The Cultural Representation of the Horse in Late Medieval England: Status and Gender


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Introduction

Throughout the medieval period the equine played a multifunctional role, acting as a form of transport, an agricultural animal and as means of conveying goods. It was a significant attribute in warfare, providing the man-at-arms with vital manoeuvrability and acting as the ‘equivalent of a tank in modern warfare’. The versatility of the horse meant that it featured in the daily lives of the people who lived in the Middle Ages, and its importance is reflected in the equine imagery that appears in many texts throughout the period. Although the horse played a significant role in society little scholarly attention has been paid to its cultural significance in literary and visual images, and how it could provide a figurative representation of status and gender. This dissertation will focus on the late medieval period and examines a variety of manuscript images to explore how the horse acted as a cultural lens. By looking through the equine filter, a range of meanings were conferred onto the people who were portrayed on horseback. Social position, physical attributes and mental qualities could be inferred and gender ideologies could be reinforced or subverted. Equine historiography has focused largely on the practical function of the horse and this dissertation attempts to fill the gap by exploring how equine imagery functioned as a symbolic form of communication.

The role of horses as symbols of status in the Middle Ages is usually encompassed in works that address the broader scope of horse breeding or the use of equines in war. R. H. C. Davis was one of the first scholars to research the types and uses of medieval horses in the 1980s, and a decade later Andrew Ayton followed this up with his work on warhorses using military

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inventories from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.\(^2\) Ayton draws from *restauro equorum* accounts in linking rank and horse values and is a useful work for connecting horse types to status, if only in the context of warfare.\(^3\) Ann Hyland’s equestrian books have been widely cited, and *The Horse in the Middle Ages* provides a study on topics from breeding to tournaments, using primary sources such as the Register of Edward the Black Prince.\(^4\) These works are useful for gaining an insight into the various types of medieval horses and their values but Peter Edward’s book *The Horse as a Cultural Icon: The Real and the Symbolic Horse in the Early Modern World* is perhaps the only work that seeks to address the equine’s role as a cultural signifier.\(^5\) Although this study focuses on a later (early modern) period the author does acknowledge in his introduction that these ideologies owed much to the medieval period.\(^6\)

When asked to conjure up an image of equestrianism during the Middle Ages the figure of the knight on horseback immediately springs to mind. Contemporary texts and images frequently exploit the trope of the chivalrous warrior on his charger. Take for example Sir Thomas Mallory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, a work which highlights the popularity of knights in forming medieval tales.\(^7\) The association between horses and men in the culture of the Middle


\(^3\) *Restauro equorum* accounts (literally, ‘restoration of horses’), were lists of horses lost in battle during the reigns of Edward I and Edward II, and give information on the owner’s name, the horse type and its appraised value.


\(^7\) Sir Thomas Mallory, *Le Morte D’Arthur: Sir Thomas Malory’s Book of King Arthur and of his Noble Knights of the Round Table, Volume 1* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Library, 2002). The only surviving manuscript version, the Winchester manuscript, is held in the British Library and was produced in 1471.
Ages is largely taken for granted - mounted knights were after all an ‘essential feature of medieval society’ and the horse was a vital component in creating their image.\(^8\) Ramon Llull, who composed a work on chivalry c. 1276, reiterated the importance of the equine, writing that ‘a knight who has no horse is not suited to the office’\(^9\). For the nobility and aristocracy, male gender and equestrianism went hand in hand. One of the ways to prove masculinity was through demonstrating bravery and skill in battle, tournaments and out hunting, and the horse played a fundamental role in these pursuits.\(^10\) Women also rode and were often featured riding horses in the literature and art of the Middle Ages. The types of animals that they are depicted as riding and the way they rode them reflected and reinforced some of the feminine ideologies that were circulating during the Middle Ages.

The way gender was formulated and perceived during the medieval period has been the subject of much scholarship, and therefore just a few key points will be mentioned here. In *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, Ruth Mazo Karras addresses the construction of gender from a social point of view, showing that it was partly dependant on ‘the way the world outside the individual views or represents him or her’.\(^11\) This can be applied to how people were portrayed in literary and visual images, but as Linda Mitchell points out many of these images were created by men, and so the portrayal of women was framed by ‘male eyes’.\(^12\) Taken in context, this means that images of women


\(^11\) Karras, p. 4.

perhaps reflect masculine ideals rather than reality. However, they still offer an insight into some of the gender ideologies that were circulating during the medieval period. Hanneke de Bruin’s research into medieval woodcuts makes exactly this point, concluding that although imagery was not necessarily an accurate representation of the real world, it can still provide ‘interesting and revealing information’ on cultural perceptions. This project builds on the work of these scholars by considering how the equine was one way in which the image of status and gender was culturally represented.

Chapter one looks at the medieval inheritance by considering how the role of the horse in the ancient world influenced its cultural impact in the Middle Ages. The history of the equine will only be covered briefly due to word constraints but this chapter will consider how the human-horse relationship was shaped by its significance in religion and warfare. It will examine how the use of animals as metaphors for human behaviour was drawn from these influences, and ask how it framed the medieval perception of the horse. Finally, the different types of horses that appeared in the late medieval period will be summarised to provide context for the following chapters. Chapter two investigates how horses were used to represent male status and gender. Primary sources such as the Ellesmere manuscript version of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* will be explored in order to consider how artists used horses to define their male characters. It will ask what role the horse played in shaping the audience’s perceptions of men, and consider how they provided figurative representations of rank, wealth and masculinity. Chapter three will focus on female riders. Illuminations from manuscripts such as the Queen Mary’s Psalter and Taymouth Hours will be examined to

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14 San Marino, Huntington Library, MS EL 26 C 9.
highlight the differences between portrayals of men and women on horseback. Although some scholars have postulated that the imagery in these manuscripts is in the ‘world upside-down’ tradition, this will not be the focus of the chapter. It will instead analyse the images to consider if different types of horses were used to represent female status and ask why this might be so. Finally, it will consider if the horse was used to represent femininity, and how artists might have achieved or subverted feminine ideologies through equine imagery.

In summary, this dissertation will explore some of the visual imagery that depicts people on horseback during the late Middle Ages. The elite will be the main focus of the investigation as medieval images of riders inevitably depict the class of people who could afford to own horses as well as commission the texts. It will show that the cultural representation of the horse was significant in shaping the audience’s perceptions of men and women. The equine acted as a cultural lens, through which artists and writers could confer status and gender on the characters that they created.

All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

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Chapter One

The Medieval Horse

Representations of the ridden equine in medieval literature and art relied on two distinct ways in which the human-horse relationship could be perceived: the material and the metaphorical. These perceptions were often merged to create imagery that conveyed a wide range of meanings to an audience. High status could be inferred by simply portraying a person on a good-quality horse, but the attributes that were expected of someone holding a high position were also a part of confirming that status. Noble position could be conferred by birth, but as Ruth Mazo Karras points out it was insufficient if noble character was not also demonstrated. Loyalty and courage were just two of the chivalric characteristics expected from the knightly class, and so high position and character were mutually inclusive when creating and projecting images of status. Such images could be shaped by exploiting the cultural ideologies that surrounded the image of the equine in that period. During the Middle Ages it was acknowledged that animals were carriers of symbolic meaning: they could be used as metaphors for human behaviour and to reflect the hierarchies that existed in society. This concept was part of the medieval inheritance of classical beliefs that were transmitted through myths and texts such as fables. On the material level horses were expensive animals, and wealth, rank and social position could be judged by the type of horse people

17 Karras, p. 37.
18 For more information on knightly virtues see Maurice Keen, Chivalry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).
owned and rode.\(^{21}\) This applied equally to women as well as men, but the differences in gender meant that women were portrayed as more commonly riding particular types of horses. In order to fully explore the cultural representation of the horse in late medieval England we must first consider the history of the human-horse relationship, the emergence of animal exemplars and the different types of horses that existed during the period.

