

Journal X

Volume 7
Number 1 *Autumn 2002*

Article 7

2002

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Recommended Citation

Landry, Donna (2002) "Writing Riding," *Journal X*: Vol. 7 : No. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jx/vol7/iss1/7>

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Writing Riding

Donna Landry

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The horses go round the covered school, dust motes hovering, riders rising to the trot. In America we call it posting, not rising. Up down, up down, up down: easing the horse's back and the rider's spine by a moment's suspension in the air. Posting a manuscript, sending it willy-nilly through the mail. Posting to the trot was what English postillions began to do in the eighteenth century, riding bareback on coach horses famous for delivering passengers and postbags at a "spanking" trot. After a time, the rhythm enters one's bones, never to be forgotten, like other early internalizations of rhythm. In "A Poem Is Being Written," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick echoes Freud's "A Child Is Being Beaten," commenting, "When I was a little child the two most rhythmic things that happened to me were spanking and poetry" (Sedgwick 114). Horses teach their riders pace — the quickness or slowness of the rhythm, calculated for covering a particular piece of topography. And they teach their riders cadence, the dance-steps of the movements of horse and rider over the ground. Poetry in motion, or the poetry *of* motion.

Riding a horse is many things, but ever since Pegasus gave a lift to a poet, riding has been a metaphor for writing. In "Strike, for Bonnie, my first horse," the Scottish writer Veronica Forrest-Thomson exercises this old chestnut wittily:

Hail to thee, blithe horse, bird thou never wert!

And, breaking into a canter, I set off on the long road south
 Which was to take me to so many strange places,
 That room in Cambridge, that room in Cambridge, that room in
 Cambridge,
 That room in Cambridge, this room in Cambridge.

(84)

And so English poetry has been produced for centuries, ink-stained aspirants taking to the road to discover their fortunes, trotting boldly out of the provinces, cantering along turnpikes to the great university towns. As Forrest-Thomson adds at lines 30-32, "There was an I-have-been-here-before kind of feeling about it. / That hateful cripple with the twisted grin. But / Dauntless the slughorn to my ear I set."

To write well is to ride well and vice versa, to produce well-crafted verse, to travel distances in rhythm and harmony. According to this conceit, the poet's craft is synonymous with the horseman's artistry. In *The Battel of the Books* (1710), Jonathan Swift mounted Homer on "a furious Horse, with Difficulty managed by the Rider himself, but which no other Mortal durst approach" — a fair estimate of the visceral power and inimitability assigned to Homer by the eighteenth-century reading public (Greenberg and Piper 389). Swift's satire reveals that the arts of riding and writing required "management," but his choice of word refers both to the "manege," the indoor school, and to the principles of classical riding (what today we would call "dressage" which literally means training or schooling). Swift has Virgil, too, take the field as a consummate horseman, mounted on "a dapple grey Steed, the slowness of whose Pace, was an effect of the highest Mettle and Vigour" (Greenberg and Piper 389). Managing his horse's energetic impulsion without overly containing it, Virgil has achieved a high degree of collection and brilliance in his horse's movements. Dryden, by contrast, cuts an embarrassing and unschooled figure, mounted upon "a sorrel Gelding of a monstrous Size" — huge, we notice, but castrated — who, being "old and lean, spent the Dregs of his Strength in a high Trot, which tho' it made slow advances, yet caused a loud Clashing of his Armor, terrible to hear" (389). Dryden appears ridiculously like one of Oliver Cromwell's rustic recruits to the New Model Army, riding not an artfully schooled cavalry charger, but an ungainly cart horse with uncomfortable paces. Sensibly, he fears even to mount Virgil's steed: "[W]hen it came to the Trial, *Dryden* was afraid, and utterly unable to mount" (390). Victory for the ancient poets over the moderns is achieved by means of a dressage test.

