

**Riding the Centaur Metaphor from Past to Present:
Myth, Constellation and Non-gendered Hybrid**

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Abstract

Tracking the ancient centaur as myth and metaphor through cultural history to the twenty-first century reveals how humans have begun to reconceive animal-human relations. Its origins are open to question, but at least date from pre-classical and early Greek history, when nomadic tribes with superior horsemanship skills appeared. Associated with the astronomical constellation Centaurus, the centaur metaphor was initially gendered. The hybrid embodied human and equine qualities, both negative and positive (for example, the bestial classical centaur and the supra-human Spanish conquistador). After examining the history of the centaur metaphor as well as relationships between horses and humans in the pre-twentieth century Western literary tradition, this research focuses on five texts: Monty Roberts' *The Man Who Listens to Horses* (2009); Tom McGuane's *Some Horses* (2013); John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* (1945); Jane Smiley's *Horse Heaven* (2000); and Gillian Mears' *Foal's Bread* (2011). It argues that contemporary nonfiction and fiction demonstrate a change in the way in which the metaphor has been used, reflecting a will to reshape relationships between species, grounded in empathy as well as respect for alternative communication strategies. The centaur metaphor as non-gendered hybrid appears when riders feel one with their horses through harmonious partnerships inherent in teamwork. They feel as if they have become the centaur, literalizing the metaphor within themselves.

Keywords: Centaur, horse-human relations, metaphor, interspecies communication

Introduction

The centaur is a mythological being, a constellation and a metaphor that occurs in ancient cultures, which developed diverse understandings of its significance. Always referring to a hybrid that possessed both human and equine attributes, representations of the centaur denote humanity's conceptualisations of its relationship to the natural world, both positive and negative. Tracking this being primarily through the Western tradition, from antiquity to the modern age, reveals how writers have manipulated the centaur, initially to emphasise differences between human and nonhuman animals and then to suggest synergies between species. This essay asks how contemporary nonfiction and fiction demonstrate a change in the way in which the centaur metaphor and associated tropes have been used. The texts explored here, focused on horse-human relations, present equines as discrete beings, reflecting a will to reshape relationships between species. The harmonious partnerships possible for all genders, embodied in refreshed centaur metaphors, are grounded in empathy and respect for alternative communication methods. They suggest that each individual can benefit through interspecies exchange, as it promotes physical and psychological well-being. Humans and equines find they might be able to develop untapped talents and strengths through teamwork. The centaur therefore signifies respectful human interaction with another species, which can lead to a positive fusion or transcendence above the limitations of each¹.

After defining the centaur in pre-classical and classical times, the essay identifies examples in Western literature that illustrate cultural attitudes toward the centaur, noting its implicit appearance in histories of the Spanish conquistadores. It provides evidence of how horses have been deployed metaphorically and literally either to confirm human superiority or to critique human society up to the nineteenth century, where literary texts began to consider if not employ the horse's point of view. This change paved the way for twenty and twenty-first century reinvigoration of the centaur as a metaphor to embody a hybridity that signifies harmony between species, often conceived of during movement as "flow." Sociologist Eva Linghede says that "human-horse engagements are meshworks; complex interweaved series of intra-action that shapes and reshapes both humans and horses ... [so that] subjectivities are not fixed, but develop and take shape through multispecies and multicategorical encounters" (2019, p. 12). These intra-actions emphasise unity or symbiosis, which can alternately be called interdependence, co-dependence or hybridity. The texts selected for analysis speak to these intra-actions possible through riding or "flow," with a concomitant loss of the sense of an individual self as human beings feel themselves merging with the Other – becoming a centaur.

Nonfiction texts analysed are Monty Roberts' autobiography *The Man Who Listens to Horses* (2009) and Tom McGuane's book of essays, *Some Horses* (2013). Among the fiction are John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* (orig. pub. 1945), Jane Smiley's *Horse Heaven* (2000) and Gillian Mears' *Foal's Bread* (2011). Characters who come to horse companionship through diverse avenues in these texts learn about themselves through nonhuman animals. They consider equine response, noting how human behaviour influences them, so that they too alter, for better or worse. Mid to late twentieth-century natural horsemanship proponents, such as Monty Roberts, known as "the horse whisperer," lay the groundwork for understanding the dynamics of interaction by drilling down to a practical level, proposing nonverbal communication

¹ My survey of Centaur metaphor origins owes a debt to my 2018 article, "The horse-human bond as catalyst for healing from sexual or domestic abuse: Metaphors in Gillian Mears' *Foal's Bread*." Here I have expanded and rephrased, including new sources, and treat a broad range of literary texts.

methods based on gesture and sound. When people learn “Equus” (Roberts 2009, p. 79)², they cement the horse-human bond. Tom McGuane expresses a similar philosophy, highlighting human responsibility to reach out to understand the Other: Horses “are as distinct as people, but they are a herd” (McGuane, 2013, vii).

