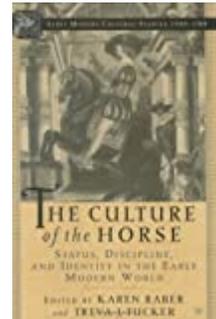




**Karen Raber, Treva J. Tucker, eds.** *The Culture of the Horse: Status, Discipline, and Identity in the Early Modern World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. xvi + 246 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-6621-6.



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### The Horse in Motion and as Metaphor

The horse was ubiquitous in early modern Europe. Scholars often note this fact and consider its role in plowing, cartage, and transportation, but it is treated often only as tangential to other concerns. The editors of this intriguing collection want to place the horse back into the forefront of early modern history. In the process, they grapple with the horse's significance in early modern culture, horse training technologies, the social significance of equitation, and the horse as an international commodity. As someone who spent approximately twenty years training and showing horses, I was intrigued but wondered how the authors would handle specialized equestrian vocabulary and knowledge. In these twelve chapters, they have combined the technical and general in such a way that readers of various backgrounds can all find something useful in their collection. Although the book reflects the preliminary nature of studies on the horse in premodern Europe, a point with which the editors would certainly agree, the collection introduces the field and properly situates itself historiographically.

The book is organized into three parts: "Power and Status," "Discipline and Control," and "Identity and Self-

Definition." While each chapter clearly fits within its assigned part, obvious bridges are evident between these sections, and some articles could easily fit into other sections. However, the thematic division is central to the editors' goal of placing the horse within common emphases in early modern historiography. While they have succeeded in this goal, less successful is their attempt to cover the early modern world. The book primarily focuses on early modern Europe, with one article on South Africa, and the definition of "early modern" is quite broad; one chapter continues until the early twentieth century. If the editors were wedded to the idea of "world," perhaps an essay on Latin America or North America would have been a good addition; if the authors were pushing the chronological limits of early modern, perhaps an article on the horse in other parts of Africa, the Near East, or Australia would have worked. While the available research may have prevented the editors from covering many areas, I am surprised that nothing was available on the early modern Americas.

In Part 1, "Power and Status," two articles focus on the experience of horses and horsemanship, while two

analyze the horse metaphorically. The first chapter, “Cultural Convergence: The Equine Connection between Muscovy and Europe” by Ann M. Kleimola, requires that readers immediately recognize that horses provide shared, international frames of reference: the experience of horse training, breeding, and technologies transcends national boundaries. In this way, the first chapter successfully sets the tone for the rest of the book. Kleimola describes the convergence between Muscovite and European “horse culture” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as part of the process of “Europeanization” of Russia’s elites. Like many of the articles in this book, it was clear and concise, but I wished it were longer. In chapter 2, Elizabeth Tobey describes the wild world of the Renaissance *palio*, a horse race through Italian streets that took place during urban festivals. Because of the prestige attached to victory in the *palio*, *palio* horses themselves acquired high social standing, appeared in Renaissance frescoes and paintings, and were exchanged as gifts in international diplomacy. The pursuit of the finest *palio* horses led Italian rulers to foster trade networks with North Africa and the Near East and fear of being cut off from these sources influenced international diplomacy.

In chapters 3 and 4, the collection moves into familiar territory: the horse as metaphor and/or simile. In both chapters, the authors analyze the role of horses in specific texts and genres, although they nuance the standard symbolism. Bruce Boehrer in “Shakespeare and the Social Devaluation of the Horse” connects the presentation of the horse in Shakespeare’s plays with a growing belief in the obsolescence of nobles’ military function and, by implication, social value. The horse became the symbol of the nobles’ transformation from a productive social order to a “leisure class,” and as one of the most dramatic statements of noble, military status, the horse itself evolves in the plays “from a military necessity to a social excrement” (p. 106). In chapter 4, “‘Faith, Say a Man Should Steal Ye—and Feed Ye Fatter’: Equine Hunger and Theft in *Woodstock*,” Kevin De Ornellas presents a more sympathetic picture of literary horses. He argues that in the play *Woodstock* (date uncertain; late sixteenth century), traditionally seen as advocating revolt in late Elizabethan England, the horse-stealing, horse-related imagery, and even the horse itself call for revision rather than revolution. Although the master may be ungrateful, the horse does not protest its work, and the horse recognizes that its master has limited and misdirected resources: “[a]n explicit link is forged between over elaborate human dress, the declining quality of horses suit-

able for the state’s work, and the loss of quality in horse-management equipment” (p. 133). While the broader argument is persuasive, particularly valuable is the way De Ornellas highlights terms that are rooted in a world in which the horse is commonplace and whose subtleties may thus escape many modern readers.