Humans and horses share a long history of interaction. Palaeolithic cave paintings of wild horses such as those found in Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc in southern France demonstrate that they were a significant feature of the historic landscape.\(^{22}\) These wild horses were a source of food, and their value in providing meat and milk led to the first domestication of horses around six thousand years ago.\(^{23}\) Evidence of horses being used for haulage and traction survive in the form of the Kikkuli horse texts, a set of clay tablets produced by the Hittites c. 1400 BCE.\(^{24}\) The tablets are a set of written manuals that give instructions on how to train horses to pull war chariots, and provide evidence that the care and cultivation of equines was well-established by this time. By the eighth century BCE the tradition of riding on the backs of horses had reached Europe and the equine became a valuable asset to mankind, versatile enough to serve as vehicles for war, hunting, travel, and the transportation of goods.\(^{25}\)

Harnessing the power of the equine changed the relationship between mankind and the horse. From being an animal that simply provided a source of nourishment, the horse became one

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that opened horizons, providing fast transportation and giving those who harnessed or rode it a tactical advantage in warfare. But the human-horse relationship was not limited to just the practical benefits that these animals provided. Their importance to humans is indicated in the role they played in religious beliefs and their supposed connection to the supernatural.

During the Bronze Age in Europe horses were associated solar cults where they were believed to perform the daily role of drawing the sun across the skies in a chariot, a symbolic action that had connections to mortality and the afterlife. Evidence of the importance of horses in ancient culture can be witnessed in several sites in Britain where horse symbols have been carved into the landscape. For example, the White Horse of Uffington, a chalk carving of a horse in Berkshire, dates to the late Bronze Age and is thought to be connected to the worship of solar deities. The Celtic deity Epona, (whose name derives from the Celtic word for horse) was represented by a woman riding or standing beside a horse and was worshipped across Europe and as far afield as Rome and North Africa. To the Roman cavalry Epona was the patron of horses and she was also seen as a symbol of fertility, sometimes evidenced by the addition to her imagery of a suckling foal or loaves of bread.

The connection between the equine, man and the afterlife can also be found in burials that involve horses. One recent excavation at Pocklington, Yorkshire, uncovered an Iron Age grave that showed evidence of horse sacrifice – in this particular case two harnessed ponies

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27 Jarrett A. Lobell and Erica A. Powell, p. 2.
were interred together with their chariot and owner, presumably to accompany him into the afterlife.\textsuperscript{31} The presence of horses in cults and burials suggest that the horse was an important feature of ancient society and its relationship to man existed on both on an earthly and supernatural level.

Supernatural horses are found also found in myth and legends. In Ancient Greece the winged horse Pegasus was said to carry the thunderbolts of Zeus and in Norse mythology Odin was carried on his journeys by Sleipnir, an eight-legged magical horse.\textsuperscript{32} In ancient Scottish folklore the kelpies were believed to be water spirits who assumed the shape of horses, but they could sometimes appear in human form but with hooves.\textsuperscript{33} The special connection between horses and men was also borne out into the world of the living as many famous men were associated with horses that had divine powers. For example, the horse belonging to Julius Caesar took a similar form to the human-horse hybrid seen in the kelpie as it was said to have ‘forefeet resembling those of a man’.\textsuperscript{34} According to Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and Sian Lewis projecting unworldly status or attributing special powers onto a horse reinforced the idea that the person who rode it was superior to other men.\textsuperscript{35} If a person such as Caesar was identified as someone who could master the supernatural equine then it served to show that he was capable of mastering and leading his contemporaries.

The idea that the horse helped to create self-image was not a new idea. The legend of Alexander the Great’s taming of the ‘vicious and unmanageable’ Bucephalus not only served

\textsuperscript{32} Jarrett A. Lobell and Erica A. Powell, p.2.
\textsuperscript{33} Valda Roric, ‘Riding the Seas: The Kelpies and Other Fascinating Water Horses in Myth and Legend’, \textit{Ancient Origins} (26 June 2016) [n.p.].
\textsuperscript{34} Pliny, \textit{Pliny’s Natural History in Thirty-Seven Books}, trans. by Philemon Holland (London: G. Barclay, 1887-49), Book VIII, Chapter XLII, p. 74.
to demonstrate the leader’s horsemanship but also his superiority over other men. The horse acted as a projection of its master by exhibiting the same characteristics. For example, Bucephalus is described as ‘wild and ungovernable’ and Alexander is portrayed as a man who ‘did not easily submit to authority’. The human-horse relationship here is one of mutual mirroring and reinforcement, and this blurring of the boundary between human and animal was taken a step further by the use of animals as metaphors for human behaviour.

Ancient Greek fables such as those believed to be compiled by Aesop used animals as ‘human exemplars’. The animals spoke and acted like humans and served a didactic role in showing people how they should behave, and this concept filtered down into the medieval period. Isadore of Seville, the seventh-century saint and scholar, acknowledged the classical use of animals as exemplars in stories, stating that they should be ‘recognised as a certain image of the life of humans and […] about human morals’. Fables were popular and appeared during the late medieval period in printed form such as William Caxton’s version of *The Fables of Aesop*. In Caxton’s version of the *Horse and Ass* story a horse, who has committed the sin of hubris before falling low in the world, feels human emotions such as ‘pryde’ and ‘shame’.

The anthropomorphism of the equine had roots that stretched back into antiquity and appear in texts written by Pliny the Elder. The Roman philosopher described how horses could feel human emotions such as shame and grief, recounting ‘they mourn the loss of their masters;

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37 Plutarch, pp. 1-2.
38 Salisbury, p. 105.
sometimes also they shed tears of love for them’. Pliny goes on to explain that horses were exceptionally loyal and were known to defend their masters to the death, sometimes avenging them and even committing suicide when they died. The attribution of human emotions to the equine, so clearly described by Pliny and evident in the fables that formed part of the medieval inheritance of classical writings, also resurfaced in other forms of literature.

One of the most popular forms of literature that circulated during the Middle Ages were texts that are known today as bestiaries. Real and mythical animals appear in these works, including the horse (figure 1:1).

Figure 1.1: Miniature of horses in a thirteenth-century English bestiary. London, British Library, Harley 4751, fol. 27.

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42 Pliny, Book VIII, Chapter XLII, p. 75.
43 Salisbury, p. 114.
44 London: British Library, MS Harley 4751, fol. 27.
In a similar vein to Pliny’s description of equines the bestiaries portrayed horses as being as particularly loyal to their masters, and their strong association with battle was emphasised as it was said that they could even ‘smell war’. The human-horse relationship was closely connected with warfare through the horses’ ability to carry men into battle, firstly in chariots and then mounted. The reliance on horses in war perhaps explains why they were credited with human emotions such as loyalty and eagerness for battle – the same qualities that would have been expected of a warrior or medieval knight.

The writers and artists of the late Middle Ages took the classical idea that the horse could stand in as a human metaphor and applied it to their mounted characters. In much the same way that Bucephalus mirrored his master’s attributes, the boundary between the medieval equine and its rider blurred so that the characteristics of horse and master were mutually representative. The trope that horses had the ability to feel human emotions, transmitted through popular fables and bestiaries, meant that to medieval audiences the portrayal of the horse was intimately connected to the identity of the person who rode it. This was, of course, only one way in which the horse acted as a cultural representative. Equestrian imagery could also send out messages of status and much of this was drawn from its role in war, economic value and what type of horse was portrayed.