Research by sociologists, gender theorists and leisure theorists, such as Keri Brandt (2005, 2006), Lynda Birke and Keri Brandt (2009) and Katherine Dashper (2018), illuminate how a willingness to be open to alternative modes of being underpin the way in which centaur tropes appear. Birke proposes “kinaesthetic empathy” (Shapiro, 1990, p. 192, as qtd. in Brandt, 2006, p. 146) based on physical and emotional contact, while Eva Linghede speaks about “co-joint actions” (Linghede, 2019, p. 8) in teamwork. In sum, these researchers suggest that openness to other species’ frames of reference facilitate the production of a hybrid body, whereby riders can experience a sense of unity (Ann Game, 2001) – what can be termed the “Centaur effect” (Barclay, 1980, p. xi, as qtd. in Game, 2001, p. 3).

Although there has been critical discussion of the centaur as employed in specific literary texts, this research broadens the discussion within the context of a history of the centaur metaphor. In the past, writers predominantly emphasized its binary nature, which relegates equines to an inferior position. This research now argues that many contemporary incarnations of the centaur metaphor as a non-gendered hybrid suggest an enhancement of both species through a unity that maximizes potential. Along with authors Roberts and McGuane, characters in the Steinbeck, Smiley and Mears’ novels who learn equine communication strategies strengthen relationships with them. Those male and female characters most successful at forging strong horse-human bonds usually experience “The Centaur effect” (Barclay, 1980, p. xi, as qtd. in Game, 2001, p. 3).

Origins of the Centaur

The Centaur is the most harmonious creature of fantastic zoology. ‘Biform’ it is called in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, but its heterogeneous character is easily overlooked, and we tend to think that in the Platonic world of ideas there is an archetype of the Centaur as there is of the horse or the man. (Jorge Luis Borges, 1970, p. 56)

The concept of fusion between animals and humans dates back beyond recorded records, appearing in extant primitive art and expressing various cultural preoccupations (Morris, 2011). For Egyptian civilization, hybridity was positive and non-gendered, embodied in their pantheon of gods and goddesses, who took the shape of hybrids: “... in Egyptian thought and art, hybridity was a mark of power of the divine” (Morris, 2011, p. 190). In pre-classical and early Greek history, the centaur was not aligned with the divine, but it did not appear to be a negative, springing from a perception that humans with superior horsemanship skills possessed mastery if not full understanding of another species.

Jorge Luis Borges’ opening to the centaur in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1970) highlights the harmonious combination of the attributes of a nonhuman and human animal; it is not a monster or an accident, therefore, but expresses a need to capture the essence of each. Whether his summary of the diverse origins of the centaur is accurate or not, they indicate embeddedness in human cultures since before the classical age. He identifies centaur-like beings in the

² Despite nonverbal animals being unable to consent to work or play in human terms, they certainly indicate preferences by their behaviour for certain activities and “the human partner believes [their pleasures] are shared, at least to some extent” (Cochrane & Dashper, 2015, as qtd. in Dashper, 2018, p. 2).

Gandharvas in Vedic myth (ancient Sanskrit Hindu scriptures), which he describes as “minor gods who drive the chariots of the sun” (Borges, 1970 p. 56).

In early classical culture, he notes encounters between “Greeks of Homeric times ... [and] the first Scythian horseman they came across [who] seemed to them all one with his horse” (Borges, 1970 p. 56). In *The Iliad*, Homer speaks of “mare milking milk eaters (Il.13. 3-6) as well as the figure of Ancharsis, known to Herodotus ... as a Scythian prince” (Meyer, 2013, p. 25). Warlike nomadic warriors whose civilization arguably dates back to “the second half of the seventh century BC” (Salgaraev and Zulpikharova, 2017, p. 251), Scythians hailed from Eurasia, and relied on their horses to cover vast distances. They selectively bred horses, “invented leather armor with metal or gold plates, as well as the first saddle, which made it possible to ride freely on the back of a horse and not on the thighs, as was done previously” (Salgaraev and Zulpikharova, 2017, pp. 263-64). These facts account for the respect and awe that they inspired in cultures that either did not possess horses or their consummate riding skill. Centaur stories, identifying the hybrid as a horse and man, appear throughout Greek and Roman mythology, art and astronomy. Centaurus or the Centaur is of course also a constellation, which has the advantage of being “the best globular cluster, the nearest star to the Solar System, the third-brightest star in the sky” (Inglis, 2004, p. 86), suggesting why it has exerted such an influence on human culture.

At some point in cultural history, the balance between positive and negative perceptions of hybridity shifted so that, for Greeks and Romans, “it is largely presented as negative or ambivalent” (Morris 2011, p. 190). Recent dictionaries of classical mythology reinforce the evaluation of the centaur as a species tainted by animality. They were beings “feeding on raw flesh ... and had natures to match their monstrous forms: as a race they were wild, brutal and lascivious” (March, 2014, p. 116). Their anatomy is variously described: “In art they are usually depicted with the body and legs of a horse, and growing from their shoulders the torso, head and arms of a man” (March, 2014, p. 116). Portrayed as belligerent beings who lacked self-control, body ruling mind, they over-indulged in drinking and sex. Oral and written mythology as well as visual art interpreted the union between the natural and untamed and the civilized as a struggle between opposing forces. Morris says that the hybrid’s physical form, however, was not stable: “Mutability of the animal-human boundary is also expressed by the melding of the two into composite creatures that share a horsey nature, centaurs and satyrs” (Morris, 2011, p. 193). At first, centaurs can appear as “a fully human body ... conjoined at the buttocks with the body and rear legs of a horse, though later all four legs become equine” (Morris, 2011, p. 193). The satyr possesses a different physique, “tak[ing] mainly human form but with the important additions of the ears and tail of a horse, though in later Hellenistic and Roman times the satyr can be more goatlike ... he belongs to the convivial world of Dionysius and is thus highly visible on painted pottery” (Morris, 2011, p. 193).

