

2009

Equine Orientalism

Kari Weil
Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Weil, Kari (2009) "Equine Orientalism," *Criticism*: Vol. 51: Iss. 2, Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol51/iss2/8>

EQUINE ORIENTALISM

Kari Weil

Noble Brutes: How Eastern Horses Transformed English Culture by Donna Landry. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. Pp. 248. \$50.00 cloth.

The horse is one of few nonhuman animals that have been deemed worthy of historical representation. From the earliest stone reliefs of the ancient world to paintings of Napoleon or Teddy Roosevelt, horses have figured both as literal supports, carrying men into battle, and as representatives of the defiant forces of nature that *man* has harnessed to his control. In the first natural histories, horses were placed at the top of the animal kingdom—closest to man through their service to him or their ability to reflect his power and nobility, though assuredly distanced from him in their status as mere brute. According to Donna Landry, that brute status underwent a marked transformation during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England, under the influence of “eastern” horses—horses that were brought from North Africa and Turkey to England and bred with English stock. The title of her book, *Noble Brutes*, refers to the double, if contradictory, status of equines in English culture at the time. On the one hand, the new breed of the English Thoroughbred that was thereby produced would become “the epitome of noble blood in equines,” even functioning in art and fiction as ideal selves (4) for the British.¹ On the other hand, to regard a horse as having something like a self was rare. As domesticated animals, they were chattel property and, as such, subject to whippings, beatings,

and overwork. When not observed and studied for their “blood,” it was their labor that mattered and, as laborers, they were more often invisible to a culture that depended on them.

Although Landry does refer many times to what was regarded as the surprising “rationality” of the Eastern horse—which usually meant its keen sensitivity to human signals or intention—the book is not about the mind of horses or Thoroughbreds. It is rather about how horses may be agents of history, regardless of whether they are aware of the world they change. This is a historical perspective that has been opened by the emergence of animal studies. In an essay on “The History of Animals,” Erica Fudge explains that for animals to have a meaningful role in history does not depend on their having “subjectivity.” One can have the capacity to shape the world without having a “sense of self-in-the-world.”² Landry’s book thus contributes to this animal history that seeks to understand not only how humans have constructed and represented their interactions with animals, but also to how humans have, themselves, been constructed by those interactions. Eastern horses changed not only the way the British rode and trained their horses, and thus the manner of horsemanship that has been so intimately linked to British identity, but also how they would represent horses in art and

literature. In this way, they were crucial actors in the shaping of British culture.

If Landry’s book has a place within animal history, it also finds a point of convergence between that history and the history of orientalism. Curiously, what begins as the attraction on the part of the British for the otherness of Eastern horses (their dished faces, their speed, and their sensitivity to human touch) or for the otherness of Eastern riding (shorter stirrups that make one sit forward in the saddle as opposed to the upright seat of classical, continental riding) becomes a story of the appropriation and suppression of oriental influence. Landry explains this convincingly in terms of a Lockean logic whereby the English took what was seen to exist only as potential in the Eastern horse and transformed it through breeding and nurturing on British soil into the “rightful possession of the imperial cultivator” (86). In an even more critical vein, she writes that Eastern influence was unacknowledged because of the “failure to recognize oriental knowledges as knowledge” and the practice of regarding “the Orient as a source of raw materials, but never of cultural practices or end products” (25). Eastern horses, in this respect, along with the people who bred and trained and rode them (much like Eastern women in other orientalist discourses), were creatures of nature, not of culture.

By attending to this equine orientalism and, through it, to the making of the English horse and Englishman (and to a lesser extent the Englishwoman) out of a hybrid past, Landry sheds a broader, political light on historical details of the horse trade between East and West, as well as changes in riding styles and riding equipment. Styles of horsemanship come to figure manners of governing and the rivalry between Eastern and Western empires. "Riding lightly," which is to say riding in a style where the lightest touch of the rein will result in the horse moving to the wish of the rider, becomes a political allegory for governing—one, moreover it seems that England appropriated from the East and made their own. Riding freely through the open countryside rather than performing exercises in an arena or manège becomes representative of English love of nature that, as with English gardens, appears to run wild, unconstrained by human control.