The horse’s use in warfare has been well documented. Whether in a chariot or on horseback mankind no longer had to rely solely on his own powers of speed and endurance, and so the horse was both a valuable asset and a symbol of conquest. During the first century BCE the equine’s valuable contribution to battle had been widely recognised and horses became associated with the elite warrior class. Their effective use in early warfare was noted by

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45 MS Harley 4751, fol. 27. ‘odorant belli’.
Julius Caesar who stated that the Celts’ use of horse-drawn chariots made them a formidable fighting force, describing how ‘first they ride through all divisions, and throw their spears together: throwing the ranks into disorder mostly by terror of the horses’. 47 The horse was a vital component of warfare throughout the Middle Ages, reaching its peak in England in the form of heavy cavalry in the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, yet it remained a potent symbol of knighthood in the art and literature of the late medieval period. 48

Many texts and visual images emphasised the figure of the mounted warrior for, as Andrew Ayton points out, ‘the horse was far more than simply a means of conveyance’. 49 The social status conferred by horses was exploited in fourteenth-century tales such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. 50 Gawain’s status is reinforced by his fine charger Gringolet, who is described as ‘gurde with a sadel Þat glemed ful gayly with mony golde frenges […] Þe brydel barred aboute, with bryȝt golde bounden’. 51 The rich adornment of Gringolet’s saddle and bridle shows that horses and their trappings were very much part of the outward display of wealth and status expected from the nobility. The significance of the horse as a cultural representation of status can be also seen in how they were used as gifts and payments.

The economic value of horses can be illustrated in records show the dispensing of horses between high-status individuals. For example, in 1236 gifts of horses were recorded as being given to Henry III and his queen by the Archbishop of York, and in 1300 Edward I presented the bishop of Durham with a finely-bred animal. 52 Horses were also used as payment in lieu

48 Ayton, pp. 23, 27.
50 London: British Library, Cotton Nero MS A x.
52 Gladitz, p. 171.
of tithes. Edward II took horses in part payment of from a stud in Essex and later, under Edward III, the Church reserved the right to receive every tenth foal bred in the studs of Windsor, Princes Risborough and Macclesfield.\textsuperscript{53} As well as being used for gifts and as substitutes for payments, horses could hold value as mortuary donations. In 1347 the earl of Surrey, John de Warenne, bequeathed two of his warhorses to the church of St Pancreas on his death.\textsuperscript{54} The range of transactions involving the aristocracy, nobility and the Church points to the value of horses as high-status gifts in medieval society. Apart from John de Warenne’s description of his equines as warhorses, the other records refer only to the fact that horses in general were given. However, the economic value of a horse was very much dependant on its type, for a warhorse cost considerably more than one that was used for haulage.

During the Middle Ages horses were not referred to by breed, as they are in the modern context. Instead the terminology that differentiated one type of horse from another was based on what it was used for. For example, the horse inventories drawn up to appraise cavalry mounts during the fourteenth-century list several different types of horses such as destrier, courser and rouncey.\textsuperscript{55} The destrier was a term used to describe a high-status warhorse designed to carry a fully equipped knight into battle and were ‘the personification of equine power’, being recognisable for their size and strength.\textsuperscript{56} Charles Gladitz’s investigation into the value of destriers in the Records of the King’s Remembrancer from 1295-1302 shows that they could cost as much as eighty pounds.\textsuperscript{57} Considering that the average labour’s pay c.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Gladitz, p. 171 and Ayton, p. 38.
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Ayton, pp. 62, 68.
  \item \textsuperscript{57} Gladitz, pp. 224-28. Gladitz bases his information on the Court of Exchequer army, navy and ordnance accounts E.101 (available at the National Archives).
\end{itemize}
1300 was two pounds a year the investment required to buy and keep a destrier meant that ownership was limited to a small section of the aristocracy. In the hierarchy of the horse world the warhorse was at the top and ownership of a destrier stood as the symbol of the elite classes.

The courser was the next preferred mount for the military and ranked lower than the destrier as it was more affordable. R.C.H Davis describes it as a lighter, swifter animal that cost between £10 and £50 around the mid fourteenth-century and notes that it was suitable for hunting and tournaments. He adds that it was not particularly used in combat but Ayton points out that coursers appear in high numbers in Edward III’s *restauro equorum* accounts, explaining that with the destrier reserved for the very wealthy, coursers were a common choice for use as warhorses for the lesser nobility. All other horses were used for general army transportation and were therefore lower in the horse hierarchy. The rouncy was associated with the ordinary man-at-arms, but it was a poorer quality animal and worth only up to twenty marks in first quarter of the fourteenth century. Outside of the military field horses were used for travelling, hunting, haulage and agricultural use.

The horse most often described as being ridden by women in the literature and art of the late medieval period are palfreys. They were considered to be finely-bred riding horses that could be ridden by both sexes but were considered especially suitable for ladies of high birth. This is presumably because they were not associated with the military (and therefore the masculine-dominated arena of warfare) but were still costly animals, valued at almost the

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59 Ayton, p. 63.
60 Ibid., p. 68.
same price as a courser. The term sumpter denoted a general pack horse and at the bottom of the economic scale horses known as stots and affers, which were used for harrowing and ploughing, were considered to be the cheapest horses as they were low-quality animals fit only for agricultural use.

A note must be made about the type of horse known as an ambler or ambling horse, as this equine also appears in late medieval art and literature. This term referred to the horse’s gait, or way of moving, and ambling horses moved their legs in lateral pairs as opposed to the diagonal gait of ordinary horses, making them a much smoother ride. In an age where long-distance travel necessitated the use of a horse, having an ambler would have been a decided benefit to those undertaking their journey.

Ambling horses appear alongside palfreys in the rolls of Durham abbey in 1456-7 but they were not new to the medieval period. In the first century Pliny the Elder explained that ambling horses ‘have a peculiar and not common pace of their own, which is very easy, and arises from the two legs of the same side being moved together.’ Accounts from London’s Smithfield market in the late twelfth century also attest to horses who moved with this distinctive gait. On visiting the Smithfield horse fair in 1118 William Fitzstephen wrote, ‘it is a joy to see the pacing horses with a flashing action smoothly ambling, raising and setting down their feet as it were, both on one side alternately’. Ambling horses appear in texts written during the late medieval period, perhaps most famously in Chaucer’s The Canterbury

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62 Davis, p. 67.
64 Hyland, The Horse in the Middle Ages, p. 28.
65 Gladitz, p. 157.
Tales. Their cost depended on what type of horse they were as according to Gervase Markham’s sixteenth-century treatise on horsemanship any horse could be trained to amble. An ambling palfrey would therefore have been a great deal more expensive than an ambling rouncey. For example, in a letter to Sir John Paston in 1477 Edward Bedingfeld mentions paying ten marks for an ambling horse, but in the accounts of Worcester Priory in 1518 the three amblers listed have values ranging from only forty-three shillings to three pounds. Even though the type of horse has not been made clear in these accounts, the priory’s horses were probably of a lower quality than those mentioned in the Paston letters.

Horses were clearly ascribed a hierarchy in much the same way as the people who lived during the Middle Ages. Equines such as the destrier who were associated with war and the elite were ranked highest, but outside of the military environment an elevated social status could still be conferred through riding high-quality horses such as palfreys. Joan Thirsk points out in the foreword to The Horse in the Middle Ages that the constant presence of horses in everyday medieval life meant that to onlookers the social ranking of horses would have been as obvious as the status of people. The literature and illustrations of the late medieval period recognised this fact and correspondingly matched their portrayals of equines to the characters they were describing.

