
H-France Review Vol. 21 (July 2021), No. 110

Kari Weil, *Precarious Partners: Horses and Their Humans in Nineteenth-Century France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. xiii + 240pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780226686233; \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780226686370; \$10-\$30 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780226686400.

Review by Chris Pearson, University of Liverpool.

Kari Weil's *Precarious Partners* offers an insightful and illuminating exploration of horse-human relations in nineteenth-century France. Weil joins other historians in noting the ubiquity of horses in European and North American societies at that time, and how they literally kept cities moving.^[1] Yet rather than focus on horses as beasts of burden, Weil dives into the cultural histories of French horses. Drawing on natural history texts, paintings, sporting manuals, and literature (amongst other sources), Weil investigates shifting understandings of horses, including attitudes towards their intelligence, capacity to suffer, and ability to bond with humans. Weil's command of written and visual sources is outstanding throughout the book.

In addition to providing cultural histories of horses, Weil uses the animals as a lens through which to interrogate class, gender, and sexuality during a period of great transformation: "as boundaries between classes and genders became increasingly fluid, the omnipresent horse could represent both what was lost and what was gained" (p.2). Equine culture in France shifted from one centered on the aristocratic and often military man whose partnership with his horse centered on displays of virility and nobility to a more democratic situation in which men and women drawn from a range of classes rode, lived with, thought about, and—sometimes—ate horses.

Most notably, Weil highlights the relationship between women and horses, and how the figure of the *amazone*, usually an upper-class woman who rode side-saddle, inspired fear and fascination. Unlike eighteenth-century female horse riders, nineteenth-century ones were forbidden from riding astride the horse as male commentators believed that this would lead to the de-feminization of women and damage their health. Female riders, such as artist Rosa Bonheur, challenged these prohibitions by riding astride the horse. Another major theme within the book is domestication, and Weil homes in on the debates among natural historians, animal protectionists, and others about whether the human domestication, riding, and varied usage of horses represented the pinnacle of human achievement or evidence of human cruelty towards animals. In addition to situating horses with nineteenth-century debates on humanitarianism and gender, Weil links the increasing fetishization of pure horse breeds with growing obsessions about racial decline and degeneration, and the emergence of eugenics.

Precarious Partners consists of essays, structured in a loosely chronological way, that offer windows into various aspects of human-horse relationships. In chapter one, Weil discusses the early nineteenth-century paintings of Théodore Géricault. Weil mobilizes theories of animal agency and queer ecology to offer a provocative and original reading of Géricault's paintings in which the horses become subjects. Noting Géricault's fascination with horses' rears and their muscular haunches, Weil argues that his paintings break down boundaries and hierarchies between species and desire: "as a physical, if not psychosexual, connection is graphically displayed, the ethics of companionship give way to a bestial erotics; knowledge of the other is sought not in the face, but beneath the tail" (p.35). In chapter two, Weil discusses Derrida, Singer, Agamben, and Levinas, as well as Marx, Butler, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, to explore changing displays of pity towards horses in the years leading up to the anti-cruelty Grammont Law in 1850. This is the least successful chapter, to my taste, as the theoretical apparatus threatens to overwhelm the empirical material. Weil returns to surer ground, and re-engages the themes of chapter one, by discussing Rosa Bonheur's passionate paintings of horses in chapter three. Like Géricault's images, Bonheur's paintings depicted horses as lively agents and creatures with souls, and they became "integral to her feminist persona, as they were for a growing number of women riders" (p.74).

Horses might have been partners and agents, but they were also eaten in increasing numbers after the legalization of eating horseflesh in 1866. In chapter four, Weil describes how a perceived need for cheap protein for the working classes and animal protectionists' arguments that hippophagy would encourage owners to treat their horses better (in theory, a well-looked-after horse would command a better price at the slaughterhouse) led to the legitimization of eating horses. Weil is also alive to the classed and speciesist dimensions of hippophagy. The upper and middle classes promoted horsemeat to demonstrate their superiority over the working classes *and* horses, whose physicality and fine breeding exposed the flaws of even the human elite, and whose physical proximity reminded them of their own animality.

The gendered dimensions of equine culture come to the fore in chapter five in which Weil expertly untangles the gendered critiques of, and fascination with, female horse riders, from the *amazones* of the Bois de Boulogne to the mixed-race American theatre performer Adah Isaacs Menken whose shows took Paris by storm. Associated with both illicit female desire and denatured women, the *amazones* and the horses they rode came to be linked with degeneration, decadence, and depopulation in the minds of their conservative critics. Chapter six redirects attention to Frenchmen's attempts to reclaim horses from women and the recapture the "equine's physical and sexual potency for themselves" (p.133). Weil explores this attempt through a focus on male circus performers and the integration of horses into the male culture of physical renewal in fin-de-siècle France. Chapter seven rounds off Weil's exploration of equine cultures with a discussion of animal magnetism, education, and "moral dressage" (p. 156). She ultimately calls for mutual respect and reciprocity between humans and horses: "we should underscore the possibilities for mutual training, horse and human each effecting habitual responses in the other by learning to read the other and make the other readable" (p.175).

Precarious Partners is a nuanced, stimulating, and sophisticated account of changing understandings of horses in nineteenth-century France. Readers looking for a social history of everyday interactions with horses might be disappointed with Weil's focus on Parisian elites. But those in search of a theoretically-informed cultural history of varied human-horse relationships

will find much to appreciate here. Historians of nineteenth century France looking for an original approach to the era's race, class, and gender relations will also discover much to admire. *Precarious Partners* stands as a fascinating addition to animal studies and the historiography of nineteenth-century France. The book is also beautifully produced, with plenty of black and white, and some color, illustrations.

NOTES

[1] [Ghislaine Bouchet](#), *Le cheval à Paris de 1850 à 1914* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1993); Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); and Ann Norton Greene, *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

Chris Pearson
University of Liverpool
chris.pearson@liverpool.ac.uk

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172