their lives, then a safe place for upper-class women to ride was Rotten Row. By the 1860s, for men and women, riding one's most beautiful horse in one's most beautiful clothing along Rotten Row was a well-established part of the “London

²⁶ The recent HBO miniseries *Gentleman Jack*, a fictionalized narrative about Anne Lister, a real pre-Victorian woman who loved both women and horses, still uses this trope in its narrative and visual depictions of how Lister must navigate physical and social worlds. While her relationships with horses figure prominently in her plotlines, interestingly, Lister is depicted as a woman who more often chooses to walk or drive a carriage to her destinations — not to ride.

season”, wherein social status and potential marital alliances between members of upper-class families were performed and negotiated. The rules of this performance allowed women to ride without challenging social boundaries: the road was lined with iron rails to enforce class separations, fashion had to be of the highest rank, no one was permitted to ride at high speeds, and it was expected that courtly manners should prevail. Such rules made it safe for women to ride without risking being labelled as mannish. The stated end goal of this public riding was in-class heterosexual marriage, and there was literally nowhere to go. Unlike characters in sensation novels riding headlong across the countryside, women riders on Rotten Row could “safely” ride because all other structures that upheld their gender roles — literally: iron fences! — remained in place.²⁷

But the horses ridden on Rotten Row did not simply appear from the tony stables of the Victorian well-to-do: they were bred, trained, bought, and sold, and some of the people who did this work were women. The trappings of Rotten Row were not designed to uphold the femininity of these *professional* riding women, but rather served to highlight their class and gender nonconformity by associating their position on the working side of the iron rails with sex unleashed from the ties of marriage and social class that were ostensibly preserved inside. Women horse trainers were given the moniker “pretty horse-breakers”, a sharp-edged term that pointed to their assumed sexual availability to men of the upper classes. The real live horse, like the fictional horses of sensation novels, was the means by which such transgression could occur. The most famous example is that of Catherine Walters, an accomplished working-class horse trainer hired by an ambitious London horse seller to ride his best sale horses along Rotten Row, in the hope that they would catch the eye of wealthy buyers. Walters was one among a seemingly small cadre of women horse trainers in London during those years who were not members of the highest echelons of Victorian society but who crossed the iron rails with horses. Walters famously cemented these ties with sexual relationships, eventually becoming a long-time supported courtesan.²⁸

²⁷ Kane, “Rotten Row Was Rotten”.

²⁸ Forrest, *If Wishes Were Horses*.

Horses, for Walters, provided access to a lifetime of social and economic wealth outside marriage — but only because horses and socially dangerous feminine sexuality worked in tandem.

At the risk of stating the obvious: while horse training and sex were co-interpreted through a dominant framework of transgressive feminine sexuality, women horse trainers were not all prostitutes. The professionally successful Victorian “pretty horsebreakers” who were paid for horse training but not for sex provided a much more difficult subject to interpret at the time. One noted equestrian professional, a woman named Annie Gilbert, provides an example of this vexed interpretation. She and her horse training methods were the subject of a much-discussed painting by the famed Victorian animal artist Edwin Landseer. His 1861 painting, *The Shrew Tamed*, depicts her and a horse reclining together in a stall piled high with dishevelled straw. The calm repose of the horse and the woman are belied by the signs of motion and struggle that surround them, as well as a leather strap that lies close by. While records of Gilbert’s young life or of her death remain difficult to find, equine historian Susanna Forrest found several records of Gilbert’s participation in the London social world and of her professional life as a horsewoman in upper-class Victorian circles, including riding with the Queen’s Hounds. In a blog post exploring the history of the painting and the identity of the woman it depicts, Forrest notes that the woman in Landseer’s painting has for many years been mistakenly identified as Walters by serious art historians, despite contemporary evidence clearly identifying the woman in the painting as Gilbert — a misidentification that speaks to the staying power of the horse-sex connection.²⁹

Forrest points to reactions to the painting at its 1861 unveiling at the Royal Academy, which managed to both admire and disparage Gilbert. The *London Daily News* wrote, “This picture has been painted, we hear, in compliment to Miss Gilbert, the accomplished horsewoman who has so thoroughly mastered Mr Rarey’s system of horse-taming as to have practiced it herself with perfect success.”³⁰