The representation of the horse in the Middle Ages has been explored in two ways. The history of the human-horse relationship in religion and warfare has been shown to have had a

69 Gervase Markham, Cavelarice, or The English Horseman (London: Early English Books Online), [n.d], fourth book.
71 Hyland, The Horse in the Middle Ages, p. xi.
significant impact on equine ideology. It was an animal that was so closely related to human life and death that it became metaphorically ‘human’, able to feel the same emotions and to express man’s finest qualities. On a material level the horse held economic value and the equine hierarchy was a way in which rank, wealth and status could be easily recognised in a social context. Writers and illustrators of the late medieval period combined the metaphorical and material aspects of the horses in their works to create their characters. By shaping the audience’s perception through the lens of the horse, these characters were conferred with a particular status and in many cases, gender.
Horses were linked to status in the medieval period and were closely associated with the male gender. The display of good horsemanship was vital in demonstrating the superiority of the upper classes and aristocracy. For example, Sir Thomas Elyot, writing in 1531, stated that the nobility must be seen to ‘ryde surely and clene on a great horse’ in order that they ‘importeth a maiestie and drede’ to men of lesser status.\(^2\) The horse played a valuable role in the construction of self-image and it was for this reason the artists and writers of the Middle Ages turned to equines to help construct their characters. Horses were useful a way to help shape the way that audiences perceived these characters for they acted as a cultural lens through which men could be viewed. The type of horse, or the way it was ridden was a figurative representation of the human who rode it. Through the equine lens certain attributes could be reflected and inflected and these acted as a form of symbolic communication, sending out messages about status and gender.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* provides a rich resource for examining how horses were used to represent status and gender in the late medieval period. Written at the end of the fourteenth-century, Chaucer’s narrative describes a group of pilgrims who are travelling to Canterbury on horseback. The Ellesmere manuscript edition of *The Canterbury Tales* is accompanied by many illustrations of the travellers and their individual horses and the artist has faithfully produced the equine imagery to correspond with Chaucer’s descriptions.\(^3\) The manuscript was made within a few years of the author’s death and it can be assumed that the equine imagery would have probably been recognisable to Chaucer and the people for whom

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\(^3\) MS EL 26 C 9.
it was made. One of the most recognisable characters in The Canterbury Tales is perhaps the Knight and an illustration of this character on his warhorse appears in the Prologue (figure 2.1).⁷⁴

Figure 2.1: The Knight in the Ellesmere manuscript. San Marino, Huntington Library, MS EL 26 C 9, fol. 10v.

Chaucer’s Knight is a particularly suitable candidate by which to explore the cultural representation of the horse as he epitomises the ideal of status and masculinity in the medieval period.

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⁷⁴ MS EL 26 C 9, fol. 10v.
Chaucer introduces his figure as a ‘worthy man’ who ‘loved chivalyre’, and emphasises the Knight’s warrior status by listing the many campaigns he has fought in foreign countries.\textsuperscript{75} Maurice Keen’s broad definition of a knight is of an aristocratic man who ‘is capable, if called upon, of equipping himself with a warhorse’.\textsuperscript{76} The Ellesmere artist has portrayed Chaucer’s character on just such an animal. The Knight is depicted astride a powerfully-built animal which has strong quarters and an arched neck, and according to Andrew Ayton its build and conformation suggests that the artist was attempting to illustrate a destrier, or warhorse.\textsuperscript{77}

The warhorse was an indispensable part of the cultural image of the knight, a fact that R. H. C. Davis addressed in \textit{The Medieval Warhorse}, so it is no surprise that the Ellesmere artist has chosen to place his figure on a destrier.\textsuperscript{78} The horse provides the viewer with confirmation that the person riding it is of elite status, as destriers were highly expensive and only the wealthy could afford to buy and maintain such animals.\textsuperscript{79} Chaucer presents his knight not as a triumphant figure in armour but as a travel-weary figure recently returned from abroad, his tunic still stained from wearing a mail-coat in battle.\textsuperscript{80} Had the Knight been portrayed on foot there would have been little about his appearance to indicate to a viewer that he had noble status. In the Ellesmere manuscript is the horse that provides the symbolic communication that the rider is of high birth and a member of the warrior class. The artist has also added some small yet significant details to the image of the horse that can be examined to gain further insights into the status of the Knight.

\textsuperscript{75} Chaucer, \textit{The Canterbury Tales}, pp. 4-5.
\textsuperscript{77} Ayton, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{78} Davis, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{79} Ayton, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{80} Chaucer, \textit{The Canterbury Tales}, p. 5. ‘fustian he wered a gipoun, all bismothered with habergeoun’.
The Ellesmere destrier has two brands on its neck and flank. The addition of brand marks suggests that the artist had some knowledge of military horses and it may indicate that person for whom the manuscript was made would have appreciated the real or symbolic meaning that such marks conveyed. Andrew Ayton suggests that the brand mark on the neck is an M, signifying the animal’s use in the military, and suggests that there may be a connection with the Teutonic knights who bred warhorses and branded foals at weaning. Branding was a common method of identifying different studs, and breeding farms in Italy often branded horses on the thigh, followed by a second mark added elsewhere (either on or close to the horse’s head) when the animal came under new ownership. Italian destriers, particularly those bred in Calabria and Apulia, were much in demand during the late medieval period and were considered to be of exceptional quality.

The Ellesmere artist was perhaps commissioned to illustrate a particular knight and warhorse that were known to the manuscript’s patron, or was communicating something about the figure’s status through the horse. Geoffrey de Charny, a French lord who served in many battles during the fourteenth-century and wrote three treatises on chivalry, stated that knightly worth was vastly increased by service ‘in strange and distant lands’. Chaucer described the Knight as having been in the ‘Grete See’, or Mediterranean area, and the horse’s brand indicates that it must have been imported from abroad. With this in mind, the brand marks may have been symbols deliberately chosen by the artist to emphasise the Knight’s foreign service and indicate his elevated status. In effect, the horse was used as a textual image that

81 Ayton, p. 31.
84 Keen, Chivalry, pp. 12-13.
85 Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales, p. 5.
could be read to give clues to its rider’s social and professional standing. In addition to helping reflect position in society, the Ellesmere horse reveals much about how gender ideals were perceived in the late medieval period.

One of the qualities that defined the ideal of masculinity during the later Middle Ages was the ability to wield power over others.\textsuperscript{86} The \textit{Ellesmere} knight is depicted as sitting easily in the saddle and expertly controlling his stallion with only a single hand on the reins. According to historian Peter Edwards, the ability to easily control a high-spirited horse was a ‘social signifier’ that indicated that the rider possessed the virtues required to command others.\textsuperscript{87} The horse was therefore more than simply an animal to be ridden. It was figurative symbol of the ‘other’: those who were subject to the orders from men of higher status. A comparison can be drawn with Alexander the Great and Bucephalus who were mentioned in the previous chapter, where Alexander’s ability to master the horse figuratively represented his ability to lead other men.

The medieval inheritance of using animals as human metaphors, and in particular the classical idea that horses could exhibit human emotions, permeated the imagery of artists such as the Ellesmere illustrator. The Knight’s horse has been anthropomorphised so that it displays attributes which reflect and inflect the rider’s status and gender. The spirited nature of the Ellesmere horse is shown in its expressive face: the tucked-in chin suggests that it is being expertly restrained by its rider’s authority and the ears have not been drawn facing forward but are instead cocked back in a pose that suggests that it is listening for its rider’s command. The horse’s mouth is firmly closed and set in downwards expression, and the eyes are narrowed under slanting lids. The overall impression is that the animal looks brave and

\textsuperscript{86}Karras, p. 10.

ready to fight. These were the very attributes that were expected of a warrior and noble
courage was a quality that was intrinsically linked to ideals of knightly masculinity.\(^{88}\) The
horse’s human-like qualities served to reflect the nature of the Knight, indicating that martial
and chivalric qualities were a significant trope in the Ellesmere artist’s representations of
high-status masculinity.