Part 2, “Discipline and Control,” tends to focus more on equitation than the other parts. As such, the material is probably less familiar to most modern readers and of necessity more specialized. Readers with riding experience, however, will likely find these chapters the most engaging. While the material in Pia Cuneo’s article, “Just a Bit of Control: The Historical Significance of Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century German Bit Books,” is fascinating, it is unfortunately one of the weakest in the collection because of its thesis. Cuneo argues that bit books bridge the practical and the literary; the fact that she does so through detailed description and many illustrations helps to redeem a thesis that concludes with the truism that bit books “can also function as mouthpieces for the late Renaissance to be used by contemporary historians for greater understanding of an age” (p. 143). Bit books essentially depict the different bits appropriate for varied training and tasks. Although some of the bits were produced, much evidence suggests that bit books served as displays of virtuosity rather than as manuals for production. Cuneo sketches some of the bit books’ cultural implications, but needs to explore further the significance of the bits themselves.

The following two chapters in this part concentrate on the elaborate methods of horse training known as *mã@nage* and *ballet ã cheval* (roughly translated as ballet done by horses) developed by continental European elites in the later sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The closest, well-known modern approximation to these “airs” on horseback are those of the Spanish Riding School’s Lipizzaners. Elizabeth LeGuin and Kate van Orden, in their respective chapters, clearly distinguish the similarities and differences between these early modern and modern approaches to precise, controlled equine movement. In “Man and Horse in Harmony,” LeGuin stresses how training a horse is depicted in the leading manuals of the time as fundamental to defining the trainer himself. In the process of training the animal, from the basic skills to the achievement of almost “musical” movements, the rider learns to see himself in juxtaposition to the bestiality, albeit refined, of the horse. In so doing, he governs the horse and himself. According to LeGuin, this approach is based on the fundamental belief that a key component of refined humanity

is the capacity for command not coercion, and the elaborate maneuvers of noble riding reflect the symbiosis that is at the heart of command. Complementing LeGuin's work, van Orden analyzes equitation's place as a fundamental part of noble education in the seventeenth century and the ways that dressage trains horse and rider in such a way that the rider benefits at court in her "From *Gens d'Armes* to *Gentilshommes*: Dressage, Civility, and the *Ballet À Cheval*." In this chapter, she provides clear summaries of the distinctions made between the training and type of horse that performs *haute À©cole*, the movements most clearly related to this newer noble culture and the traditional warhorse. Not surprisingly, given the mental and physical discipline these activities require, van Orden links her analysis to Norbert Elias's concept of a civilizing process; more intriguing and innovative is her connection of horse ballets and movements to Neoplatonism. Her description of the famous *ballet À cheval* staged by Antoine de Pluvinel at the marriage of Louis XIII to Anne of Austria in 1615 and depicted in Pluvinel's famous *Le Maneige royal* (1623) is both detailed and fascinating. I would have loved to see her recreation of it and was amazed that she was able to find enough horses and riders with such expertise.