29 Forrest, “Who Is the Woman”.

30 Quoted in Forrest, “Who Is the Woman”.

Meanwhile, Forrest notes, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, disparaged Landseer “and his friends”, Gilbert among them, finding that “the intrusion of ‘pretty horsebreakers’ on the wall of the Academy is not less to be regretted than their presence in Rotten Row”.³¹ These reactions interpret Gilbert within the same narrow frameworks utilized by sensation novelists: her independent professional accomplishments, threatening as they were to the prerogatives of class and masculinity, are both undeniable and “regrettable”. Thankfully, as a real woman and not as a character in such a novel, Gilbert, as far as we know, did not face imminent threats to her life for choosing to live it in the company of horses (or artists!) while enjoying the economic and geographic freedoms they provided.

Forrest’s choice of excerpt from the *London Daily Times* review provides a key insight for reading Landseer’s painting and understanding more of women’s roles in the Victorian horse world. The “Mr Rarey” mentioned above is John Solomon Rarey, an American horse trainer who enjoyed brief but fervent fame across North America, Europe, and the United Kingdom for his innovative methods of horse training that emphasized kindness and communication rather than fear and violence as the central pillars of human–horse relationships. Landseer depicted Gilbert using one of Rarey’s key techniques. The reviewer interprets this technique through the familiar gendered tropes:

A vicious thoroughbred mare has had, as we see from the strap now thrown aside, its leg bound up, and after a struggle to which the condition of the straw bears witness, lies thrown. The “shrew” is at length so entirely subdued that she now permits her mistress to recline at full length on her shoulder, and even advances her muzzle at the patting of the small fair hand, as if begging for a caress to seal a better understanding for the future.³²

This reviewer identifies the horse as a mare, and moreover has chosen to identify the horse, rather than the woman, as the titular “shrew” who has, to follow the Shakespearean reference, been

31 Quoted in Forrest, “Who Is the Woman”.

32 Quoted in Forrest, “Who Is the Woman”.

lately demonstrably unwilling to be in relationship with Gilbert, but whom Gilbert has nevertheless “subdued”. Of course, the painting itself leaves it to the viewer to decide which of the two is the “tamed” shrew.³³ This reviewer, in casting the mare in this role, nevertheless plays with that ambiguity to subtly argue that neither the mare, if it is indeed a mare, nor the woman are conforming to the feminine ideals of compliance and domesticity. The mare’s late unwillingness is characterized as viciousness; likewise, Gilbert has done the work of a man but with the promise of a “caress” from a “small fair hand”. Those invested in preserving classed, raced, and gendered hierarchies used the language of sex to narrate their boundaries in service of their protection.

Yet this language does not accurately reflect Rarey’s training methods and the philosophies that undergirded them — philosophies that included making space for women to work, and making that work less violent for both horses and humans. By focusing less on Gilbert’s *sociopolitical position* as a professional horsewoman and the social narratives that were used to interpret her, and more on her *work* as a professional horsewoman, we can get a clearer sense of how such work offered *both* women *and* horses a measure of shared liberation from the stringent actual and narrative constraints that limited who they had to spend time with and how. The moment depicted in Landseer’s painting is one of the first steps that must be reached, according to Rarey’s method, before training can fully begin — it is a breakthrough moment where a horse’s resistance to the presence of a human first fully yields, and where, if done very carefully, the horse can first begin to work with a human partner. Annie Gilbert may have learned Rarey’s methods from him personally. Following the publication of his book, *The Modern Art of Taming Wild Horses*, in 1855, Rarey became an equine training celebrity and gave popular

33 Many thanks to a reviewer of this essay who also pointed out the slipperiness of species in the ambiguity of this title, as well. Given the Shakespearean reference, many viewers would be drawn to identify the woman as the “shrew”, not the horse; it is also quite rare for a nonhuman animal to be referred to metaphorically as a different species. To read the mare as the “shrew” requires that the mare be first anthropomorphized as a woman resisting the expectations of domesticity and then zoomorphized, as such a woman would be, as a shrew.

performances across the United States. He was invited to England in 1857 to improve the military training of horses there. He gave four performances for Queen Victoria during the winter of 1857 and 1858 and quickly amassed around two thousand students who paid to receive hands-on training in his methods. As historian Sharon Cregier notes, fully half or more of his students in England were women.³⁴

