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Sex and gender in the equine in literature

by

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DEDICATION

For Sabrina, a dear friend and the wise, patient, yet spunky fulfillment of a young girl’s obsessive yearning for a horse.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ..............................................................................................1

CHAPTER 2: THE EQUINE AS REPRESENTATION OF HUMAN SEXUALITY ............3

CHAPTER 3: THE HERO’S HORSE .....................................................................................22

CHAPTER 4: THE WOMAN’S INNER EQUINE .................................................................54

WORKS CITED ......................................................................................................................76
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What about the horse elicits such fascination in the human heart? The animal is found in poetry, myth, historical record, religious doctrine, and story of every kind. Asses appear in the Babylonian law codes, some of the oldest examples of written language. Equidae of all sorts appear as important characters in legend and literature from ancient Greece and Rome. The old Norse and Celtic traditions put strong emphasis on horses. Equine characters abound in fairy tales and fables, modern narratives, and everything in-between. Given the horse’s importance in human development, none of this literary attention should be surprising. What is surprising, perhaps, is how, despite the vast range and volume of horse-studded literature, the general portrayal and symbolism of the horse remains impressively consistent through time and irrespective of culture. The time-worn lyric, “A horse is a horse, of course, of course,” is certainly true when one examines the symbolic purposes of the equine.

Although horses play many roles in literature, this study will focus on one aspect of equine meaning: the horse as it relates to sex. Certainly, in the western world, the horse has always served as a generic symbol for sexuality and passion, but interestingly, when examples are specific to gender, the image of the horse becomes strikingly different depending on the sex portrayed. For males, the horse mirrors or foils both his heroic status and virility. The greater the hero, the more powerful or magical his mount becomes. Or, his ignominy is apparent through his inability to master his mount. For females, the horse mirrors some aspect of herself. The animal reflects a woman’s social status, especially in regard to her level of repression or independence. The horse also serves as embodiment of an
important change in her life, either social or psychological. This study will not seek to address the topic exhaustively, but, through a range of examples, demonstrate its pervasiveness. Simply put, the horse, throughout time and across genre, consistently embodies sexuality, and does so differently for males and females.
CHAPTER 2

THE EQUINE AS REPRESENTATION OF HUMAN SEXUALITY

The horse’s connection with sexuality is perhaps as old as its relationship with human beings. The Amazon women of Greek mythology are associated with both horses and aggressive sexuality. Oskar Seyffert\(^1\) notes that “In works of art the Amazons were represented as martial maids…and usually on horseback” (Dictionary of Classical Mythology 25). According to tradition, this tribe of female warriors attacked nearby settlements (on horseback, of course) and raped the men they overpowered in battle in order to increase their numbers. As Seyffert points out, “They suffered no men among them; the sons born of their intercourse with neighbouring nations they either killed or sent back to their fathers; the girls they brought up to be warriors” (25). Certainly, there is a link between the aggressive, sexual animalism of the Amazons and their association with war horses. Interestingly, many Amazon names reflect this identification with horses. Hippolyta means "Of the Stampeding Horse"; Ainippe is "Swift Mare"; Alcippe, "Powerful Mare"; Melanippe, "Black Mare"; Philippis, "Woman Who Loves Horses"; Xanthippe, "Yellow Mare"; Hippo, "Horse"; Lysippe, "She Who Lets Loose the Horses"; and Hippothoe is "Imperious Mare" (Meyers). Not surprisingly, many of these names contain words like “stampeding,” “powerful,” and “let loose,” which are easily associated with unreined sexual feeling.

Also associated with sexuality in Greek myth are the centauri. These dual creatures, half man, half horse, “are a rude, wild race, fond of wine and women” (Seyffert 123). Their intolerable “drunkenness and lust” leads to their banishment from Pelion (123). Homer notes

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\(^1\) Seyffert’s original work was published in German in Leipzig in 1882. Since then it has undergone supplementation, translation, and revision by successive scholars (see preface of Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature, and Art).
this episode in his *Iliad*, when Nestor describes great men who “fought against the strongest, the beast men / living within the mountains, and terribly destroyed them” (i 267-68). The sexual nature of centaurs can be seen in depictions of art, for example this image, taken from Seyffert’s *Dictionary*.\(^2\) The centaur is being ridden and directed by Eros, god of erotic love, and the artist took the time to show that the creature’s phallus is both obvious and partially erect. Clearly the centaur represents all that is virile and unrestrained in the equine. For the ancient Greeks, the horse served well as a representation of sexuality; and they were not alone in this association.

From what can be gleaned of Celtic records, the horse was as much a symbol of sex in Europe as it was in Greece. In her treatment of Celtic horse symbolism, Miranda Green describes Epona, a horse goddess. Green explains that “Epona’s name derives from *epos*, a Celtic word meaning ‘horse’” (“The Symbolic Horse in Pagan Celtic Europe” 11). In fact, the goddess is “never represented” without a horse (Green 11). Among other things,\(^3\) Epona is a goddess of fertility, or “fertile abundance” (Green 13). In images of her, especially those from Burgundy, Green notes that “their most distinctive characteristic is the presence of a foal which suckles his mother, trots behind her or lies asleep between her hoofs” (13). In her

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\(^2\) Centaur teased by Eros, Hellenistic, by an unknown sculptor. Date: C1st - C2nd AD. On display at the Louvre in Paris and reproduced as a sketch in Seyffert’s *Dictionary*.

\(^3\) Green lists Epona as a “multifunction goddess,” representing: a “protectress” of Roman soldiers and their mounts, “a divinity of domestic prosperity and well-being,” and a deity overseeing “the passage of life and death,” as well as a fertility figure (“The Symbolic Horse in Pagan Celtic Europe” 12-13).
closing remarks, Green suggests that “the horse’s vigorous sexuality perhaps caused it to become part of the imagery of deities like Epona, who was concerned with domestic fertility and abundance” (19). While Epona is not directly linked to the sexual act, it is at least arguable that her connection with equine fertility indirectly associates the horse with sex.

The Celts also took the sexuality of stallions seriously. Dafydd Jenkins, in his discussion, “The Horse in the Welsh Law Texts,” cites R.H.C. Davis’ *The Medieval Warhorse*, noting that “The medieval warhorse was a stallion...Geldings were considered to be lacking in courage” (72 ellipses Jenkins’). This was a commonly held belief, despite the fact “that the Turks, Muscovites and Tartars did use geldings and continued to defeat the Christians” (73). For the Celts, a stallion’s sexually intact body was a part of his ability to perform in war, and this is more a culturally-ingrained ideal than a statistical fact. Miranda Green, in her “Symbolic Horse,” argues that shrines from the Iron Age include “carved stones which demonstrate the importance of the horse as a war symbol” (8). This warrior status is synonymous with virility. Green describes a frieze from Kleinklein, Austria, in which “The horses…have radiate manes, as if in imitation of the sun’s rays, and they are ithyphallic [sexually erect] in reflection of their symbolism of virile fecundity” (7). These depictions of intact male horses also are found in coinage. Green notes that “A great many Celtic coins are decorated on the reverse with horses associated with unequivocal solar symbols” (9) She provides a sketched example of a coin from the Slovenské Národné Múzeum, seen here. Green calls attention to the animal’s
“triple phallus, a fertility symbol…which presumably serves to emphasize the role of the animal as an emblem of sexual vigour and the fecundity of the herd” (10). In other words, the Celts associated stallions with sexual virility. Certainly, the treatment of equine phalluses in Celtic texts and art demonstrates that the animal was widely used to symbolize sexuality. This, as well as the depiction of mares as emblems of fertility, emphasizes the sexually charged nature of the image of the horse in the ancient Celtic world.

This trend continues through time. The medieval bestiaries attest to the tendency to assign human sexuality to the equine. Willene B. Clark, in *A Medieval Book of Beasts*, provides a translation of the Second-Family Latin text, which dates to the middle of the 12th century (preface). The bestiary is divided such that each member of the horse family receives its own entry. The ass, the wild ass (onager), the horse, the mule, and the unicorn (and monoceros) are each provided with a somewhat practical description and an account of their particular moral status. For instance, the onager is associated with the Devil, because “with their brays, the wild asses mark the number of hours of the day or night, hour by hour” and this is because “[the Devil] roars night and day, hour by hour, seeking his ‘food’” (156). The animal’s moral status was low because he was believed to be a violent herd-master. The text reports that “[The males] are jealous of the little colts and bite off their testicles” (Clark 156). The ass’s tendency to castrate his own progeny certainly contributed to his immoral reputation.

The bestiary’s treatment of mules represents them to be as immoral as the ass. Clark’s translation reads that when horse mares were exposed to asses, “new animals contrary to nature were born” (160). The authors further emphasize that “human activity *forced* an adulterated commingling” (160 emphasis mine). The natural world and animal behavior are
full of examples of inter-species coupling between similar animals. It is well within the “nature” of a horse or a donkey to see the other as another equine. Not only that, but the term used, “forced,” is clearly not true, for a jack turned out with a mare in season will produce a mule foal without any human coercion whatsoever. The entry here castigating mules’ origins is indicative of the human tendency to apply a cultural moral code onto the horse. In this case, the moral code relates directly to the politics of proscribed sex. Because the mule’s parents are different species, the offspring is considered illegitimate in the same way the offspring of two unmarried persons is illegitimated.

The bestiaries treat horses in a much more positive light. In his translation, Clark describes horses as “very lively, for they gambol about in the fields, they scent war, they are aroused for battle by the sound of the trumpet” (156) and “If the masters are killed or die, the horses weep” (158). The horse is considered alone in this type of empathy (158). Here, man assumes a strong kinship with the horse, one in which the horse is assumed to be, in some ways, a reflection of humanity. In regard to sexuality, it is noted that “the libido…can be destroyed by cutting their manes” (157). This edict sounds suspiciously more like a human phobia than an equine one. Also, “When the males are born a love magic is produced that the foals carry on their foreheads…called the hippomanes” (157-58 emphasis Clark’s). This superstition was prevalent enough to have survived to the modern era. T. H. White, in his own translation of this script, written in 1954, notes that he had seen a “farm laborer” take this “charm” off a new foal in 1934 (The Book of Beasts 86). The contemporary audience of the bestiaries believed that this birthing material, or “love charm,” presumably intended by nature to bond the mare with her colt, would also work to inspire human desire. This is another example of human beings associating the equine with human sexuality.
Nowhere in the bestiaries is horses’ sexuality more explicit than in the descriptions of unicorns. The animal’s nature is described thus:

The unicorn [is]...a small animal and similar to a kid, very fierce, having one horn in the middle of the forehead, and no hunter is able to capture it. But by this series of events it is captured: a virgin girl is led to where it lives, and is left there alone in the woods. And as soon as <the unicorn> sees her it leaps into her lap and embraces her, and thus, it is seized. (Clark 126)

Sexual language is clearly perceptible here. The animal in question is “fierce,” with one “horn,” and is wild, its one weakness innocent virgins, for whom “it [will leap] into her lap” in embrace and be “seized” (126). The illustrations accompanying the words are no less suggestive. In these two examples, taken from different bestiaries, the unicorn crouches into the maiden’s lap. As with other bestiary illustrations, the two are in embrace, and often the maiden grips the shaft of the horn in one hand. Piercing action is always depicted, in the act of the hunter spearing his quarry. In fact, in one of the images, the spearhead passes through the beast and, by a trick of two-dimensional drawings, appears to the outside of the maiden’s thigh. However, if the composition is imagined in three dimensions, taking into account how
the unicorn is cradled between the virgin’s legs, it is clear that the spearhead ought to run through the animal and then between the knees of the young girl. Whether the artist intended a chaste interpretation, the imagery is suggestive.

It would seem that this risqué language (and imagery) is metaphorical, for the unicorn is compared to Christ. Clark’s translation states, “And thus our Lord Jesus Christ is spiritually the unicorn” (126). Perhaps the suggestive imagery is meant to invoke the marital union between Christ and the Church, for that relationship is by association sexual. But it is more complicated than that, for the text continues: “Further, <the unicorn> that has one horn on its head signifies that which [Jesus] said, *I and the Father are one* (Jn 30:10)” (126 emphasis Clark’s). An image of the unicorn as the Father is invoked here, complicating the sexual implication of the following lines, which read: “only by the will of the Father did he [Christ] descend into the womb of a virgin for our salvation” (126). The unicorn’s descent onto the virgin’s lap is the same descent of Christ into Mary’s womb. The piercing of the innocent beast is easily likened to the piercing of Jesus by the Roman Soldiers. However, in the images of the unicorns, the proximity of the piercing action and the virgin’s lap is so close it is easy to see a suggestive position. If the savior and the father are one, as the text reminds readers, then the unicorn’s prone position in the virgin’s lap not only represents Christ being deposited into Mary’s womb, but also the father depositing him. The Translation further compares the unicorn to Christ, who “*was made in the likeness of sinful flesh and of sin*…(Rom 8:3)” (126 emphasis Clark’s). Any Christian reader would assume that “sinful flesh” is a reference to sexual sin. Clearly, the authors of the bestiaries meant to use sexual imagery to represent a divine set of relationships. Clark notes that other bestiaries are far more explicit in their portrayal of the unicorn as sexual. She explains there are two versions,
the one seen here, and another “with sexual overtones in the lore,” including “depicting a nude maiden” (126). Yet even the more modest portrayal includes highly sexualized language in the text and posturing in the illustrations.

The monoceros is also listed in the bestiaries, like the unicorn, as having “an equine body” and “A wonderfully showy horn protrud[ing] from the middle of its forehead…so sharp that anything the beast attacks is pierced easily by its thrust” (Clark 137). Again, the sexually-charged language is obvious. Also like the unicorn, this animal can be killed, but cannot be taken alive (Clark 137). White explains, “The reason why there are two unicorns described in this Bestiary is that [it was] believed there were two species” (44). In essence, the two are both believed to be unicorns, but with slightly different descriptions. White supports the implication of sexuality in the unicorn and monoceros when he notes, “the idea of the unicorn probably originated in travelers’ tales about the rhinoceros whose horn was so much valued in Asia as an aphrodisiac” (44). If this is true, then those who first tried to draw the animal from description saw fit to situate an aphrodisiacal appendage onto an already sexually charged animal, the horse.

In all the permutations of equines depicted in the 12th century bestiaries, especially how the perceived sexual immorality of the ass and mule contrasts the perceived virtue and sexual potency of the horse and unicorn (and monoceros), it is evident that horses were assumed to have a sexual nature which was morally akin to that of human sexuality.

Geoffrey Chaucer, writing in the 14th century, takes advantage of this connection, and in “The Reeve’s Tale,” a fabliau in the Canterbury Tales, utilizes the horse’s association with sex to forecast the tale’s plot and give it a sense of poetic justice.

