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Becoming Centaur, Eighteenth-century Masculinity and
English Horsemanship, Pennsylvania State University
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REFERENCES

Monica Mattfeld, *Becoming Centaur, Eighteenth-century Masculinity and English Horsemanship* (University of Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2017), 288 p., ISBN 978-0271075778

- 1 The book is the ninth in the series “Animalibus—of Animals and cultures” published by the Pennsylvania State University Press. Works on zoos, dogs and apes, among others, are already available. Monica Mattfeld’s aim is to blend gender studies and animal studies, as the subtitle suggests. Her starting point is that the relations between horse and man (as the male of the species) are indicative of the evolution of culture over time. The book is decidedly chronological, organized in four chapters each focusing on important figures in the world of horsemanship. In this way, she retraces the evolution of manners in the wider world of politics and man/woman relations from the mid-seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century.
- 2 What the book is not is a study of the general condition of horses and their relations to the overall population during the period. The focus is definitely on the elite classes who have produced writings on horses and how to train them. However, through this lens, you get a sense of how the upper classes considered the lower classes, and what the horse meant for them as a sign of their superiority. The book is a great success in something it doesn’t brag about, that is, a study of class division, snobbery and elitism. The question of gender is treated in so far as the elite is predominantly male.
- 3 The first chapter is a masterly examination of the views of William Cavendish, first duke of Newcastle (1592-1676), a staunch royalist and a friend of Hobbes, who, while in

exile in Antwerp during the Interregnum, started a riding school and published a lavishly illustrated book on horsemanship, in French (1658)—later translated into English. Monica Mattfeld skillfully unpicks how the Hobbesian theory of power is expressed in the way the royalist aristocrat behaves towards his horse, like the king with his people. The horse is gradually conquered, and submits, not because he is a dumb animal, but because he recognizes the rider's superiority—man and horse become one persona, like Hobbes's *Leviathan*. The author also studies William Cavendish's connection to the king and she looks at some of the impressive illustrations that proclaim the exclusive rights of the perfect horsemen surrounding the monarch. Technically, the kind of horsemanship extolled by Cavendish is derived from the French school of riding, called "haute école", which later faced some criticism.

- 4 The second chapter studies how civic humanism in the eighteenth century displaced the "haute école" style, in favour of a new type of riding and harnessing that gave the horse, and the rider, more liberty. The emphasis was on a simpler kind of bit—the snaffle—, on lighter saddles, on local breeds, on ease and relaxation, rather than stiffness and control that prevailed earlier. Caricatures by Cruikshank are commented upon, giving us a better understanding of what is at stake when riding a horse in the eighteenth century. The rise of hunting on horseback is presented as the celebration of freedom through the exhilaration of the chase and is directly opposed to the stiff exercises of the former French-oriented school. This chimes with the attacks on foreign imports typical of the early eighteenth century, and the ascendancy of Locke over Hobbes. Interestingly enough, though, the chapter ends on a study of the riding school created by an Italian, Domenico Angelo Malevolti Tremamondo, commonly called Angelo (1717-1802), succeeded by his son Henry Angelo. Both were riding and fencing masters who taught aristocratic pupils and notable luminaries. Women were invited as part of the audience, and in another riding school in London, women could even learn to ride. This chapter deals with the question of female riders, and how their status allowed or prevented their participation in riding schools and in hunting, with an excellent analysis of the painting representing Mr and Mrs Coltman by Wright of Derby (around 1770). The woman may well be on the horse, but it is the husband who is in control of the animal.
- 5 Henry Angelo was the master of Philip Astley (1742-1814), who is the subject of the third chapter. With him, we move into the world of entertainment, but with political undertones. The chapter first examines the literature about performing horses from Will Stokes' *The Vaulting-Master* (1652) to Astley's own published work, *System of Equestrian Education* (1801). But Astley being a former Sergeant-Major in the Seven Years War, we quickly encounter military heroism and national emblems. Astley is remembered as the inventor of the modern circus, the initiator of the Amphitheatre, a place of entertainment which combined musical acts, performing animals, firework displays—any kind of amusement short of spoken drama, only allowed in proper theatres. Astley was able to use as a centerpiece of his circus acts a famous white horse, the Gibraltar charger, mounted by the commander of the Gibraltar garrison, George Augustus Elliott, during the siege (1779-1782). Monica Mattfeld demonstrates that this horse enabled Astley to draw on his audience's interest for glorious military actions, at a time when Britain, lately defeated in the American War of Independence, was under pressure from France. Extremely successful, performers on Astley's horses, including his son who could dance on horseback, were nevertheless criticized for the useless nature of their achievements. However, Astley tried to preempt his critics by

organizing a riding school and presenting himself as a military trainer able to make horses stand still under fire, which would have been particularly useful in battle.

- 6 The last chapter is a study of caricaturist Henry William Bunbury (1750-1811), who, under the pseudonym Geoffrey Gambado, poked fun at inept horse riders in two books, *Academy for Grown Horsemen* (1787) and *Annals of Horsemanship* (1791). A traditionalist, Bunbury attacks incompetent upstarts, brutal horse trainers and corrupt horse dealers. The background to his satirical writing is the disdain for trade and commerce, and the celebration of traditional values. Images by Bunbury are analyzed at length, which enables the reader not only to understand what was at stake in that period about horsemanship, but also to appreciate the comedy of the situations, of which we might be ignorant, as the world of horses and all the fine details of riding are mostly gone from our world.
 - 7 The book has no overall conclusion, which is surprising as it would be useful to recap the different themes addressed, as they give us a new insight into a turbulent period. Seeing the evolution from the Stuarts to the eve of the Victorian age through the representation of horsemanship is a useful adjunct to our knowledge of the elite discourse on politics, centering on male success on horseback, in battle, in hunting, and in front of their peers and ladies.
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INDEX

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Mots-clés: caricature, chasse, cirque, cheval, dix-huitième siècle, élite, équitation, genre, politique

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