In the final part, on "Identity and Self-Definition," the articles divide roughly into two groups: those that concentrate on England and those that treat other areas. The article by Treva Tucker, "Early Modern French Noble Identity and the Equestrian 'Airs above the Ground'" naturally pairs with that by van Orden, although given the article's thematic organization it is clear why it was not placed in the same section. Tucker analyzes the actions horses were trained to perform and the ways that this training exemplified and reinforced redefined standards of early modern nobility. Through her description of specific movements, such as the *capriole*, *pesade*, and *terre À terre*, Tucker produces probably the most technically demanding chapter for a reader but the most fascinating for someone with a strong equestrian background. The book moves away from this focus on equitation in the chapter immediately following, "Horses! Give Me More Horses!": White Settler Identity, Horses, and the Making of Early Modern South Africa" by Sandra Swart. While interesting, Swart's chapter seems the most out of place, and her thesis on the "integral" role of the horse in "Boer masculine identity" is more argued than proved. In part, the problem stems from Swart's ambition; in fourteen pages, she covers material ranging from the sixteenth century to the end of the Second Boer War. Within this sweeping vista are some wonderful and astonishing de-

tails that testify to her thorough research and topic's potential.

The majority of articles in part 3 focus on early modern England and an unusual aspect of the English exceptionalism argument: the equation of equine freedom, symbolized by activities such as the hunt and steeple chasing, with British freedom and British national identity. Karen Raber begins this emphasis in the first chapter of the section, "A Horse of a Different Color: Nation and Race in Early Modern Horsemanship Treatises." Despite the title, Rader's focus is really on William Cavendish's *General System of Horsemanship* (1743), one of the more famous British equestrian guidebooks. Here Rader successfully presents the process by which foreign horses and foreign riding techniques are "Englished," although I was curious to know more about how this process plays out in the other English equestrian books such as that by Blundeville. In "'Honest English Breed': The Thoroughbred as Cultural Metaphor," Richard Nash builds on Raber's argument about the construction of Britishness through the strange and the foreign and adds to it a demolition of most of the pervading myths about the thoroughbred's origins. The Englishness of that quintessential English breed, the thoroughbred, has its identity established "via Orientalist discourse," a process that Nash succinctly and convincingly describes. The final article in the collection, "Learning to Ride in Early Modern Britain, or, The Making of the English Hunting Seat" by Donna Landry, builds on Nash's and Rader's analyses of English equitation and identity and the many chapters on the social/symbolic function of riding styles. Landry argues that English authors equated the distinctively English hunt seat and the relative freedom it gave to both rider and horse to an innately British need for freedom that distinguished and elevated them over their continental counterparts. The argument is interesting, if not entirely original, but the chronological incoherence of the chapter made it somewhat frustrating to read.

As the editors rightly note, they faced many challenges with this collection. The first deals with coherence. As with any collection, the chapters are of variable quality, although each deserves a place in this collection. The second has to do with its many potential audiences. By trying to expand the book's chronological and geographic scope and readership, the editors included some chapters that would have been excluded from a more precise collection. They may have been under pressure to broaden the collection's focus. Such pressure may also account for what appears to be editorial unwillingness to make certain authors fit the chronological boundaries

more precisely and to demand clearer and more thoughtful theses. In addition, the editors faced the formidable task of presenting a subject fundamental to early modern life to two distinct groups of readers: those searching for general knowledge and those who are looking for the history of animals and daily activities. Some aspects of the collection that I found most interesting, for example, would be quite difficult reading for those without equestrian background, and the book is hard to analyze for those without such a background, despite the editors' obvious attempts to write for an audience unfamiliar with horses. The third challenge the editors faced has to do with the authors themselves. As with any topic, authors approach equestrian history with varied backgrounds and biases. Some of these authors are expert riders. In other articles, however, it is clear that the authors are fascinated with the image of the horse but have little experience with the reality of living with horses or have only dealt with that reality in a more romanticized set-

ting, like an expensive stable or horse show. While that situation does not devalue their work, I personally found the horsemanship articles the most gripping and actually wanted more about the experience of living with horses: horsemanship, training, tack, and so on, at lower social levels or with horses of poor quality. The final challenge the editors faced was situating their research within the broader historiographical context, and in this respect, they succeeded admirably. While the exceptional link between English identity and the horse is not completely persuasive, the horse's embodiment of discipline, its role in molding elite identity, and its place as an international commodity and signifier are intriguing and convincing. With its clear and comprehensive introduction, *The Culture of the Horse* is a fascinating sampling of the work being done on early modern horses and horsemanship. I look forward to future monographs expanding the ideas presented here.

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