Centaur origin stories are varied too. Borges notes three: they are “the offspring of Xion, a king of Thessaly, and a cloud ... they were the offspring of Centaurus, Apollo’s son, and Stilbia ... they were the fruit of the union of Centaurus and the mares of Magnesium” (Borges, 1970, p. 56). March notes the third origin; they are “the offspring of Ixion’s son Centaurus when he copulated with wild Magnesian mares on the slopes of Mount Pelion in Thessaly” (March, 2014, p. 116).³ It is not uncommon for mythic characters to have multiple origins appearing in oral and written birth narratives, which frequently contain a cautionary lesson. Whatever the story, however, the centaur as an “overall package” (Morris, 2011, p. 193) comes to represent

³ March capitalizes names that appear in other places of the dictionary, but to avoid confusion I have not done so here.

social transgression in Greco-Roman mythology.

This ambiguous or indeed negative attitude toward the lascivious and drunken hybrid centaur is demonstrated clearly in “the battle of the Greek Lapiths against the centaurs ... a stock theme in Greek temple art” (Morris, 2011, p. 194) and in various classical texts. This battle is known as the Centauromachy. Invited to the wedding of Xion’s son Peirithous, the centaurs became drunk: “They seized the Lapith women ... and a violent and bloody battle broke out” (March 2014, p. 116). The tale was significant enough to adorn the Parthenon, as Borges notes (1970, p. 197), “the West Pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, and the frieze from the Temple of Apollo at Bassae” (March, 2014, p. 116). Morris summarizes the moral for Greco-Roman civilization by asserting that the battle is “one of a number of ways of expressing the idea of Greek civilized, socially ordered behavior in contrast to the barbaric and disorderly world of ‘the other’” (Morris, 2011, p. 194).

In this context, the centaur’s appetites and weaknesses illustrate moral lessons. Reducing the hybrid in this way denies the positive aspects of his animal nature and does not accord him respect as a being in himself. This manipulation comments on human behavior and has similarities with *Aesop’s Fables*. Animals have no individuality or subjectivity aside from what can be turned to exemplify the bestial or animal, of which humans need to beware; or, alternatively, what virtues they should cultivate. Those virtues, however, are relevant to humans, not animals, whose points of view are missing. As Jacques Derrida argues, this type of exploitation of animals depends on “focalization ... remain[ing] an anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, a domestication. Always discourse of man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and in man” (Derrida, 2008, p. 37). Fables do not consider animal natures in themselves, therefore, something that begins to receive its due in twentieth-century texts.

Nevertheless, as Greek civilization matured, some mythologies were rehabilitated, and the good centaur appears in the form of Chiron, “the rational hybrid horse-human” (Karen Raber 2013, p. 75), whom Apollo taught medicine among other arts, enabling him to tutor centaurs as well as notable heroes, among them “Achilles, Jason, Asclepius, Aristaeus and Actaeon” (March 2014, p. 124). Chiron or Cheiron’s birth narrative foregrounds his superior nature. He is “the immortal son of the Titan Cronus and the Oceanid Philyra” (March 2014, p. 123). In the myth, Cronus wants to seduce or rape Philyra,⁴ so takes the form of a horse to fool his wife Rhea. Chiron is the offspring. Homer’s *Iliad* (1973, Book Eleven) names him “Cheiron, most righteous of the Centaurs” (p. 250), praising him for wisdom and temperance. In classical art and literature, Chiron enjoys a “special status ... from other centaurs ... [He appears with] human forelegs and [given] the dignity of a tunic or cloak” (Morris, 2011, p. 194; March 2014, p. 124). Although initially immortal, he desires death because of the suffering caused by an untreatable wound. Prometheus exchanges his death for immortality and Chiron is allowed to die, although Zeus immortalizes him by placing him among the stars as Sagittarius (March 2014, p. 125).

European Literature Before the Twentieth Century

Greco-Roman mythology depicting centaurs and similar hybrids⁵ continued to inspire Western

⁴ In the introduction to her dictionary, Jennifer March cautions against reading classical myths with a contemporary bias. The sexual union of both gods and goddesses was sometimes violent and at other times not.

⁵ Borges devotes a section to Ichthyocentaurs or “Centaur-Fish” (Borges, 1970, p. 61), rarely mentioned in classical literature but frequent in Greco-Roman iconography: “They are human down to their waist, with the tail of a dolphin, and have the forelegs of a horse or a lion” (Borges, 1970, p. 61). Since they have been classified as “among the gods of the ocean, close to the sea horses” (Borges, 1970, p. 61), they are also known as “Centaur-Tritons” (Borges, 1970, p. 61).

culture in literature and visual art. Although the essay does not have space to identify examples from every century, the following are some of the most notable that speak to the gradual alteration in the way in which centaurs or, on a broader level, horse-human relations, were perceived. In the Middle Ages, Dante Alighieri included Chiron in his *Divine Comedy*, according him some status and setting him apart from sinners in the *Inferno*. Canto XII, “generally known as the ‘Canto of the Centaurs’” (Borges, 1970, p. 58), shows Chiron with pride of place, as it were, as master of the centaurs who guard a boiling river of blood with bows and arrows, keeping the damned submerged according to their sins (Dante, 1974, pp. 142–146). As a nonhuman without a human soul, however, he can never ascend to a higher plane according to Christian doctrine, no matter how virtuous his life has been.