Using the horse as a lens through which status and attributes could be projected was not a
limited to the visual arts. Late medieval literature clearly illustrated that the horse was a
cultural representative of male status. In *Le Morte d’Arthur*, the knight Sir Damas is revealed
as a traitor and he is subsequently told that he will be given ‘a palfrey to ride upon, for that
will become you better to ride upon than a courser’.\(^{89}\) Sir Damas’s fall in status is linked to
the type of horse that he is given to ride. The courser, which was ranked below the destrier
but still an expensive and well-bred animal used by the lesser nobility as a warhorse, is being
replaced by the palfrey, a riding horse.\(^{90}\) In effect, the knight has been stripped of his elite
warrior status and relegated to the civilian orders. The idea that the equine served as a marker
of status in late medieval literature was not new. The trope had appeared centuries earlier in
*chanson de gestes* such as the *Song of Roland*, a French epic that described the exploits of the
knight Roland, who was serving under Charlemagne in Spain in the eighth century.\(^{91}\) The
version that was written in the twelfth century describes how Ganelon, Roland’s stepfather,
tells King Marsil that he will be degraded if he is captured, and he is informed that he will no
longer be allowed to ride a destrier but will instead be forced to ride a sumpter horse.\(^{92}\) The
sumpter, a horse used as a pack animal, was clearly a large step down in status compared to

\(^{88}\) Karras, p. 37.
\(^{89}\) Sir Thomas Mallory, *Morte D’Arthur: Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of his Noble
Knights of the Round Table, Volume 1*, p. 121.
\(^{90}\) Ayton, p. 63.
\(^{91}\) Oxford, Bodelian Library, MS Digby 23(2).
\(^{92}\) *La Chanson de Roland*, ed. by Raoul Mortier, Bibliotheca Augustana (Paris, 1940), XXXVII, f. 9v.
‘*Vus n’i avez […] ne destre […] getet serez sur un malvais sumer*’.
the warhorse. The type of horse ridden defined military position, and it also helped to communicate status in other areas of life.

Horsemen were often depicted outside of the military context in images that showed them engaging in hunting or hawking, pursuits that were the ‘preserve of the aristocracy’, a situation that Richard II attempted to protect by restricting participation to those who owned land worth over forty shillings a year. One of the Cotton manuscripts made in England in 1321 contains a miniature of King John stag hunting, and this is a useful image to compare to the Ellesmere Knight (figure 2:2). The king is shown cantering on a horse that is lighter in build than the destrier in the Ellesmere manuscript, and is probably a courser, similar to the one that Sir Damas was described as riding in Le Morte d’Arthur. The artist has drawn attention to the king’s good horsemanship by picturing him sitting easily in the saddle and lightly holding the reins in one hand despite the fast pace. The king’s legs are thrust firmly forwards and the feet are placed well home in the stirrups.

This posture was replicated in the later illustration of Chaucer’s Knight, and has a military significance dating from the twelfth century. The rider had to position himself with an exaggeratedly forward leg to brace himself against the high cantle of the saddle. This helped to absorb the shock of the enemy’s lance and prevent the rider from being thrown backwards over the rump of his horse. The brace position can be seen in many illustrations of men on horseback in the Middle Ages. Women tended to be portrayed riding astride with a straight posture.

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93 Davis, p. 67.
94 Almond, p. 33. The 1390 Statute of the Realm also restricted the participation in hunting of members of the Church unless they held an office valued at ten pounds annually.
95 London, British Library, Cotton MS Claudius D II, fol. 116r.
leg unless the artist was making a satirical point (for example, the Wife of Bath in the Ellesmere manuscript).

The exaggerated forward leg functioned as a symbol of masculinity by taking its image from the trope of the knight. The king has no need to adopt the brace position in the non-military field of hunting, but it suggests that the ideology that surrounded the male elite in the medieval period had its roots in warfare. Although the image of the Ellesmere Knight was
produced a century after the illumination of King John, these ideologies were still surfacing in artists’ representations of noble masculinity. A further example of how horses shaped image can be found in the Luttrell Psalter, a manuscript that was commissioned in the early fourteenth century by Sir George Luttrell. 97

The Luttrell Psalter contains an illustration of Sir George mounted on a particularly well-built horse and shows him about to compete in a tournament. 98 The horse is richly caparisoned and has an exaggeratedly thick and arched neck, similar to Chaucer’s destrier and the king’s courser, indicating that it is a high-status animal. The rider also has his legs placed well forward, and this would be an advantage during the tourney. Sir George may have chosen to have himself pictured as about to compete as masculinity and ‘worthiness for knighthood’ involved demonstrating one’s physical skills and expertise, and the tournament was one way of publicly demonstrating these attributes.99 The horse is exceptionally tall, dwarfing its rider and the two ladies that are stood nearby. The artist has perhaps deliberately made it oversized to emphasize Sir George’s status as the lord of the manor. His elevated position in the social hierarchy is reflected by the lofty height accorded to him by the horse’s stature: Sir George has been literally and metaphorically portrayed as head and shoulders above everybody else. The horse was an integral part of how high male status and masculinity was portrayed in images but they also presented an opportunity to inflect low position, or even femininity onto men. In order to explore this further we must return to the Ellesmere manuscript.

The Clerk of Oxford in Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales is depicted as riding a horse that is of a much lower quality than the knight’s destrier.100 Chaucer describes the Clerk as

98 MS 42130, fol. 202v.
99 Karras, p. 37.
100 EL 26 C 9, fol 88v.
‘thredbare’ and having ‘no benefice’. \(^{101}\) In the social hierarchy of the university the Clerk is therefore of the lowest rank, one of the *pauperes*, a student who has little or no income.\(^{102}\) His poor status is reflected in the fact he can only afford to ride a low-quality animal that is described as being ‘as lenne […] as a rake’.\(^{103}\) The Ellesmere artist has kept true to Chaucer’s description of the clerk by illustrating the character sitting astride a malnourished and poorly-bred animal, shown by its goose rump and sparse mane and tail (figure 2:3).\(^{104}\)

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101 Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 13.
102 Hilde de Ridder-Symoens, ‘Rich Men, Poor Men: Social Stratification and Social Representation at the University (13\(^{th}\) – 16\(^{th}\) Centuries)’ in *Showing Status: Representation of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages*, (Belgium: Turnhout, 1999), pp. 159 – 176 (p. 161).
104 Juliet Hedge and Don Wagoner, eds., *Horse Conformation: Structure, Soundness and Performance* (Guildford, CON: Lyons Press, 1999), p. 199. A goose rump is a conformational defect that indicates weakness and is characterised by a sharply angled croup.
The half-starved horse represents the Clerk’s lowly social status and this is further emphasised by his lack of horsemanship for he is described as riding ‘as coy and stille as dooth a maide’.\textsuperscript{105} The artist has drawn the clerk in a somewhat precariously perched position on the horse, and his legs hang straight down rather than in the forward thrust position that was employed by the knight, King John and Sir George Luttrell. Low social status has been placed hand in hand with poor horsemanship, and the artist has chosen to illustrate a maidenly riding style by placing the Clerk’s legs vertically. The horse was a vehicle for the transmission of symbolic communication in quite a literal sense. A comparison between the riding position of the Clerk and the Knight shows that for the Ellesmere artist, femininity was equated with lesser horsemanship and a weaker leg position. For men, equestrian prowess and a martial style of riding was symbolic of the male elite. The way the horse was used to shape the ideal of masculinity can be explored further by considering the gender of the horses that they rode.