The leather strap cast aside in the painting was then known as The Rarey Strap, and it was used to tie one of the horse's forelegs up so that the horse had to balance on three legs. Most horses can balance on three legs without falling, but it does challenge their mobility, and it makes them have to think twice before moving if they want to avoid a fall — and, to be fair, horses do fall with this method, which is why at the time it was common to do this on large heaps of straw, as Landseer's painting shows. It is a tool of force, no doubt, but in careful human hands, it is a tool to force the horse to pay attention and to think. In other words, to confront a human handler through cognition rather than through bodily motions such as running, kicking, or striking. A panicked horse, or a horse with a history of violence at the hands of humans, uses his or her body as a means of avoidance and is wholly focused on defence and escape. In the painting, white hairs along the horse's withers speak to a long embodied history of ill-fitting saddles or harnesses, aligning this horse with prior violence. With a foreleg hobbled, these bodily options are less available, and the horse has to engage his or her mind. In Rarey's formulation of equine intelligence, the horse's mind could best be accessed through the senses, which would be immediately switched on when the horse came to terms with his or her inability to move. To re-evaluate their situation, a panicked horse with a leg tied who could not just move away from or threaten a human handler would have to start gathering new information: smells, sights, and sounds. This key moment makes it possible for the horse to finally begin to take in specific information about the handler, and to begin to respond to that person in a calculated, specific way — in short, to pay close attention, the very opposite of panic or avoidance.³⁵ Fear, panic,

³⁴ Cregier, "John Solomon Rarey", 172–73.

³⁵ Cregier, "John Solomon Rarey", 172.

and paying attention are all immensely exhausting, and so Rarey's method taught handlers, once they had reached this critical moment where the horse was focused completely on them and would try to figure out a new strategy, to use the leverage of the strap in a series of calm, careful motions to encourage the horse to lie down, or, if the horse had fallen but was calm, gently to encourage him or her to stay down, until the strap could be slowly and safely removed. If this action could be accomplished, then the horse would associate rest and relief with their attention to the calm handler, and make the first step towards curiosity and mutual communication, rather than avoidance and fear.

The immediate aftermath of this breakthrough is depicted in Landseer's *The Shrew Tamed*. True to the best-case result of using Rarey's method, the horse, free of all constraints, is now calm enough to be curious about this human, and starts to use her senses—the ears pricked, the muzzle reaching for a “small fair hand”—to learn about Gilbert, rather than flee from her.³⁶ Gilbert, true to the method, stays still and calm, available for the horse's curiosity. They are bonded in shared exhaustion and are finally able to relate to each other on shared terms. This moment, for anyone who has reached this kind of mutuality with a member of any species—the moment where you are finally, fully paying attention to one another, and feeling similar feelings—is imbued with a particularly potent intimacy. In 1860s London society, this intimacy was at the core of gendered transgressions made by professional horsewomen who were sexualized in order to be controlled. To return to the ambiguous question of who exactly was the “shrew” in the painting in the language of the *London Daily Times* review, it is implied that both the mare and the woman depicted are deserving of judgment. The mare is “begging for a caress” from Gilbert; the woman, meanwhile, has stepped into male roles, an action which must be simultaneously recognized, sexualized, and belittled, as revealed by the cutting humour of the reviewer in ridiculing her success: “the lady's self-possession and saucily assumed air of conqueror are highly amusing.” Ha, ha.

36 Forrest, “Who Is the Woman”.

Such mistrust for women horse trainers gives Landseer's title a hard edge: who, in this image of two prone, exhausted, but intimately connected ostensible females, is the shrew—the “vicious” mare, or the “pretty horsebreaker”? Yet such initial muddlements and the subsequent distinctions matter only to those trying to make both horse and woman fit into gendered social roles. For Gilbert and the horse, however, and perhaps many other horses such as those depicted in the painting? They don't care. During their work, Gilbert and the horses in real life stepped outside of this conversation altogether, relating just to each other. The work of horsemanship, for building relationships based on attention and bodily knowledge, allowed a number of Victorian women and horses to carve out space to simply be who they were and to be known by one another. This ambiguity is mirrored in the title: the unresolved question of whether the horse or the woman is the “shrew” links their bodies inextricably together while also upending gendered assumptions about them both. Where “shrew” connotes unruly feminine behaviour which the title suggests could be applied to either human or horse, the image itself neutralizes the insult to the point where it matters not whether the horse is a mare or not, or Gilbert a woman or not, or who has “tamed” whom. Stark divides between human masculinity and femininity, as well as stark divides between human and equine subjectivities, recede behind the word and the image, which instead offers an intercorporeal coupling that defuses the offending sexualities that brought them together (the supposed “viciousness” of the mare, and the gendered trespass of Gilbert) by virtue of the repose of both human and equine subjects.

