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book review of

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*Precarious Partners: Horses and Their Humans in
Nineteenth-Century France* by Kari Weil

Reviewed by Stephanie Triplett

Kari Weil,

Precarious Partners: Horses and Their Humans in Nineteenth-Century France.

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In *Precarious Partners*, Kari Weil reveals how equine culture reached its apex in France during the nineteenth century, as workhorses flooded overcrowded Parisian streets and the practice of horse riding, once primarily associated with the military and nobility, was taken up by a wider swath of society. The volume deftly explores the complex interdependence between human beings and the omnipresent carthorses, aristocratic purebreds, racing steeds, circus performers, and military mounts. The non-speaking role played by these equine creatures was, the book persuasively argues, a largely unappreciated but central aspect of the century's material, economic, and social history. While the text incorporates a sweeping range of sources and media, from novels and paintings to public health treatises on the salutary benefits of horsemanship for the French working classes, it was the *image* of the horse—and his/her accompanying rider—that pervaded the popular discourses and imaginaries of animality and humanity. The classical image of the mounted sovereign literally and figuratively governing his subjects from “above” continued to be referenced by equestrian statues and paintings like Jacques-Louis David's *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Mount St. Bernard, May 20, 1800* (five versions, 1801–05), but was also destabilized by artists like Théodore Géricault (1791–1824) and Rosa Bonheur (1822–99), who gave their equine figures equal (or greater) priority as compared to their humans. Print culture likewise ranged between the dignity of the *amazone* and the scandal of Jewish American Adah Menken's (1835–68) scantily clad horse-riding feats. However, as Weil so astutely observes, the external gloss of this imagery, whether hegemonic or subversive in nature, was always underpinned by the quotidian relations between horse and human. Human and animal engage in subtle,

unspoken forms of communication through gaze, touch, and training that Weil (herself a longtime equestrian) posits to be more complicated than a simple matter of physical animal strength submitted to human intellectual will. The horsemen and horsewomen of nineteenth-century France were indeed preoccupied with appearances: the showmanship of dressage, the class display of a Sunday afternoon carriage ride in the Bois de Boulogne, the masculine feats of military riding techniques. Despite this human-dictated artifice, the paintings and prints selected by Weil are one of the best means of glimpsing moments of interspecies intimacy and the otherwise elusive expressions of the animals. The instinctual frenzy of Géricault's unmounted steeds in *The Race of the Riderless Horses* (1817) and the horses chafing at their bonds in Bonheur's *The Horse Fair* (1852–55), to name two central examples, evince the subterranean energies of animal vitality and, in Bonheur's case, the horse's emotional connection to the rider and to the viewer. In a particularly poignant passage in the afterword, Weil also notes the "witnessing" role played by the horses in Eugène Delacroix's (1798–1863) turbulent canvases:

And what was especially telling, and newly apparent to me in these works, was the way Delacroix paints the horse as witness, figured with one eye on the violence of the scene and one on the viewer who is pulled in by his (or her) often terrified look. The lateral placement of horses' eyes perfectly positions them to allow for such a range of vision. As historical actors in these scenes, the horses also solicit the viewers' gaze and implore them to notice and respond to the lives and suffering shared by human and nonhuman animals alike. They remind us that horses and other animals have a point of view with regard to the action, one we would do well to consider, to the extent that we can know it (176–77).

Art and fiction, as Weil thus demonstrates, often do a better job of eliciting these cross-species sympathies, of capturing something akin to animal subjectivity, than the scientific discourses and reportage of the day. Her nuanced reading of the affective dynamics of human "pity" for animal beings in chapter 2 sets up this problematic, one that threads its way through the remainder of the volume.

The first chapter, on Géricault, adroitly analyzes the artist but does not quite rise to the same level as the rest of this excellent book. Weil rightly points to the atmosphere of charged eroticism and purely corporeal tension, drained of reason and sentiment, in the group of oil sketches comprising Géricault's *Race of the Riderless Horses* group. The artist produced numerous sketches and oil studies during his sojourn in Italy based on a Roman Carnival event in which unmounted horses, goaded into a lather by whips, spurs, and other implements, were raced through the closed off streets of Rome. Weil's argument that "the various stages of the *Race* . . . read as foreplay to a sodomitic fantasy where desire and identification are inseparable" (38) apparently presumes a chronological, teleological progression in the sketches. In this reading, the sketches evolve from a more or less faithful rendering of the contemporaneous races to an increasingly classicized display of nude male figures pressing towards idealized equine buttocks. The sequence in which the artist produced the paintings remains an open question in the art historical literature, though Weil appears to hew closely to Lorenz Eitner's ordering of the works.^[1] More recent art historical scholarship, like that of Régis Michel and Sylvain Laveissière, casts doubt on the theory that Géricault intended the race paintings as preliminary studies for an eventual large-scale Salon submission.^[2] Michel and Laveissière also dispute the favoring of Neo-Classical over

