
At the end of the sixteenth century, a French écuier, a riding instructor, sieur de Lugny, wrote a treatise on horse-riding. In difference from the treatises of such famous instructors as Fiaschi, Grisone, Pluvinel, and de La Brue, which went through several printed editions in the early modern period, the treatise of sieur de Lugny was distributed only in manuscript format, most likely among his pupils. As a result, this treatise has remained unknown for centuries. It was discovered and edited for the first time by Frédéric Magnin.

In his book, Magnin provides a critical edition, for which he has consulted all the known manuscripts of the treatise, seven in all. The text is preceded by detailed introduction and commentary. Magnin makes an attempt to identify the author and reconstruct his biography, based on archival material; in doing this, he provides a glimpse into French history of the second half of the sixteenth century and the context in which a gentleman as sieur de Lugny would have grown, learned the art of horsemanship, and would have used his knowledge in the service of a nobleman and, later, as a riding instructor. He also discusses such issues as the culture of noble education in early modern France, the rise of academies and the difference between academies and universities, as well as the rhetoric behind the study of such practical arts as horsemanship and fencing. Another fascinating subject Magnin considers in the introduction, before discussing the riding school of sieur de Lugny, is the rhetoric and practice surrounding the teaching of horsemanship. Finally, the introduction includes a detailed explanation of the critical apparatus, of the relations between the extant manuscripts, and the differences and similarities between the manuscripts.

The text itself is given from a single manuscript, with variant readings in footnotes. In addition to notes and glossaries provided for specific readings of the text, there is a glossary of equestrian terms, which is highly useful for non-equestrians and, in some cases, for equestrians, too. I was, for instance, surprised to learn that horses, too, have hands: apparently, the term “mains du cheval” (literally, “horse’s hands”) signifies the forelegs.

Although some materials in the book are very specialized, such as the section on critical apparatus, the text itself is an invaluable addition to the library of any equestrian historian. Indeed, many of sieur de Lugny’s statements have not lost their topicality even today. There are things any riding instructor, whatever his or her discipline or school, should keep in mind. Having a foot in both equestrian history and horse riding camps, I could not but agree with sieur de Lugny when he argues, for example, that an advanced pupil should work with young horses as well as the more experienced once, explaining that “in working with the cavesson, and in beginning to work young horses, a pupil will learn more secrets than well-trained horses will show him, because the latter are experienced. But the young ones, who cannot forget their liberty all at once, show their humor and their mettle by their actions and their ignorance, from which one should know how to profit to make them useful for man or to correct them, to create other habits using appropriate rules” (translation mine).
The treatise of sieur de Lugny is timeless, in that it gives advice on how to organize training sessions for pupils and to communicate one’s art and knowledge efficiently. Sieur de Lugny also discusses the ethos of horseman and that of a riding instructor, the values which a true cavalier (a word that, for sieur de Lugny, could signify both a horseman and an instructor) should cultivate, etc. In many cases his advice is surprisingly modern: a good cavalier should be patient, should speak little, but should be generous with his knowledge (when asked).

In editing the treatise, Magnin thus gives equestrian historian access to previously unpublished source, but he also provides an introduction to the world of sixteenth-century equitation in France, to the ways horsemanship was taught and to the theoretical, ethical, and sometimes even religious underpinnings of the instruction and practice of horsemanship.

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