For it is a false assertion that the sense of man is the measure of things.

Francis Bacon, Novum Organum

William Cavendish, first Duke of Newcastle (1593–1676), believed that ‘there is nothing of more Use than A Horse of Mannage; nor any thing of more State, Manliness, or Pleasure, than Riding; and as it is the Noblest, so it is the Healthfullest Exercise in the World’. Through-out his life, Newcastle put this belief into practice, devoting time, money and faith to his love of horses and the art of the riding house, or manège, through which the soldier’s battle-field skills took on new refinement. He published two horsemanship manuals, in 1658 and 1667, setting down his pleasure in horses, riding and the symbolism of noble display to establish his ideal pattern for a worthy tradition.

These two books on the rearing, training and management of the ‘horse of mannage’, the ancestor of today’s dressage horse, are the only seminal texts on horsemanship ever produced by an English author. They also stand apart from those of his peers, due to his sophisticated understanding of both the human and equine mind and the way in which this led to a more thoughtful and progressive method. A century later Françoise de la Guérinière, perhaps the most influential of the classical horsemanship authors, declared that Newcastle was ‘the greatest expert of his age’ and that this would be the ‘unanimous sentiment of all connoisseurs’.

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1 Cavendish William, A New Method, and Extraordinary Invention, to Dress Horses (London, Thomas Milbourn: 1667) 13–14. Further references to Newcastle’s manuals will be included in the text using the date of publication, followed by the page number.

2 de la Guérinière François Robichon, School of Horsemanship, transl. by Tracey Boucher (London: 1994) 87.
Fig. 1. Newcastle and his horse performing the Croupade in a volte (circle of approx. 10 metres) on the left rein. Abraham von Diepenbeke, engraved plate number 35 from John Brindley’s 1737 reprint of La Methode Nouvelle et Invention Extraordinaire de dresser les Chevaux (1658). Image © Elaine Walker