

# Shakespeare and Horsemanship as an Art by Anthony Dent



**Editor's Note** – Anthony Dent was a renowned 20<sup>th</sup> century English equestrian author. In addition to writing “Chaucer and the Horse”, in 1987 Dent completed “Horses in Shakespeare’s England”. That singular book documented an astonishing array of facts about the famous playwright and equines. For example, Dent revealed that the proportion of men who could not ride was equivalent to the number of men today who cannot ride a bicycle. Dent also points out that though England would become a great seafaring nation, in Shakespeare’s day equestrian metaphors were more prevalent than nautical ones. Though horses were a common sight, England at this time was not predominantly horse-borne but ox-drawn. In Shakespeare’s day there was no reliable mail delivery and goods were transported by teams of pack horses. English roads were so notoriously bad that there were no public coaches during the reign of Queen Elizabeth 1. The wagon would have been an unfamiliar sight to Shakespeare because it was not introduced to Warwickshire until a century after the Bard’s death. These details explain why Shakespeare wrote about stallions, which were the favoured mount of the nobility, but did not deem a coach to be a fit conveyance for a hero. Another important fact was that mounted stag hunting, not racing, was the preferred national sport. Though Shakespeare included numerous references to horses, like the majority of his countrymen he was not interested in breeds or a prestigious pedigree. The riding style known by Shakespeare and his audience was called “snaffle-riding.” There was no display about it, the object being to conserve the horse’s energy rather than expend it in pretentious display. This fact serves as the preamble to the following chapter in Dent’s book, wherein the author explained why the riding method known today as dressage does not appear in any of Shakespeare’s plays.

**“As art united with experience long  
Taught him those lofty steeds in awe to hold. “**

Thus wrote Nicholas Morgan in his obituary on Sir Robert Alexander, Knight, of Walton-on-Thames, who in 1588-9 was Gentleman Rider to the Earl of Northumberland and later Equerry of the Stable to the Queen herself, until his death in 1609.

'Not only he in England was esteemed,' says Morgan, 'but eke in foreigne countries for his art', thereby implying that Sir Robert was an English horseman of international repute - as it might be today a dressage exponent of Olympic standard. Alas for Morgan's patriotic implications.

Not only is the name of Robert Alexander nowhere to be found in Continental writings on the High School, then or later, but neither is it the real name of this hero, who was born Roberto Zinzano. He was just another Neapolitan riding-master, though he had three English-born sons.

Morgan wrote his book after retiring from legal practice, near Seven Oaks in Kent, and must have been born about 1550. His is the first generation of English writers to think, as a matter of course, of horsemanship as an art. It is noticeable, among treatises on horsemanship, that the tone of the Introductions, Dedications, Prefaces, Forewords, Commendations, and all other preliminaries becomes more rarified, and their extent greater, until they culminate in those prefixing the Duke of Newcastle's classic treatise *A General System of Horsemanship* (1658), in reading which one wonders if he is ever going to cut the cackle and come to the horses.

*William Cavendish, the Duke of Newcastle, is seen being worshipped by the horses subjected to his severe training methods.*



Yet the more desperate and the more long-winded their efforts to define the means whereto horsemanship is an end, the more they convince the reader that the justification is not needed, and that the writers know this in their hearts. Once horsemanship has attained the status of an art, it automatically becomes an end in itself.

No one enquires into the purposes of a statue by Donatello, because they are so obviously two-fold: first, to exist in all its perfection, and second, to keep the artist alive.

In this field there existed, in the day of Shakespeare, the professional side by side with the amateur. The latter was engaged in raising what had been one of the accomplishments of a gentleman, which enabled him to discharge effectively the functions appropriate to his station, to the status of those skills practised by the Renaissance aesthetic superman - another *virtu*. Newcastle was to be the prime English example.

But a professional like Zinzano could do moderately well for himself. With the Percies he earned £10 a year in cash, a very superior bed and board at Petworth, and a handsome clothing allowance. In the royal establishment at Windsor his regular emoluments in cash and kind were not much better, but then there was the knighthood, and the fringe benefits would be a shade higher.

His eldest son and successor in office, Sir Robert junior, was in the habit of selling Great Horses ready-made for £100 each; and of course they had been 'made' in the King's time.

For a great many ordinary purposes (ordinary, that is, in the life of a landowner) the old 'country' style of equitation - 'snaffle-riding' - would serve very well: for travel, for hunting, for hawking. The essentially military style, practised on the Great Horse, did not need to be brought to that pitch of perfection demanded by the academic riding-master for the rider to be the terror of the Queen's enemies.

Notoriously, Napoleon's seat on a horse would have brought tears to the eyes of every *écuyer-professeur* in Europe, but he seems to have got along all right. Yet the apologist for the art of riding in Shakespeare's day always made great play with the military obligations of the equestrian class.