In European culture, from the Middle Ages on, religion was also an impetus for New World conquests. It is a commonplace that many of the great expeditions from Europe were driven not only by a quest for wealth and political power but also by the desire to spread Christianity. The sixteenth-century Spanish conquistador expeditions provide useful examples (Hoig, 2013). Priests accompanied the military to offer pastoral care and to convert the natives if possible. Spanish colonialization reinvigorated the idea of a horse-man, embodied in the physical confrontation between European civilization and both the Aztecs in Mexico and the Incas in Peru. Sophisticated culturally and economically prosperous, they nevertheless had no knowledge of Europeans (Wood, 2003, p. 56). A number of historians and explorer diaries testify to the effectiveness of their horses:

The Indians, who had never seen horses before, could not think otherwise than that horse and rider were one body. Quite astounded at this to them so novel a sight, they quitted the plain and retreated to a rising ground. (Diaz, 1844, 1568, p. 76)

This reaction recalls the awe Scythian horsemen inspired in the Ancient Greeks.

Bernal de Diaz’s *Memoirs* (1568) records not only first contacts, but minute particulars about the Spanish mounts, including color, temperament, bravery and stamina, understanding that the conquests depended on them. Cortés grasps at once that the size, power and shock of something heretofore unknown could maximize their advantage (Wood, 2003). If the Indians believe that the invaders can integrate with their horses, they have accorded the Spanish a super- or supernatural superiority. The emphasis here is on the power of the humans, not that of the horses. An astute military strategist and politician, Cortés turned this reaction to his advantage by demonstrating his ability to control. He “terrified ambassadors and rulers through his domination of horses, supposedly ‘taming’ a stallion, by hiding a mare in season nearby and then having her removed” (Diaz, 1844, p. 79). Spurring horses to gallop down a beach intimidated the Indians as well (Wood, 2003, p. 34). Whether one with or separate from his horse, a conquistador remained the superior being.

In Renaissance literature the ideal of the horse-man, made possible by horsemanship skill and adherence to a chivalric code, was promoted (Raber, 2013). In *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture*, Raber proffers Sir Philip Sidney’s character Musidorus in *Arcadia* (1590 as evidence of “the more generalized image of the rider-as-centaur ... where the centaur’s hybrid nature expresses human triumph in appropriating and exploiting animal power and grace through the aristocratic arts of horsemanship” (Raber, 2013, p. 75). In equitation texts of the period, however, authors assert that the experienced horseman recognizes that horses are Other, and riders need “the willing cooperation of a creature that ... has its own agenda, its own sensations

and its own character” (Raber, 2013, p. 85). This sensitivity accords with the chivalric code. Raber nevertheless confronts the complexity of Chiron as “the rational hybrid horse-human” (Raber, 2013, p. 75) by acknowledging that other literature of the period focuses on the horse’s animal nature, which debases the human. She raises the Centauromachy – the battle arising from centaur behavior at a wedding discussed previously – pointing to cultural confusion about the centaur myth, which for so long focused on the hybrid as self-indulgent, aggressive and lascivious.

By the eighteenth century, horses still represent brutish animal nature. Jonathan Swift’s Book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) ridicules his contemporary society by inverting human and nonhuman animal qualities. If reasonable, temperate behavior makes for a moral, civilised being, then the Houyhnhnms are superior, having created a peaceful, just society, impressing the narrator because they are “so orderly and rational, so acute and judicious” (Swift, 1776 in Greenberg (Ed.) (1970), p. 183). On the other hand, the Yahoos – or humans – are inferior, more bestial in terms of their habits and vices. When the narrator is forced to leave the land of the Houyhnhnms, and return to so-called English civilization, he is distraught, not only by being forced to tolerate Yahoos or humans, but because he knows he is one of them. He prefers the companionship of two horses he keeps, rather than imperfect humans. This satiric reversal only reinforces the conventional division between human and nonhuman animal nature, because Swift is not concerned with exploring what equines might be in themselves, but only with using his portrayal to expose human follies and vices.

In the nineteenth century a shift occurs in portrayals of horse-human relations and the anthropomorphic perspective weakens. Anna Sewell’s popular *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse* (1877) advocates for the horse rather than for human owners. The use of autobiography in the title strengthens this intention, maintaining the fiction that the horse speaks for itself. Although Beauty was trained with patience and kindness, with touch and voice rather than force, some of his subsequent handling amounts to torture. Characters reveal their moral natures, therefore, by the way they treat Black Beauty, who cannot defend himself but who nevertheless believes that animals are meant to serve humans. Its depiction of Beauty’s suffering because of the cruelty of human characters, who use and abuse him for their pleasure, evoked sympathetic responses in audiences of the time. B.H. Beierl (2008) calls *Black Beauty* “a benchmark in the heightening empathy for both humans and animals in England and America” (p. 214). What George T. Angell called “the equine Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (Beierl, 2008, p.214) led indirectly to the founding of societies against cruelty to animals in both the United States and Great Britain. The pairing of humans and animals is instructive here, as it suggests that treating one species with respect and sensitivity encourages similar behavior toward other species. That concept reoccurs in the contemporary literature discussed later.

