THE RACEHORSE AS PROTAGONIST:
AGENCY, INDEPENDENCE, AND IMPROVISATION

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One of the first things I remember learning about my home state is a favorite adage of its citizenry: Kentucky is the home of fast women and beautiful horses. It was years before I got the joke, and I still mull it over from time to time. On the surface, the old saying is merely a derogatory comment on women, but the truth it reflects about the state of things in my home state is that the worth of a thoroughbred is not infrequently prized above that of a person—a non-white male person, that is. It was only when I moved away from home as an adult that I came to realize that what Kentuckians view as a way of life—horse racing—most Americans treat as just another sport.

Like most sports, the elements of drama inherent in a horse race draw the casual spectators into the world inhabited by the athletes. The great horses—the champions—become more than sports figures. They become characters at the centers of elaborate narratives: not just performers in arenas but players in dramas. High-profile thoroughbred protagonists are constructed as characters through anthropomorphism. Character is defined by H. Porter Abbott as a “human or humanlike entity,” and he elaborates by stating that “characters are any entities involved in the action that have agency.” Assigning human qualities to the animals qualifies them as characters, and the constructions attribute agency to the animals.

Discounting thoroughbreds as characters, John Jeremiah Sullivan claims, “Beasts do not make good protagonists, for the simple reason that unless you have money riding on their success or failure it is impossible for anyone older than ten to identify with them fully.” As evidence, he attributes the success of Laura Hillenbrand’s book on racing champion Seabiscuit (2001) to the fact that it spends most of its time on

the human team members, not the horse in its title. While I concur with Sullivan’s assessment of what attracted so many to the Seabiscuit story, I find abundant instances in the racing industry of fans “identifying” with horses (as fully as they do with human athletes) without placing a bet. 2004 Kentucky Derby winner Smarty Jones was constructed, by the media and his team members, as the protagonist in an underdog, against-all-odds fairy tale, and it inspired American adults as well as children, who sent hordes of letters and emails to the horse. In 2005 no one could get enough of the story of Preakness and Belmont Stakes winner Afleet Alex, known as “the little colt that could”—a dramatic tale emphasizing how he survived being born to a mother that produced no milk and was named after a little girl who died of cancer. The story of Barbaro, the 2006 Kentucky Derby winner who broke an ankle in the Preakness Stakes, overshadowed all other sports news as daily reports of his life-threatening condition proliferated on television and the internet. Letters were sent to Seattle Slew and Secretariat, and after the legendary horses retired, people made pilgrimages to see them, not the trainers or the owners. When racing legend Man O’ War died in 1947, he was the first horse to be embalmed; he lay in state for three days while two thousand people filed by the coffin.

Such horses are protagonists, central characters in narratives of conflict, created by people inside and outside the racing industry who are inspired by the athletic prowess the horses display. By constructing the horses in terms usually reserved for humans, we reduce the animals to mere personalities instead of recognizing them as individuals we cannot fully comprehend. I argue that while anthropomorphizing horses attributes agency to them as constructed characters, the act of interpreting animal behavior as if it is human does not empower animals; rather, it undermines their differences.

Following the lead of other performance studies scholars, here I present the sports field as a theatrical playing area. The nature of the race, the track conditions, and the field of horses are just some of what contribute to the mise en scène of the performance. But it is the narrative that completes the drama of the race event. The narratives that concern me are those in which the horse plays the part of protagonist

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3 Sullivan, “Horseman,” 53.