In 1755 Bonnell Thornton described British women poets riding Pegasus — sidesaddle, if you please. In the 1750s, as Harriet Guest has shown, women as well as men could represent the glory of the nation: "Writing poetry seems indistinguishable from dressage, or from dressing elegantly; it is an appropriate feminine accomplishment" (87). Katherine Philips, the Restoration's "Celebrated ORINDA," puts on an

elegant show, though she "never ventured beyond a canter or an hand-gallop," making Pegasus "do his paces with so much ease and exactness, that *Waller* owned he could never bring him under so much command (Thornton 1:412). Aphra Behn, outrageously insisting on riding astride, proves equally skillful in the equestrian arts, adding airs above the ground: "She made the poor beast frisk, and caper, and curvet, and play a thousand tricks; while she herself was quite unconcerned, though she shewed her legs at every motion of the horse," embarrassing some of the Muses (413). The most dramatic performance is achieved by Laetitia Pilkington, who, "despising the weak efforts of her husband to prevent her," "jumped boldly into the saddle, and whipping and cutting rode away furiously helter skelter over hedge and ditch, and trampled upon every body who came in her road (414). She "took particular delight in driving the poor horse, who kicked and winced all the while, into the most filthy places," yet when she paused in this mad career she convinced the audience "that she knew as well how to manage *Pegasus* as any of the females, who had tried before her (414). Not content with displaying her dressage skills, Pilkington shows herself to be a bold cross-country rider in the famous Irish free-style.

Around about 1750 the English, not to be outdone, began to dedicate themselves to jumping at speed while out hunting with hounds, turning the tops of their boots down and taking their stirrups up a notch or two in order to negotiate obstacles at a gallop. Previous practice had usually involved going up to a fence and "craning" one's neck to see over it, checking what lay on the other side. Then the horse would be turned around and the jump taken slowly without much of a run up to it. After 1750, the hunting scene changed dramatically, gradually becoming the contest of thrusting horsemanship familiar from nineteenth-century sporting paintings and prints. With the production of fast Thoroughbred horses and foxhounds, and newly laid quick-set hedges enclosing large grass fields in formerly open country, the effects of the second (the landlords') Agricultural Revolution were apparent.¹ By shortening their stirrups, Britons departed from Continental practice partly, but crucially, in the name of national superiority and imperial sovereignty. Some of that sense of superiority derived from the new Thoroughbred horses, who were in fact the produce of imported bloodstock from the East, a sign of British mercantile might. More ironic still is that the actual riding techniques involved can be traced to the Turkic horsemen of the Eastern steppes who had made the cavalry of the Ottoman empire so invincible. They were the first people to use stirrups and they rode with short stirrup leathers, extending rather than collecting their horses. Riding short came to be known as riding in the "Turkey fashion," though there were undoubtedly native innovations of the Pilkington cutting-a-dash variety.

Mad helter skelters over hedge and ditch as a substitute for proper horsemanship were exactly the kind of thing which William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, riding master and equestrian advisor to Charles II,

wished to eradicate. Newcastle found his seventeenth-century countrymen inelegant and bumpkinish, sorely in need of time in the manege:

I wonder how men are so Presumptuous, to think they can Ride as *Horse-men*, because they can Ride forward from *Barnet* to *London*, which every body can do; and I have seen VWomen to *Ride* Astride as well as they.

(Cavendish 11)

Another, because he hath *Ridd a Hundred Miles* in a *Day*, (which a *Post-Boy* can do) thinks Himself a *Horse-man*; or, Because he can Run a *Match* with his *Groom*, or Leap a *Ditch*, or a *Hedg*, in *Hunting*, and Hold by the *Main*, he thinks he is a *Horse-man*; but his *Hunts-Boy* doth as much. . . And I have seen many *Wenches* Ride *Astride*, and Gallop, and Run their *Horses*, that could, I think, hardly Ride a *Horse* Well in the *Mannage*

(Cavendish 46-47)

Already by the 1660s, it would seem, Britons desired nothing so much as expedition, both the efficient use of time in a commercial sense and the quest for adventure. The sports of the aristocracy and country gentry partook no less than did commerce in this spirit of enterprise. The result of the English preference for riding from Barnet to London as expeditiously as possible was that, as John Adams commented in 1805, "reciprocal contempt has subsisted between the *manege* riding and *jockey* riding ever since" (1: xvii).