Indeed, as art historian Kate Aspinall pointed out to me, the presence of a small domestic dog in the painting is an important detail. The dog, with the looks of a King Charles Spaniel, is perched at the top of the straw pile observing the reclined horse and woman. Formally, the dog completes the “holy triangle” of normative formalism as the third subject in the frame. But symbolically—as well Landseer knew, given that dogs were among his portrait specialties—the dog, as a toy breed, exemplifies the nurturance of perpetual domestication. In contrast, the horse has recently been “wild”, but through

Gilbert's actions has just now begun her return to domestic behaviour. And Gilbert as a woman may have been born domesticated according to the constraints of the time, but through her professional work, she has, in a sense, "re-wilded" herself.³⁷ To me, the moment depicted in *The Shrew Tamed* is a kind of opposite to de-sexing: as whole adult beings, these two are indeed free from the death-or-domesticity double bind; they are free to be adults and not lovers of each other, or men, or women; they are free to be simply horse and human. They are free to set the terms of their relationship; free from the centrality of sex and the definitional associations of sexuality and propriety; free from the metaphorical gymnastics of species signifiers (who is the shrew?) that have supported the derogatorily gendered interpretations of their actions.

Equitable self-possession is most frightening in a society that believes women should be possessed by men, not themselves. In Victorian sensation literature, in the trope of the "pretty horsebreaker", and in critical responses to Landseer's painting, the body of the horse carried cultural anxieties about undomesticated women and public femininity. The anxiety in Victorian England was the anxiety that women would gain the social and economic privileges of self-possession that were guarded by the gates of masculinity. A sexually mature woman such as Gilbert, who chose a life where her sexuality was not confined to heterosexual marriage or homospeculative intimacy—where, in fact, sex and her sexuality were perhaps *not* the most important part of her own identity as a woman—was thus subject to a gamut of interpretive and social constraints that instead directed attention always back to sex, with men. In our current horse culture, the words that denigrate feminine sexual maturity—slutty, flirtatious, unfocused—are directed at mares, and they preclude equitable adult co-relations. These words contribute directly to the parent/child pattern of the relationship between women and companion mares, and disrupt pathways towards building solidarities between women and horses as adults who should both possess more freedoms to relate to each other as they choose.

37 Kate Aspinall, email message to author, 23 August, 2021.

The pharmacological blunting of mares' sexuality in order to control these behaviours ultimately replicates the Victorian social structures that similarly controlled and narrated the movements and actions of women. During the twentieth century, opportunities for women to ride as professionals and amateurs expanded dramatically, but this expansion did not result in a shared liberation of feminine sexualities. Rather, in the words of historian Sandra Swart, "gender norms have jumped the species boundary", and the relative freedoms gained by women did not translate into better terms to interpret relationships between women and mares, who began to take on a larger share of the burden of conforming to strict constraints of sexual propriety.³⁸ One wonders what happened to the openings into a different world that training methods like Rarey's offered — of a world where a woman and a horse could simply pay attention to each other, and nothing else mattered.

Visual Media and the Persistent Narrative of Equine Innocence

Susan McHugh's *Animal Stories* vividly dispels such wondering by chronicling what actually did happen to women in the English-speaking world who entered into professional equestrian careers during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She highlights technical advancements which opened horse work up to more and more women — innovations in underwear and saddles were so important! — and links these developments to reactionary backlashes in narrative and media representations which continued the sensation novels' tradition of bringing violent ends to women's equine relationships.³⁹ This tandem analysis paints a stunningly depressing picture. While methods of training such as Rarey's enjoyed popularity at the end of the nineteenth century and opened professional opportunities for women in the horse world, such methods were still very much left of centre. "Rarey's insistence on the existence of equine intelligence", historian Cregier notes, "predated behavioural theories by almost 100 years", making him very much an

³⁸ Swart, "The Equine Experiment".