Virility and sexual potency were among the masculine qualities expected of men in the Middle Ages, largely because they were expected to produce heirs.\textsuperscript{106} As the horse helped to create self-image these qualities could be applied to it as well, and many of the illustrations of elite men on horseback show them riding stallions (also known as entire horses). Animals were believed to be more lustful than humans and horses were thought by some to be born with an extra piece of flesh, believed to be an aphrodisiac.\textsuperscript{107} Horses and sexuality therefore had a connection and the stallion was perhaps the most potent symbol of virility. Of the twenty-three images of horses in the Ellesmere manuscript only three can be clearly

\textsuperscript{105} Chaucer, \textit{The Canterbury Tales}, p. 293.
\textsuperscript{107} Salisbury, p. 80.
identified as stallions. The knight and squire who are both high status individuals are depicted on entire horses, and also the Wife of Bath (although this is probably the artist’s allusion to the character’s sexual habits and is discussed further in the following chapter).

The horse in the image of King John is also a stallion, and this has been illustrated in the positioning of the horse’s hind leg so that the viewer can see that it has testicles. Destriers were normally stallions as gelding horses (removing the testicles) was believed to rob them of the masculine attribute of courage. The connection between the removal of sexual organs and fearfulness was mentioned in the thirteenth-century by Albertus Magnus, who wrote that ‘warhorses are not castrated as castration makes them timid’. The courage of a stallion was put to good use in battle as the warhorse could be used as a fighting machine alongside its rider. Albertus Magnus goes on to describe how destriers were used to ‘break battle lines by biting and trampling and striking out with their heels’, showing that their natural aggression was a decided benefit during combat.

An ‘certain aggressive attitude’ was one trait that expected to form a part of a knight’s masculinity, as after all he was expected to engage in combat. Images that showed the elite riding stallions can be considered to be making a point about their aptitude as warriors and connecting this with male potency. Links can also be drawn between stallions and hierarchy. Frederico Grisone’s provided a commentary on equine testicles in his 1550 treatise on horsemanship, stating that the ‘more expensive horses have larger ones [testicles]’. The allusion here is that high status horses were more sexually potent, and artists who chose to

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illustrate their elite characters riding entire destriers were sending out strong symbols of power, status and masculinity.

The horse played a significant role in representing male status and gender in the late Middle Ages. Visual images of men on horseback in the late medieval period present an idealised view of male status and gender, and reflect the view of the artist who created them. However, they can be considered to give an indication of some of the masculine ideologies that were circulating during that time. Horses and men had a special relationship that had its roots in warfare, and medieval imagery used the equine to reinforce the image of the ideal high-status male. The type of horse that was ridden reflected martial and social positions, and by applying human characteristics to the animal certain qualities and attributes were conferred on to the rider. The way that the horse was ridden also sent out symbolic messages. Good horsemanship was linked to status and masculinity, and the position of the rider in the saddle was a marker of male gender. This could be reinforced by emphasising the gender of the horse itself. As a figurative representation of its master, the image of the powerful and virile stallion was instrumental in creating images that represented the cultural ideal of the medieval male elite.
Chapter Three

Women: Status and Femininity

The cultural representation of female status and gender in the late Middle Ages can be explored by looking at how women were portrayed on horseback. The images that accompany medieval texts were produced by male artists and therefore form an idealised picture of women in the Middle Ages, but they provide some useful information. Examining how the equine was used as a lens through which the ideal woman was projected provides an insight into the general ideas and values that were circulating about women during that time.

Women were often depicted riding different types of horses to men. The most common type of horse that women are portrayed as riding in late medieval literary and visual imagery were palfries, finely-bred horses that were expensive to buy and were therefore associated with the upper classes.\textsuperscript{112} The concept that certain types of horses could be associated with women is evidenced in fourteenth-century literature. In Geraint, one of the prose texts that make up the Mabinogion, Gwenhwyfar asks for ‘horses suitable for ladies to ride’.\textsuperscript{113} Ambling horses also had a connection with women riders. The relationship between gaited horses and women is revealed in Gervase Markham’s treatise on horsemanship in which describes ambling as a ‘smoothe & easie pace’ suitable for ‘diseased persons [and] to make women undertake journeying, and so by their comunity to grace societie’.\textsuperscript{114} If a palfrey was also trained to amble then the ladies of the nobility had at their recourse a well-bred and comfortable

\textsuperscript{112} Davis, p. 67.


\textsuperscript{114} Markham, p. 2.
conveyance by which to travel, and it is this type of equine that is seen in many images produced in the later medieval period.

Manuscripts that depict images of women on horseback invariably show those of aristocratic or noble birth engaging in riding for pleasure or hunting. Ladies of high birth were expected to attend hunting and hawking parties if occasion demanded it, as sporting activities provided a field in which to see and be seen, as well as being useful for making social connections.\textsuperscript{115} The Queen Mary’s Psalter, a book of psalms that was created 1310-20, possibly for Edward II’s wife Isabella of France, provides a useful source of illustrations of women on horseback.\textsuperscript{116} The manuscript contains many bas-de-page scenes of women engaged in hawking, a pastime that was considered suitable for high-born ladies as it allowed them to demonstrate their horsemanship without the danger of faster-paced hunting.\textsuperscript{117} In one drawing two ladies out enjoying a day’s hawking are mounted on horses that correspond to the definition of ambling palfreys (figure 3.1).\textsuperscript{118}

In this image the women’s veils are flowing in the breeze as their horses move rapidly forwards and the horses’ legs have been drawn to show that they move in lateral pairs, a trait that signified the ambler. The horses that the women are riding are of good quality, as befits the noble status of their riders. There is little hair on their fetlocks and the horses’ heads are fine and taper to the muzzle, showing that they are not coarsely-bred, and this suggests that they are palfreys. The horses’ movements are elegant, their necks proudly arched and their manes are thick and curly, suggestive of good breeding, youth and vitality.

\textsuperscript{115} Almond, pp. 15, 27.
\textsuperscript{116} MS Royal B 2 VII.
\textsuperscript{117} Almond, p. 159.
\textsuperscript{118} MS Royal B 2 VII, fol. 151.
Figure 3.1: Hunters hawking in the Queen Mary Psalter. London, British Library, MS Royal B 2 VII, fol. 151.

The equine imagery in the Queen Mary’s Psalter reinforces the attributes of the female riders: viewed through the lens of their horses, the ladies grace, youth and impeccable breeding is emphasised to the viewer. The way that the artist has shown the riders handling their mounts reflects that they are skilled in horsemanship. The horses appear spirited but are easily controlled by a single hand elegantly holding the reins, and parallels can be drawn here with the way men were shown to ride in the previous chapter. The whole image represents the artist’s vision of what refined and well-educated young aristocratic women should look like, and gives an indication of the idealism that surrounded women at the time.

A comparison can be drawn with a further illustration in the Queen Mary’s Psalter that shows a high-status male figure riding out with his hawks.\textsuperscript{119} The rider’s posture is very different to

\textsuperscript{119} MS Royal B 2 VII, fol. 75\textsuperscript{v}.
that of the ladies’. Whereas the female riders have their legs in an almost vertical position, the male horseman has his thrust firmly forwards, very much like the imagery of Chaucer’s Knight and the illumination of King John that were explored earlier in this project. The figure hawking in the Psalter is mounted on a horse that is clearly moving its legs in diagonal pairs. This indicates that it is trotting rather than ambling, perhaps indicating that the rider has less need than the ladies to ride a horse with smooth pace. The horse also steps higher than the ladies’ mounts and its neck is more exaggeratedly arched it so is perhaps meant to be a stallion. The artist has used the horse to give the male rider a distinctly more a more masculine image in comparison to the illustration of the women enjoying their hawking expedition, demonstrating that equines were a useful tool for illustrating the differences in gender.