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4 White explains that the “unicorn” is “solid-footed, donkey-sized” and “identified with ‘the Indian Asse,’” while the other unicorn, the “monoceros,” is “a cloven-footed creature identified with the oryx” (44).
In the tale, a miller named Symkyn has a wife of questionable breeding and a fairly unattractive daughter. The miller’s wife is not treated as a lady because of her questionable parentage. She is the parson’s daughter (I.3943), and as such “She was as digne as water in a dich [She was as dignified as water in a ditch]” (I.3964). The miller’s daughter has her own unpleasant characteristics. She is “thikke and wel y-growen… / With camuse nose and eyen greye as glas, / With buttokes broke and brestes rounde and hye; / But right fair was hire heer, I wol nat lye [thick and well-grown…with pug nose and eyes grey as glass, with broad buttocks and breasts round and high; but right pretty was her hair, I will not lie]” (I.3973-76). In other words, her only nice feature is her hair. These descriptions of the women in Sympkyn’s life suggest that he must keep an eye on his wife’s potential extra-marital opportunities, and also that his daughter is not a boon, but a burden to him; her greatest asset is that she is still a maid, and is therefore still potentially marriageable. These details about the women help inform the joke of the story when it later unfolds.

The miller is also well-known as a thief, not giving his customers back their honest portions of grain (I.3939). And so, two college boys, Aleyn and John, decide to accompany their grain and watch it be milled, so as to prevent the miller’s sneakiness. But the miller, thinking himself smarter than they, unbridles their horse who, immediately, sets off “Toward the fen, ther wilde mares renne, / Forth with ‘wehee” (I.4065-66). Put another way, the stallion makes a beeline through the swamp to be in the company of mares, whinnying as he goes. The horse’s sexual interests are obvious. When the young men discover their animal is missing, they forget all about their goal to watch the miller: “This Aleyn al forgat bothe mele and corn; / Al was out of his mynde his housbondrye [This Allen forgot all about his meal and corn, his business with the miller was all out of his mind]” (I.4076-77). Try as they
might, it is almost impossible for the young men to catch the stallion. It takes until nightfall, because the animal always runs away so fast (I.4104-06). Chaucer is playing here with the image of an unbridled horse equated with unbridled sexual passion. Once let loose, it’s impossible to rein him in until he is spent. The stallion, let loose to chase the mares, reflects what will happen when the boys find themselves with access to the miller’s women.

When the scholars retrieve the horse, “it was night, and forther mighte they noght” (I.4117). They beg hospitality of the miller, who lets them stay for pay. But the miller is foolish, and as he earlier let the horse loose to pursue the mares, so he is foolish here and drinks himself into a stupor. Chaucer describes it thus: “This millere hath so wisly bibbed ale, / That as an hors he fnorteth in his sleep, / Ne of his tayl bihinde hi took no keep” (I.4162-64). By becoming drunk on ale and losing consciousness with the young men right under his roof, the miller has essentially unbridled them, and set them free to sniff among his “mares.” And so they do. Aleyn is the first to act, complaining to John that they deserve retribution for their stolen grain and stolen time chasing the horse (I.4181-86). And then he is on top of the young maid before she has a chance to make noise (I.4193-97). John also takes action (I.4207-09). By moving the cradle, he tricks the wife into entering his bed when she returns from going outside to relieve herself. Then, “on this gode wyf he leyth on sore. / So mery a fit ne hadde she nat ful yore [on this good wife he layeth on sore (sets to it vigorously). So merry a fit she hadn’t had for a long time]” (I.4229-30). Thus the two young men unleash their physical desires on the Miller’s females.

With the dawn comes the waking of the miller and a humorous scene in which the young men get away with all their grain and the miller knows he has been, in effect, doubly-cuckolded. Despite the fact that he should be aware that men are interested in his wife, she
has been taken sexually in the very same room. The miller’s daughter, a difficult sell to any suitor, is now ruined for marriage, and the miller will be hard-pressed to find someone to take her off his hands. The poetic justice implied here is that the man got what he deserved. Not only is he a thief of the grain his customers paid him to grind, but in letting loose the other men’s stallion he was tempting fate. Just as the freed animal runs wild in his amours, the two young men run wild with their swyving. For Chaucer’s audience, the implied connection between the sexually lusty horse and the vigorous young men lends to the outcome of the story a sense of continuity and balance and, of course, poetic justice. It is clear here that the lusts of the horse and the lusts of the men are, artistically, one and the same.

On the subject of sexually-charged equines in the literary canon of the “greats,” Shakespeare is not to be left out. In both *Antony and Cleopatra* and “Venus and Adonis,” the bard’s use of horses to communicate the sexual can readily be seen.

In the third act of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra discusses with Enobarbus an upcoming battle. The subject of discussion is why Enobarbus feels it is inappropriate for Cleopatra to personally observe the fighting. She asks, “why should not we / Be there in person?” (3.7.5-6). Enobarbus’ first response, one that he keeps to himself, is couched in terms of horses. He mutters under his breath, “Well, I could reply: / If we should serve with horse and mares together, / The horse were merely lost; the mares would bear / A soldier and his horse” (3.7.7-9). Cleopatra asks him, essentially, to speak up, and what he then replies to her implies that her presence would emasculate Antony, since he has difficulty being taken seriously because of his relationship with her (3.7.12-15). What is of interest here is Enobarbus’ first reply, which uses horses to describe a human situation. Clearly, a sexual implication is made when the mare is said to bear both soldier and horse. Gordon Ross, in his
discussion of this scene, cites Irving Ribner’s *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, wherein he says, “A ribald jest is doubtless intended, although its precise terms are not clear. ‘Bear’ is often used in the sense of ‘support the male’” (“Enobarbus on Horses” 386). But Ross asserts that “the intention is as clear as we could wish it” (386). Shakespeare’s audience would doubtless be put in mind of stallions covering mares. Ross insists, “What Enobarbus says is simply that if horses and mares are both employed in battle, the horses will mount the mares and thus be ‘lost’ with regard to their intended function” (386). So Enobarbus is saying that women do not belong on the battlefield because the temptation would be for the men to posture for and elicit attention from the women. Their minds would be distracted by sexual matters rather than on fighting and doing battle. In this one simple parley between Cleopatra and Enobarbus, Shakespeare demonstrates the easy sexual implication of horses and humans.

Shakespeare also treats horses as sexual beings in his poem, “Venus and Adonis.” Here, the lusty Venus desires the physical affections of a disinterested Adonis. Shakespeare writes, “Hunting he [Adonis] lov’d, but love he laugh’d to scorn; / Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him, / And like a bold-fac’d suitor ’gins to woo him” (4-6). Despite her multiple attempts to allure or cajole him into lovemaking, the young Adonis “Still is…sullen, still he low’rs and frets, / ’Twixt crimson shame and anger ashy-pale” (75-76). Imbedded in the midst of this conflict of interests is a moment of distraction wherein Adonis breaks free from Venus and “Away he springs and hasteth to his horse” (258), presumably to escape Venus’ aggressive tactics. “But lo from forth a copse that neighbours by, / A breeding jennet, lusty, young and proud, / Adonis’ trampling courser doth espy” (259-61), and the stallion’s interest is no longer with his master. He breaks his rein and heads right for the jennet (264). The two horses flirt with each other, and Shakespeare takes the time to describe what a fine
male specimen is the courser, including the comment, “For through his mane and tail the
high wind sings, / Fanning the hairs, who wave like feath’red wings” (305-06). These images
bear a striking resemblance to Miranda Green’s description of Iron Age carvings of stallions’
“radiate manes” (7) and supports the connection between manes and virility suggested in the
bestiaries, where a horse’s potency requires an un-cropped mane.

The courtship of the two horses is clearly situated in contrast to Venus’s failing
attempts to woo Adonis. Robert Miller, in “Venus, Adonis, and the Horses,” suggests that the
behavior of the animals “proceeds according to the artificial conventions of romantic
courtship,” and that “The Courser and Jennet are treated in terms conventionally applied to
the ideal knight and his lady” (251). Miller argues that the horses are depicted acting out a
very human courtship. In fact, Venus herself chides Adonis for not being more like his
mount. She instructs, “learn of him, I heartily beseech thee, / To take advantage on presented
joy; /…O, learn to love; the lesson is but plain” (404-07). But this is the last thing on Adonis’
mind. He complains, “For all my mind, my thought, my busy care, / Is how to get my palfrey
from the mare” (383-84). The humorous double-meaning here is unmistakable, as he wishes
both he and his mount were not detained by ardorous females. In this digression from the
main action of the poem, the comparison between horse and human lust is plain.

What is also plain is the language of unmanaged sexual freedom. Shakespeare notes
the stallion breaking his bonds. As the horse approaches the mare he becomes unmanageable,
“And now his woven girths he breaks asunder; /…The iron bit he crusheth ’tween his teeth, /
Controlling what he was controlled with” (266-70). Shakespeare’s use of a horse to show
unbridled passion here is clear. When Adonis calls to the wayward animal, ordering him to
“Stand, I say” (284), the stallion is oblivious: “He sees his love, and nothing else he sees, /
For nothing else with his proud sight agrees” (287-88). This horse has eyes only for his mare. It is a clear metaphor for the idea that those who are in lust have no control over their actions, and even less chance of listening to reason. Shakespeare comments, “Look, what a horse should have he did not lack, / Save a proud rider on so proud a back” (299-300). Again, this symbolizes that he who is overwhelmed with sexual desire has lost wise control. Miller addresses this metaphor, explaining, “The horse…symbolizes the lower appetites of the flesh, while the rein and rider stand for the powers of reason which are theoretically supposed to control and direct such lusts” (256). Miller offers examples, such as these lines from Arthur Golding, “The man in whom the fyre of furious lust dooth reigne / Dooth run to mischeefe like a horse that getteth loose the reyne” (256). And this snippet from Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, “For as a hot proud horse highly disdains / To have his head controll’d, but breaks the reins, /…The more he is restrain’d, the worse he fares; / What is it now but mad Leander dares?” (256-57). What Miller demonstrates here is just how common was the concept of runaway horse as runaway passion for the Elizabethan audience. In both “Venus and Adonis” and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare compares human sexual behavior to that of the horse. His poetry is quite effective, and the modern reader has no trouble understanding and finding entertainment in these comparisons.

Perhaps the examples set in classical mythology and by Chaucer and Shakespeare have had an inspiring effect on later literature and cultural expression, or perhaps the continued proliferation of horses representing all things sexual is something intrinsic to culture. Either way, it is no wonder the Victorian era is also in awash in examples of the

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5 For another example of Shakespeare’s treatment of horses and sexuality, see David Blythe’s “Lear’s Soiled Horse,” in which is discussed “Lear’s rail against libido”(86), and his comparison of lecherous people and the soiled horse. Blythe uses as one example the treatment of “the image of Antony as a soiled horse” (87), in *Antony and Cleopatra* and in other sources. *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31.1 (Spring 1980): 86-88.
equine in relation to sex. Gina Dorré writes of this in her book, *Victorian Fiction and the Cult of the Horse*. Her study tackles many roles⁶ that the horse plays which are specific to the Victorian Era. Consistently through her work, the sexual footing of the horse is important in her analysis. In describing how and why people use horses to tell human stories, Dorré cites Jane Tompkins’ *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, explaining that the animals “are something people have close physical contact with, something they touch, press against their bodies. Something that is alive…big, powerful, and fast-moving. Something not human but not beyond human control, dangerous, even potentially lethal, but ductile to the human will” (18). If the reader didn’t know better, this passage could be describing something sexual, and that is part of Dorré’s argument. She claims that “Horses often signify beyond their literal function” (19), and very often that signification is sexual.

Dorré opens her work by describing the advent of a painting of Queen Victoria and her groom-become-Highland Servant, John Brown. She explains that the unprecedented rank this “mere groom” achieved

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⁶ “By the mid-nineteenth century, images of the abject urban working horse often functioned to displace gender and class concerns, resonating uneasily with parables of defiled manhood, fallen women, and an exploited work force” (12). Dorré covers topics such as the Victorian definition of a horse, the advent of the “Iron Horse,” horsemanship as opposed to homemaking, dress reform, treatment of gambling and literature production, and the changing perception of the horse in a modernizing world.
was offensive to members of court and “titillating” to “the public sphere” (1-2). Dorré asserts this scandal “only intensified in May of 1867, when a large portrait that Victoria had commissioned…was unveiled” (2). The reason this painting made such an impact has to do with its composition. Victoria is astride her horse, whose head is held by Brown. Dorré points out that, for the public, the picture cemented rumor into reality and “With the exhibition of the portrait…the effrontery of their familiarity was ‘brought into sharp focus’” (2). Dorré argues that there are plenty of subtle reasons why the painting would be seen as disgraceful or tasteless, but the predominant factors have to do with the sexuality of the equine. She notes,

Brown’s unruliness as a temperamental Scotsman, his close association with the animality of the horse, his unseemly social advancement and swift movement from outdoor service to in, and the freedom that the largely unmonitored horseback rides allowed both him and the Queen coincided with the charged symbology of the horse to give shape and substance to the royal affront in the cultural imagination. (3)

The overt sexuality lent to the composition by the presence of the horse is certain. Dorré quotes the diary of the poet Wilfred Scawen Blunt, wherein he states, “It was the talk of all the household that he [Brown] was ‘the Queen’s stallion’” (3). The fact that the court and public could, as a group, interpret sexual impropriety in an image which is apparently benign indicates that there is some form of collective interpretive imagery at work. Dorré argues that although Blunt’s comments are opinion, his “account indicates a telegraphic understanding in the culture of the confluence of provocative significations that are regularly born by representations of and associations with the horse” (4). In other words, the fact that the horse appears in the painting as part of an integral unit of man-horse-Queen, invokes for the entire

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7 Dorré proceeds to analyze the composition piece by piece, demonstrating how the details work together to emphasize the “horsey sexuality” of the work (4).
audience a sense of sexual intimacy. The horse does not behave sexually; it is merely the presence of the horse, and its visual cohesion with the work as a whole, that suggests the intimacy.

Dorré offers other examples of the horse’s sexual role in Victorian literature. She quotes Beryl Rowland, who says, in *Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism*:

> The body of the horse is the repository of sex and as such is often equated with woman. Proverbial expressions in many countries compare courting a woman to buying a horse, or urge a man to keep a tight rein on both his wife and his horse, or declare that well-traveled women, like well-traveled horses, are never good. (10)

This connection is certainly visible in Victorian literature. Dorré notes the character, Edith, in Dickens’ *Dombey and Sons*. She argues that “Dickens endows Edith with phallic intensity, picturing her as a magnificent but unbroken horse” (54). Dorré cites Dickens’ description of Edith and how “she speaks ‘with a rising passion that inflate[s] her proud nostril and her swelling neck…uprearing her proud form as if she would have crushed him’” (54), the “him” here being Mr. Carker, Dombey’s manager. The impression here of Edith’s horsey sexuality is unmistakable. Dorré also mentions that the converse was also true, in that “The horsebreaking text manages its subject through discursive tactics that eroticize the horse, charting trajectories of sexual desire in the rhetoric of the taming” (71). The “text” in question here includes several horsebreaking texts popular at the time, specifically, Mr. Rarey’s “The Taming of Horses.” An excerpt from this work reads, “you must stroke him—you must fondle him, until he lets you enthrall him” (Dorré 71). Read in the context of sexuality, this passage is almost disturbing. Between the portrayal of “horsey heroines,”
(Dorré’s affectionate term for characters like Edith) and horses imbued with femininity, it can easily be seen how conflated were the equine and the feminine in Victorian perception.

