



*Cheiron: The International Journal of
Equine and Equestrian History*
Vol. 3, Issue 2/2023
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Available online at
<http://trivent-publishing.eu/>

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Keywords

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DOI: 10.22618/TP.Cheiron.20233.2.216002

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Good Mothers or Lascivious Females? The Perception of Mares in the Context of Equine Husbandry and Breeding in Medieval France (1200-1500)

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I. Introduction

In medieval France, destriers — the name given to warhorses — and palfreys — the riding horses of the elite — were exclusively male, uncastrated horses, while coursers — used for racing, among other functions — and hunting horses were geldings.² Many horses had names, but the Bayard, Morel, Ferrant, Grisel, Veillantif who appear in chronicles, in financial records or in literature were all male.³ The assimilation between a knight and his mount, perceived as being so close that they were represented as sharing one body, as well the symbolic, economic, and military value of destriers explains the focus on male horses.⁴ But where does this leave the mares?

¹ University of Exeter, Centre for Medieval Studies, United Kingdom.

² See, for example, Ann Hyland, *The Medieval Warhorse from Byzantium to the Crusades* (London: Sutton Publishing, 1994).

³ See, for example, Charles Gladitz, *Horse Breeding in the Medieval World* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997).

⁴ See, for example, Andrew G. Miller, "Tails of Masculinity: Knights, Clerics and the Mutilation of Horses in Medieval England," (*Speculum* 88(4) (2013): 958-995). This article shows that the assimilation

Female horses are less present in medieval French sources than their male counterparts. Destriers overshadow them in the texts and in the iconography, where horses with obvious male genitals are often depicted, as if to assert the virility of their riders: the eleventh-century Bayeux tapestry is a striking example of that. When mares do appear in the sources, their portrayal is ambiguous: while destriers are idealised as loyal and brave, mares are only considered from the point of view of their maternal and breeding abilities, or are hypersexualised and portrayed as vain, lascivious females. Was this ambiguous perception reflected in the day-to-day use of the horse? Did it have any impact outside an elite, intellectual context? Does the ambiguity of this portrayal indicate that mares were perceived as more complex and multi-faceted than stallions?

The subject of mares is at the crossroads between gender studies and the increasingly developed field of animal studies.⁵ The way they are portrayed and understood is reflective of two relationships, that between humans and horses, and that between humans and the beings characterised as female. Like their human counterparts before the development of gender studies, medieval female horses have not been at the centre of much interest from historians. Despite the development of research on medieval male horses, and especially warhorses, mares remain mysterious.⁶ However, studying them is essential to understand fully the co-dependant relationship between humans and horses in the Middle Ages, and the resulting anthropomorphism to which equids were subjected. Studying horses from a gendered perspective can shed more light on the particularities of the general medieval perception of equids, on its origins, and on its consequences especially in terms on animal-husbandry. The medieval warhorse would not exist without the mare who gave him birth. Therefore, the history of the destrier would not be complete without studies on medieval mares. Like elite medieval women, mares were excluded from military pursuits, yet they played an essential role in the construction of chivalric ideals.⁷

The thirteenth century witnessed the intensifying development, in France, as in other countries of Western Europe, of royal studs. Their purpose was to breed better warhorses.⁸ To achieve that goal, mares, as well as stallions, were carefully selected, according to their temperament and conformation, and sometimes imported at great cost from Lombardy or Spain. Measures were also taken by the monarch to ensure

between a horse and his rider was such that the physical mutilation of the former was used to humiliate and morally wound the latter.

⁵ *A Cultural history of animals in the medieval age*, ed. Brigitte Resl (Oxford: Berg, 2007) is an example of the developments of animal studies applied to medieval history.

⁶ See, for example, *Le Cheval dans la culture médiévale*, ed. Bernard Andenmatten, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, Eva Pibiri (Florence: SISMEEL - Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2015); Brigitte Prévot, Bernard Ribemont, *Le Cheval en France au Moyen-Age : sa place dans le monde médiéval ; sa médecine : l'exemple d'un traité vétérinaire du XIV^e siècle*, la Chirurgie des chevaux (Orléans, Caen: Paradigme, 1994); Jean Lacroix *et al.*, *Le cheval dans le monde médiéval* (Aix-en-Provence: Centre universitaire d'études et de recherches méditerranéennes, 1992).