Black Beauty is a work of its time, framed as a conventional narrative. To a contemporary audience it might appear sentimental and unconvincing for several reasons. For one, the horse sounds like a well-spoken, polite human; for another, it does not engage with the question of how a human – in this case the author – can know what occurs in a nonhuman animal’s mind. Contemporary researchers such as D. J. Haraway (2008) and M. DeMello (2013) debate issues such as animal subjectivities and nonhuman species in the Anthropocene (Wolfe, 2013), which would not have occurred to Sewell, whose narrative does not aim at verisimilitude. It reads something like a nineteenth-century sermon from the horse’s mouth about how treating animals proves a person’s moral worth.

A decade later Leo Tolstoy attempts something similar by presenting the horse’s perspective

in “Strider: The Story of a Horse” (1886). Although he uses a third-person omniscient narrator, rather than first person, Tolstoy frequently narrates events from Strider’s point of view, tracing the vicissitudes of the horse’s life to analyze human vanity, greed, jealousy and cruelty as Sewell’s text does. Strider is passed from owner to owner, who consider him property, rather than a sentient being that should be respected: “Suffering for the pleasure of others is nothing new to me” (Tolstoy, 1886, p. 127). If he cannot be used for breeding, he must race; if he cannot race, he must work. As Black Beauty, Strider suffers but endures, as if that is an unavoidable fate. The text has similarities with Book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels* in the way in which Swift applies the concept of animal baseness to the Yahoos. It is horses who are the moral beings. Tolstoy gives Strider this insight about human nature: “I became convinced that not only as applied to us horses, but in regards to other things, the idea of *mine* has no other foundation than a base animal instinct in men, which they call the feeling or right of property” (Tolstoy, 1886 p. 142). Unlike men, horses do not seek to acquire possessions purely for status or image and this difference sets them apart. Strider comments: “... in the scale of living creatures we stand higher than man” (Tolstoy, 1886, p. 142).

Despite often taking the horse’s point of view, the story’s narrative focus is inconsistent, because the text at times gives human motivations to horses and in particular reveals them as proud and as inconsiderate as humans, bullying and tormenting in their own way. Youngsters in the field revel in their energy and strength, buoyed by an “aristocratic sentiment” (Tolstoy 1886, p. 134) born of their lineage. There is a slippage here between human and equine behavior. As in any herd, the dominant mare disciplines the young, but in Tolstoy’s narrative this takes the form of her informing the colts and fillies of Strider’s past glory, of which he is still proud.

The conclusion also slips between pity for Strider and the implication that he endures the fate of any elderly being. When no longer useful, he is expendable. The cynical picture of the circle of life shows the lame horse’s throat slit. But at least his body and bones can be recycled, the narrator comments, the former feeding wolves and birds, the latter providing material for peasants. Deceased human bodies cannot be put to any good use, but an individual’s pride in possessions outlives him. Strider’s favorite owner’s death comes soon after the horse’s own. His expensive burial reinforces the text’s emphasis on human waste. Although Tolstoy’s story attempts to treat Strider as a sentient being who deserves respect and empathy, its thrust is also to satirize human vanity and selfishness, diluting the portrayal of a discrete life worthy of understanding on its own terms.

In early to mid-twentieth century, although narratives attempted to present the animal point of view more consistently, authors usually did not engage with the issue of writing a nonhuman species (McHugh, 2011; DeMello, 2013). Even an award-winning anti-war novel such as Michael Morpugo’s *War Horse* (1982, reissued 2014; adapted for stage and film), which celebrates the bond between horses and people, adopts the convention of speaking for a nonhuman animal in a human (and formal) voice.

The Centaur Effect in Twenty and Twenty-first Century Nonfiction and Fiction

The twenty and twenty-first century nonfiction and fiction texts discussed below illustrate the transition from an anthropomorphic perspective to a more inclusive one that does not try to speak for equines but acknowledges their “otherness.” It does this without denying the possibility of understanding through respect and empathy. Humans are responsible for making the effort to move beyond their own points of view to learn alternative communication

strategies by studying the behavior of other species. In this way they can gain trust. The explicit or implicit manipulation of the centaur metaphor expressing the possibility of union with another species embody this position, highlighting the mutual benefits of a horse-human bond that transcends gender.

Monty Roberts and Tom McGuane clearly formulate a philosophy of cross-species interaction in their nonfiction that underpins this essay's treatment of the novels. Roberts' autobiography, *The Man Who Listens to Horses* (2009), is at once a personal story about overcoming adversity and a legitimation of his training methods. According to Roberts, the impetus for writing the book came from the English monarch, for whom he demonstrated his training regime.

It was Her Majesty's suggestion that I give an account of my experiences and methods in communication with horses, and it is largely due to her influence that I started out on the long and difficult task of remembering what happened to me in my life, and how I came to love horses so much that I was led to try to reach out across the divide that separates our species from theirs (Roberts, 2009, p. 13).