Whereas the first half of the book concentrates on the way oriental horses changed English equestrian practice (a practice she is clearly familiar with in ways that are not only academic), the focus of the second half turns to the ways that Eastern qualities were represented in literature and visual art. Landry traces the literal and figurative trajectory of the Bloodied Shouldered Arabian—a celebrated stallion obtained in 1720 through

shady dealings in Aleppo and shipped to England where, as "his lordship's Arabian," he became an English cultural icon. Social history and mercantilism merge in the stories and images of this horse with a strange mark on his shoulder. Within three years of his arrival, he was painted by the foremost portraitist of horses, John Wootton, and, according to Landry, had a lasting influence on this new genre of painting. Although racehorses were the first to be "figured and heroized as individuals" (115), this horse never raced, and it is unclear whether his popularity was due to the horses he sired, his peculiar markings, or his commanding spirit—"horses like the Bloodied Shouldered Arabian" are masters of all they survey" (108). In other words, the "agency" of this horse seems to alternate between the accounts of his Arabian "character"—his particular loyalty and intelligence—and those of his physical, marketable qualities.

Landry focuses less on the slip-page between character and conformation in appraisals of the Arabian, and more on a different tension, that between the foreign and naturalized elements that are visible in the image of the Arabian. This paradoxical, hybrid origin of the English horse is one she pursues in its various incarnations in works by John Wootton, Jonathan Swift, and George Stubbs. Thus, Swift's portrayal of the Houyhnhnms in *Gulliver's Travels* offers a

clear picture of Eastern influence by satirizing “the fantasy of civil equines that had become something of a vogue in the British Isles” (137). Stubbs, by contrast, celebrates equine rationality in the life-sized portrait of an oriental stallion, *Whistlejacket*, that hangs in the National Gallery in London and has, paradoxically, become an emblem of England’s “shared national culture” (149). In each of these cases, it is the character of this hybrid horse—his “rationality”—that is said to play a significant role in his iconic status (a point that is certainly more transparent in literary rather than visual representations). But what the reader is presented with is really less that character than the discourse around it, which is ultimately open to satire and to stylized representation. Here I wish Landry had more to say about what exactly came to count and be seen as equine rationality and how it differed from what was regarded previously as horse sense or character. Indeed, the story of *Whistlejacket* is a case in point. It was reported that he was shown the life-sized painting of himself and reared up as if to attack it as a rival; such were “the blood horse’s powers of observation and intelligence” (152). This sounds more like a story told to rival Aesop than to describe a horse, and Landry is correct to see in it as much (if not more) a story of Stubbs’s artistic mastery as of *Whistlejacket*’s powers of self-recognition (or Lacanian

misrecognition, she suggests in one of few theoretical remarks regarding subjectivity).

Such discourse is, of course, part of the “cultural specificity” that Landry is interested in over and against any philosophical concern with “the animal” (13), but it seems that she allows this preference to close herself off to ways to bring these concerns together. Indeed, her research lays the groundwork for charting a much wider effect of horses on English culture than we are offered, inviting us to shift perspectives and ask, for example, what kind of animal a horse was understood to be at this time and in what ways Eastern blood could be said to have changed that understanding. Implicit in the title of the book, of course, is a contradiction between the horse as “knowing, feeling, energetic subject” (155) and as exploited, commodity object—a contradiction for which Landry offers many examples but without always pursuing the questions they raise. Why, for instance, would the “special relationship” that Eastern horses offered be “best experienced not so much with a faithful hunter or riding horse as with a winning racehorse” (121)? How are the human-animal relationships different in these different equine sports? How do we account for the fact that the painter who offered most testimony to the intelligence and emotional sensitivity of the horse was also the one whose method for exploring their anatomy involved

“bleeding them to death by cutting the jugulars, while injecting them with a preservative fluid so that he might dissect and study them for as long as possible” (162)? Landry raises the question and, indeed, wonders about Stubbs’s involvement with the more brutal side of horse culture but offers little to help us understand or historicize these contradictions.