Whether serving to function as a symbol for sex in general,\(^8\) or as the female body as a sexual vessel, the horse in Victorian culture and literature clearly embodies sexuality. Although her argument is not focused on the sexuality of the horse in Victorian literature and culture, Dorré’s study of the Victorian horse demonstrates that the animal is certainly, for Victorians, symbolically associated with the sexual.

Classical mythology, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Victorian literature, and other western literatures and cultural traditions are full of examples of the horse serving as a symbol for human sexual appetite, need, and behavior. Whether this association is the result of some kind of primal wiring in the human psyche, or a complex set of conceptual language and meaning developed slowly over eons of close co-existence with the creatures is beyond the scope of this study, but it is clear that the horse’s role as sexual icon is ingrained in the collective imaginations of the western literate world.

Taking this connection further, it is possible, actually easy, to distinguish a marked difference in the sexual representations of the horse in regard to gender. The male warrior stallion serves as a reflection and a symbol of his rider’s heroism. The female connection with the equine is more subtle in its representation, but often the fiery mount she rides serves as a symbol of her own sexual power, and the companion horse, often quietly tempered,

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\(^8\) Dorré’s examination of the term “horsebreaker” as another term for “prostitute” is another fascinating look at the sexual implications of horses. She mentions a painting of a woman reclined against a stallion, titled *Taming the Shrew*, which became popularly known as *The Pretty Horsebreaker*. This unofficial name refers, of course, to the sexuality perceived in the painting. See “Whores, Horsewomen, and the ‘Woman Question’” in ch. 2 (73).
serves as the embodiment of her personal struggle or growth, often in regard to sexual development.

In the following chapters, these concepts will be discussed. Chapter Three, “The Hero’s Horse,” will examine the male representation of horse heroism and Chapter Four, “The Woman’s Inner Equine,” will discuss the connection between female sexuality and the equine.
CHAPTER 3

THE HERO’S HORSE

The horse in western tradition and literature often mirrors or informs the level of heroism, or lack thereof, in the male psyche. The animal’s relation to the man is different depending on his inherent level of worthiness or worthlessness. The horse can serve as amplifier of glory, teacher, inspiration, companion, and embodiment of (or contrast to) the hero’s character. But in every case, the animal clarifies in some way who this man is, and what manner of hero he may be, and, by extension, his level of virility. For whatever makes up a hero is certainly synonymous, ideologically, with whatever makes up (pardon the pun) a stud.

Several permutations of the hero-and-horse dynamic are discernible. The most traditional is that of the divine or otherwise special equine who emphasizes the heroism of his master. In other cases, a gifted horse leads a boy or young man into heroism. There are also many examples of males unworthy of heroic status, for instance, boys or young men who are not yet ready to take on more adult roles, and as such are unworthy of their mounts. Also plentiful are examples of fully grown men whose character flaws make them unworthy of the horses in their lives. Complicating this dynamic are problematic heroes, men whose nature and relationship to their mounts makes it difficult to decide whether they are heroic or not. Yet what is consistent in all these permutations of the horse-and-hero relationship is how in every case, the horse is pivotally linked to the male’s status of worth.

In the most traditional sense, a horse’s role in relation to a heroic male figure is to serve as his noble mount. In numerous literary examples, the glory of the horse, usually a
stallion, enhances or defines the specific heroism of the man in question. The “undying steeds” (Seyffert 466) of Achilles are a good example. Originally, Xanthus and Balius were a divine gift to Peleus, but were passed down to Achilles and accompanied him and his dearest friend Patroklos to Troy. In Homer’s *Iliad*, the horses and Patroklos form a heroic team. Achilles calls him “illustrious Patroklos, rider of horses” (XVI 126). The Trojan prince, Hector, uses the term “Patroklos, lord of horses” (XVI 839). With these animals pulling the chariot, Patroklos fights as a god: “Three times he charged in with the force of the running war god, / screaming a terrible cry, and three times he cut down nine men; / but as for the fourth time he swept in, like something greater than human” (XVI 784 –87). Patroklos is so powerful that he cannot be killed until Apollo steps in and attacks (XVI 788), and even then he is struck again by two mortals before he succumbs. When he dies, the two godly animals mourn his passing. Automedon, their driver, tries to rejoin the battle, but the horses, “still as stands a grave monument… / …stood there / …leaning their heads along the ground, and warm tears were running / earthward from underneath the lids of the mourning horses / who longed for their charioteer” (XVII 434-39). The immortal horses weep for a mortal only this once. With an elegy of this magnitude, Homer bestows a significant honor to Patroklus’ fame, for if the divine horses of Poseidon would serve him in battle and mourn his passing, Patroklos is an exceptional a hero among the Greek warriors.

The flesh-eating horses of Diomedes are another good example of how the valor of the hero determines how powerful a mount he may handle. Diomedes is a mortal, but also “a son of Ares” (Seyffert 281) and one of the Greeks in the *Iliad* who fights in Troy. Legend has Diomedes stabling several horses, likely four mares (171), according to D. C. Kurtz in “The Man-Eating Horses of Diomedes in Poetry and Painting.” These mares were fed “the flesh of
the strangers landing in the country” (Seyffert 281) by their master. Heracles’ eighth task was
to “subdue” these mares (Kurtz 170) and bring them back to Eurystheus, his master (Meyer
62 and Seyffert 281). Kurtz discusses papyrus brought to light in 1961 which has on it a
poem by Pindar from the 5th century B.C (171). In this poem, Pindar describes Heracles’
efforts: “He snatched up the groom, fed him to the beasts to distract them…broke off the
chain and drove the horses away” (172). By some accounts, Herakles entrusts the mares to
“his friend, Abderus, whom they promptly devoured” (Meyer 62). By other accounts,
Heracles feeds Abderus to the horses, but “then found[s] Abdera in his memory” (Kurtz 172).
Finally, Heracles overpowers Diomedes and feeds him “to the very horses he had taught the
loathsome habit” (Kurtz 172). Then the mares “became tame upon partaking of the flesh of
their master” (Meyer 62). Heracles brings the once-fearsome chariot pullers to Eurystheus,
who releases them (Seyffert 281).

This episode demonstrates two significant ways in which horses are used to glorify a
hero. First, the mares not only are fed people, but have learned to carnivorously attack them.
Kurtz quotes a few lines from Pindar’s description: “a sound cracked through the rending
bones…one was carrying off a leg, one a forearm, another in her teeth the head by the root of
the neck” (172). These are not straw-fed horses served diced-up meat mixed with their sweet
feed. These fillies are happy to do their own butchering. There is a similarity between these
mares and the myths of enraged Amazons on the warpath, looking for flesh in battle or flesh
in rape. Charles Anthon, in his Classical Dictionary, points out “the Scythian term” for the
Amazons “was Oiorpata, or ‘man slayer’” (120). Both Diomedes’ mares and the Amazons
are females that devour men. The connection between killing men for food and devouring
them sexually is not a weak one. The Amazons are well-known for their rapacious sexuality,
and here, the horses’ link with the sexual is presumable, for these mares are violent, dangerous man-eaters that have destroyed every male in their path, except Heracles. This parallels his experience with the Amazons, when he is sent to retrieve the girdle of Hippolyta but finds her “ready to give up the girdle of her own accord” (Seyffert 281). And with the mares, Heracles alone is mighty and wise and quick enough to avoid being consumed by the angry females. Even the mares’ supposed master, the man who trains and keeps them, is not really man enough to handle them, for they eat him too, when given the opportunity. Heracles’ glory is accentuated by his ability to control these troublesome mares.

The second way this episode lends superior hero-status to Heracles is through the taming of the mares. It is important that Heracles does not just outwit or overpower the mares, but that he finds the key to gentling them. It’s a classical parallel to stories like *The Taming of the Shrew*. For while it is truly impressive that this man can overpower these females, even more significant is that he can stop the hateful behavior without beating them into submission. There is no account of Heracles beating the mares, although Kurtz points out that he’s often depicted brandishing his club toward them (172). Heracles’ heroism entails not only his amazing strength, but also the ingenuity to understand the seemingly crazed animals. He is able to cure their madness. Clearly a hero, Heracles can outwit, overpower, and normalize the fractious mares; he is man enough to handle and eventually tame such untouchable females. Not only is his status as hero secure, his has taken any questions about his virility well in-hand.

Patroklos’ and Heracles’ horse-inspired heroism parallels more modern examples. In Michael Blake’s *Dances With Wolves*, Lieutenant John Dunbar is a man whose heroism is linked with, if not dependent upon, his unnaturally intelligent mount, Cisco; “this was a
once-in-a-lifetime animal. There would be no replacing him once he was gone” (3).
Throughout the novel, the horse is described as brave and loyal, and the unique relationship between Dunbar and the very valuable Cisco is emphasized.

The friendship between this particular man and horse is special. Blake explains, “What matters is that something extraordinary happened when Dunbar swung onto the back of a horse, especially if it was a gifted horse like Cisco” (40). The “something extraordinary” between them is enhanced by their ability to understand each other so well. After a few days of inactivity, Cisco “looked pointedly at the lieutenant and stamped his hoof in the way of horses…Dunbar knew he wanted something. A ride probably” (40). Both Dunbar’s and Cisco’s gifted ability to communicate lends import to them as a heroic pair.

The horse isn’t merely empathic; Cisco’s bravery comes into play early in the story. Dunbar first meets up with Cisco when, badly injured in the foot and unwilling to have it amputated, he decides upon a suicide mission to “draw enemy fire” (31). He and the “small, strong buckskin” (31) take a gallop right through the enemy line. Dunbar “sat straight up so as to make a better target…[He] waited for one of the bullets to find him. But none did” (32). Although Dunbar’s thoughts are defeatist, Cisco “surged against the bit” (33), showing his enthusiasm for the task. When asked to run across enemy fire, “the little horse flattened his ears and flew at the wall” (32). Clearly, the animal is brave and motivated to perform his duties.

Dunbar’s goal is simply to end things, but the men in both armies are astounded. At first, “the rebels were too shocked to shoot” (32). And, “Determined not to fail himself, the lieutenant suddenly and impulsively let the reins drop and lifted both his arms high into the air” in a farewell to life (33), but “It might have looked like a gesture of triumph” (33). When
the Union soldiers see this they “streamed over the wall, a spontaneous tide of fighting men, roaring with an abandon that curdled the blood of the Confederate troops” (33). This moment has all the elements of heroism: A man, taking no thought for his own safety, boldly turns the tide of events and somehow comes out unscathed. Both Dunbar and Cisco are the embodiment of valiant action. Despite Dunbar’s suicide wish, his choice of action is uncannily effective, and the fact that he and his mount are untouched by enemy fire lends their destiny a sense of divine order.

Not only are these two brave and super-naturally communicative, but Cisco’s persistent loyalty accentuates the perception that this is a heroic pair: “Cisco had been stolen…twice to be exact, and like a faithful dog, he had always found a way to come back” (65). Cisco’s affection for Dunbar speaks much to the man’s character. He is a man who is good to his animal, and worthy of an exceptional horse, since the animal himself demonstrates a preference for him.

Later, Cisco’s loyalty is a major factor in Dunbar’s acceptance by the local Indian tribe. The tribe had driven the soldiers out the previous fall, and “Taking their horses had been laughable” (52). Dunbar is terrified when he sees a Comanche; “he had never expected anything so wild” (54). Dunbar hides until the Indian goes after Cisco. Dunbar’s “paralysis evaporated…He shouted out, his bellow cracking the stillness like a shot. ‘You there!’” (54). When Dunbar is threatened with the loss of his horse, his fear disappears and he becomes an intimidating figure. At least, the Indian thinks so, for he “stumbled backward in horror, righted himself, and…galloped off as if the devil were on his tail” (55). Later, three of the tribe’s boys covertly decide to steal the horse. They “were at full run when the buckskin wheeled sharply away” (64). The young men return empty-handed, and the elders believe the
horse might be magical when one of the boys “told them the horse had not spooked, that he had broken away deliberately” (66). While the tribe deliberates on this, Wind In His Hair, a warrior, decides to let men accomplish what the boys could not (70). This time, he and his men surround Cisco as they lead him away (76). But, “The buckskin leaped as if he’d been stung on the rump, and shot ahead. The man holding the lead line was pulled straight over the head of his pony” (76), so the Indians take chase, but one of the five ponies breaks a leg and two lose their riders as they fail to “imitate [Cisco’s] lightning zigs and zags” (77). Clearly, Cisco’s unnatural loyalty and supernatural agility fascinate the horsemen of the plains.

The few tribesmen who have already seen Dunbar have been very impressed with him: “He seemed not to be afraid…the man should be afraid. How could he not be?” (75). The soldier’s inconceivable horse has them speculating that he might be a white god. Kicking Bird, the tribe’s medicine man, suggests that “It might be a magic horse, something belonging to a magic person” (77). Cisco’s intelligence and loyalty to Dunbar inspire respect and awe from the tribe; hence, they approach him to talk and find out about him, rather than treat him as they have the other white soldiers. Chief Ten Bears decides, “this soldier should be investigated’” (107). So begins Dunbar’s relationship with the tribe.

Throughout the novel, Blake points out Dunbar’s good, even heroic qualities, but it is his talented, brave, and loyal equine companion that lends the lieutenant an air of something magical and heroic that rallies disillusioned soldiers with determination and intrigues the white-leery Comanches, so that they draw him into their midst, rather than obliterate him. Without the support of Cisco, Dunbar’s heroic qualities might never have manifested.

In the few examples noted here, the archetypal role of the hero’s special mount is consistent. The hero is a man of noteworthy character or skill already, but his pairing with a
magnificent steed amplifies or showcases his valor. Without their noble horses, these heroes would still be honorable men, but their glory would be greatly diminished.

A variation on the theme of the pairing of horse and hero is that of boys whose horses lead them to develop into heroes. The young men are already good boys; something in their character hints at their impending heroic adulthood. The equine’s help may be intentional or inadvertent, but always, the young man’s process of becoming a hero, of growing up to manhood, is a result of his relationship with a horse.

In Marguerite Henry’s young adult novel, *Misty of Chincoteague*, Paul Beebe’s journey to moral manhood is informed by his experiences with Phantom and Misty, two of the wild ponies of Assateague Island. It’s the first year he’s old enough to join the men on their annual pony-penning (32), and he dreams of catching the elusive Phantom. She seems more legend than pony; he ponders, “Was the Phantom real?…She had never been captured, and the roundup men did sometimes tell tall tales” (31). Phantom is a special horse, and it is fitting that she will be instrumental in Paul’s coming-of-age experience.