This difference marks a significant split in the discourse of riding in the early modern period which still has effects today. Before 1800, *The Sportsman's Dictionary* did not bother with a special entry on "Horsemanship" as such, and the entry "To Ride" referred only to "learning the manege" (*The Sportsman's Dictionary* 1735, 1778, 1792). In the 1800 edition, "Horsemanship" appears as an entry drawn from John Lawrence's *A Philosophical And Practical Treatise On Horses* (1796):

The decline of Riding-house forms in this country, and the universal preference given to expedition, fully confirm the superior use and propriety of a jockey-seat. . . . There are many persons unaccustomed to riding on horseback, who, when they occasionally mount, are very justly anxious both for their personal safety, and their appearance. It is for the benefit of these we write.

A growing urban culture was by the 1790s producing increasing numbers of city dwellers with no immediate connection to horsemanship of any kind, let alone the manege. Like William Cowper's comic citizen, John Gilpin, they might, without proper tuition, be expected to be run away with by willful horses and made laughingstocks of town and country (Cowper 346-51). In 1807, still under Lawrence's influence, a revised entry "To Ride" is added:

To RIDE is so familiar and appropriate a term for exercise on horseback, that it is impossible to make it clearer by any periphrasis. . . . What is commonly called riding the great horse, but more properly the manege, . . . has the same relation to riding, in its common acceptation, that the military exercise and dancing have to the general use of the limbs of a man in walking and running; and the traveller and the sportsman, if they have only been trained in the riding school, will have much to unlearn, or they will find their horses ill able to carry them through a long journey, or a long chase.

(382)

By this moment in history, what I would call the English hunting seat has been fully invented. It is patriotically charged — an enactment of English, or rather, British freedoms. Free forward movement of the horse with a minimum of interference from the rider: the liberties of the freeborn subject in action. Adams's hymn to the English seat as it has developed outside the manege, for road-riding, hunting, or racing, is couched in a rhetoric powerfully evocative of British sovereignty based in English liberty: "The rider participates the like ease or unrestrained liberty . . . laying aside all unnecessary restraint when we can perform to our satisfaction without it" (2:6; 2:8).

Like the men's, the women's story was also the story of riding ever faster and ever shorter, but side-saddle. The side-saddle was above all a gender machine, a machine for producing sexual difference between women and men among the upper and middle classes. Like a number of other such machines, the side-saddle did not survive two world wars, the rise of the internal combustion engine, and the levelling influences of the twentieth century, except as nostalgia.

"Dauntless the slughorn to my ear I set," as Forrest-Thomson wrote: it was the notes of the hunting horn that she heard. Where would English poetry be without the heart-poundingly creatural music of riding to hounds? This would not have been news to William Butler Yeats. Indeed the Irish have always had a special relation to courageous cross-country pursuits, as we have seen, setting a standard of puissant leapin' over hedge, ditch, wall, and bank that the English envied and attempted to appropriate for themselves. A bit like Irish writing, actually, which comprises most of the finest English writing of the last century. Yeats was fond of hound voices and the music of the hunting horn. They were to him precious reminders of an older, more ceremonious world in which beauty, ritual, and heart-pounding excitement could bring people together in collective ecstasy at the achievements of their fellow creatures. "At Galway Races" (1910) captures something of this mass investment in the animal world, which Yeats considered produced admirable people, gentlemen and gentlewomen irrespective of class or accent:

THERE where the course is,
 Delight makes all of the one mind,
 The riders upon the galloping horses,
 The crowd that closes in behind:
 We, too, had good attendance once,
 Hearers and hearteners of the work;
 Aye, horsemen for companions,
 Before the merchant and the clerk
 Breathed on the world with timid breath.
 Sing on: somewhere at some new moon,
 We'll learn that sleeping is not death,
 Hearing the whole earth change its tune,
 Its flesh being wild, and it again
 Crying aloud as the racecourse is,
 And we find hearteners among men
 That ride upon horses.

(108)

Against this active creatural union rings the voice of the anti-hunting fanatic in "Three Songs to the Same Tune":

*'Drown all the dogs,' said the fierce young woman,
 They killed my goose and a cat.
 Drown, drown in the water-butt,
 Drown all the dogs,' said the fierce young woman.*

(322)

Modernizers are nay-sayers and bullies, confusing care for goose and cat with a vengeful command to kill the dogs, the unfortunate pack of hounds who must have run riot in a farmyard.