³⁹ McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 73–4.

outlier in both his training methods and his philosophies.⁴⁰ Women publicly entered the horse world, but horse training methods that emphasized partnership and intelligent communication across species lines did not necessarily come with them. Nor did a transformation in what it meant, culturally, for women to be horsewomen.

Sensation novels responded to social change by re-inscribing violent punishments for pursuing masculine freedoms. McHugh identifies a continuity of this pattern during a later period of change, where media representations of both real and fictional girls and women and horses foregrounded injury and suffering, thus associating horsewomen with bodily and gender violence. In these twentieth century depictions, even the less gruesome representations have tended, in McHugh's analysis, to position time with horses as a "phase" that is normal for (white) girls, but is odd for an adult, feminine woman to pursue. Both narrative tracks block the representation of women and horses from sharing healthy adult relationships outside of the tropes of either transpeciative violence, or gender and sexuality transgressions. From *National Velvet* to modern media coverage of equestrian sports, sexual maturity is seen as a problem to be resolved by breaking the affective ties between women and horses.

One of the key twentieth-century twists that McHugh identifies in this pattern is the emergence of a narrative insistence that horses should be part of the lives of *girls*, but not *women*. In her inimitable phrasing, McHugh notes that before the twentieth century, stories about women and horses were common enough (as we have seen), but stories about *girls* and horses were as "rare as hen's teeth".⁴¹ Over the course of the century, this rarity dissolved under a flood of girl/horse stories, as well as the actual demographic rise of young white girls as riders of horses. In the context of women gaining entry into professional competitive horse sports, "fictional horsewomen [were] cast increasingly on the defensive, victimized by a particular linkage of girlish love for horses with sexualized violence."⁴² McHugh

40 Cregier, "John Solomon Rarey", 173.

41 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 65.

42 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 66.

observes that many of these narratives fit heteronormative interpretations that position horses as a substitute and training ground for eventual heterosexual love between women and men. Girls, in this reading, will eventually transfer their affection for horses to men.⁴³ Elspeth Probyn makes similar recollections about the overwhelming prepubescent girl-ness of late-twentieth century horse worlds, reminisces that “from the pony-club stories and experiences of my youth, I can only remember girls and girls together with horses, and not a boy to be seen.”⁴⁴ In narrative and in real-life experience, Probyn observes, the normative path that is modelled through puberty is that girls “get over horses”, and trade in their best girl (and horse) friends for a boyfriend. Horses, in this interpretation, are a kind of substitute boy, a training-wheels phallus that, through literal spread legs and body-to-body connection, train girls to stop wanting the companionship of other girls and to start desiring men. A girl’s “horse phase” will eventually pull her girl-girl relationships apart as they reach sexual maturity, and the multitudes of gender expressions and affinities that are possible in girlhood become systematically reduced to cisgendered, heterosexual womanhood norms.⁴⁵ Probyn and McHugh both roundly reject this interpretation as scandalously impoverished — McHugh notes that such psychoanalytic rhetorics sell girls out “at the expense of other stories about their own bodies, along with those of animals”⁴⁶ — and both authors offer careful re-readings of girl-and-horse stories that attend to a multitude of queer and transpeciative desires, as well as illuminate the always-present, if oft-ignored, narratives of bodily empowerments and independence that exist through girl-horse relationships.⁴⁷

43 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 92–3.

44 Probyn, “Girls and Girls”, 23.

45 Probyn, “Girls and Girls”, 25–26. Brett Mizelle describes a similar phenomenon in the plot of the book and film *Charlotte’s Web*, where the main human character, Fern, is instructed to leave her girlish love of animals and nature behind to focus on heterosexual human pursuits. See Mizelle, *Pig*, 143–46.

46 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 67–8.

47 See also Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* and Ann Game, “Riding: Embodying the Centaur,” 1–12 for psychological and phenomenological explorations of desire, identity, and riding women.