On the morning of the pony-penning Paul begins his initiation: “Grandma stood over the stove, frying ham and making coffee for him as if he were man-grown!” (59). Grandma encourages this sense of new-ordination; she tells him “I picked the first ripe figs of the year fer ye…Now sit down, Paul, and eat a breakfast fit for a roundup man!” (59). But the men in town are happy to remind Paul that he’s still a boy. As Paul heads toward the roundup, a neighbor man taunts him and then laughs and “wink[s] at the rest of the group” (61). Likely because he thinks the boy needs watching over, Wyle Maddox, the roundup leader, keeps Paul in his group when they split up (62). As the chase gets intense, Maddox sends Paul out
of harm’s way. Paul is perceptive enough to notice this deception: “His face reddened with anger. They wanted to be rid of him…Sent him after a straggler!” (65). But their attempts to protect the boy lead to a chance for him to prove himself.

While he’s alone, Paul’s horse picks up a new scent, “dancing on his hind legs, his nose high in the air” (65). Paul decides to listen to his horse and heads after a “blur of motion” in the distance (66). As the roundup nears completion the men start to worry about Paul, who hasn’t returned: “there was an undercurrent of tension…their subdued voices and their too easy laughter” (70). But Paul has trumped every other man’s performance.

Suddenly the laughter stilled. Mouths gaped in disbelief. Eyes rounded. For a few seconds no one spoke at all. Then a shout that was half wonder and half admiration went up from the men. Paul Beebe was bringing in the Phantom and a colt! (70 emphasis Henry’s)

The men are more than impressed; they now see Paul as a young man. He has managed to outsmart the mare that no man could: “The men accepted Paul as one of them now—a real roundup man” (71). But being accepted as a man is only part of Paul Beebe’s initiation; he also develops heroic traits.

Paul has caught a horse that no man ever could, but her foal must swim the channel with the other horses. Some of the men comment, “It’s the newest colt in the bunch; may not stand the swim” (71). Paul feels responsible for the foal, and requests to swim his horse with the captured herd, but Wyle says it’s against tradition (72). Paul assents to this, but once in the water, the little horse doesn’t have the strength to swim. Unwilling to be the cause of the filly’s death, Paul risks the flailing hooves of the herd and jumps overboard (77). A crowd watches on the other shore; “Shouts between triumph and relief escaped every throat as the
little filly tottered up the bank” (80). Paul has managed an act that is cheered by everyone as heroic.

Paul’s final opportunity to grow into a man of moral grit comes when the foal, Misty, is weaned and the Phantom grows restless for her wild home. She would pace, and “Other times, she stood leaning far out over the fence, and there was a wild, sad look about her” (143). Then one day Phantom hears a “ringing neigh in the distance” and pricks up her ears (166). Grandpa, Paul, and Maureen (Paul’s sister), realize it’s the Pied Piper, Phantom’s stallion, calling for her. Paul removes the bridle, “giving Phantom her freedom” (168). Here, Paul sacrifices ownership of the horse he loves in favor of her own happiness. He lets her return to the wild and is content. Maureen notices that “some of the Phantom’s happiness seemed to shine in his face” (170). That shine is the glowing countenance of one who has found a hero within himself. When Paul decides to let Phantom go, her role as his mentor is complete, and the boy is a man.

Paul Beebe’s heroic development is not unlike other boys-to-men stories involving special horses. Sometimes, when the young man must grow into a truly great hero, the horse that guides him must also be truly great. In C.S. Lewis’s The Horse and his Boy, for instance, Shasta is a young fisherman’s son, or thinks he is, slavishly working for the man he calls father (7). But the boy is destined for a heroism that involves the fate of kingdoms. The horse that takes him into his care and escapes with him, Bree, is a talking horse from Narnia, and schools the young man in all he needs to know.

Another story in which the young man’s magnificent horse guides him to magnificent heroism is Peter Beagle’s The Last Unicorn. In this tale, Prince Lír is inspired to heroic acts by his relationship with the unicorn, Amalthea. Before Lír meets the unicorn, he is lazy and
youthful. His adoptive father, King Haggard, accuses him, “you do nothing that becomes a man but ride astraddle” (112). Lír’s voice is describes as “light, kind, [and] silly” (123). But in the moment he first sees the unicorn, Lír finds something happening within himself. To his father he laments, “I have always been sorry that I have never pleased you; but now, when I look at her, I am sorry that I have never pleased myself. Oh, I am sorry” (112). Although the unicorn is disguised as a human female, she is suspiciously distinct in appearance and manner; Lír admits that no matter what, he “would know that this creature was different from anything [he] had ever seen,” and this mysterious creature invokes immediately in Lír the desire to perform great deeds (112). A little later on, Lír reflects that he “felt strangely, happily certain that she had looked him round and through, and down into caverns that he had never known were there…Prodigies began to waken somewhere southwest of his twelfth rib, and he…began to shine” (116). In the presence of this disguised but magical equine, Lír becomes aware of embryonic heroism lying dormant within him.

A natural connection exists between the two from the start. As she enters the castle for the first time, with her companions, Lír follows her as escort, “his step grown as tender as that of the Lady Amalthea, whose every movement he imitated unaware” (114). The young man inadvertently locks himself into a subconscious mimicry of her.

While it is easy to construe this fascination as romantic interest, Beagle emphasizes the fact that this “girl” is no human, but something magical. He describes ‘a hand on which the ring and middle fingers were of equal length” (121). The two equal-length fingers are the cloven toes upon which she treads as a unicorn, and “The strange place on her forehead…gloving as bright as a flower” (121) is, of course, the spot where her unicorn’s horn should be. Lír notices her “[lower] her head in the way of a goat or a deer” (147). And
in her eyes, Haggard cannot see his reflection, only “green leaves, crowded with trees and streams and small animals” (122). While she is, for now, in the shape of a beautiful girl, she is definitely a unicorn.

And it is precisely because she is a magical equine that Lír finds her so fascinating, although the only thing he understands about her mystery is his romantic attraction. He composes poetry for her, even though “he had never wanted to write poems before” (124). Lady Amalthea’s presence stirs the young and unmotivated Lír into unprecedented heroism. In trying to be the kind of man that can be worthy of her, he slays five dragons (127) and has “swum four [mile or more wide] rivers…climbed seven mountains never before climbed…vanquished exactly fifteen black knights” and many monsters and many other exploits that take half a page to list (128-129). Summing it all up, he says, “I cannot touch her, whatever I do. For her sake, I have become a hero—I, sleepy Lír, my father’s sport and shame—but…My great deeds mean nothing to her” (129). Perhaps Amalthea’s indifference is her fear of caring for him, since unicorns prefer solitude: “She had never minded being alone, never seeing another unicorn, because she had always known that there were others like her in the world, and a unicorn needs no more than that for company” (4). Or perhaps it is because, as brave as his deeds are, this is simply his learning ground.

Lír’s true graduation into heroism comes in the climax of the story, when the unicorn must face Haggard’s Red Bull. Her quest is to find her people, and they are trapped in the sea by the Red Bull. Now she must face the Bull to save the other unicorns. Schmendrick returns Amalthea to her rightful form so that she can fight, but the fiery demon drives the frightened unicorn toward the sea (184). Lír, furious, accosts the magician for not performing magic and Schmendrick says that magic cannot help “If she will not fight him” (187). Lír demands,
“Then what is magic for?” (188). The reply is simple: “That’s what heroes are for” (188). The words crystallize real purpose in the young man, who suddenly realizes what a real hero is. “‘Yes of course,’ he [says]. That is exactly what heroes are for,” and he leaps before the raging Bull (188). The Bull doesn’t even notice the tiny human as he charges by. In his wake, Lír’s crumpled body lies imbedded in the sand. This greatest of brave and selfless acts marks Lír’s full status as hero. His willingness to make such a sacrifice is profound, and is the turning moment in the struggle, for “Suddenly the unicorn screamed…it was an ugly, squawking wail of sorrow and loss and rage, such as no immortal creature ever gave” (189). In her grief and rage, Amalthea no longer fears the Red Bull; she wants to slay him. In righteous anger she drives him into the sea, instead of he her. With the bull’s disappearance under the waves, all the other unicorns are set free, and they swarm the land like a giant glowing wave (192). Through Lír’s sacrifice, Amalthea finds a courage that no other unicorn had ever possessed. While the unicorn and the man both experience a new courage within them, it is clear that the cause of it is their union. Alone, Lír would have never amounted to anything special; his association with a magical horse inspires Lír to reach his full potential as hero.

When the unicorns have fled and Haggard and his dark castle crumble into the sea, Amalthea returns to her companions and with a touch of her horn, revives Lír’s body. The only coherent words he can muster are, “I was dead,” and the unicorn gently touches his heart with her horn and rests it there for a moment, before promising to remember him and galloping away (196). Quite literally, this young man is reborn a hero through the power of his magical horse.
Although many tales describe a young man growing into his adulthood or led to heroic acts through the inspiration of his horse, others are not ready yet for this important rite. In classical mythology, Phaethon, “Son of Helios…and the Sea-nymph Clymene” (Seyffert 475), wants to have his divine heritage acknowledged a bit before he is ready. When he feels he is old enough, ‘he demand[s] of his father, as a proof of his birth, the privilege of driving the chariot of the sun for a single day” (475). But young Phaethon is not the god his father is: “he prove[s] too weak to restrain the horses, who soon [run] away with him, and [plunge], now close up to heaven, now right down to earth, so that both [begin] to take fire” (Seyffert 475-76). Phaethon’s attempt to prove himself worthy of god-like glory fails miserably and fatally, for “to save the whole world from destruction, Zeus shatter[s] the young man with his lightning” and the corpse falls to earth (Seyffert 476). Sadly, Phaethon’s reach for glory is not heroic; greedy for power and status, he is completely unable to command the fiery horses of Helios, who require a nobler master.

Phaethon’s ignominious adventure bears an eerie resemblance to a Navajo myth, “The Sun Father’s Horse.” Gerald and Loretta Hausman, compiling numerous myths in The Mythology of Horses, remark that this tale “is so similar to Ovid’s Phaeton tale…that one can easily accept Carl Jung’s premise that the human race is one collective unconscious” (135). Like Phaethon, Right-Handed Sun goes to his father, Sun Father, in the sky, and meets his father’s immortal horses. One horse intrigues him the most, Nightway (136), and the boy insists on riding him. But his father reproves, “Beware, my son, this horse is not meant for mortals, and I do not want to give you the gift of death” (136). But the boy persists and Sun Father reluctantly agrees to let him ride. Immediately, “The reins [slip] out of Right-Handed Sun’s hand,” and the ride is tumultuous (137). Death seems imminent for the boy; “The
morning was coming on as fast as they were falling” (137). But this tale differs in an important way from Phaethon’s. Right-Handed Son finds the godliness he inherited from his father and succeeds in grasping the reins; “he reined as hard as he could, not the little pull of a mortal but the goodly grip of a god” (137). The boy, literally overnight, grows into his godly right, “and the ridden horse at last bowed to the unthrown rider” (138). Right-Handed Sun’s ability to control his mount puts this story with those of boys growing to heroes because of their horses, but in all other respects it’s extremely similar to Phaethon’s tale.

Yet this twist in the classic plot is not alone. In the book of Numbers in the Old Testament, Balaam is called by Moab to curse Israel (22.5). In the story, God appears to Balaam and insists that he “shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed” (22.12). But Balaam is persuaded to travel with Moab’s men (22.21). So “God’s anger [is] kindled” and He sends an angel to stop Balaam (22.22). Balaam’s ass has no difficulty seeing the angel and interpreting his fatal intention, so she turns “out of the way…into the field” (22.23). Balaam is furious with the beast and commences a battle of wills with her until he, too, sees the angel (22.31), after which he prostrates himself and the angel reveals that he would have slain Balaam had not the ass refused to approach him (22.33). That Balaam cannot see the angel, but his mount can, indicates that the animal is on a higher spiritual plane. When he beats the animal for her seeming insurrection, he demonstrates a very unworthy temperament. Nevertheless, because of his ass’ concern, instead of being destroyed, Balaam lives to repent of his mistakes, and he proceeds thereafter to do as the Lord bids him.

More boys who are unworthy of their mounts can be found in Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty*. One of Beauty’s friends is Merrylegs, who is often ridden by children but, “two of the boys were older” (39). Merrylegs, usually a reliable animal, tells the other horses, “those
children are under my charge when they are riding; I tell you they are entrusted to me” (41). His master senses this about the pony, because he assures a friend, “you need not be anxious about the children. My old Merrylegs will take as much care of them as you or I” (41). But one day the plucky pony throws the older boys off his back. The other horses are astounded; Beauty cries, “What?...I thought you did know better than that!” (39). But Merrylegs is unperturbed; amusedly, he says, “They did not know when they had had enough, nor when I had had enough, so I just pitched them off backward! That was the only thing they could understand” (39). That the boys couldn’t understand what the little horse was communicating, or what he needed, provides an interesting contrast to Michael Blake’s emphasis of John Dunbar’s talent for understanding his horses. Merrylegs then describes at length the circumstances of abuses that led him finally to refuse to play with the boys. He explains, “They are not bad boys; they don’t wish to be cruel. I like them very well, but you see I had to give them a lesson” (40). The pony’s complaint is supported by the groom’s reproval of the boys for using such big sticks to whip the little animal. It is interesting here that Merrylegs’ words indicate that these young men very well could grow up to be good men, with a finer sensitivity to working with equines. What is important is that they are not there yet, and Merrylegs is happy to instruct them by pointing that out.

Boys who are not yet heroic enough, or man enough, to partner with a horse are unworthy because they still have to grow and mature. Merrylegs’ boys are naïve more than they are cruel; Balaam is cruel to his ass, but their shared experience leads him to become a great prophet; the Sun Father’s son is impetuous, but in the end finds a greater strength within to claim his birthright; even Phaethon’s tragic ending is less damning to his character than to his youthful impatience and inexperience. This is the main difference between boys
who cannot keep their horses and men with the same problem. When men are disgraced by horses, it is always because they have some fatality in their character that makes them morally unworthy of a good horse.

A well-known classical episode of a man who is not worthy of his own mount is Bellerophon’s partnership with Pegasus. The winged horse, like Achilles’ Xanthus and Balius, is of divine origin, offspring of Medusa and Poseidon (Seyffert, 465). There is not much to say about the mortal Bellerophon before his capture of Pegasus. He is the prince of Corinth, and experiences some misadventures as a youth that require him to perform labors that are secretly meant to do him in (Seyffert 95). Perhaps because he is innocent of any wrongdoing, Athena and Poseidon favor the young man and provide him with a magic bridle with which to tame the godly steed (Pindar, Olympian 13.63-65). Once atop the most valuable horse in the entire world, Bellerophon becomes a hero. With the horse as his companion, Bellerophon “destroy[s] the fire-breathing monster Chimæra…conquers the Solymi and the Amazons…[and] slays an ambush of the boldest among the Lycians” (Seyffert 95). As Seyffert succinctly puts it, “It was on Pegasus that Bellerophon was mounted when performing his heroic exploits” (465). Clearly, only Bellerophon’s association with the divine winged steed gives him any claim to heroism. This fact is proven further when Bellerophon loses the favor of the gods. Seyffert claims he “was hated by all the gods, and wandered about alone, devouring his heart in sorrow” (95). Because of his pride, Bellerophon “wished to mount to heaven on Pegasus” (Seyffert 95). Zeus is not interested in welcoming a mortal to live on Olympus, and in his disgust at Bellerophon’s arrogance, “drove the horse wild with a gadfly,” and the would-be Olympian falls to his death (Seyffert
Without question, Bellerophon’s stewardship over the magic steed gives him the power to perform heroic labors. Before taking control of the noble beast, he is plagued by misfortune. His amazing deeds are all performed in partnership with the horse, and when he develops a sense of himself as somehow worthy in his own right, he is fatally reminded that only on the wings of Pegasus could he ever hope to see Olympus.