Roberts is among a group of practitioners who advocate what is known as natural horsemanship. They study equine nonverbal means of communication as a way of establishing trust. Closely observing herds in the wild, Roberts realized that equine language was "predictable, discernible and effective", and included "body language" (Roberts, 2009, p. 101). Observation came first, then "listening" to how horses behave individually and as herd animals, and then acting on that knowledge.

I believed the horses were telling me something and, most importantly, I learned hardly ever to believe the people connected with the horse. It's not that they were lying, but simply that they weren't listening (Roberts, 2009, p. 31).

Roberts emphasizes human responsibility in cross-species transactions, which has previously been noted as a mid-twentieth century development that transcends gender. This insight forms the basis of his training methods:

In order to gain a horse's trust and willing co-operation, it is necessary for both parties to be allowed to meet in the middle. However, it is the responsibility of the man, *totally* of the man (I'm speaking generically, to include women) to achieve this, and to get to the other side of this hurdle (Roberts, 2009, p. 85).

He offers one of his first mounts, Brownie, as a case in point. Although cruelly broken by his father, Roberts trained the horse himself: "It was almost as if I wanted to be a horse myself, so thoroughly had I taken their side; these horses weren't only Brownie's brothers and sisters, they were mine also ..." (Roberts, 2009, p. 82). This assertion suggests that Roberts wants to be part of the family. He treats horses as he would like to be treated. Victimized by his father, Roberts refuses to do this to horses. As a result of this approach, he develops new terminology. Breaking horses becomes "starting" (Roberts, 2009, p. 90); training becomes "joining up" (Roberts, 2009, p. 108). Brownie and Roberts go on to have a long, successful relationship: "He'd become as close as a brother to me and we lived and breathed the same air" (Roberts, 2009, p. 139). Implicit in this description of a familial bond is that Roberts has crossed the species divide.

Tom McGuane's polished essays, *Some Horses* (2013), nominated for the American National

Book Award, reinforces the sense that a productive and mutually satisfying relationship with horses comes from respect for and understanding of the species' communication methods. They embody McGuane's belief that humans and animals share behaviors, needs and emotions. Empathy for animals of all types also fosters self-knowledge. At the same time, he underlines in what ways animals are, if not superior, more honest and defined as personalities. While Roberts emphasizes that horses can't lie, McGuane emphasizes behavioral coherence: 'Like animals, we like to eat, breed, travel, sleep, and sun ourselves, but we lack their clarity' (ix). McGuane speaks of being "present" (McGuane, 2013, p. ix) with a horse, "quiet and consistent, firmly kind, and, from the horse's point of view, good listeners" (McGuane, 2013, pp. 10–11).

Each essay in McGuane's book circles around individual horses that have taught him something about them as well as himself. Although set in the American West and the culture of the rodeo, the book's insights apply to horse communities globally. This wide-ranging perspective is apparent in the first piece, simply titled "Horses," which focuses on the animal-human bond, but, as well, the manner in which humans manipulate the Other metaphorically to reflect something in themselves: "Those who love horses are impelled by an ever-receding vision, some enchanted transformation through which the horse and the rider become a third, much greater thing" (McGuane, 2013, p. 1). The centaur as entity is implicit in this description, recalling the Renaissance ideal of "the rider-as-centaur" (Raber, 2015, p. 75), but without the necessity of human domination. The transformation is rooted in love rather than self-aggrandizement, an ideal symbiotic partnership that pushes toward transcendence, where "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (McGuane, 2013, p. 20). This letting go, of surrendering to the experience, leads to "harmony ... You have to reflect that horse's energy, and he has to reflect yours" (McGuane, 2013, p. 97). This sense of unity echoes the centaur effect described next.

In "Riding: Embodying the Centaur," Ann Game (2001) makes explicit how the centaur trope encapsulates the positive aspects of the horse-human bond: "different species attune to each other, *live* with and through each other" (Game, 2001, p. 2). When riding reaches a certain level, echoing Eliade she says, "our bodies know the centaur" (Game, 2001, p. 3). A key term she defines is entrain, or "learning to be carried along in the flow, learning to become in tune with or in the train of So, in living the image of the centaur, we entrain with it" (Game, 2001, p. 3). Both McGuane and Roberts in their differing ways express the necessity of reading the other species' movements and motivations. This insight is transformed imaginatively in the fiction this essay now turns to, as characters who know horses reach across the species divide. Whereas the nonfiction I have discussed comes from a practitioner perspective, the fiction offers multiple points of view: child, adult, male and female. Each novel presents an array of characters who define themselves by the way in which they treat horses. Some approach them as property to be manipulated for human gain; some learn through interaction and grow personally by respecting them; some heal psychically through horse companionship; and some achieve a rare transcendent connection whereby they feel as if they have joined with the Other.

John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* (1945) is a transitional work that shows a movement away from a masculine culture where humans are dominant to a more empathetic and gender-inclusive one. The novel expresses the mid-twentieth century ethos of the American West by concentrating on the passage of ten-year-old Jody Tiflin from innocence to experience. The pony, Gabilan, initiates the process, but cannot facilitate its completion, as he dies by the end of Part I. Jody has only begun to establish a relationship with him, learning about horse-human communication – "The pony talked with his ears" (Steinbeck, 1992, p. 16) – as well as responsibility and empathy, but he never has the chance to ride. Jody has, however realized

that a rider has more status than ordinary men, being literally and figuratively above them according to the culture in which he has been raised.

