

The Origins of the
Shakespeare
Equestrian Collection
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In 2017 the Long Riders' Guild Academic Foundation received an unusual research request. Two scholars investigating William Shakespeare's marriage had detected evidence indicating that the most celebrated English playwright in history was a Long Rider.

While attempting to confirm or deny that possibility, the LRGAF began a search for clues that might reveal how horses had influenced the best-selling author of all time.

What emerged was a treasure trove of equestrian evidence.

William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's supreme dramatist. He wrote 39 plays and 154 sonnets. He is often called England's national poet. Yet because of their universal appeal, Shakespeare's works have been translated into 80 languages including Klingon.

Though the author enjoys world wide acclaim, in an age addicted to technology the fundamental link between Shakespeare and horses is increasingly overlooked or misunderstood.

Horses in Shakespeare's England

This is a surprise when you remember that horses were a pervasive part of sixteenth century England. Everyday lives were influenced by horse riding, breeding, feeding, travelling and equipment. The omnipresence of horses was so strong that horses or equestrian references appear in all of Shakespeare's plays. Dramatic equine images have been identified for twenty-nine of these works.

Shakespeare's equine knowledge was both vast and subtle. He knew horses from a practical point, as demonstrated in his poem, Venus and Adonis, when he describes the perfect horse.

*Likewise in his comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare compiled a long list of the worst equine defects and mounted his hero Petruchio on such an unworthy nag.*



The author often referred to the courage of the horse on the battle field but he was wise enough to remind the audience that the bravest horse could be frightened at the unexpected “stirring of a feather.”

His experience extended far beyond just riding. Shakespeare wrote about horse thieves, warned travellers to watch thieving ostlers who would steal the oats from the manger of their weary mount. He described how to train a horse and explained how to repair a saddle.

One mark of his genius is that Shakespeare moved beyond the physical world and repeatedly used the horse to draw similes in human life. Nobility, cowardice, courage and treachery were on display amidst the horses and humans on Shakespeare’s stage.

The Father of the SEC

The 19th century saw the advent of the Industrial Revolution but it also inspired the first attempt to document Shakespeare’s extensive equestrian knowledge.

In 1887 Charles Flower, who helped create the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, became the father of Shakespeare equestrian research when he delivered a lecture entitled “Shakespeare on Horseback” to the Stratford-on-Avon Shakespeare Club.

After a careful review of all of Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets, Flower stated that Shakespeare’s equestrian wisdom was so profound that “the knowledge he had of horses, their good and bad points and characteristics, was quite sufficient to have qualified him for a certificate from the College of Veterinary Surgeons.”

Charles Edward Flower, the father of Shakespeare equestrian research, painted by Philip Richard Morris in 1891.



A great lover of horses, Flower campaigned to reduce the suffering caused by cruel harness, especially the tight bearing reins and gag bits criticised in the 1877 novel *Black Beauty*.

Yet Flower was not the only 19th century investigator to connect Shakespeare with horses.

Shakespeare in the Saddle?

Most people have a strong mental image of William Shakespeare which is based upon the funerary monument located inside Holy Trinity Church at Stratford-upon-Avon, the church in which Shakespeare was baptised and where he was buried two days after his death.

Believed to have been created before 1623, it depicts the playwright as a middle-aged, balding, rotund pedestrian holding a quill pen and represents an idealized image intended to depict the author when he resided in London's narrow lanes.



With the onset of the 19th century, national industrialization and environmental destruction began to transform the English countryside. Victorians, who harkened to the past and had a growing reverence for nature, made pilgrimages to the pathways, cottages and rural landmarks where Shakespeare was born, courted his wife, lived and died.

Charles Cattermole was the English artist who broke with tradition by becoming the first to depict a vigorous Shakespeare in the saddle. To accompany a lecture about Stratford's most famous son, in 1899 William Ryland commissioned Cattermole to paint thirteen scenes depicting Shakespeare's life.



Cattermole's Illustrated Biography of Shakespeare not only provides a chronological framework of events, they also include references to the people who influenced Shakespeare's life, depict significant locations in the playwright's existence and show the author in the saddle departing on a journey.

Horses and History

At the dawning of the 20th century John Thomas Looney began a methodical investigation of Shakespeare's life. Based on a careful study of the plays, poems and sonnets, Looney compiled a list of eighteen attributes which the author possessed. Prominently listed was horses and horsemanship.

"We find there is more in Shakespeare about horses than upon almost any subject outside human nature. Indeed we feel tempted to say that Shakespeare brings them within the sphere of human nature," Looney wrote.

Like Flower before him, Looney acknowledged Shakespeare's familiarity with riding and other aspects of equestrianism. But Looney also noted that Shakespeare had deliberately used horses to depict human emotions and moral dilemmas.

"There is, of course, his intimate knowledge of different kinds of horses, their physical peculiarities, all the details which go to form a good or a bad specimen of a given variety, almost a veterinary's knowledge of their diseases and their treatment. But over and above all this there is a peculiar handling of the theme which raises a horse almost to the level of a being with a moral nature," Looney advised.

Troubles in Translation

The horse dominated human history for thousands of years. Agriculture, art, literature, travel and warfare were all entwined with equines.