A Dakota legend strikingly similar to the Pegasus story bears comparing here. In Ella Deloria’s “The Gift of the Horse,” a man and his wife are unable to keep up with the rest of the migrating tribe because of their poor-quality mare, their only horse. As the man is taking a break from foraging for wood “he [sees] something come up over the horizon, in the spot where the sun rises” (Deloria 256-57). It happens to be the most “beautiful black-spotted horse…coming for a drink” (257). A “tiny grey bird” comes to the man and says “I bring you a horse” (257). The bird proceeds to explain to the man how to go about catching the animal, and gives him some “medicine” to work into a specially-made bridle and to rub onto his own mare, ostensibly to make her smell appealing to the pretty stallion. This medicine traps the horse in such a way that he is tame for the man. The bird tells him, “The days of your hardship in the tribe are now over” (257), and proceeds to explain that this animal will sire others just like himself. Sure enough, two foals are born, first a colt, and the next year a filly, both animals “as beautiful as, and marked exactly like, the black-spotted horse” (258). The three horses possess “inconceivable speed” (258). The man becomes wealthy and respected in the tribe (258).

One night, a jealous member of the community sneaks “up to them, planning evil against them” (258). He wishes to steal the horses, but is thwarted when the black-spotted

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<sup>9</sup> In *Dakota Texts*, Ella Deloria has compiled and annotated over sixty Dakota stories, published in their original language alongside English translations.
horse calls to his master, “Wake up and come out. Someone approaches with the intention of causing our death” (258). The horse’s master is not pleased, and makes a speech about how these animals have always been shared freely among the tribe, and many men have had excellent luck in hunting and “in war…[achieve] glory” (259). But it is too late, for the horse deems the tribe unworthy of his or his offspring’s services. The horse vows the tribe must return to its previous state. Although the exceptional horses remain with the tribe, they lose “their power to run as of old, and no more colts [are] born” (259). Without the help of their mysteriously gifted horses, the tribe returns “to their former state of hardships” (259). So ends glorious partnership of man and horse.

The likeness of this tale to Bellerophon’s experience with Pegasus is striking, from the unlucky start in life, to being pitied by the supernatural, to a glory-filled partnership between the human male and divine equine. But the people are not worthy in that they are jealous of what the horses posses, much like Bellerophon’s jealousy of his mount’s right to dwell in Olympus, and the magical gifts of the horse are taken away, leaving the riders as helpless as they were before the appearance of the horse. Also of note is that the man in this story is instructed by the heavenly messenger, here a bird, how to catch the animal, and given magic “medicine” to make a special bridle to handle the beast. The likeness here to the special bridle Bellerophon is given to capture Pegasus is uncanny. Whether this story is somehow an adaptation of the classical myth or independent is beyond the scope of this study. It is enough to note that something in the details of both of these stories resonates powerfully with an audience, and part of that includes the issue of a man’s worthiness to manage a magical steed. In both cases, it is the human who steps out of moral bounds and so is relieved of his heroic privilege.
In Grimms’ “The Bremen Town Musicians” are two such examples of men being relieved of their equine-related privileges. First is a man who “had an ass which for many years carried sacks to the mill without tiring” (144). Implicit in this opening line is the ass’ loyalty and work ethic, for clearly the animal does not balk at the workload his master gives him. But after a lifetime of service, the poor animal is spent and “no longer of any use for work” (144). Immediately, the owner plots to neglect the ass. After benefiting from years of work, he feels no concern for the welfare of his equine charge. The ass is smarter than the miller, though, and sensing “mischief in the air,” simply runs away, headed toward Bremen (144). For the donkey to be able to leave so easily implies that this would always have been an option, but that he was before always loyal to the miller. When the miller stops caring for the ass, the assertive little animal no longer deigns to honor the man by being present. Through his intended cruelty, the man has shown himself unworthy of an equine helper, and the circumstances of the animal’s leaving indicate that the human never really owned the animal, but that the ass is self-possessed and unwilling to stay with a man beneath his own character.

The second instance of losing an unearned privilege comes after the ass has been traveling, picking up companions as he goes. The gaggle of unwanted animals plan, under the ass’s guidance, to become musicians in Bremen. On the way they seek lodging for the night at a house. But the home turns out to be a “brightly lighted robbers’ den” (146). The conversation among the animals abruptly turns to a discussion of “how to set about driving the robbers out” (146). It is not that the animals have declared war on humans. Their plan is actually to sing for their keep in town. The reason they don’t think twice about ousting the robbers is because there’s no question that they are more deserving of the food, shelter, and
the warmth of the fire. The robbers, by nature of their “vocation,” are immoral beasts. So the group of animals, led by the ass, storm through the window and scare the robbers out. The thieves are not very bright, and are convinced in turn that “the devil was coming in upon them” (146), and that “a gruesome witch [is] in the house” (147). This idiocy lends itself to demonstrating how inferior these men are: their livelihood is dishonest, and they don’t have enough sense to recognize the antics of a donkey and his companions. By contrast, each of these animals has served their master until they were too old to perform their duties, for which they were all about to be killed rather than retired (144-45). The ass sees fit to decide that this situation is unfair. He’s taken himself and each of his comrades from human clutches, and it is fitting that now they find themselves in possession of the robber’s house, in which they retire comfortably (147). The ousting of the robbers serves symbolically to satisfy the animals’ needs to rise up and turn the tables on humans, who have shown them so little empathy. Here and in the previous example, the ass removes himself (and his companions) from the hands of men who no longer deserve authority over them. In both cases, the act is laughably easy, indicating a superiority in both the ass’s intellect and moral character.

In Jane Smiley’s work, situations where men are not man enough for their horses abound. In her epic saga, *The Greenlanders*, Skuli Gudmundsson is different from other men. A Norwegian, he dresses colorfully and doesn’t work by physical labor. In other words, the fellow sticks out as a bit of a dandy. Smiley notes that “he was possessed of a very fine

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10 In *Horse Heaven*, the horse trainer, Dick Winterson, fails to see the true nature in his horses. Limitless is removed from his care and, under better guidance, wins the Arc de Triomphe. Of the horse’s skill, Dick admits, “I didn’t see it” (537). He also fails to fully acknowledge Epic Steam’s unruliness, and the animal savages a track employee and is banned from racing. Dick can only explain, “We did think…that we had him under control” (441). The man ends up losing the two most talented horses he’s ever trained.

And in *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton*, Lidie’s husband’s virility is dwarfed by the quality and beauty of her stallion, Jeremiah. Of her husband she confesses, “I resented my husband…part of me found him wanting,” and of her horse, she is “wholly pleased with Jeremiah” (192).
horse, strong and quick and on the large side” (113). But the horse is plain rather than showy and this bothers Skuli. However, Margret, his mistress, believes the horse “brought them good luck” (113). Skuli doesn’t seem to share her perspective, however, and covets “a dark gray stallion owned by Thorkel Gellison” (113). Gellison’s stallion is a sought-after stud, “big and aggressive as well as good-looking,” so that he is paid well for the animal’s services (113). Skuli manages to work it out with Thorkel to lend the stallion in exchange for acquiring breeding fees while he visits his friends (and mistress) at Gunnars Stead and the surrounding area. Margret’s first comment is, “My Skuli, you have thrown away your luck, for it seems to me that this gray horse will be your death” (113). But he is not interested in giving up the animal. He feels manlier astride the great horse. Even Margret admits to herself that, “his striking appearance mounted on the gray horse riding into the farmyard filled her with admiration she was hard put to contain” (114). But it’s a false impression; the horse is borrowed, although Skuli allows himself to pretend otherwise. Smiley notes that the “stud horse seemed to him to be his own while it was in his care, and he showed great pride in it’” (114). Skuli’s pride for the flashy horse that is not his own is an indication that he overreaches his own masculinity.

Skuli feels indestructible astride the borrowed animal. Forgetting himself, he rides the stallion on his secret excursions to be with Margret. But the horse is distinctly colored, and everyone in the district knows that Skuli is riding him. The animal is easily recognized by a neighbor and gossip spreads until it reaches Margret’s husband, Olaf. The joke is not lost on the village that Skuli rides a borrowed horse and a borrowed wife as well. Olaf and his brother-in-law, Gunnar, sharpen their axes and ride out to interrupt the lovers (118). When Margret and Skuli see the men coming, Skuli heads for the grey stallion grazing
nearby, for mobility and because “his only weapon, a knife, was fixed to the saddle” (118). But this is not his horse, and the animal is not interested in helping. When Skuli whistles to him, “as he was in the habit of doing with his own horse,” the animal “paid no heed, and walked farther off” (118). When he presses the stud further, the animal simply moves away faster (119). In fact, when the men come closer on their horses, Skuli’s borrowed horse recognizes his “fellows” and calls, running to them (119). So Skuli is left without mount or knife and when the men ride up he is a simple target for their axes.

Perhaps Skuli is killed because he’s not industrious enough or intimidating enough to avoid the punishment doled out to him, maybe he is killed because he is in an adulterous relationship. Regardless, what is pertinent is that the horse he chooses refuses to recognize him as friend or master; and he fails to recognize the mount that does. He can’t command his desired horse any better than he can defend his desired relationship with Margret. If Skuli’s own horse had been in attendance, it would have trotted right up to him, and he would have had a chance to flee, or at least be a much more difficult target. Perhaps if he’d recognized the value and quality in his honest mount, he would have been better disposed to assert his right to a woman who loves him and is unloved by her husband. Instead, the horse he pretends is his ignores him, and it proves fatal.

In each of these cases of men who cannot manage their horses, the man in question possesses an unforgivable flaw that makes him unworthy of hero status. For Bellerophon, it

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11 It would seem Smiley feels differently about Skuli’s brashness with the horse than his brashness for the woman, for where the borrowed mount refuses to recognize Skuli, Margret makes it clear to Skuli that she loves and is intimate only with him (95). Actually, Olaf is indifferent to his wife throughout the story, marrying her originally as a tactic to avoid returning to the monastery (60 & 61) and showing little interest in her ever after. 12 For a representation of the type of horse such a flawed individual deserves, Cheng Ch’ing-Wen’s “Three-Legged Horse” is intriguing. The narrator is fascinated by carvings of crippled horses. He travels to find the artist and hears his story. It turns out the man was very cruel when he was younger, and this caused him much
is the hubris of assuming a status beyond his birthright; for the Dakota tribe endowed with magical horses, it is greed; for the ass’s owner in *The Bremen Town Musicians*, heartlessness is punished, and for the thieves, greed is again a factor. For Skuli, there are two possibilities. One is that he pretends to own a horse he doesn’t, and he pretends to own a wife he doesn’t. The other is that his failing to see the value in his rightful mount is akin to failing to acknowledge the rightness of being with Margret, and hence stand up for their union. Either way, Skuli’s inability to perceive the horses clearly leads to his demise.

There is another permutation of the horse and hero archetype. In many comic or satiric works, the status of “hero” is problematic. The relationship between the protagonist and his equine counterpart is ambiguous, so that the man appears to be both hero and fool. In Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*, Lucius is a young man who carries both laudable and pejorative traits. In traditional heroic style, he rides “a pure white animal” (I 2), which he takes care of attentively. When he is weary from riding, he dismounts, and his first duty is to wipe down his horse, rub “his forehead scientifically, [caress] his ears, and [take] off his bridle” and let him have a little snack (I 2). And later Lucius requests of the maid, “It’s my horse that is the important thing; he’s carried me well. Here’s some money, Photis; please get him some hay and barley” (I 24). He even feeds the animal “with [his] own hands” (III 26). Lucius’ handling of his horse should indicate a man of moral fiber, but he is more complicated than that.

Lucius fancies himself “an eager student of the remarkable and miraculous” (II 1). While visiting Thessaly he lodges with a man named Milo and discovers that his wife,
Pamphile, is “a top-class witch, mistress of every kind of graveyard spell” (II 5). Anxious to see if it is true, Lucius plots to ingratiate himself with his host’s maid in order to find out more, musing, “It may be risky, but I’ll have a go at Photis” (II 6). The laws of guest-friendship forbid a man to take advantage of anyone in his host’s household. Yet Lucius unflinchingly seduces the maid and spies on Pamphile.

Lucius’ asinine flaws are made literally obvious when he pushes Photis’ loyalty too far. He presses to see Pamphile’s magic, and Photis says to him, “I’m…terrified to disclose what this house conceals and to lay bare my mistress’s secrets. But I know I can rely on your character and training” (III 15). Photis sneaks Lucius to where he can spy on the witch as she transforms herself into an owl and flies away (III 21). This spectacle ought to satisfy his desire to know if magic is real, but the young man is also a fool, and doesn’t know when to show restraint. He convinces Photis to turn him into a bird as well, but she is a novice, and administers the wrong potion. Lucius complains, “I looked myself over and saw that I was now no bird, but an ass” (III 25). Lucius finds himself the literal embodiment of his foolishness.

Placing Lucius on the heroic equine spectrum is difficult. Were he a traditional hero, he would not be transformed into a lowlier animal that his own mount. Were he a young man in need of growth or reprimand, his status as ass would be part of a process in which he learned a lesson or performed some good deed, but he does neither. Were Lucius an ignoble character, his transformation would be just punishment for his vanity. This is not likely, however, since he eventually returns to human form through Isis and his wealth and white horse are reinstated to him. One might be tempted to argue that Lucius’ divine deliverance

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13 In C. S. Lewis’ The Horse and His Boy, Aslan turns the traitorous Prince Rabash into a donkey to temper his pride. (Ch 15)
from donkey form inspires in him a change, but Lucius spends the rest of his adventures losing his wealth to the priests of Isis and Osiris as he works to discover all the mysteries of the cult. This is the exact fault that got him into trouble in the first place. Placing Lucius morally in relation to his equine experiences is problematic.

