Reviews

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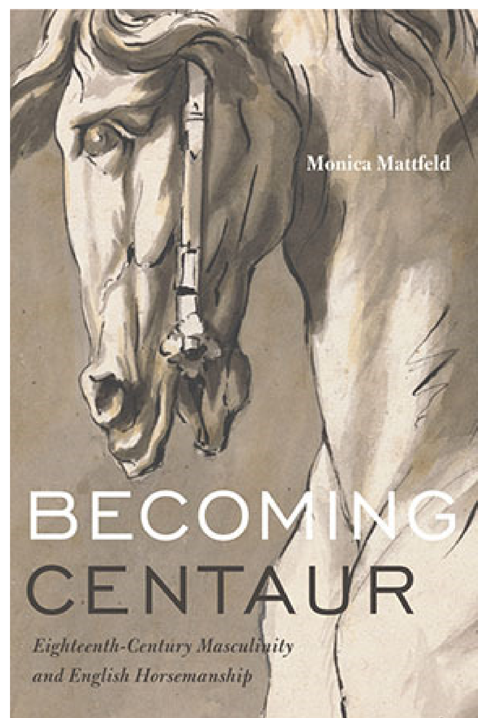
The Perfection of Horse-Manship

Monica Mattfeld, *Becoming Centaur. Eighteenth-Century Masculinity and English Horsemanship.* University park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2016. 288 pp. $99.95 (hc).



Monica Mattfield's *Becoming Centaur: Eighteenth-Century Masculinity and English Horsemanship* will be a welcome addition to any library in early modern studies, and a valuable contribution to the fields of Gender Studies and Animal Studies.

Her careful and attentive study covers roughly the period from the Interregnum in the mid-seventeenth century to the regency era at the end of the eighteenth century; and it is a credit to the originality of scholarship that one frequently finds (even if, like myself, one spends far too much time studying little known topics in the period) that her discussions both introduce the reader to new material and raise for the reader interesting lines of questions that we want to follow further in future work. The period

under discussion, for instance, roughly a century-and-a-half is comparable to the length of the "automotive age." Consider how much has been said and written already (and how much more still could be said and written) about cars, trucks, and masculinity in this era. Yet her topic of horsemanship and masculinity in the eighteenth century has been until now relatively untouched.

That is perhaps partly owing to the fact that today, this deep into our own automotive age, we tend to think of horsemanship as a somewhat arcane performance on the cusp between sport and art; and it certainly is, and that is a very important — even central — feature of Mattfield's discussion. But that discussion is complemented and lent greater texture by her attention to the ways in which an emergent bourgeois culture adopted and adapted previous practices to new forms of cultural commodification.

As important as these discussions are, they are also inextricably bound up with an equally significant contribution that this work makes to animal studies: thinking through identity performance beyond the species limit. The historical work Mattfield does here nicely complements both social and economic histories that seek to tell the story of an animal within human culture, as well as those cultural histories that tell primarily a story of human history with an emphasis on the supporting role played by animals. Between these two poles, Mattfield's work inclines more closely to the second, but as her title conveys, she is specifically interested throughout her study in attending to how a particular interspecies relational identity of "*horseman*" is performed.

Over the years, I have held several different "horseman's licenses," and have been supported by one of my favorite organizations, the Horseman's Benevolent Protection Association (HBPA). And like many other members and licensees (though not nearly enough), I have considered it a great honor to have known some "real horsemen," and I am hesitant to use the term too loosely (particularly in reference to myself), as it is — properly used — one of the ultimate accolades one can bestow on someone who works with horses. Charlie Whittingham was a horseman.

Oddly enough, while that honorific retains (at least for some of us) a very special set of associations, in my milieu of horse racing, those associations are about knowledge of, and care for, the health and training and well-being of the racehorse; and may have little or nothing to do with riding itself as an activity. I know excellent horsemen who do not ride. "Horsemanship," on the other hand has always been associated in mind with the act of riding, and more specifically, with what I think of as "equitation," and the highly disciplined art of dressage, known in the early modern period as Manège. While it is important to me personally as an entry point to Mattfield's argument, it is

only a minor opening gambit in her study to underline the close connection and special relevance these two terms — "horseman" and "horsemanship" — enjoyed during the early modern era.

Nicholas Morgan of Crolane's *The Perfection of Horse-Manship; Drawne from Nature, Arte, and Practise* (1609) is now an exceedingly rare book, but it was in its time an important early articulation of the peculiar power encoded in this hybrid identity whose performance was constituted by forms of intimate knowledge that appear almost occult to the uninitiated. In my use and understanding, those forms of intimate knowledge have to do primarily with diagnostics, projection, and predictive understanding — a capacity that might seem uncanny to see what most do not, a practice built largely on sight and touch that can often detect what elude even the most sophisticated of current diagnostic technologies. For those more grounded (so to speak) in the arena of equitation, it has more to do with subtle communicative touch between leg and flank, or transmitted along a leather line between finger and mouth that join two bodies into a seamlessly connected, fully integrated whole. This is an identity that emerges through practice, beyond the limits of species and individuation; and it is a performative identity with a rich cultural history that Mattfield's book opens up for further exploration.