On 22 September 2002 the Countryside Alliance organized a march in London, protesting against New Labour's proposed ban on hunting with dogs. The march, which attracted over 400,000 people, making it one of the largest marches ever in London, also addressed other matters of importance, such as the recent crises in British farming, especially last year's foot and mouth epidemic, and the apparent deafness of a largely urban-centered government to rural needs and wishes. In deference to the anti-hunting urban majority, the organizers of the march had leafletted protesters not to bring hunting horns or whistles. What this prohibition meant in practice was that vendors sold plastic whistles and horns along the route, and that many people who possessed a hunting horn brought it and blew it with passion. I have never before been on a march that was simultaneously so self-assured and so carnivalesque. Nor have I ever felt such spine-tingling excitement as that aroused when the huntsman blows her horn.

The hunting field was once the ultimate testing ground of riding in the free forward manner, balancing horses with minimal interference

with their way of going, encouraging extension over collection. Continental observers continue to regard the British passion for hunting as typically aberrant. Colonel Alois Podhajsky, director of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, told pupils at Porlock Vale in England in 1950, "You will never ride properly until you give up this foxhunting."² That moment of giving up may well be upon us. The future of hunting in Britain today looks bleak. A hostile urban majority, outsiders to the rural culture of hunting and field sports, have mistaken a ritual drama, in fact a fox cult, for cruelty to foxes. As a consequence of hunting's declining reputation in Britain, the philosophy of riding there, as in the United States, has been shifting away from the free forward movement style towards formerly rejected German, French, and Austrian models. Maneges and the techniques of dressage have been on the rise internationally. The new horsey talk is all about discipline and control and modifying horses' ways of going rather than encouraging their natural balance, pace, and cadence. And in both Europe and North America it is becoming increasingly difficult to find anywhere to ride across country anyway.

What will have been lost if a hunting way of going and the free forward movement style of riding disappear? A certain apparatus of national identity inclined towards identification with the gentry will go. But it is a minor link in the signifying chain of class in Britain, insignificant compared with the institutions of prep school and public school, Oxford and Cambridge, gentlemen's clubs, inheritance practices, and economic infrastructure. It is there in the record, certainly, but so too is Yeats's cross-class collective vision. What will have been lost more damagingly is the excitement of pure being that riding across country brings, and that hunting enables in so far as "any one who chooses to put himself on horseback, let him be a lord or a tinker," as Anthony Trollope observed, has "permission to ride where he will, over enclosed fields, across growing crops, crushing down cherished fences, and treating the land as though it were his own — as long as hounds are running" (73).

The excitement of pure being remains necessary, though, for good writing and for poetry in particular. Sylvia Plath was moved to write one of her least sinister, least melancholic, most beautiful poems when she was riding regularly on Dartmoor, an upland area of wild open country, a few miles from the farmhouse she shared with Ted Hughes at North Tawton in Devon. When we read "Ariel" we should remember not only Swift and Thornton with their equine tests of poetic value (and valor), but also Yeats's collective ecstasy. For once at one with the drive — of speed, of the horse beneath her — Plath is only imaginatively suicidal in her headlong gallop, the craggy granite tors receding in the distance:

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.

God's lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees!--The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch . . .

Something else

Hauls me through air —
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Godiva, I unpeel —
Dead hands, dead stringencies. . .

And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red
Eye, the cauldron of morning.

(36-37)

Too few are the opportunities for such experiences these days. It is, however, still possible to ride across Dartmoor, and if dauntless or feckless enough, to strip away the dead stringencies as the wind whistles through the ears. I highly recommend it.³

Notes

1. See Allen (21) and my *Invention of the Countryside* for elaboration.
2. Private communication with the author.
3. Mrs. Rosemary Hooley, proprietor of a riding stable on Dartmoor since 1964, used to advertise "Adventurous and Interesting Rides" across the moor. Today hardly any customers appear interested in the "adventurous" part. You can find her at www.skaighstables.co.uk or email info@skaighstables.co.uk.

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