What is not difficult, though, is placing this story in relation to the sexuality of the equine. Apuleius takes full advantage of the donkey’s sexual reputation. Lucius’ trouble begins when he doesn’t restrain himself with Photis. Then, when Lucius finds himself transformed, one of his first thoughts is: “The only redeeming feature of this catastrophic transformation was that my natural endowment had grown too—but how could I embrace Photis like this?” (III 24-25). Later, when Lucius is a pet to a wealthy man, a noble woman takes a romantic interest in him. Of her lust, Lucius ponders, “The only remedy she could devise was to play Pasiphae,\(^\text{14}\) this time with an ass for a lover” (X 19). His only concern in this is “how [is] she going to cope with my immense organ?” (X 22 emphasis translator’s). Lucius’ owner decides to make a spectacle of the ass’ predilection for human females, and schedules a public show with a condemned woman (X 23). Although the event never takes place because Lucius fears being devoured by the beasts dispatching the woman (X 34), Apuleius sees fit to put the idea of it in the reader’s mind. Clearly, the association of the ass as a sexual beast, and as a symbol for human sexuality, is an important aspect of the story.

This is true also for Shakespeare’s Bottom, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In this case, the unsuspecting Bottom is transformed not through greedy curiosity but through Puck’s devious sense of humor. The fairy trouble-maker gives him the head of an ass (3.1). But Bottom is more wholly transformed into an ass that his partial appearance implies, for he

\(^{14}\) Lover of Minos’ white bull and mother of the minotaur. (Seyffert 462-63)
finds himself hungering for “good dry oats” and “a bottle / of hay: good hay, sweet hay” (4.1.32-33). Bottom’s transformation into an ass plays out similarly to Lucius’ adventures, for Bottom becomes the romantic plaything of Titania, the fairy queen. Drugged by Puck, she wakes to see the ass-headed Bottom, and is instantly infatuated. She cries “I love thee” (3.1.141) and lavishes affection on him. It is possible that Titania is most attracted to Bottom’s beastly equine characteristics, for she tells him “So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape” (3.1.139); and later “Come…while I…kiss thy fair large ears, my gentle joy” (4.1.1-4). She admires his features, but to her fairies she orders, “Tie up my lover’s tongue; bring him silently” (3.1.201). Titania is not interested in Bottom’s human speech, but his donkey-like appearance.

The sexual nature of Bottom and Titania’s encounter is hinted at but never explicitly depicted in the play. However, through Titania’s caresses and professions of love, the audience cannot help but make the connection. Then, as Bottom falls asleep, Titania, lying with him, offers, “Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms / …O, How I love thee! How I dote on thee!” (4.1.40-45). The pair’s intimate proximity lying together in her bed leaves no question that Shakespeare here intends sexual intimacy.

Bottom’s equine sexual experience is much like Lucius’. Bottom is also difficult to place in the range of heroic relation to the equine. Here, as with Lucius, the equine as reflection of his character is within himself, and is not a separate animal. In one sense, Bottom has heroic experiences, for he, in league with his equine, is worthy of a super-human adventure. But he does not perform heroically; he is merely a passive object of the queen’s affections. Titania makes this clear when she commands, “out of this wood do not desire to go; / Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no” (3.1.152-153). A prisoner, especially a
willing one, does not make a good hero. Bottom is also not a young man in a state of progression, for he remains unaltered by his experience. He wakes up returned to original form. Puck tells him “Now, when thou wak’st, with thine own fool’s / eyes peep” (4.1.84). Puck’s statement implies that Bottom will still see the world as he did before his experience, which he does. He considers the whole thing a silly dream, and chides himself, “Man is but an / ass, if he go about to expound this dream” (4.1.206-07). Bottom is also not an unworthy character, unless his transformation reveals that he is a lowly creature. But in this case, his inner-donkey, as it were, makes him special and enticing to Titania, and it is in this form that he experiences the supernatural romantic encounter. For Bottom, the donkey persona is elevating. So in this case again, using Bottom’s relation to the equine does not clearly inform his status as hero or fool.

Another problematic horse-hero relationship is evident in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. When Gulliver arrives on the island of the Houyhnhnms, he encounters a world where humans are disgraceful, dirty animals, and horses reign. When Gulliver first encounters the humans, or yahoos, he doesn’t recognize them. He complains, “Upon the whole, I never beheld in all my Travels so disagreeable an Animal” (207). When Gulliver later encounters the Houyhnhnms, he notices quickly that they are not ordinary horses: “this Animal seeming to receive my Civilities with Disdain, shook his Head…Then he neighed three or four times, but in so different a Cadence, that I almost began to think he was speaking to himself in some Language of his own” (208). The Houyhnhnms do not at first recognize Gulliver as a yahoo, owing largely to his clothing, which they have never seen before; “they [are] under great Perplexity about [his] Shoes and Stockings” (209). Gulliver lives three years with the Houyhnhnms, and is totally converted to their perspective; he
remembers, “natural Awe...grew upon me by Degrees...and was mingled with a respectful
Love and Gratitude” (251). Of humans, Gulliver can only think in terms of repulsion: “When
I thought of my Family, my Friends, my Countrymen, or human Race in general, I
considered them as they really were, Yahoos in Shape and Disposition” (251 emphasis
Swift’s). After a time, the Houyhnhnms recognize Gulliver as one of the primitive creatures
and insist that his master “employ [Gulliver] like the rest of [his] Species, or command [him]
to swim back to the Place from whence [he] came” (252). Gulliver begrudgingly returns to
England and his family, but can never again tolerate their touch or their smell (261). He
purchases two horses and prefers their company: “I converse with them at least four Hours
every Day. They are Strangers to Bridle or Saddle; they live in great Amity with me, and
Friendship to each other” (261). Gulliver is unable to live outside the perspective of the
Houyhnhnms.

Placing Gulliver’s brand of heroism or ignobility is tricky. As a hero he is awkward.
He returns from great adventures with a wealth of new experience, his eyes have been
opened to a greater world, and he has managed to learn something about humanity. He is also
befriended by the Houyhnhnms, who distinguish him as superior to yahoos in having “some
Rudiments of Reason” (252). In this way, he seems a hero, for he alone of his species is
worthy of conversing with these distinguished horses. But at the same time, Gulliver is
anything but a hero, for he does not consider himself the equal of a Houyhnhnm, or even
worthy of riding the horses he purchases when he returns home. He believes that he, along
with all humanity, is inferior to all horses. In some respects, Gulliver’s journey inspires
moral growth, for he rids himself “of some bad Habits and Dispositions, by
endeavouring...to imitate the Houyhnhnms” (253 emphasis Swift’s). But he has also lost his
ability to recognize the presence of morality in other human beings. He cannot see past their vices, especially if they are “smitten with Pride” (266 emphasis Swift’s). Gulliver’s encounter with the Houyhnhnms is ambiguous in its effect on him.

In more recent storytelling, David Stern presents another awkward hero in Francis, the story of a second-lieutenant and his friend, Francis, a talking army mule. The lieutenant’s first impression of the mule is that he is “as sad a creature as ever hauled a load” (5). Francis is equally disdainful, telling the man sarcastically, “And I’m just as impressed as you are...having had some previous experience with second lieutenants” (6). Nevertheless, when the lieutenant is wounded (14), Francis pulls his unconscious body off the battlefield. After their first meeting, Francis periodically contacts the lieutenant and gives him orders and information that lead to various promotions and feats of glory. For instance, Francis proves the man’s girlfriend as “an Axis agent” (48), advises him in commanding an landslide attack (68), assists him in capturing “a Jap listening post” (76), and provides him with secret intelligence so that he can warn Headquarters about “four waves of twenty medium bombers” (103) scheduled for a sneak attack. For good measure, he also leads the lieutenant on a short excursion to squash an enemy tank that has “snuck through [the] lines” (139). In every caper, Francis refuses to tell the lieutenant where his information comes from. These adventures cause the lieutenant to be decorated, but they also cause him a great difficulty. After every exploit with Francis, the lieutenant is expected to explain his success, but every time he mentions the talking mule, he’s sent to the psychiatric ward of the hospital. Each time, the doctors conclude that he is “suffering from hallucinations!” (132) and put him on rest in a locked room. This is not an easy friendship for the young man.
Deciding the lieutenant’s relation to the horse-and-hero archetype is problematic. He could be labeled a hero for all the great achievements he and Francis accomplish. But he is also very naïve, and the mule mentors and cajoles him into each task. The lieutenant would seem to be a hero in the respect that Francis will talk only with him, but the final adventure the two share involves Francis talking to reporters and allowing himself to be made famous. Also, as far as noble mounts go, Francis is troublesome. First, he is a mule, and his ignoble breeding status is one of impotence; the traditional hero’s mount is a stallion. As a reflection of his human counterparts’ worth and virility, Francis doesn’t particularly flatter the lieutenant. He is also rather ratty and worn looking, making him very un-heroic. Second, Francis makes it clear the lowly officer is beneath him. He tells the man: “you’re a pretty pathetic case” (7), refuses to allow him onto his back (11), and explains that each army mule is worth seven lieutenants (13). On the other hand, Francis is a very special animal, for his wits and his fantastic ability to speak. This unique equine chooses this young man out of all the others to be his friend and relies upon him to carry out his schemes to save the day. He also refuses to take credit for the operations, and helps the lieutenant further his army career. In all, it’s simply hard to define the lieutenant’s level of heroism. He’s saner than Gulliver, less a fool than Bottom, and more altruistic than Lucius, but he is also more naïve than all three, and like them, his experiences leave him not much better off than he was in the beginning.  

In this examination of heroes and their horses, it is evident that the range of depictions is vast. Men of all moral persuasions may have an equine counterpart which

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15 Miguel de Cervantes provides another problematic hero and his mount in *Don Quixote*. The man, in form, performs as a traditional Chivalric hero, but he is old, emaciated, delusional, and not a knight. His horse, Rocinante, is of a similar deficiency, excepting he is sane.
mirrors or contrasts his personal attributes. What remains consistent for each story is that the horse assists in defining the man’s character and virility. The point to remember about all these examples of men and their associated equines is that it is all, to one degree or another, euphemism. In the paradigm examined throughout this chapter, men’s heroic status is measured by the quality of their mounts. For many of the man-equine pairs examined here, sexuality is an inherent part of the dynamic, for others, the link is easily interpreted. The implied connection between mounting a ride and mounting a lover is intrinsic to the human experience. As a common and ancient symbol of sex, the equine in literature always carries with it the possibility of that connotation, however benign any specific representation might seem. That a man’s qualities as a hero are mirrored in his sexual qualities is a commonly known paradigm, and in no need of extended justification here. When a man is situated on the back of his horse, his ability to control the animal, or to inspire fondness in it, is also a commentary on his sexual prowess and desirability. Perhaps it is enough to say that the more virile and sexually adept a man is, whether by glorious heroism or simple masculine maturity, the more beautiful, smart, and magical a mount he will manage to rein.
CHAPTER 4
THE WOMAN’S INNER EQUINE

As might be expected, women’s associations with horses are much different from
those of men. Instead of reflecting virility, the horse mirrors a woman’s emotional or social
bearing. The horse also informs the woman’s sexuality, because her sexuality is not
identified through her hero status, but is rather a composite of her whole being; her character,
maturity level, and whether she is an active or passive participant in her sexuality. All
contribute to the whole. When a female character relates to a horse, the animal functions as a
gauge for her level of independence or repression, and also her relation to her own sexuality.
The horse serves as a representation of the health and progress of the female’s inner and
interpersonal lives.

Clarissa Pinkola Estés touches on the symbolic use of horses in her examination of
fairy tales and what they can offer in the study of the female psyche. In Women Who Run
With the Wolves, she retells the tale of “Vasalisa the Wise.” Estés traces this story to various
parts of Eastern Europe and dates its origins “back at least to the old horse-Goddess cults
which predate classical Greek culture” (71). She argues that part of why this tale is so
important is that it “carries ages-old psychic mapping about induction into the under-world of
the wild female God” (71). The story is fairly long and complicated, as fairy tales go: when
Vasalisa’s mother dies, her soon-acquired step-mother and step-sisters are cruel to her. Sent
into the dark woods to re-light the hearth fire by borrowing a coal from the witch, Baba
Yaga, she encounters three horsemen. First, “a man in white on a white horse galloped by
and it became daylight” (73). Then, “a man in red sauntered by on a red horse, and the sun
rose” (73). As Vasalisa reaches the witch’s little house, “a rider dressed in black came
trotting on a black horse, and rode right into Baba Yaga’s hut. Swiftly it became night” (73).

Later, Vasalisa asks the Yaga about these horsemen, and Yaga tells her they are Day, Rising Sun, and Night, respectively (75). Estés argues these horsemen have a much deeper symbolic meaning:

The black, red, and white horsemen symbolize the ancient colors connoting birth, life, and death. These colors also represent old ideas of descent, death, and rebirth—the black for dissolving of one’s old values, the red for the sacrifice of one’s preciously held illusions, and the white as the new light, the new knowing that comes from having experienced the first two. (98)

Estes’ point here is that the three horsemen represent fluctuations of growth in the female psyche. The colors of the horses represent the cycle of life and death and rebirth that occur inside the female mind as she grows and matures and leaves her old ways of thinking, and being, behind.

That horses bear this message of psychic growth is not surprising. Equines are often used to represent the feelings and internal world of a female. Alice Walker, in her short work, “Am I Blue?” describes a horse she befriended and how she found herself equating his experiences with her own, insisting that emotions are the same for both horse and woman. The horse, Blue, is pastured in her neighbor’s lot, alone on five acres; she remarks how she’d “forgotten the depth of feeling one could see in horses’ eyes” (864). The horse’s loneliness and boredom cause her to empathize with the animal, and she often feeds him apples from a nearby tree (864). When a mare is moved in with Blue, Walker sees happiness radiating from the old animal. She writes, “The look in Blue’s eyes was one of unabashed ‘this is itness’” (866 emphasis Walker’s). But the intention of the mare’s owner was to have her bred, not pair-bonded. She disappears and Blue is left alone again (866). Walker describes how Blue was no longer interested in the apples she offered him. She explains the look in his eye by
comparing the horse’s situation with her inherited experience: “If I had been born into slavery, and my partner had been sold or killed, my eyes would have looked like that” (866). Here Walker has no compunction about arguing that the horse can directly express emotions that she herself possesses. She argues, “It was a look so piercing, so full of grief, a look so human, I almost laughed (I felt too sad to cry)” (866 emphasis Walker’s). Here, Walker deftly compares the plight of a human female slave with the experiences of a horse who is not free to leave or stay with his mate. While Walker here might be anthropomorphizing, she is also using a horse to embody the emotions and sympathies of a female mind.

The tradition of associating the horse with a woman’s heart is no surprise. After all, many young girls develop a keen yearning and affection for horses. It is as though horse-g geared play is the purest way for a young girl to express or discover herself. Jane Smiley renders this idea beautifully in *Horse Heaven*, in which one of her characters, Joy, reflects on the tie of horses with little girls. She remembers her first pony:

> When the pony walked away too quickly (as he always did), Joy would slide to the ground and jump up, hurt, unhurt, who cared? Whatever the pony did was fine by her, because he was her very own pony, and if you were a certain kind of little girl, a pony of your very own was the world’s finest treasure, and no matter how many times over the years your mother said, “It was that awful pony that started all this. I mean, he wasn’t even pretty or nice! I told your father--,” he still remained in your mind as the ultimate good thing. (26-27).