William Cavendish, created Duke of Newcastle at the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 was a colorful character and something of a prototype of seventeenth-century cavalier Royalist. A courtier of the first two Stuart monarchs, and one-time tutor to the young Charles II, he led Royalist forces into battle (and defeat) at Marston Moor. Remarkably self-conscious (perhaps even self-involved), Newcastle's cavalier identity was immensely important to him; and particularly during his period of exile following Marston Moor, he assiduously cultivated his reputation in Europe as "the greatest expert of his age in the matter of horses" (24). And, as Mattfield shows, for Newcastle it was specifically horsemanship in the sense of equitation that mattered most to the carefully cultivated identity: "there is nothing of more use than a horse of manage; nor anything of more state, manliness or pleasure than riding" (22).

We are used to thinking of "management" as a significant discipline (some might consider the most significant discipline) of knowledge, particularly in areas of politics and commerce. Political and Business Management theory and practice are the cornerstones of professional activity in the modern era, but few are aware that our modern sense emerged from the early modern usage of "handling" cattle, particularly

horses, that Newcastle invokes here: "The action of controlling or manipulating a person, animal, etc.; the exercise of control" (OED).

While it is easy today to see Newcastle's investment in his reputation for riding as an eccentric anachronism from a bygone era, there is considerably more to it than that, as Mattfield shows. Even among those to whom riding well matters today, his reputation still holds up well, in spite of vast ideological differences between his time and ours. Our era is predominantly democratic in impulse, and we tend to privilege those whose theorizing of human-animal interactions privileges communicative exchange between collaborating partners. And it is possible to discern something like that message in Newcastle's actual practice, albeit with more difficulty in his published writings. But Newcastle was deeply committed to an anti-democratic royalist ideology, and found ways to reconcile his riding practice to those beliefs. Like so much elaborate analogical reasoning produced in the Renaissance, Newcastle's thoughts on riding found resonance in a form of order that echoed throughout the creation — not just rider and horse, but in the domestic arena, the political arena, and the vast arena of the created world as well. All these relationships were hierarchical, but with reciprocal responsibilities, so horse, spouse, subject, and creature should all love, honor, and obey rider, husband, monarch, and creator, whose right conduct should equally compel fear and love, and command with firm and measured authority.

Ultimately, Newcastle's commitment to this ideology, which was, if anything, somewhat dated and anachronistic already in his time, develops into something more than is usual for his era. For Newcastle, theorizing the role of horse and rider leads to a conception of riding well as a performance that enacts the ideal state. Rather than monarch and subject as separate entities, one submissive to another, way gives in Newcastle's work to a model of a thoroughly integrated state in which the sovereign directs the subject as the mind directs the body — a single entity, greater than any of the parts. That is the essence of "becoming centaur." This is not a theorizing of identity through the concept of the fully autonomous, individuated subject, but the resistance to that emergent political philosophy. Riding well, for Newcastle, who may be thought of as devoting his life to that activity, becomes a model for a performative identity more complex than we are used to associating with early modern political philosophy or human-animal interactions.

In his own lifetime, Newcastle's commitment to the ideological practice of "becoming centaur" was already a reactionary ideological commitment to cavalier values that grew ever more dated, even as Cavendish himself refined and perfected those commitments as active performance. What follows as Mattfield traces the history of riding as

performance over the eighteenth century is an unfolding of a narrative both familiar and completely new. The transformation from aristocratic courtier culture to the modern world of bourgeois commerce; the emergence of new codes of masculinity, privileging "politeness" and sensibility, over anachronistic codes of honor and power; the appropriation of such performances for mass consumption, and the satiric checks that arose in response to push back against how such popularizations rendered only a corrupt, decadent imitation of lost ideals; these are all familiar stories. But the materials, forms, and social spaces that Mattfield guides us through are new: the riding school of Angelo's Academy, and the performance arena of Astley's Amphitheater; the high art of Joseph Wright's painting of polite masculinity, and the low ribald engravings that parody it; the performance of masculine style among the Ton in Hyde Park, and Henry Bunbury's satiric critique in the illustrated horsemanship guides of Geoffrey Gambado, Esq; these are new materials to most scholars of the eighteenth century. And they add a new dimension to our understanding of how much the social codes of the modern era that emerged during that century owe to the definition of proper human-animal relations that provide the focus to *Becoming Centaur*.

While the diligent reader will be able to uncover faults (at one point, it would seem that the Hanoverian succession began with a William, rather than a George), their number are few, and easily outweighed by the new focus and fresh analysis Mattfield brings to our understanding of the importance of horse-human relations in the eighteenth century.