Further examples of women riding ambling palfreys can be found in the Taymouth Hours, an illuminated book of prayers made between 1325 - 1335.\textsuperscript{120} The book is believed to have been made for an aristocratic woman, and suggestions include Isabelle of France and Philippa of Hainault, queen to Edward III.\textsuperscript{121} In a similar tradition to the Queen Mary’s Psalter it contains many coloured illustrations of women hunting on horseback. One illumination shows two mounted ladies leaving a castle for a hunting expedition, and they are riding horses that are well-bred and are clearly amblers.\textsuperscript{122} The horses are very similar to the ones depicted in the Queen Mary’s Psalter. The lead horse has an arched neck and thick mane and tail, it is finely built and therefore shows no common bloodlines. The female rider again easily controls her horse with a single hand on the reins, showing that she is an expert horsewoman. Once again, the equine acts as a lens by which the rider can be evaluated. The good breeding and elegance

\begin{footnotes}
\item[120] MS Yates Thomson 13.
\item[121] Ibid.
\item[122] MS Yates Thomson 13, fol. 75v.
\end{footnotes}
of the horse, it youthfulness and the accompanying notions of fecundity, shapes and reinforces the ideal portrayal of the aristocratic lady that rides on its back.

Good horsemanship was a way that medieval artists conferred the image of high status upon the men and women that featured in their illustrations. Gender could be expressed by the type of horse that was ridden, but perhaps one of the most significant ways in which feminine ideology could be expressed was in how artists chose to seat women on horseback. So far, all the women that have been discussed have been shown as riding astride - in other words, they ride with a leg either side of the horse. In other manuscript illustrations the artist has chosen to show ladies riding on side saddles, so they sit sideways or aside their mounts. The Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, a French book of hours commissioned by the Duc de Barry in 1413, shows several illuminations of ladies on horseback. The women are richly dressed and are of the upper class, and are depicted as riding out for pleasure and hunting. Every woman on horseback in this text is pictured riding her horse aside. The illumination that accompanies August in the calendar shows a hawking scene featuring three horses (figure 3:2).

Two of the horses are ridden by men and each one has a lady riding pillion (directly behind them on their saddles). The men are shown riding astride but the ladies have been seated sideways. The female figure that rides alone on her horse has also been placed side saddle on her mount. The scene is clearly an idealised version of a hunting party and intended to appeal to the commissioner of the book, the Duc de Barry. Designed for and from the male point of view, the positioning of the ladies reflects the ideology that high-class women were more feminised when seated sideways on horseback.

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123 Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry 65.
124 Ibid., August.
A reference to side saddle riding appears as early as 1131 by the Benedictine monk Oderic Vitalis, who wrote of a group of women ‘riding in women’s fashion on side-saddles’. To some male authors women who rode astride were less feminine than those who rode side saddle. In the early twelfth-century the Byzantine writer Niketas Choniates wrote of seeing women riding ‘in the manner of men, not on coverlets side saddle’, adding the criticism that they ‘conveyed a wholly martial appearance, more mannish than the Amazons’. The subject of gender and riding style was not limited to the East. Giraldus Cambrensis, a Welsh

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scholar who wrote of his travels to Ireland in 1187, wrote ‘the women as well as the men ride astride, with their legs stuck out on each side of the horse’.\textsuperscript{127} The fact that he felt obliged to mention this suggests that the custom of women riding in this manner was, to him at least, somewhat unusual.

Quite how or exactly when the fashion for women riding aside started is obscure, though there are distinct parallels to be drawn between Epona, the Celtic goddess of horses and fertility who is traditionally shown as sitting sideways on her horse.\textsuperscript{128} It may well be that side saddle riding had its roots in the cult of Epona, and that the sideways style was influenced by this ancient symbolism. Another reason for ladies to riding side saddle in the Middle Ages may lie in the medical beliefs of the time. Horseback riding was considered beneficial for women in certain cases: some medical texts that based their advice on Galenic theory advised it as useful to bring on menstruation and to correct suffocation or movement of the womb.\textsuperscript{129} There was, however, a recognition (if largely confined to men) that bladder problems could be brought about by engaging in ‘prolonged, vigorous or incorrect horseback riding’.\textsuperscript{130} The reason why women are often linked to ambling horses may have some connection to this type of medical belief. One of the medical texts concerning women’s health care that was widely circulated in the later Middle Ages was \textit{The Trotula}, and this


\textsuperscript{130} Luke Demaitre, \textit{Medieval Medicine: The Art of Healing from Head to Toe} (Santa Barbra: ABC-CLIO, 2013), p. 288. Thought today to have been more likely to have been prostrate problems.
explained that women were ‘by nature weaker than men’. The view that women were believed to be physically more delicate may explain why riding aside, which naturally relegated women to the position of sedate passenger, was thought to be more suitable for women. Finally, the question of modesty and protection of virginity cannot be ignored, and this has been put forward as another reason as to why side saddle riding and the female gender are inexorably linked. Riding on early side saddles enabled a lady to not only keep her long gowns but also (literally and metaphorically) her legs together. The connection with female propriety and riding aside was enduring: as late as the early twentieth-century women who rode aside were described as being ‘indelicate’.

The artist who created the illustrations in Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry was using the horse and the way it was ridden to present the ideal version of femininity. The artists who portrayed the women as riding astride in the Queen Mary’s Psalter and Taymouth Hours may have been catering to their female audience (who probably hawked and hunted themselves) or were satirising women who rode astride when engaging in such activities. However, the illustrations may indicate that women did sometimes ride their horses astride when hunting. According to Richard Almond, this may not necessarily have been considered highly unusual as it would have been a great deal more practical than sitting in a chair-like side saddle. Ladies who sat aside were in a much more unstable position than if they rode with a leg either side of a horse, and would have found it more difficult to control their mounts, something that was vital for following a hunt over varying terrain. The Morte d’Arthur describes several

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134 Almond, pp. 144-5.
135 Ibid., p. 151.
ladies ‘riding full fast, as the horse might ride’, and they must surely have been riding astride for it would have been impossible seated sideways. A further investigation into how the style of riding reflected gender ideology during the later Middle Ages shows that the horse played a significant role in representing femininity and masculinity – and that sometimes it could be used to cross both boundaries.

Perhaps one of the most iconic figures of a woman riding astride in the medieval period appears in the form of the Wife of Bath in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. The Ellesmere manuscript, which was introduced in the previous chapter, contains an illustration of the character in the Prologue (figure 3:3).

![Figure 3.3: The Wife of Bath in the Ellesmere manuscript. San Marino, Huntington Library, MS EL 26 C 9, fol. 72r.](image)


137 MS EL 26 C 9, fol. 72r.
Chaucer introduces the Wife of Bath as ‘upon an amblere esily she sat’ and the artist has faithfully followed the narrative by portraying the figure on ambling horse which on close examination also appears to be a stallion.\(^{138}\) Although medieval women may very well have ridden stallions on occasion, especially if they were tractable animals, the artist may well have added this detail to confer a certain amount of masculinity onto the character. This is further emphasised by the Wife of Bath’s riding outfit and the style in which she is shown to ride. Whereas the ladies in the Queen Mary’s Psalter and Taymouth Hours ride in gowns and are depicted as graceful riders, the Wife of Bath is wearing what appears to be riding trousers. She also flourishes a whip in one hand ‘and on hir feet [wears] a peire of spores sharpe’.\(^{139}\) Her legs are also thrust well forward in the brace position, emulating the masculine posture that was seen in the illustrations of the male riders in the previous chapter.