Yet, as McHugh makes clear, professional horsewomen who have chosen not to grow out of relationships with horses find themselves filtered through a punishing cultural lens that can overtake their own self-interpretation. Twentieth- and twenty-first century media representations of women's work and relationships with horses reinforce the same kinds of stories told by sensation novels and reviews of *The Shrew Tamed* that served to warn, rather than empower, people who wish to remain socially accepted as women and as competent equestrians. One of McHugh's more striking examples is the parallel experience between the fictional story of *National Velvet* and contemporary real-life women jockeys. McHugh writes of the novel, "whether for riders, horses, stewards, or audience members, the experiences of the National becomes filtered through communications technologies, enveloping and reconfiguring the race as it is run."⁴⁸ In this example, mediated representation infiltrates each character's experience to create and reinforce a dominant meaning of the race. Outside of fiction, media representation has similar effects: contemporary women jockeys find themselves having to navigate not just their work as jockeys, but media representation of their work as jockeys. Their representation is experienced by many women jockeys as the most dangerous and unpleasant aspect of their careers — not the fact that they careen around crowded tracks at high speeds.⁴⁹ If we read these examples alongside decades of televised coverage of women equestrian Olympians that have consistently emphasized "struggling female riders", the dominant representation of real women pursuing competitive equestrian careers is that of a woman suffering.⁵⁰ While companionate time with horses, and even careers with horses, are open to more girls and women

48 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 97.

49 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 98.

50 McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 101–3. This pattern repeated at the 2020 Olympic Games, when the Modern Pentathlon competitor Annika Schleu of Germany ran into trouble with her mount, Saint Boy, during competition. Images and a video of her weeping in distress as the horse refused to continue a show jumping round circulated internationally. Their coach, Kim Raisner, was caught on camera urging Schleu to hit the horse with her crop, and Raisner even struck the horse herself. This understandably created a media sensation and outcry on behalf of the horse and resulted in censure for the coach. Images of women succeeding at this event, or any other Olympic event, by contrast, were scarcely covered in mainstream news or sports coverage.

than in earlier periods of history, the Victorian equestrian dichotomy of death or domesticity for sexually mature women has barely been blunted in the public sphere in the intervening years.

If, as I argued at the outset of this essay, horses rhetorically serve, in each of the situations I've described, as a living screen onto which to project larger human cultural anxieties, it would seem that both sexually mature women and mares are united by the fact that modern English-speaking horse cultures refuse to grant either of them the freedom to co-exist without depicting them as outlandishly, boundary-crushingly, dangerously, inconveniently mature. Neither woman nor mare in this context is permitted a fully adult existence. In her exploration of humans masquerading as animals and old European myths about animals masquerading as humans, Wendy Doniger reminds us that "the animals want to do all the things that we want to do, but they lack the language and self-reflection to tell stories about them. They share our sexuality but not our stories of sexuality."⁵¹ Stories of sexuality, in the case of both women and mares, and companion animals more broadly, hold sway over the expression of bodily sexualities. Predominant narratives about what sexuality means, what its consequences are, and who is responsible for whose sexuality shape actual relationships with companion animals and companion horses. By defining nonhuman homospeciative sexuality as inappropriate, and by demanding that companion animals focus all of their affection, chastely, on their human companions, the maintenance of an absent sexuality becomes a dominant form of relating. This is of course what makes it possible for many men and women to uncritically accept the hormonal regulation of mares as *de rigueur*—in a manner quite similar to the multitudes of humans who readily accept de-sexing surgery for their in-home pets as a prerequisite for multispecies domestic arrangements. Literary, artistic, and media representations of women's sexuality have thus exerted a significant amount of power in leashing, blunting, or removing the sexual lives from the animals whose attention and affection humans crave, but will not return in equal measure.

51 Doniger, "Mythology of Masquerading Animals", 726.

This essay has focused mainly on how a genealogy of attitudes towards and representations of women with horses has shaped the contemporary lives of horsewomen and companion mares, and I wish to close this section with an example of a mare in front of the camera to illustrate further the troubled paradoxes of sexuality in which women and horses are bound up. An American political media event at the end of 2017 placed a little mare named Sassy in the midst of a maelstrom of sexuality stories. Coverage of Sassy, as well as public interpretation of her body and what was happening to it, drew heavily from cultural tropes that enforce the impossibility of being concurrently female, feminine, adult, and sympathetic. Following Alabama senator Jeff Sessions's resignation from the U.S. Senate to serve as United States Attorney General in 2017, a special election was held on 12 December to fill the vacancy. Democrat Doug Jones edged out the Republican nominee Roy Moore in the election, but not before Moore made national headlines for two main things: allegedly engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviour, and riding a horse to the polls on election day. As videos and images of Moore's ride to the polls hit cable news outlets and the internet, the horse was soon identified as Sassy. Moore had ridden Sassy on a similar errand just months before, when he won a run-off election against Sen. Luther Strange (R-Alabama) to enter the December contest. Sassy's presence became a kind of election-day superstition for Moore. In the days leading up to the special election, he announced that he would be riding to the polls, saying, "I think it's a good thing to do, I won the last time I rode a horse."⁵²