Many women can attest to such enthusiasm for horses when they were of a similar age. This single-minded infatuation is persistent in girls, whether they actually have access to the animals or not.

Karen Getterr Shoemaker, in her collection of fiction, *Night Sounds and Other Stories*, includes a story that focuses on the same subject. In “Playing Horses,” the narrator (unnamed) remembers how important horses were to her as a girl, and how she used the idea
of them to express herself. Her favorite solitary pastime involved “pretending to be a wild
horse” (13). She explains how real the game was to her: “Words just aren’t enough to explain
it and saying it now makes me laugh, but back then it was serious business” (13). The
realness of the game isn’t because this girl has such a great imagination; it’s because this
particular game touches something deep within that promises transformation. Shoemaker
writes, “I was a wild stallion, the fastest, strongest, wildest, most beautiful wild stallion that
ever walked the earth. As a little girl I was timid and clumsy, but when I became a horse I
became everything I ever knew about power and freedom” (13). The girl focuses on
embracing a horse, which invokes feelings of “power and freedom” that are hers to inherit as
she matures into a woman. She’s invoking for herself the qualities she perceives as horse-
like, but that are very much female desires to be strong, beautiful, and self-determined.

Sadly, these qualities are something forgotten by many girls as they begin to take men
into their lives. Shoemaker’s narrator’s best friend is an example of this. The two girls played
horses together until the friend, Bobbi, moved away. The narrator remembers, “we just raced
and jumped and dodged, not needing to explain what we were running from or jumping over
or dodging around. Like horses, we just knew” (14). Both girls are practicing freedom and
learning to avoid attack by “wolves” or some other “danger” (13). But when Bobbi returns at
age fifteen for a visit, she has a husband in tow. They go out to a ranch to ride, and after the
girls take a turn on the horse stabled there, Vinnie, the new husband, leaps into the animal’s
saddle. The narrator sees him “grab a switch from the willow tree” (21) and whip the poor
animal the entire time he’s on it. She notices when he abruptly stops the horse that “pink-
tinged foam flew from its mouth” (22). Vinnie’s treatment of the horse parallels the way he
treats Bobby. She has not managed to maintain her wild, beautiful freedom, but has been
ridden hard and carelessly. Shoemaker emphasizes the girls’ inability to know how to react: “Bobbi and I just stood there; we didn’t get out of the way or move to protect one another, our human senses so poor at preparing us for action. We weren’t playing horses anymore” (22). The girls do not yet know how to apply their instincts to their real lives. Or rather, the instincts they feel as human are the social habits of politeness they have learned, but the wild freedom they cultivated as girls, and associate with wild horses, is needed to keep them from being abused.

For Shoemaker’s narrator, invoking the characteristics of the horse is the same as achieving more mature traits that keep a girl out of a bad relationship. Musing on what she’s seen, the narrator thinks about how Vinnie hurt the horse by yanking on the bit (23). In her thoughts she internalizes the horse’s pain and translates it directly to what she must fear from men. She reminds herself, “When I played horses I knew how to take that bit in my teeth and though I had never seen a real horse do it I still believed it was possible” (23). In these words, there is no implied difference between a broken horse and a woman with a domineering mate. There is no clear line for the narrator between the equine and the female. Taking on the identity “horse” is synonymous with being untouchable and wary of threats. She admits, “I can remember just exactly what it felt like to take on that magic. I can close my eyes, breathe deeply and feel my velvety nostrils flare, picking up the scent of danger, freedom” (13). She isn’t just playing horses; she’s looking for self-preserving traits that will be invaluable to her as an adult. When she runs into Bobbi’s mother years later the woman remembers her as “that girl who loved horses” (22). But the girl, now a young woman, thinks to herself, “No… I didn’t just love horses” (23). And she didn’t just love them; she practiced and internalized their traits into her adult makeup. Shoemaker’s use of horses to represent a
girl’s need for the wild wisdom that keeps her from harm’s way is similar to other instances in literature wherein the horse embodies some psychological aspect of a woman.

Shoemaker, Smiley, Walker, and Estés demonstrate the prevalence with which horses represent the internal feminine. It is not a difficult leap, then, to see that when a horse in story enters the life of a female character, or leaves it, this action in the plot represents a change in the woman’s life. The number of examples in which horses come or go, in contrast to being a static representation, is surprisingly high. Rarely does a narrative begin and end with the horse present throughout. Far more often the horse a woman loves dies at a critical moment in her life. Conversely, sometimes the horse enters the woman’s life after the story begins, appearing synonymously with some change in her. These two types of transitional moments consistently represent two types of progression for the female protagonist. When a horse dies, an immature or repressed part of the woman is also dying. When a horse newly befriends a woman, it indicates a transition for her into a state of greater independence, power, or maturity, and usually includes a sexual awakening.

The death of a horse in a woman’s story marks a big change for her. In losing the animal, the woman gains power or independence. It is as though her docile servitude dies along with the horse. This is notable in the Grimm Brothers’ “The Goose Girl.” Here a princess, betrothed to a prince, is robbed of Falada, her talking horse, and her royal finery by a crooked servant, and threatened with her life should she ever tell (69). In her new kingdom she is treated as a servant, while her lady-in-waiting usurps her place as bride. The king sets the girl to work tending geese, and she is bound by her word not to correct the confusion. But her horse isn’t. Of course, the false princess knows this, and has Falada murdered, explaining
only that the animal “angered me on the way” (70). But this cruel act seals the false woman’s fate, for it is after Falada is relieved of his life that he begins to talk. The Goose Girl persuades the “knacker” to hang Falada’s head in a gate so that “she might see him as she passed” (70). And every day as she’s leading the geese, she has a short conversation with her dead horse’s head. The king gets word of this spectacle and hides himself so that he might observe, and he hears their sad exchange. The girl calls, “Alas! Falada, there thou hangest,” and the horse head answers, “Alas! Queen’s daughter, there thou gangest. / If thy mother knew thy fate, / Her heart would break with grief so great” (73). The King discovers that she is indeed the rightful bride. Here the death of her horse coincides both with her inheriting the kingdom through marriage and an end to being mistreated by others. It’s not that the horse had to die for the princess’ rights to be saved; it’s that the horse’s death marks the point in her life when she will no longer take abuse.

This principle holds true in other stories. For Janie in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the death of the mule portends the death of her own servitude. Long before the mule is established as a character, Janie’s grandmother explains to her about hard labor, and that “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (14). The use of a mule here is key, because this particular equine, as pointed out in the discussion of bestiaries, is looked upon as illegitimate and good only for bearing burdens. Unfortunately, that’s just how it is for Janie. Her husband, Joe Starks, expects her to work hard and not participate in human activity. When she is asked to speak at his election as mayor, he doesn’t allow it, saying, “mah wife don’t know nothin’ ’bout no speech-makin’...She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (43). He might just as well have said,
“She’s not one of us; she’s here only to serve.” Janie’s position is very much like that of a mule.

It is no wonder, then, when “Matt Bonner’s yellow mule” (51) becomes a topic of entertainment that Janie takes it personally. The men tease Bonner about how neglected his animal is. They laugh, “yeah, Matt, dat mule so skinny till de women is usin’ his rib bones fuh uh rub-board, and hangin’ things out on his hock-bones tuh dry’ (52). But Bonner insists, “Aw dat mule is plenty strong. Jus’ evil and don’t want tuh be led” (55). This is Janie’s life exactly: enough work to keep her busy all day, and no emotional support to keep her going.

One day, the men decide to have some fun with the old mule. The scene described is downright disturbing:

Lum went out and tackled him. The brute jerked up his head…Five or six more men left the porch and surrounded the fractious beast, goosing him in the sides and making him show his temper. But he had more spirit left than body. He was soon panting and heaving from the effort of spinning his old carcass about. Everybody was having fun at the mule-baiting. All but Janie.

In fact, Janie is so offended by what she’s witnessed that she has to retreat, exclaiming, ‘They oughta be shamed uh theyselves! Teasin’ dat poor brute beast lak they is! Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish devilin’ ’im tuh death” (56). Her distraught words could easily describe both herself and the mule.

When the mule eventually dies, Janie is the only mourner. For the rest of the town, it’s a joke and a holiday. Of the funeral parody they hold, Hurston comments, “They mocked everything human in death…the sisters got mock-happy and shouted and had to be held up by the menfolks. Everybody enjoyed themselves to the highest and then finally the mule was
left to the already impatient buzzards” (60-61). No one in the town takes the mule’s life (or death) seriously. Fittingly, Janie is forbidden to attend the ceremony. Joe couches his control in terms of her being too good to be “goin’ off in all dat mess uh commonness” (60). She’s not allowed to grieve the mule just as she’s not allowed to mourn her own plight. Joe will not tolerate her to express her feelings. He notices “that she was sullen and he resented that…She wasn’t even appreciative” (62). But even though Joe can physically separate Janie from the mule’s death, he cannot change what that death portends: the death of Janie’s own internal beast of burden.

After the mule’s funeral, Janie awakens to how she’s being treated. She realizes Joe “wanted her submission and he’d keep on fighting until he felt he had it” (71). When she cooks a meal that doesn’t turn out, he slaps her for it, and this knocks some clarity into her, for, “something fell off the shelf inside her...It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered” (72). As Janie’s girlish view of life shatters, she can see how unfairly put upon she has been. Her inner servile brute, her mule, dies, and she refuses to be abused any longer. Joe humiliates her in public and she rails, “Humph! Talkin’ ’bout me lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (79 emphasis Hurston’s). The cut is deep, and public. She’s unmanned him. Hurston adds, “Joe Starks realized all the meaning and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible” (79). Janie’s friend Phoebe remarks “dat Joe was ‘fixed’ and you wuz de one dat did it” (82). Soon after, Joe succumbs to kidney failure (83). Janie mourns him out of respect, but she tells Phoebe, “I jus’ loves dis freedom…mourning oughtn’t tuh last no longr’n grief” (92). Janie is free now to live as a woman, not a mule. She begins to have adventures, and many of those who have known her are judgmental. Hurston
contrasts Janie’s full humanity with the townsfolk who haven’t shared her awakening:

“Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were
gone, so the skins felt powerful and human” (1). They accost Janie but she’ll have none of it.
She bids them good evening and then “kept walking straight on to her gate” (2). Her
neighbors don’t understand Janie anymore, for they still function in a world where people are
treated like mules. But Janie’s mule has died, leaving her power over her own life.

Ana Castillo also writes about a girl’s oppression disappearing in conjunction with
the loss of a horse. In her novel, So Far From God, Caridad is used by local men as a sexual
outlet. Castillo describes her as having “perfect teeth and round, apple-shaped
breasts…Caridad had a somewhat pronounced ass that men were inclined to show their
unappreciated appreciation for everywhere she went” (26). Caridad marries young, only to
find out her husband, Memo, “was seeing his ex-girlfriend” (26). So she returns to her
mother. After that, she is rudderless. It becomes common knowledge that by around ten in
the evening, “you could bet that Caridad was making it in a pickup off a dark road with some
guy whose name the next day would be as meaningless to her as yesterday’s headlines” (27).
Castillo suggests that Caridad’s promiscuity is an attempt to recover what she thought she
had with Memo, but instead, “she came home one night as mangled as a stray cat, having
been left for dead by the side of the road” (33). After a long recovery period, Caridad is
physically whole but spiritually shattered. Castillo simply states, “she moved out with her
Corazón” (43). The girl moves out alone and isolates herself from the company of human
beings.

Importantly here, “corazón” is Spanish for “heart.” Corazón is also the name of
Caridad’s pet mare. It is Castillo’s unmistakable intention that Caridad’s heart and horse
function as one and the same. The animal is always spoken of as “Caridad’s Corazón,” or “it,” and not as a character herself, but as a part of Caridad. When Caridad moves out, she has no place to stable the horse and “when it got loose it pretty much wandered about on its own” (43). Caridad’s heart has nowhere to rest. Castillo remarks, “Corazón had never been ridden and did not seem ready for the idea” (51). In all her experiences, Caridad has never been with anyone who knew how to handle her heart. She’s been abused and mistreated and has holed up in her rented trailer to sort things out. Her motherly landlady, doña Felicia, tries to look after her. Doña Felicia notes that “The horse needed better attention” (52). She observes that “she herself could not get close to it because the mare was not used to no one” (53). Caridad has been wounded badly enough that she will let no one near her heart.

But soon Corazón is dead. The restless animal was found “lying by the road having broken its hoof jumping over the cattle guard” (53). The apathetic local police shot the animal. When Doña Felicia must tell Caridad, “It was obvious she had taken quite a blow from the news and couldn’t get herself to stand up” (54). As doña Felicia and Caridad discuss the loss of her Corazón, the girl admits she knew it would happen, “But knowing and preventing are two very different things” (54). Caridad’s restless Corazón needed to die, because the animal represented her broken and confused heart, and for her to progress, she must leave that pain and confusion behind. The horse is not a functional part of the story until Caridad is broken, and her dying coincides with Caridad’s learning to let people into her life and to care for them. Castillo remarks, “So it turned out that a tragic morning in Caridad’s life turned out to transform itself very much the way it is when we wake up to an overcast day and suddenly the sun breaks through. That’s how she took doña Felicia’s offer to teach
her to heal” (56). So Caridad starts a new phase of her life, letting the old woman mother her, and learning to care, medically, for others. Her horse’s death is her liberation from isolation.

In Jane Smiley’s *Moo*, Joy is in a similar situation. Joy is isolated within herself, unable to express to others how she feels. When asked at a party how she is affiliated with the University, she gives a short reply and then “fell silent” (54). Later that night, walking home with her boyfriend, Dr. Dean Jellinek, the pair “walked silently” (55). When they are saying goodnight, Dean mentions that he feels uncomfortable with her going back to her “empty apartment” (55). Joy has a retort, but she never uses it. Perhaps it is no wonder, for when she didn’t care for an idea Dean had, she “made the mistake of showing skepticism and he had been mad at her for three days” (56-57). Usually though, her response is to “[hold] her tongue” (99). Joy must stifle her opinions or be punished.

Considering Joy’s temperament, it is no surprise that her favorite horse in the school’s program is Brandy, a horse that never reacts. When Brandy is introduced she is non-responsive to the activity around her. Her handler moves and she “didn’t notice. She was standing with her head down, her ears flopped, and her lower lip hanging” (95). When Joy shoves a worming tube down her gullet, the students expect her to protest like the other horses. Joy explains, “This looks bad, but Brandy, here, doesn’t mind” (98). The only indication that the horse is uncomfortable is that she “stepped to one side and rolled her eyes” (98). Clearly, Brandy and Joy have the same problem, being too passive to voice their complaints.