To compensate for the pony's loss, Jody's father sends a mare to a stallion to be bred and tells Jody he can train the resulting colt. His father, a stereotypical inarticulate male, uncomfortable with emotions, does not want to entertain the possibility the foal will be female. With no experience yet of practical horsemanship, Jody fantasizes about the bond he will forge. In his mind he has named the colt Black Demon and once on his back he will be a man: "Jody was not a boy anymore, and Demon was not a horse. The two together were one glorious individual" (Steinbeck, 1992, p. 70). Jody dreams of winning rodeos, capturing bandits and being lauded by the American President, reflecting the West's masculine culture. He has not had the chance to meet another species on their own terms. Recalling the Indian response to the Spanish conquistadores, Jody envisages he and his mount as a terrifying hybrid. Demonic to others but dominated by him, Jody would use Black Demon for his own benefit.

The lone voice in the novel possessing practical knowledge of horses belongs to Billy Buck, the hired hand. He counsels respect, kindness and patience in training a nonhuman animal and wants to ensure the colt is handled so he is willing, not fearful. Readers never learn if Jody successfully trains the foal, and whether Billy Buck's attempts to alert him to fortune's vagaries have made an impact. Nevertheless, the text suggests by the conclusion that Jody has gained insight at least into human nature. By listening to his grandfather's story of how he lost his purpose once he completed his great task of bringing a wagon train westward, he has proven he has the capacity to be more empathetic than his father. The novel often implies that sensitivity to one species can lead to empathy for another.

Jane Smiley's *Horse Heaven* (2000), published more than fifty years later, demonstrates a broader perspective where characters of diverse genders, races and socio-economic backgrounds learn about themselves and their human relationships through interactions with horses. A comprehensive picture of American thoroughbred racing, it opens with a Cast of Characters (like a *Dramatis Personae*) that includes equines and humans. There are racehorse owners (and spouses), trainers, exercise riders, grooms, jockeys and an animal communicator. Only equines, however, are foregrounded in the Prologue, "Who They are" (Smiley, 2000, pp. 3–7), introducing horses all born in the same year. Readers follow their fortunes in the novel.

The text portrays various manifestations of empathy and affection between those who care for horses as well as those who ride them. For example, there is the masseur, Luciano, whom the horses love for his gentleness and habitual quietness; Tiffany, a young black owner, who wants nothing more than to touch them and share their space; William Vance, one of the few black trainers in America who saves a horse's life through expensive surgery even though he might never recoup his investment; exercise riders who enjoy their grace, power and spirit; jockeys who marvel at their strength, tenacity and speed; and some well-known trainers who care as much for equine welfare as for money.

The mutual benefit and healing potential of a person giving oneself over to understanding another is exemplified by Joy Gorham, a former dressage rider and mare manager at a stud ranch. Bipolar and emotionally vulnerable, Joy is urged to exercise a horse nicknamed "Wow" (official name: Limitless), who is happiest moving rather than standing still. Riding Limitless transforms her, letting her experience the centaur effect, even though that metaphor is implicit.

As soon as she rode Limitless for the first time, the looseness of his back had loosened hers ... His mouth carried exactly the weight of the bit, a few ounces,

his tailbone flowed out of his spine, then curved gracefully downward, and the breeze picked up the silken hairs and completed their metamorphosis into effortless motion. (Smiley, 2000, p. 522)

... She had had a dressage teacher once who had told her something impossible, that he could feel the horse's every breath. But with Limitless, now, there were times when she could feel not only his every breath but his every heartbeat, at least at the trot. (Smiley, 2000, p. 523)

Joy experiences something similar when she gallops a retired racehorse, Terza Rima or Mr T, feeling what the next gear is like – at the gallop, all four feet in the air – that simulates the centaur effect. Horses can move freely and confidently when their riders “go with the flow,” or follow their motion rather than dictating it.

A Mexican-American jockey, Roberto, exemplifies the professional empathetic rider who becomes one with his horse. In fact, his race position requires him to fold over the horse's neck so he can achieve maximum speed, which visually suggests the union between species of the centaur. Roberto has sensitive hands and does not resort to the whip. His first ride is on an old hand, a horse named Justa Bob, and Roberto senses at once that his only job is to give himself over to the pleasure of motion, letting the horse take charge.

There he was, right in front of you, and you did now know, from déjà vu, or dreams, what your horse looked like—a long shining dark neck in front of you, two unique ears, and the feel of his mouth, his personality, really, right there in your hands. (Smiley, 2000, p. 49)

When Justa Bob is ridden by jockeys who can “listen,” he wins or places, remaining relaxed and good-natured. In her analysis of Jane Smiley's *Horse Heaven*, Jopi Nyman (2016) emphasizes that the horse-human dyad means species' boundaries are crossed, benefitting both: “[T]he novel suggests that the identities of horses and humans are mutually transformed through their encounters, leading occasionally to hybrid and joint identities” (Nyman, 2016, p. 237). Empathetic trainers and riders in *Horse Heaven* connect by respecting equine individuality.