For some, Sassy soon became the main focus of election day coverage. "Horse Twitter", a subset of the social media platform's users with interest and/or expertise in horse world goings-on, exploded in judgment of his riding style. Moore's style mystified many: he held his reins long and moved his hands from high to low in jerky, awkward motions while Sassy skittered uncertainly with quick steps.⁵³

⁵² Gore, "Roy Moore Will Ride".

⁵³ These users, along with many others, did not recognize this style of riding as style, but as ignorance. In a series of explanatory tweets, Katrin Boniface, an equine historian and multidisciplinary horse trainer, carefully explained that the style Moore displayed was

One user commented, “the way he’s holding the reins is legitimately bizarre and that horse is confused as fuck.”⁵⁴ Another weighed in with emphasis, “I KNOW THIS ISN’T THE POINT BUT ROY MOORE IS AN AWFUL RIDER, PUT YOUR FUCKING HEEL DOWN AND GET YOUR LEG UNDER YOU AND STOP HAULING ON YOUR HORSE’S MOUTH YOU GODDAMN PEDOPHILE IDIOT.”⁵⁵ In this latter example, Moore’s alleged behaviours towards teenage girls were a tool within quick reach of this user to critique his treatment of his mare, Sassy. Sassy’s body-in-distress was nearly instantly made into a palimpsest of the bodily distress allegedly suffered by Moore’s human accusers as Twitter spun out a stream of instantaneous co-interpretations.

Viewers’ readings of Sassy’s body coincided with the rushing tide of public #MeToo testimonies that had rushed forth following the Harvey Weinstein allegations in that autumn. The month after the Weinstein story broke, during Moore’s campaign for the run-off election, a total of nine women reported that Moore had either assaulted them or made unwanted romantic or sexual advances to them in the past. Public records assert that two of the accusers were minors at the time they alleged these events to have taken place, the youngest being fourteen. Tweets ostensibly meant to critique his riding seamlessly connected judgment of Moore’s riding style to the predatory sexual behaviour of which he was accused. Sassy was represented as a victim of both.

A screen capture from one of the videos taken earlier in the day soon began to circulate on Twitter. The image froze Sassy in a moment of visible discomfort: a taut rein connected her gaping mouth to Moore’s jerked-back hand, exposing the metal bit between her teeth. Though most of her body is in profile to the viewer, the rein has pulled her

purposeful, and part of southern gaited horse culture—but that his ride to the polls on Sassy was not a good example of what it was supposed to look like. “He rides like most folks do who pay trainers to work their gaited horses,” she noted, adding that she “still wouldn’t send an animal to a trainer whose horses looked like that.” Katrin Boniface (@KatBoniface), Twitter, 12 December 2017, <https://twitter.com/KatBoniface/status/940692901440262144>.

54 Anna Merlan (@annamerlan), Twitter, 12 December 2017, <https://twitter.com/annamerlan/status/940647814413078529>.

55 Kaye Toal (@ohkayewhatever), Twitter, 12 December 2017. Tweet no longer public.

face around so that it points towards viewers almost directly. Sassy's eyes are white-walled, her ears are pinned back, her nostrils are flaring. Her haunches and hind legs are tucked underneath of her, bent as if to either cower or leap. Moore, for his part, remains fully in profile, smiling calmly to an audience of white men who are smiling back at him, which makes it appear that Sassy has turned to face us, her imagined audience, and is pleading for us to witness this moment, while Moore carries on believing that everything is fine, either oblivious to her suffering at his hands or utterly unconcerned by it and his power over her. Superimposed onto her brown haunch, the user has emblazoned in white the words "#MeToo".

