(UN)STABLE IDENTITIES: HIPPOLOGY AND THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF SCHOLARSHIP AND HORSEMANSHIP IN EARLY MODERN GERMANY

Pia F. Cuneo

Introduction: The Issues and the Sources

Somewhere in Germany, some time in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, a scholar bends over his desk, consulting ancient Greek and Roman sources (or recent translations of the same) and weaving these strands of classical information into his own text. Outside, a horseman rides in a manege, training the animal to respond appropriately to various cues. What do these men have at least potentially in common? If one looked for the answer to this question in secondary scholarship on the early modern period, it would appear they lacked any connection whatsoever. One in fact would be hard-pressed to find sixteenth/seventeenth-century scholars and horsemen occupying the same space within the pages of literature on early modern social and cultural history. Nonetheless, primary sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries clearly indicate that some of these men indeed had one very important thing in common, and that was the horse. Humanists and university-educated men wrote about them, and some horsemen not only trained them but authored manuals about how to do so.

In this article, I draw the hippological connections between scholars and horsemen. Furthermore, I argue that these men’s work with the horse served to legitimate and validate their respective occupations. In the figurative sense, then, the horse functioned as a vehicle for the professionalization of various activities and groups, and, as such, provided a fundamental catalyst to the fashioning of professional identity.

An essential ingredient of professional identity is the assumption that a professional possesses advanced training and specialized knowledge. Such knowledge and training become mechanisms for separating the real professionals from the (real and perceived) dabblers, dilettantes, and want-to-be’s, as well as from the less talented and less experienced. And it is this separating out that becomes so crucial for dealing with competition amongst professionals. Furthermore, to be a professional
often implies a self-conscious attitude about one’s access to and exercise of such knowledge and training (as true today as it was in the sixteenth/seventeenth century).1

These are exactly the qualities stressed, either explicitly or implicitly, in the texts produced by scholars and horsemen of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These men all seek to demonstrate their control and mastery of specialized knowledge through training and experience that is presented as especially valuable and useful either to other fledgling professionals or to these professionals’ patrons. The value and the use of the knowledge on offer in these texts and thus, by extension, the status of their authors are significantly enhanced by the object and subject of that knowledge, the horse, an animal so closely associated with nobility, wealth, and power.2

Our modern-day blindness to the historical importance of horses is no doubt grounded in the contemporary obsolescence of the animal, with the exception of its continued but narrowly limited use for recreation and sport. And this blindness in turn accounts for the fact that the majority of the sources that I use in this article have never been considered, much less consulted by historians. These sources include texts dealing with an array of hippological issues, from training horses to treating their illnesses, from equine anatomy to horse breeding, written by humanists and scholars. In some cases, this literary activity also included translating foreign hippological texts into German. In addition, texts often dealing with the same subject matter were written both by scholars and by horsemen, particularly riders (‘Bereiter’) and stable-masters (‘Stallmeister’).

These sources allow us to use the culture of the horse as a lens to focus on early modern German history. Through that lens, several points become clear, especially the indispensability of the horse to early

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1 For a discussion on the debate about professional identity in Italy, see McClure G.W., The Culture of Profession in Late Renaissance Italy (Toronto: 2004) especially 3–26.
2 This association between the horse and European nobility stems from the medieval definition of the nobility as the warrior class, and significant medieval battles involved mounted knights. See Hyland A., The Warhorse 1250–1600 (Thrupp: 1998) and Davis R.H.C., The Medieval Warhorse (London: 1989). Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century hippological texts give ample evidence of the continuation of that association in that riding horses is often specifically labeled a noble art, and the horse is often described as especially suited to serve the nobility. See for example the introduction to the anonymous Ein neue und bewerte Rofartzney (Strasbourg: 1583) unpaginated; and Hans Friedrich Hörwart von Hohenburg, Von der hochbehrümpten/ adelichen und ritterlichen Kunst der Reyterey (Tegernsee: 1577).