Joy is aware of her predicament. She muses that Dean “was too self-centered to really pay attention to her mood” (99), but doesn’t appear to understand how her passivity affects her. She has developed a “headache, now permanently implanted just above the worry line
between her eyebrows” (163). She wants a drink to abate the pain, but no alcohol is available. She muses, “The only other relief from her permanent headache lately seemed to be tears” (163). More specifically, “Every time Dean updated her on his calf-free lactation project, which was hourly, she went away and burst into tears and the pain was gone for about fifteen minutes” (163-164). Joy’s significant other demands constant support from her without offering any of his own. He insists she support his passions as her own: “Joy, honey, you aren’t helping me here. We’ve got ourselves into a big project, the biggest, and there can’t be any drag…we’ve got to buck up and buckle down, turn this team into a victory machine” (230-231). Dean fails to take into account that this is not a joint project. Joy isn’t even in the same college. But Dean has trouble remembering Joy has a life outside of his own needs. He writes down a goal: “Talk to Joy about her concerns ten minutes a day” (235), indicating his grotesque self-absorption.

Joy has likely always been one to keep quiet rather than cause waves, but Dean’s neediness combined with apathy certainly contributes to her permanent headache. When her favorite mare, Brandy, dies suddenly, it pushes Joy to the breaking point. She tries to tell him about her mournful day and he chides her, explaining that the only reason people grieve for animals is “because we’re in the habit of treating them as individuals. You see, Joy, their individuality is an illusion” (311). He then launches into further discussion of his calf-free lactation project. It’s all too much for Joy. She’s emotionally bereft and must express herself. She begins politely and tentatively, but Dean “decide[s] that the kindest thing [is] to simply ignore this” (312). As Dean drones on, Joy screams in frustration, then yells, “Shut UP! I can’t stand to hear about this anymore!” Amazingly, Dean is still oblivious and continues his lecture. Joy’s ignored explosion needs an outlet, so, “she [runs] from the table right out the
door, without her coat” (312). She tries to process Brandy’s passing. Smiley writes, “she
could not get over the suddenness of it, could not could not could not” (315). Joy is not
simply mourning the death of a pet. Brandy and Joy share the same uncomplaining
temperament. Brandy is shoved in the jostle for food and breaks her leg (314), and it is the
same when Dean pushes Joy too far and she snaps. The horse’s death is as sudden and
unexpected as the death of Joy’s voicelessness.

After recovering from hypothermia, Joy begins therapy: “Joy’s program involved
choosing not to dwell on negative thoughts. That, and waiting for the medication to take
hold” (394). It is clear that Joy is suffering from depression, but at least her pains are out in
the open. Joy is unhappy, but she is not pretending to be happy. The part of her that refused
to complain is no more. Surely, the death of her pleasant and uncomplaining horse was also
the death of her inability to voice her own needs.

In the few examples detailed here, each female character loses a beloved horse. The
animal’s passing is mourned, but also signifies a death within the woman of something
immature, burden-bearing, or long-suffering. The horses here represent that part of a
woman that won’t speak up in defense of herself, which willingly bears the burdens of
others. When horses die, the women lose a cherished but immature notion of long-suffering.
Afterward, they become wiser and more capable of nurturing themselves. The Goose Girl
eventually admits her identity as the prince’s bride, Janie learns to live for herself, Caridad
lets others in, and Joy finds the power to speak up for herself. The death of horses represents
losing naïve traits that have kept the women docile.

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16 In Jane Smiley’s *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Liddie Newton*, Liddie’s beloved stallion and her
husband are murdered at the same time. Her loss sharply marks the end of her willingness to submit to others
and the beginning of her dangerous quest for revenge wherein she ultimately finds a life for herself.
When a woman’s horse dies it represents growth for the woman. Yet a horse’s arrival in a woman’s life also indicates positive growth. The nature of that growth is different, however. Instead of the death of some hurtful trait, women experience a shift into a new state of being. Usually their lives change or mature in some way for the better. This new state of being, almost without exception, includes for the woman an increased awareness and comfort with her sexuality.

In Peter Beagle’s *The Last Unicorn*, Prince Lír isn’t the only character to experience profound change from association with the unicorn. When Molly Grue enters the story, she has been living with the outlaw Captain Cully. She ran away with him when she was young and he is not a man that compliments her nature. Cully expresses disappointment in the way she has fallen into herself; he harangues, “Once you had your man, you let all your accomplishments go. You don’t sew or sing any more” (61). Molly mourns the artistic girl she once was, saying, “I sent a tapestry to the judging once…It came in fourth…Damn you, Cully” (61). Cully doesn’t seem to abuse Molly; in fact, he has encouraged her arts. He asks, “what happened to that viola da gamba I got you?” (61). The man doesn’t actively stifle Molly’s artistic expression, yet it’s been stifled by living with him all the same. He remarks unkindly, “We might as well be married, the way she’s gone to seed” (61). Yet Molly has been with Cully for a long time, and sees no reason to make a change. Her alliance is visible as Schmendrick the magician tries to escape from the band. Molly sees him and dryly asks, “Leaving us so early, magician?” (69). Molly has aligned herself with Cully’s band, and her unhappiness isn’t impetus enough to leave.
However, all of that changes the minute she meets the unicorn. Beagle writes, “She neither moved nor spoke, but her tawny eyes were suddenly big with tears” (69). Molly is overwhelmed at first, but then her anger rises and she accosts the magical animal: “Damn you, where have you been?...Where have you been?” (69 emphasis Beagle’s). Molly is furious and hurt that she comes upon a unicorn now, when she is no longer an innocent young girl. But after the shock wears off, she admits, “It’s all right. I forgive you” (70). And just like that Molly’s whole outlook changes. She’s immediately determined to travel with Schmendrick and the unicorn. She tells the magician, “I had some things I wanted to take, but they don’t matter now. I’m ready” (70). And as Molly travels with them, she begins to blossom:

To the unicorn’s eyes Molly was becoming a softer country, full of pools and caves, where old flowers came burning out of the ground. Under the dirt and indifference, she appeared only thirty-seven or thirty-eight years old…Her rough hair bloomed, her skin quickened, and her voice was nearly as gentle to all things as it was when she spoke to the unicorn. (75)

Molly is transforming, losing the hard and defeated soul that accompanied her union with Cully. Through her friendship with the unicorn, she becomes wholly herself.

This leads also to love for Molly. As she travels with Schmendrick, and helps him infiltrate King Haggard’s castle, she grows to respect the man-not-yet-a-wizard. When the unicorn expresses frustration in how the quest is progressing, she blames Schmendrick, saying, “I hope for no help from the magician…He is no magician now but the king’s clown” (135). Molly admonishes, “he is doing it for you. While you brood and mope…he jigs and jests for Haggard, diverting him…You do wrong to mock him” (135). The emotion and nerve in Molly’s response to the immortal Amalthea indicate her tenderness toward the man. Later, when they must escape an enraged Haggard, Schmendrick lags behind. Both Amalthea and
Prince Lír seem oblivious, but Molly is beside herself. She turns back to face Haggard for Schmendrick (173). When the quest is over, the unicorn has been saved, and all part to go their own ways, Molly travels with the magician: “She rode beside Schmendrick, watching the gentle advent of the spring and thinking of how it had come to her, late but lasting” (201). The budding of spring and the budding within Molly of a real love are very much the same. This change within her, both recapturing her true self and finding a mate that compliments rather than stifles her personality, happens because of and through her relationship with the magical horse. As the unicorn triumphs and regains her freedoms, so too does Molly’s heart and soul.

Jane Smiley also uses horses to mirror the awakening of female soul and sexuality. In *Horse Heaven*, Rosalind Maybrick’s journey of self-discovery is reflected in her dawning interest in the horses her husband breeds. As the novel opens, Rosalind, a mid-west girl who has married into money, spends her days shopping, even considers it a career. She reflects,

> Marriage to Al meant that there were houses to be filled, parties to be prepared, a wardrobe to be cultivated. The division of labor in their marriage was specific—he earned all day every day and she spent all day every day, and they both knew that she worked as hard as he did and that spending was no more or less as privilege for her than earning was for him. (31)

Actually, the woman is married more to her marriage than her husband. She muses, “The sexiest thing he had ever said to her was ‘Rosalind, I have no taste whatsoever’” (31). But Rosalind is neither infatuated nor repulsed by her husband. He is just kind of “there.” Smiley points out, “Rosalind never wondered whether she really loved Al…Al was not an appealing man…but Rosalind could stand him fine, because he was utterly himself. There was no mystery to Al” (31-32). Rosalind’s vapid interest in her husband is akin to her interest in his horses. She goes to the track with him and asks polite questions, but “Rosalind didn’t
especially like racing, because all the races looked the same to her” (32). Rosalind’s life is rather empty, although she doesn’t know that yet.

Rosalind is content except for a new “funny mood” that she doesn’t recognize (31). However, at the racetrack, something begins to shift. She meets her husband’s horse trainer, Dick Winterson and immediately begins to take interest in the horses. Rosalind senses in Dick something that will meet her odd craving, and at the same time, she becomes fascinated by the horses racing. She describes to herself a sense as though this feeling had “recreated the world” (34) and observes the horses entering the starting gate with a new interest: “Right then, Rosalind felt, she created the race of a lifetime” (34). She is enraptured by the animals zipping around the track. They’re each individuals to her now. She watches her husband’s filly jump over a fallen horse and begin to run like never before. She thinks, “it was as if the jump over the other horse told her who she was, and now she was glorying in it” (34). When Rosalind is later looking at the win photo, she sees that “the filly looked bright and interested, as if she had just awakened from a long, sleepy dream” (35). This is exactly what’s happening to Rosalind. She’s waking from her doldrums and discovered a hunger within her. The filly’s new joy of running reflects Rosalind’s joy in taking charge of herself and her sexuality.

Later that night, Rosalind pursues her interest in Dick. This is not the whim of a bored woman, but something much more serious. Dick is still linked with horses for her; she thinks, “What she could tell when he was taking down her hair, and then unbuttoning his jacket and her blouse, was how many years he had spent with horses” (37). His caresses make her feel like she’s being handled gently and competently, as he handles the horses. For Rosalind,
Dick’s sexuality wakens something inside of her. As Rosalind discovers fires within herself, she begins to realize things:

What she learned about love was that it was impossible. What she learned about life was that it took more strength to survive the more you knew. What she learned about horses was that anything could happen, even after you cared. Before she had cared, she found this rather interesting. Now she found it frightening, and there was no remedy for it. (98)

Rosalind’s growing awareness and interest in her sexuality, and life in general, runs concurrently with her interest in the horses. She muses, “since the onset of…their affair, she had learned a good deal more about horse racing than she had ever known before” (163). She has also lost a certain naïveté: “Anyway, now she knew enough to worry, whereas in her former life she had skimmed in blissful ignorance above the whole socially unredeemed enterprise” (163). Indeed, Dick inspires such strong feelings heretofore unknown to Rosalind, that when it comes time to name a colt she decides on “Limitless,” to describe the potential in her feelings of love (101). Importantly, though, Dick is not the source of Rosalind’s internal revolution, only the impetus.

As Rosalind names the new horse, she takes on the animal as her own and begins to manage his training. In the same way, she takes charge of herself. She opens an art gallery, and focuses her energy on that; she reflects that “art is the only thing [she] like[s] anymore” (336). In becoming more independent and aware of herself, Rosalind pulls away from Dick, likely because he can’t really teach her about herself. Under his guidance, Limitless is not reaching his potential. He places poorly in races despite his obvious speed, but “Dick hadn’t figured the horse out yet” (253). Limitless is Rosalind’s horse, and their paths are linked. Just as Rosalind is exploring her new self, “Limitless was still cultivating his own concept of himself” and is unwilling to be contained (320). When she realizes that Dick is not focused
on Limitless’ training, she decides to move the animal to another trainer (403). She tells Dick, “The horse is not getting through to you” (405). And he is man enough to recognize this is true, and says, “I’m not getting through to the horse, either” (405). This is important, because as instrumental as Dick is in helping to launch her desire for self-discovery and passion, she must be unlimited, and command her own life, rather than simply switching allegiance from one man to another. As she ponders her new verve for life and horses, she thinks of it as making space for a new “slot in her brain,” and that “Making that space for Dick, painful as it was, had made that other space, too” (322). Rosalind recognizes that Dick was instrumental in her life, but is not her final destination.

Once Rosalind has fully taken her horse and her self under her own guidance, everything fits together for her. For one, the missing passion in her marriage blossoms. Rosalind thinks, “Something new was happening. She actually seemed to be remembering why she had fallen in love with Al in the first place” (455). Rosalind’s horse is running well, too. So well, in fact, that she convinces her new trainer to take the horse to Paris to run in the Arc de Triomphe. This is an unprecedented move; after all, no “American-raced horse” had ever come close to winning that race (517). So when Limitless crosses the finish line first, “Pandemonium [shakes] the grandstand” (530). Everything has come full circle for Rosalind: Her cherished horse wins a staggering victory and she finds new tenderness for her husband. Rosalind has taken charge of her life and her romantic interests and finds happiness in doing so. It is no accident that her new interest in horses coincides with her new interest in herself.

For both Rosalind Maybrick and Molly Grue, nurturing a relationship with a special equine parallels a phase of self-nurturing and romantic maturation. For the Goose Girl, Janie, and Caridad, the death of a horse functions to mirror the internal life of a woman as she loses
a younger or more servile part of herself. These two functions of the horse are really just sides of the same coin. The horse embodies some aspect of a woman, her naïveté, submissiveness, or repression, or her ability to be wildly free, both in her life decisions and her romantic pursuits. Certainly the contradictory dual perception of the horse as both beast of burden and symbol of freedom informs these roles. But either way, what is important is that when a horse and a woman are joined in a text, the horse represents a part of that woman, and what happens to the horse parallels what is happening to the woman.

Fundamentally, this is very similar to the way horses represent the status of their male counterparts. Although the focus is on reflecting or refracting the man’s status as hero or failure, the animal is still symbolically linked to the nature of the man. The real difference in how the horse relates to each gender is the traditionally perceived differences in gender itself. Men have been expected to be performance-based beings, while women are assumed to live internally, experiencing life through the workings of their psyche. Too, a man is traditionally measured by his mastery over others, while for a woman the expectation has long been that she must be meek. These behavioral and status-related standards translate directly into sexuality, where the male is conqueror and the female is pleased to be chosen as his conquest. In other words, gender performance and sexual role performance are almost indistinguishable; thus, any discussion of gender is by nature a discussion of sexuality. The horse, as a symbolic tool, works wonderfully in expressing the dynamic and various aspects of this dichotomy. Through the animal’s long relationship with humans, the horse has become both indicative of wild freedom and tame servitude. This contradictory status makes the horse complicated and polarized, and perfect to overlay the inherent complexities within
the sexes. Also, for the western world, the horse has functioned since time immemorial as an embodiment of sex and sexual appetite, so that when the horse serves to represent gender, the sexual aspect of gender relations is amplified. Whether the horse helps to define character, gender, or sex, because of the particular associations ascribed to the horse, the animal fits naturally into the role, and seamlessly integrates the two.
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