Here we have a representation of a struggling female horse, not a struggling female rider, but in this case, Sassy is thoroughly interpreted as a stand-in for girls and women. Part of this phenomenon, of course, is because of how social media works: far more humans could view and respond to Sassy's appearance through the lens of women's struggles with aggressive men than through the lens of human-horse relationships. But in the process, Sassy herself, as a horse, became nearly completely invisible. And this is exactly why I find this example so fascinating: the rhetoric simmering around Sassy in the digital realm reinforced the same set of values that are, in our time, used to define "responsible" versus "irresponsible" relationships between humans and companion animals. In order to connect with Sassy, horse people and non-horse people alike aligned her with the identity of a child (in this specific case, as a palimpsest of Moore's alleged underage victims) in order to emphasize her innocence, and therefore her need for human care. They seemingly could not speak of her own suffering outside of this association. This overdetermined interpretation of Sassy's body and behaviour harmonizes with the logics of de-sexing; it brings her under our collective care, but only on our human terms, only as a representative of childlike innocence. God forbid she go into heat. Would our hearts go out to her, then?

Within hours of Sassy's ride hitting cable news, Sassy had her own Twitter account. "She" appeared on Twitter as @RoyMooreHorse

(the account was later publicly claimed by human comedian Dave Colan), and she announced her arrival with all-caps excitement: “LOOK I AM ON TV!” But the second line above a link to the video of her directly engages the dynamic of coercion that permeated the discussions of her body that day, positioning her both as a being with a voice of her “own” but also as one whose life was distinctly constrained (witness the handle @RoyMooresHorse). Directly above the video footage, it reads, “I DID NOT CHOOSE THIS LIFE.”⁵⁶ She certainly did not choose the story of sexuality that was imposed on her so quickly and easily in the context of Moore’s allegations and the early days of #MeToo. Sassy was given a story of violated sexuality, innocence, and personhood that in every way overlooked her actual needs. And while meeting her needs was never the point of interpreting her mediated body in this case, it nevertheless serves as a stark reminder of how easily we twenty-first century humans turn to centuries-old narratives of innocence in order to feel affinity with female and feminine beings.

Conclusions

For Sassy and the other subjects of this essay, the “story about sexuality” that is told about companion mares is that their mature sexuality should not exist. Desires that extend beyond the human risk breaching the boundaries of multispecies love. The current stories that surround mares limit their sexuality entirely, and these limits are policed and enforced both socially and technologically, through the casual deployment of hormones. These stories, as this essay has endeavoured to show, grow from old stories and techniques used to limit, police, and enforce the boundaries of feminine sexuality for women, as well; they are stories that are very useful to anthropocentric patriarchal power. These stories are very rarely about sex. They are about who has what freedoms. Disentangling the knots that bind horses and women together is to attempt telling different multispecies narrations that invite queerer, more expansive possibilities for relating to each other. To do so, we *must* recognize and get past the

⁵⁶Dave Colan (@RoyMooresHorse), Twitter, 12 December 2017, <https://twitter.com/RoyMooresHorse/status/940678609378742272>.

erasure of sexuality from human relationships with companion animals as a prerequisite of our human attentions and affections, and we must not let prudishness edge out possibilities for remaking companion relationships.

By outlining these enduring constraints, I aim to raise questions that can hopefully break open more expansive discussions about relating on more equitable terms. This essay has identified roadblocks that foreclose possibilities for living more expansive adult lives with companion animals, and has paid particular attention to how in our current moment, old methods of social control of female sexuality, which were once commonly ascribed to human women, are now uncritically and widely applied to mares. But what would be possible if “taking responsibility for” the sex lives of animals were not synonymous with removing it entirely? What would be possible if we humans worked at divorcing our definitions of multispecies responsibility from the paradigm of parenthood of a “fur child” who must conform to human-defined times and modes of heterospeciative affinity? In the horse world, would making an ethical commitment to allow mares to be adults be one way of helping women and people with uteruses to recognize the external social structures that confine the visibility — and thus effective knowledge and treatment — of their own bodies? What if we refused to equate “acceptable” sexual maturity with mandatory reproduction, and chastity with “responsible” heterospeciative love? Would these be steps towards a larger refusal to allow heteropatriarchal, anthropocentric, and capitalist structures of work to govern the uterus of horse or human, or any of us? Would we then be able to live together, as adults?

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