This explains why Elizabethan audiences were so familiar with all aspects of horses, including their temperament, colours, feeding, sexual habits, riding and equipment that Shakespeare knew he could use equestrian references to act as code for ideas which he did not want to deliberately state. For example, when he wrote about "bridling the horse," it might also imply a man's control over a woman. Riding might be about transport or it might imply an incarnation for erotic desire.

Shakespeare used equestrian imagery such as the concept of "reining" and "reigning" in his play Richard III. The domination of the horse by its imperial rider was an analogy of the rule of one social class over all others.



Unfortunately one of the unforeseen side-effects of the motorized era was the onset of humanity's equestrian amnesia. Thousands of years of wisdom were lost without a trace or regret.

Thus as the 20th century progressed everyday Elizabethan terms such as jade and jennet faded into obscurity. As a result the majority of modern audiences underwent an estrangement from Shakespeare's equestrian culture and terminology.

Scholars noted this.

In 1982 when Gabrielle MacDonald wrote, "Horsemanship as a Courtly Art in Elizabethan England," she cited a unique difficulty.

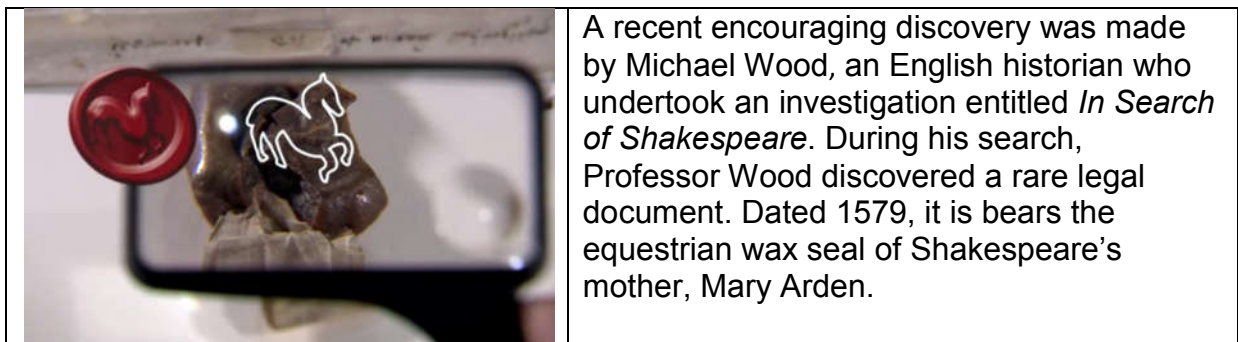
"This study has proved challenging because of the very few reliable scholarly works on the history of English horsemanship."

The advent of a new century only reinforced the on-going diminishment of equestrian understanding.

When Jonathan W. Thurston wrote "Horse Handling in Shakespeare's Poems" in 2016, he confirmed that Shakespeare's "language of horses echoes classical works, such as those by Virgil and Ovid. With this historical approach to Shakespeare's horses, scholars can begin to see that Shakespeare was incisively cognizant of an entire culture of horse riding, equestrianism, and equine science as it was understood in the late sixteenth century."

Yet the scholar concluded by citing the need for further investigations into Shakespeare's equestrian history.

"As the field of animal studies is found to be increasingly relevant to early modern literature, the appearance of equestrianism in literature becomes a much neglected trope in modern scholarship," Thurston wrote.



A New View of Shakespeare

Charles Flower documented Shakespeare's knowledge of horses. He also helped create the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Yet because he was the son of a beer brewer, London society mocked his enthusiasm and ridiculed his efforts.

He chose not to respond, focusing his efforts instead on the completion of the theatre. However Flower broke his silence at the opening ceremony two years later when he stated that Shakespeare was not restricted to the rich, nor was the study of his works confined to academics.

"A new line of criticism has been taken up by some who say we are presumptuous in undertaking it. They say we do not represent literature, science, scholarship, clergy or law; they say we are not inhabitants of that great metropolis which ought to monopolise such great works. They say, in fact, we are a set of Respectable

Nobodies! All I can say is that, the ‘Nobodies’, having waited three hundred years for the ‘Somebodies’ to do something, surely blame ought not to attach to us; rather let criticism be given to those great social and literary ‘Somebodies’ who have done nothing.”

Flower concluded by saying, “It is quite true we are nobodies. We know that, and therefore do not despair because we cannot accomplish great things at a single effort. We shall be ready to go on quietly and patiently with our work, knowing that we do so in a true spirit of love and reverence for the great man for whose memory we do it”.

Flower’s admonition to encourage public participation is the foundation of the Shakespeare Equestrian Collection.

Though the Guild’s primary interest remains connected to Shakespeare activities as a Long Rider, dozens of academic studies provided in the SEC explain how horses influenced the Bard’s plays. An illustrated biography reveals the most important events in Shakespeare’s life. A singular study depicts for the first time the horses described in the plays. The extensive work done by internet investigators has been gratefully acknowledged. And a ground-breaking investigation using scientific methods to delve into Shakespeare’s family history and his marriage has been published.

When sufficient evidence was uncovered indicating that the author had undertaken equestrian journeys, Long Rider artist Katie Cooper was commissioned to create a new world view of “Shakespeare in the Saddle.” It shows a young man in love and riding a stallion to retrieve the money needed to marry his fiancée, Anne Hathaway.



The Shakespeare Equestrian Collection contains a wealth of information for riders and readers alike.