Today, the status of domestic animals as alternately subject and object has become only more evident in concurrent practices of pet keeping and factory farming. But, according to historians like Keith Thomas and Harriet Ritvo, the origins for such contradictory attitudes can be traced to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the rise in pet keeping by the middle class and a changing bourgeois sensibility to animals led to effective campaigns against their mistreatment (on religious and secular grounds) and the eventual establishment of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1824.³ Ritvo shows how a “connection between Englishness and kindness to animals” was forged at the turn of the nineteenth century. To what extent then, we might ask, did the particular qualities of the Thoroughbred have agency in this connection, or at least in the rhetoric that was instrumental in effecting these changes?

It is true that horses were not literally pets, at least by the definition that Thomas offers, since they

were not brought inside the house, but cruelty to horses was foremost in these campaigns. And horses shared many of the same qualities of pets both in terms of the affection they offered and were shown (this is one reason why horse was never eaten in England and done so grudgingly in France⁴) and in the ways they were bred and commodified for the marketplace. Landry writes that horses were always more than commodity objects because they demanded a “more complex response from, and relationship with” (109) their purchasers, but I wish she had done more to describe in what that relationship consisted. Was it the same as that forged with a Saint Bernard or King Charles Spaniel or other breeds of dogs that were commodified at this time? Moreover, is it possible that these complex relationships with reportedly intelligent, sensitive, and loyal equines contributed to the changing attitudes not only toward equestrianism but to nonhuman animals more generally and our relationships with them?

While Landry should be commended for bringing the matter of animal agency to prominence, she treads rather too lightly on or around it (and this is often apparent in the tenuousness of her own rhetoric; e.g., “[M]ight we dare call it a trace of equine agency. . .?” [175]). In what might be understood as an effort to avoid charges of anthropomorphizing horses by

attributing marks of subjectivity, she also avoids the less controversial, but no less crucial, matter of affective relationships between humans and animals—for these also constitute a form of agency. Keith Thomas cites, in this regard, William Cowper's (1782) poem about Jack, who

Lived in the saddle, loved
the chase, the course
And always, 'ere he mounted,
kissed his horse. (101)

Between, or perhaps within, the noble and the brute, horses were partners in ways that varied from horse to horse and from groom to jockey to owner. Such bonds of affection or camaraderie are all but absent from Landry's account, and one wonders how attention to those bonds might have necessitated a more nuanced attention to class and gender differences within horse culture, if not with regard to human-animal relationships more generally.

It is becoming something of a commonplace in animal studies, but one worth repeating, to say that we have made animals what they are, and that, conversely, they have made us humans what we are. *Noble Brutes* is one chapter in that evolutionary history that should spur others onto the track or, perhaps, into the field.

—Wesleyan University

NOTES

1. Unlike the English term *Thoroughbred*, the French term *pur-sang*, or “pure blood,” retains the blood symbolism that in nineteenth-century France would link the breeding and training methods of horses to the eugenic ideal of the “*pur-sang humain*” (the “pure-blood human”). See my “Men and Horses: Circus Studs, Sporting Males and the Performance of Purity in Fin-de-Siècle France,” *French Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2006): 87–105.
2. Erica Fudge, “The History of Animals,” *Ruminations* 1, 25 May 2006, at H-Animal, www.h-net.org/~animal/ruminations_fudge.html.
3. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (London: Penguin, 1983), esp. chap. 3, “Men and Animals,” 92–142; and Harriet Ritvo, “A Measure of Compassion,” chap. 3 in *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 125–66.
4. See Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 116, and my “They Eat Horses Don't They?” *Gastronomica* 7, no. 2 (2007): 44–51.