⁷ See, for example, Louise J. Wilkinson, "The Chivalric woman," in *Knighthood and Society in the High Middle Ages*, ed. David Crouch and Jeroen Deploige (Leuven University Press, 2020), 195–228.

⁸ See, for example, R. H. C. Davis, *The Medieval Warhorse. Origin, Development and Redevelopment* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989).

that enough warhorses would be produced. For instance, a 1279 decree by Philippe III ordered that landowners with an annual income of over 200 *livres tournois* had to keep a breeding mare, while noblemen with sufficient pasture had to keep four to six.⁹ Though stallions are omnipresent in the sources, mares were more numerous in the studs and parks, due to the practicalities of horse breeding: only one stallion is needed to cover a great number of mares. For instance, in the Haras de la Brace et du Breuil, belonging to Philippe VI (1293-1350), there were two stallions, who were moved between the different studs, and twenty-five mares.¹⁰ The mares' numerical superiority contrasts with their evasiveness in the sources and with how conflicted their descriptions are, as if, despite daily interaction, they escaped human understanding.

The ambiguous portrayal of mares in thirteenth-century encyclopaedias can be compared to that found in practical horse-husbandry treatises, such as the *De medicina equorum*, written around 1250 by Jordanus Rufus, an Italian knight and marshal of the emperor Frederick II. In the decades following its writing, the *De medicina equorum* was translated into several vernacular languages, including French. It was used as a source by other hippiatric authors, one example being Guillaume de Villiers who wrote a veterinary treatise in 1456. The *De medicina equorum* is one of the most influential texts on equine husbandry and medicine for the late Middle Ages and has been the subject of an increasing number of recent studies focussing on its horse-husbandry content.¹¹ Though the bulk of Rufus's text deals with equine illnesses and their remedies, its first chapters describe the breeding and training of horses. Those chapters are the only ones where female horses are mentioned. An overview of different French versions of the text, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, show variations in the passages where mares appear, reflecting changes in the way in which they were perceived by medieval horsemen. The relationship between this perception and the description of mares in the literature of the time can be investigated. Moreover, comparison with other sources, such as royal financial records, gives additional insights, highlighting the contrast between literary portrayals of mares and what can be inferred of the real animals.

II. Anthropomorphised and Sexualised Mares

The portrayal of mares in medieval encyclopaedias is ambiguous and marked by negative undertones, which might reflect a general vision of femininity at the time.

⁹ Frédéric Raynaud, "Introduction," in *Le Cheval au Moyen Age*, ed. Elisabeth Lorans (Tours: Presses Universitaires François Rabelais, 2017), 17.

¹⁰ Jean Chapelot, "L'Ecurie du roi au XIIIe-XIVe siècles," 186-187. Jean Chapelot, "L'Ecurie du roi au XIIIe-XIVe siècles," in *Le Cheval au Moyen Age*, ed. Elisabeth Lorans (Tours: Presses Universitaires François Rabelais, 2017), 186-7.

¹¹ See, for example, Jennifer Jobst, "Practical Advice on Equine Care from Jordanus Rufus, c. 1250 CE," in *The Materiality of the Horse*, ed. Miriam Bibby and Brian G. Scott (Budapest: Trivent publishing, 2020); Elizabeth S. Leet, "On Equine Language: Jordanus Rufus and Thirteenth Century Communicative Horsemanship," in *Animal Languages in the Middle Ages. Representations of interspecies communications*, ed. Alison Langdon (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 175-195; Rena Maguire and Anastasija Ropa (eds), *The Liminal Horse: Equitation and Boundaries* (Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2021).