If the object had really been the making of more effective soldiers, then surely horsemanship at that level would have been taught in closer partnership with skill-at-arms; whereas the only weapon used in those equestrian exercises into which the tourney finally degenerated - running at the ring, and the like - was the lance. And the lance had ceased to be a decisive factor in mounted warfare.

If the gambades and the bounds, which cost so much painstaking time to teach the horse, were justified in terms of their utility in close combat, why were they not practised in concert with swordsmanship? Why were there no competitions in loading a pistol while one's horse did the levade, or firing it while he executed a capriole?

The answer is that the military side of it was really an elaborate pretence.

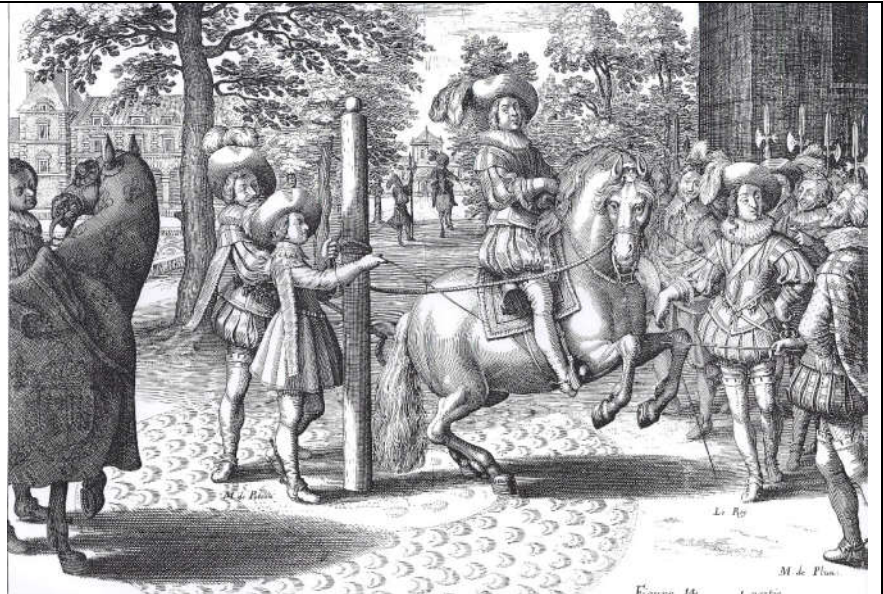
What had grown out of the military side of feudal service now derived from one alone of the three obligations by which a knight in England had held his fee. Field service for forty-two days in the year was gone for ever. So was castle-guard; but the third service, *equitatio* or *chevauchée*, the obligatory mounted escorting of the overlord from one end of the vassal's estates to the other, still had its counterpart so long as the court

progressed from one provincial palace to another at seasonal intervals. And the court did not become utterly static until well on in James I's reign.

In order that all manner of subjects might be duly impressed with the monarch's majesty, the noblemen and gentlemen of the royal train must make a brave show on horseback.

To this extent the aristocrat who wished to play a part in court life must be able and willing to play his part in putting on a show.

*Italian riding master Anthony Pluvinel is seen instructing a royal pupil. Note that the horse on the left is wearing blinders.*



And for the better performance of this professional style of horsemanship as well as for the kind of mounted ballet or carousel into which the last relics of the tourney finally merged, the services of foreign (in practice almost exclusively Italian and French) riding-masters were retained. Not only did they train adult pupils in equitation, they also 'made' suitable horses for this special function.

The aspiration to excel in this exercise was such an enormous commitment that, in the context of post-Renaissance court life, it would seem trifling to allow that what one was spending, or had spent, so much time, trouble and treasure in learning was anything less than an art.

After all, a certain kind of swordplay was called 'the art of fence'. It had little to do with ordinary fighting as practised on the battlefield: it was taught almost exclusively by foreigners; it could only be practised under artificial and circumscribed conditions; and an ordinarily competent *maître d'armes* could probably teach his pupil to wield the rapier up to an acceptable standard in a quarter the time which his colleague would need to school the same pupil *and his horse* to the corresponding standard.

Morgan asks: “How then shall it be possible, for a gentleman to attain perfection, in so honourable and difficult an art as Horsemanship, without many years' study and practice, when as all Kings, Princes, and Nobilitie become schollers for many yeares, only to attain to ride well (being but a particular part of horsemanship)?”

Of course it was not possible, and perhaps this rather transcendental quality was what attracted the real aficionados. However well one performed it was theoretically possible to do even better.

Equitation had then, and has still, a hard core of devotees whose goal is none other than Morgan's 'perfection' which they know to be unattainable, and that is what made it an art, and not a craft.

Which also means, automatically, that even the most near-perfect performance could not be of any conceivable *use*, for an ulterior purpose.

But horsemanship does not appear to have reached this philosophical dead-end until after the lifetime of Shakespeare.