Beryl Rowland points out that the image of women on horseback was often used by medieval writers as an analogy of female role reversal, and this corresponds to Chaucer’s description of Wife of Bath as being a sexually active figure who is in command of her life – characteristics that were considered as being masculine during the period.\(^{140}\) The Wife of Bath, who has had a number of marriages and is clearly a headstrong woman, has been depicted as man-like through the artist’s clever use of equine imagery.

The Wife of Bath’s riding style can be compared to the other two women pilgrims who are illustrated in the Ellesmere manuscript, the prioress and the second nun, both of whom are seated sideways on their horses.\(^{141}\) Although the nun receives no description in Chaucer’s text


\(^{141}\) MS EL 26 C 9, fols 148\(^{v}\), 187\(^{r}\).
the prioress is described as ‘simple and coy’, meaning innocent and demure.\textsuperscript{142} The Ellesmere artist has made use of the horse to create a clear distinction between Chaucer’s female characters. The religious women are pious maidens and this is reflected by their sideways positions on horseback. The Wife of Bath, who has been married several times and exhibits masculine traits, rides astride. Although the artist has followed Chaucer’s work of fiction in creating images of the pilgrims, the equine imagery suggests that there were certain conceptions surrounding gender stereotypes during the late medieval period.

Using the horse to confer masculine attributes onto women was also employed in The Lives of Famous Women, a French manuscript produced around 1504.\textsuperscript{143} It features a miniature of Joan of Arc, showing her wearing full plate armour and sat astride a large horse. Its crested neck and powerful build suggest that this was meant to be a destrier.

The rider’s posture echoes that of the Wife of Bath as her feet are pushed well forward and she wears long spurs. The image of Joan of Arc astride a warhorse draws on the archetype of the heroic knight, and it is the horse that provides the crucial element in creating the imagery. Its impressive size and stature conveys the knightly status that was discussed in the previous chapter, but here the anomaly is that the horse is ridden by a woman. The blurring of female and male gender roles has been achieved through the symbolic figure of the warhorse, and the viewer is presented with a masculinised version of Joan of Arc. The image confers the male attributes of leadership onto the artist’s illustration of a fifteenth-century woman, raising her status to that of a man. Joan of Arc could not change her gender, but through the lens of a horse the artist enabled her image to cross the boundaries of femininity and masculinity.

\textsuperscript{142} Chaucer, \textit{The Canterbury Tales}, p. 7.

\textsuperscript{143} Nantes, Musée Thomas Dobrée, La Vie Des Femmes Célèbres. For a digitised image see https://www.gettyimages.co.uk.
The horse played an important part in the construction of female status and gender in the images that appear in the late Middle Ages. The types of horses that were portrayed reflected the non-martial nature of women and the ambling gait was often illustrated, perhaps to indicate women’s weaker physicality. Good horsemanship was as important a sign of high status as much as it was for men, but the differences in riding style were significant. Women were not portrayed as riding with the braced leg position so commonly seen in male riders, instead their legs hung vertically. The epitome of ladylike propriety was to ride side saddle, but whether or not that was reflected in reality still remains to be researched. Horses could be used to blur the lines between genders by conferring masculine attributes on to women, and they could be equally as effective in determining where those lines began and ended.
Conclusion

In the late medieval period the horse was used in literary and visual images as a cultural lens through which status and gender could be interpreted. The equine had a special relationship with humans that stretched back into antiquity. Its domestication opened horizons, for the speed and endurance of the horse enabled people to travel further and faster. It’s importance in culture and society can be evidenced in the presence of horses in religion and mythology. Their connection to mankind was based on the afterlife and the supernatural, and horse cults closely associated the horse with human life and fertility. The bond between horses and humans was perhaps cemented through their use in warfare, where the thin line between life and death was most apparent. Warriors relied on the horse to take them into battle in chariots or on their backs, and to carry them to safety when the need arose. The equine was a vital component in warfare, helping in the conquest of nations and the forming of new civilisations.

The classical use of animals as exemplars for human behaviour was applied to the horse and drew heavily from man’s dependency on the equine in battle. The horse’s qualities of loyalty and courage reflected those of the ideal warrior and the human-horse relationship was exemplified in the belief that they possessed the ability to feel human emotions. These tropes filtered down to the medieval period in the form of fables and bestiaries, creating a cultural blueprint that shaped how the horse was represented literature and art. Writers and artists exploited the horse-human relationship and the use of animals as metaphors to create images that symbolically communicated ideas of status and gender. The equine became a figurative representative of its rider because in a metaphorical sense it was human. If the horse was depicted as spirited and courageous, then these attributes were reflected on to the person sat on its back. The horse became, in effect, a physical extension of the person who rode it. The transfer of values worked both ways. If the rider was portrayed as being in control of the
horse, then it demonstrated that he had the ability to master others. The horse-as-human could therefore also be representative of the ‘other’. Artists used these concepts to shape audience’s perceptions of the characters that they created.

The texts and visual images of the late medieval period often depict the nobility riding on horseback as war, hunting and travelling were largely dependent on horsepower. The image of a man or women in the saddle created a visual spectacle as horses were expensive animals and owning or riding the conferred a certain level of status. Equines shared a hierarchy that was comparable to that of society: horses such as destriers were very costly and ranked highest, whereas a plough animal such as a stot was at the bottom of the economic scale. Being seen on a high-status horse sent out the message that the person who rode it was of an equally elevated position. Writers and artists understood the connection between status and horses, so their characters (which were almost always from the elite classes) were pictured on good quality animals. The connection would also have been clear to the person who was reading these images, and their perceptions were further shaped by the way in which someone was seen to ride.

Good horsemanship was one of the hallmarks of the upper classes and this was made clear in the images of the period. Elite men and women were depicted as expert riders. They were pictured as sitting easily on their mounts and demonstrating their control of the animal by riding with a single hand on the reins. The display of excellent horsemanship coupled with a good-quality animal reinforced the social positions of the people pictured, and this created an image that could be interpreted by all walks of society. However, there were some interesting differences in the way men and women were represented on horseback.

Knightly status and chivalric attributes could be conferred onto the male rider by the artist’s decision to portray their characters on horses that fitted the knightly image. For this reason
men tended to be shown riding horses that were connected to warfare, such as destriers and coursers, and these were often illustrated as stallions. Entire horses were symbolic of virility and potency, and these masculine qualities were reflected on to those who rode them. Men are commonly portrayed as riding in the brace position with their legs pushed firmly forwards. This was a style that had military connections and reinforced the image of knightly status and maleness.

Women tended to be associated with riding non-military horses such as ambling palfreys. These were illustrated as being finely-bred and elegant, and these attributes helped to create the impression that the riders shared the same qualities. When women are depicted riding astride they had a much straighter leg position than their male counterparts as they had no need to secure their seat against the shock of a lance. This had feminine connotations as men were portrayed as riding in the brace position even when engaging in pursuits outside of warfare, such as hunting. Some artists expressed their perceptions of the ideal noble lady by portraying them riding side saddle. This possibly had its roots in the deity of Epona whose image may have formed deep-seated connections between femininity and the side saddle position. However, it could simply have been that keeping a woman’s legs together was considered a more modest and lady-like way to ride. Artists could make a satirical or political point by manipulating their equestrian imagery. Male attributes could be applied to women by seating them in the brace position and placing them on stallions or destriers, and femininity could be conferred on men through weak riding and a non-military riding style.

The horse played a significant cultural role in representing status and gender in the late Middle Ages. The material value and metaphoric symbolism inherent in the image of the equine surfaced in the literature and art of the period, providing a unique insight into some of the attitudes and ideologies that were circulating during that time. Horses were much more
than just a functional animal in the Middle Ages, they were a vehicle for communication and provide a rich source for the study of medieval status and gender.
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