genre aesthetics in the secondary literature on the paintings and the persistence of arguments claiming that the series “evolved” from genre specificities to lofty classical generality.[3] This hypothesis is usually based in the assumption that the *Race* study now located in the Baltimore Museum, with its abundant everyday details of horse and human period attire, represents the first, least stylistically developed link in a series that culminates in, depending on the author, the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or Getty studies. The choice to regard the paintings as a well-defined series perhaps merited more discussion in Weil’s text. Her thesis, while highly compelling, seems to hinge on an intentionality and cohesion behind the sketches that remains difficult to locate in the extant historical record.

Weil moves on from Géricault’s exploration of the analogous nature of human and horse embodiment to a fascinating examination of the emotive dimensions of nineteenth-century interspecies interactions. “Pity,” as something like an eighteenth-century answer to our contemporary notion of “empathy,” was an emotion and a sensation that could be directed towards the suffering of both fellow humans and non-human species. Weil cites Derrida’s formulation of a “war on pity,” waged since the eighteenth century in Europe in an effort to deny the pain inflicted by human exploitation of other species. The fraught problem of who or what deserves pity was central to nineteenth-century literature on animals, such as Eugène Sue’s 1838 novel *Godolphin Arabian*, a fictionalized account of the horse (the titular Godolphin Arabian) who went on to become the first thoroughbred sire in England. But early French debates on animal anti-cruelty legislation ultimately centered on human feeling and its impressionable nature rather than the containment of animal pain. As Weil writes: “The Grammont Law condemning cruelty to animals would eventually be passed in July 1850, but if the emotions played a role, it was largely because concern for the animal was lucrative for industry and its image” (47). Pity, as an emotion prior to rational reason, had the potential to cloud the moral judgment of enlightened human beings, who would do better to focus on the maintenance of society and industry than to expend an excess of feeling on supposedly lesser life-forms. Indeed, some nineteenth-century authors expressed the now astonishing view that the curbing of public horse beatings and other forms of animal abuse might lead to those violent impulses being redirected at other human beings. While the early discourse on anti-cruelty primarily deployed an anthropocentric line of reasoning, there were, as Weil shows in her third chapter on Rosa Bonheur, individuals living in nineteenth-century France who attempted to form a more sympathetic, less exploitative bond with the animals in their keep.

The author skillfully uses Bonheur’s oeuvre as a lens onto historical equine labor. The issue of whether to classify the horse as a “worker,” rather than a mechanically toiling beast of burden, is implicitly answered in the affirmative by the artist’s depictions of the species. Her best-known painting, the monumental *Horse Fair*, represents a delicate balance of equine resistance and compliance. The creatures submit to being ridden and guided through the streets of Paris while also bracing and rearing at their human attendants. Weil perfectly captures the central complexity of Bonheur’s animal painting practice when she writes: “Rather than animal liberation, Bonheur envisioned a kind of interspecies collaboration in which the freedoms of disparate partners may not be equal, but nevertheless inspire the curiosity, reciprocity, and affection that many theorists today consider to be our obligation” (67). There are only a few small hitches in this chapter, such as the largely unsubstantiated speculation that the bovid figure in Edouard Dubufe’s 1857 oil portrait of Bonheur might represent a yak, though its short-furred and short-horned conformation suggest otherwise.

Weil's readings of the literature on horsemeat in chapter 4 and the shifting racialized, gendered, and sexual connotations of horsemanship in chapter 5 are the highlights of the volume, deploying a magisterial blend of literary analysis, historical research, and theoretical footwork to demonstrate the inescapable significance of equine bodies and breeding techniques for the social and material formations of nineteenth-century France. The lurid saga of horsemeat production, legalized in France in 1866 as an economical protein source for the impoverished working masses, presents a number of uncomfortable ethical questions about which species we consider "good to eat" and why. The consumption of horsemeat was also, counter-intuitively, promoted as a humanitarian measure, encouraging the owners of workhorses to better feed and care for the creatures in their charge so as to preserve the animal's carcass for sale at the end of his or her working life. The creature could thereby be spared from gratuitous beatings, albeit less out of concern for equine wellbeing and more out of a desire for a full return on the human worker's investment. Nevertheless, as named, and often beloved, companion animals, horses provoked unease as a source of meat. As Weil observes, citing anthropological research on dietary taboos: "Eating those who are too 'close' is cannibalism, or at least means we ourselves fall to a kind of animal state by not knowing or not paying heed to such distinctions" (97).

Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet (1790–1835), a French public hygienist perhaps best known for his report on prostitution in the city of Paris, nonetheless attempted a dispassionately practical promotion of the nutritional and economic benefits of horsemeat consumption. The notoriously foul-smelling slaughter-yards of Montfaucon did not need to be shut down, Parent-Duchâtelet insisted. Rather, they could be rehabilitated into a model of efficient, sterilized production of horsemeat and other horse-derived products.

Weil goes on to present a canny contrast between Parent-Duchâtelet's vision of horse flesh mechanically vaporized and cleansed of odor, blood, and attendant feelings of disgust, and author Théophile Gautier's (1811–72) account of the Montfaucon slaughter yards as a colorful grotesquerie. Gautier seemed to take a morbid delight in regaling readers with tales of rats feasting on horse corneas and equine blood that, as he described it, "flowed scarlet first, then violet, then black" (90–93). This represents only one of many instances in which interdisciplinary sources are interwoven to stunning effect throughout *Precarious Partners*.

The compelling gallery of gender-bending horsewomen and their steeds, the "Pure-breds and Amazons" of chapter 5, reveal both the liberating potential of the democratization of horse riding for marginalized citizens in the Second Empire and the Third Republic and the insidious application of horse-breeding metaphors to racialized and gendered others. The striking example of Adah Menken, a Jewish-American horse-riding performer whose perceived racial ambiguity and liberation from norms of proper married womanhood provoked both intrigue and outrage, presents a troubling instance of the problematic and violent ways in which women and nonwhite races were often equated with animals as a means of maintaining white, patriarchal social structures. At the same time, Menken's antics, both in her performances and her promiscuous lifestyle, gleefully rebelled against these social strictures.

Weil again makes compelling use of visual documents in chapter 6, “The Man on Horseback,” particularly in her analysis of the classed and gendered positioning of the figures in James Jacques Tissot’s (1836-1902) painting, *Women of Paris: The Circus Lovers* (1885). The horse as a supplement to a sense of compromised aristocratic and militaristic masculinity, strangely absent from this particular image, was a recurrent preoccupation in the texts on sport and physical fitness cited by the author, as it was for the Circus Molier, (est. 1880), wherein the male performers were aristocrats reasserting the elite status of horsemanship. The Circus Molier thus attempted to shore up the exclusivity of “true” militaristic horsemanship against the democratic, feminine associations taken on by the practice at the close of the century.

The concluding chapter examines the pseudoscientific practice of animal magnetism, a term “coined by the German physician Anton Mesmer to describe invisible forces that act on living bodies, the unseen fluid whose flow within and between bodies was vital for health” (160). Weil explores the discomfort prompted by that movement’s equation of human and animal psychologies. The fundamentally relational, intersubjective model of health and mental experience posited by animal magnetism threatened a perception of humanity based in individualistic autonomy. Meanwhile, Gustave Le Bon’s (1841-1931) development of crowd psychology and related efforts to contain the bestial impulses of the “masses” aimed to construct bulwarks against the psychological interpenetration associated with collective hysteria and upheaval of a kind experienced all too often in the revolutions of nineteenth-century France. Psychologists feared that human beings, when joined in a “herd,” could all too easily revert to destructive, “animalistic” tendencies.

Weil’s reevaluation of the French nineteenth century through the figure of the horse presents an essential intervention in the fields of art history, animal studies, gender studies, and literary theory. She aptly proves the central role that the control and breeding of horses played in the maintenance of violent hierarchies of gender, class, and race, an anthropocentric order privileging masculinized dominance and disavowing the vulnerable aspects of human embodiment. Yet the human-horse relations of the era also reveal glimpses of a different set of possibilities for interspecies collaboration and exchange, particularly in Géricault and Bonheur’s depiction of animals that return the human gaze. The visual and tactile relation established in a direct confrontation with the animal (or simulated in its mediated representation) holds the potential for a rethinking of species hierarchies and the exploitative relationships with other beings that such hierarchies enable.

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Notes

- [1] Lorenz Eitner, *Géricault, His Life and Work* (London: Orbis, 1983), 117.

[2] Régis Michel and Sylvain Laveissière, eds., *Géricault, ouvrage collectif* (Paris: Documentation française, 1996), 98.

[3] Ibid.