Gillian Mears' novel, *Foal's Bread* (2011), set in Australia between the world wars, manifests a similar approach to animal-human relations. Opening in 1926, this historical novel focuses on a now defunct industry – Australian high jumping – and revolves around two protagonists – Noah Childs Nancarrow and Roley Nancarrow. They meet at a horse show and marry, but it is through their horses that their emotions are fully expressed. Both genders eventually understand that only through trust and kindness can they maximize horse and rider abilities. Mears manipulates the centaur metaphor throughout the novel, employing it explicitly and implicitly, and applying it to each protagonist. With perfect balance and sensitive touch, Roley has been able to jump virtually any horse without cruelty, evoking awe and admiration in competition audiences.

The tragedy in the novel is due to a quirk accident that destroys him physically. Struck three times by lightning, Roley has been afflicted by gradual paralysis and, unable to move let alone ride, he starves himself to death. Once performing like a centaur, he dies despairing and alone in a sleepout, but the text reinforces the pathos of his fate by returning to the image of him as a hybrid horse-man. His daughter Lainey and his mother realize he has died when they look at

the sky and see Centaurus:

So that there, there, there, Lainey and her Nin, as if their gaze was for a moment joined, saw what could only be described as a ring of light in the sky, like a huge halo as big as a showground over One Tree. Although there was the feeling that her father was galloping away from the mess of his emaciated body lying in the sleepout of One Tree, it was also as if the starry horse which carried him was streaming down along the dark blue air of morning towards the thick mist along the creek. Lainey felt the very ground beneath her feet seeming to curve up into the shape of a bold horse jumping. She saw a starry mane flying east before it disappeared. (Mears, 2013 p. 236)

Especially in the southern hemisphere, Centaurus is visible at times to the naked eye. The figurative centaur sums up Roley Nancarrow's relationship to horses and his *raison d'être*, which he loses when he is cut off from them.

Roley's wife, Noah, also has perfect balance and empathy with horses, which she begins to lose because of emotional and sexual frustration. Abused by her uncle as a child, and trying to cope with her husband's degenerative condition, she struggles with alcoholism. She has established a bond with an unruly piebald mare, Magpie, and although at times mistreats her, finally admits that she needs to take responsibility and not to abuse a horse that has given her so much. In despair near the conclusion, like her husband, and after missing a showjumping competition because of drunkenness, she attempts to scale an eight-foot ruined bridge that she feels somehow will redeem her. This act puts the horse in danger, but the text suggests that it is in Magpie's nature to seek challenges to test herself, although Noah does not try to fathom "the mystery of Magpie who'd never balked for her" (Mears, 2013, p. 339).

She glanced again at the bridge. Almighty: the word sprang unbidden into her mind and she thought how the shape of any high jump is a holy one, so gigantically calm in what it was standing there asking horse and rider to do. (Mears, 2013, p. 337)

Only if rider and horse are in perfect synch, reading each other's gestures and intentions, can they scale a jump of that height. They must imitate if not become the centaur. The horse must be willing and the rider give herself over to the other: 'For one last time horse and rider were becoming part of air not earth' (Mears, 2013, p. 337). The two unite in a tragic apotheosis that allows them to achieve what seemed impossible. Clearing the ruined bridge, they land on unstable ground and die in the attempt.

Conclusion

This research has considered the history of the ancient centaur in literature beginning primarily with its classical manifestations. By tracing its development from a mythological figure into a metaphor, it has demonstrated that, by the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the centaur has transformed from a binary hybrid, whose animal nature was deemed inferior to the human, into a non-gendered entity that expresses interspecies empathy. Previous critical discussion of the centaur has not identified this general trajectory in contemporary literature. This research therefore contributes to an understanding of how respect and empathy are key to building empathetic partnerships, embodied in the centaur metaphor, which suggests a broader trend to renegotiate relationships between humans and nonhuman animals.

Horse trainers Monty Roberts and Tom McGuane champion equine communication strategies to redress this previous species imbalance, whereby humans prioritised their needs over those of nonhuman animals. In a similar way, characters in the Smiley and Mears' novels who respect alternative ways of being achieve mutual enjoyment in partnerships with horses. These benefits are not restricted by gender or socio-economic status, as Eva Linghede discovered interviewing Swedish male riders, who felt as if their horses were “both soulmates and bodymates ...” (Linghede, 2019, p. 8).

The strongest horse-human connections are forged by riders of both genders who, like successful “dance partners” (Ford, 2013, p. 101), can perform as members of a harmonious team. By “go[ing] with the flow” (Bizub, et al., 2003, p. 81), they open themselves to experiencing what sociologist and gender theorist Keri Brandt (2005) names “human-animal interembodiment” (p. 95). She expresses the idea of “oneness” [as] ... a moment in time when horsewomen [and horsemen are] feeling like they are one with their horses, as if there exists only one singular subjectivity shared between two beings” (p. 85). These contemporary manifestations of the centaur metaphor emphasize unity, according equal status to each species, which have their own talents and strengths, making possible the maximizing of the potential of each, so that, as McGuane says, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (2013, p. 20). In other words, human partners who lose self-awareness in motion do not simply feel like the centaur, but, experiencing “the Centaur effect” (Barclay, 1980, p. xi, as qtd. in Game, 2001, p. 3), literalize the metaphor within their own bodies; they “know the centaur” (Barclay, 1980) by becoming it.

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