The Florentine notary Brunetto Latini (c. 1220-1294) wrote the *Livre dou Tresor* while he was exiled in France in 1260-1267. This encyclopaedia contains a chapter on the horse, which draws from antique sources to give an idealised portrayal of the warhorse who, like Alexander's Bucephalus, had to be unfailingly loyal to his master and a brave ally on the battlefield. Alexander was a popular character in medieval romances and his taming of Bucephalus was a determining stage in his journey. Unlike the version given by Plutarch, the medieval Bucephalus was not a beautiful horse scared of his own shadow but a monstrous, anthropophagous beast from Egypt.¹² Brunetto Latini also gives indications on how to recognise a good horse, and briefly mentions their colour, conformation, and paces. In-between those two parts, the literary one and the practical one, several indications on mares are given:

Nos lisons d'un cheval qui vesqui .lxx. ans, mais les femeles ne vivent longuement ; et lor luxure puet home refroidier, se on leur rooigne les crins ; mais en son part naist un venefice d'amor qui vient emmi le front dou poulain ; mais la mere l'oste maintenant à ses dens, car ele ne veut que cele chose viegne en main d'ome ; et neporquant se tu l'en ostoies, saches que sa mere ne li donroit jamais son lait.¹³

[We read about a horse who lived seventy years, but the females do not live long; and their lustfulness can be cooled down if their mane is cut; but from them is born a love charm, that appears on the brow of the foal, but the mother bites it off with her teeth, because she does not want this thing to come in the hand of men; and thus if you should take it, be aware that the mother will never give him her milk.]¹⁴

There are two striking elements in this description. The first is the assumption of the mare's lustfulness, which must be corrected by the mutilation of her mane. No such indications are given about male horses: in this text, lasciviousness is the prerogative of the female horse. The second is the association of mares to witchcraft, with the reference to a skin pellet found on the forehead of the foal. Though it is present on the body of the young horse, it is stated as coming from the mare herself, as if this element of witchcraft could only be associated with femininity. The mare is given agency through the mention of her desire that this skin should not be taken by men and through her reaction to refuse to give milk to her foal. However, the association with witchcraft, her hostility towards men and her refusal to feed her foal show her in a sinister light.

The Franciscan monk Bartholomaeus Anglicus (c. 1203-1272) also devoted an extensive chapter to the horse in his *De proprietatibus rerum* (c. 1240). It contains a subchapter on the mare where the same elements as in the *Livre dou Tresor* are found. The passage on the skin pellet growing on the foal's head, with its association to witchcraft, appears twice, and is even more explicit, with the mention of the witches

¹² Alexandre de Paris, *Le Roman d'Alexandre*, ed. E.C. Armstrong and trans. Laurence Harf-Lancner (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1994), 99.

¹³ Brunetto Latini, *Li Livres dou tresor*, ed. Pierre Chabaille (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1863), 240.

¹⁴ All the translations into English have been made by the author.

themselves, in the following French translation of the text written in 1372 by Jean Corbechon: “les sorcieres en usent quant elles veullent faire une personne amer par amours”¹⁵ [the witches use it when they want to make a person bitter because of love.] The passage about the mare’s mane is more developed: “la jument se glorifie en ces crins et est courroucée quand on les coupe; et est estante sa luxure quant elle voit ses crins coupés, ainsi comme se la feüst sa force de leur amour”¹⁶ [the mare is proud of her mane and is irritated when it is cut; and her lasciviousness is extinguished when her mane is cut, as if the strength of her lust resided there.] Two anthropomorphic sentiments are added to the mare’s lustfulness: pride and anger. This is counterbalanced by a description of her highly developed maternal instinct:

Et se l’une est morte qui laisse son poulain, l’autre le nourrit comme le sien propre. La jument faonne en estant, et aime son poulain plus que autre beste. Et aime ses faons et quant elle le pert, elle nourrit un estrange et le ayme comme le sien, si comme dit Plinius.¹⁷

[And if one dies leaving her foal, another will feed him like her own. The mare gives birth in summer and loves her foal more than other beasts. And she loves her offspring and when she loses it, she will feed another and love him like her own, as Pliny says.]

The love she feels for her foal is insisted upon and contrasts with the more negative aspects of her portrayal. Here, because she is an ideal maternal figure, the mare becomes a good counterpart for the valiant destrier. The mare’s association with maternity and sexuality also appears in the *De animalibus* by Albertus Magnus (c. 1200-1280). There, her milk is described as a remedy for infertility: “si mulier aliqua non conceperit et illi lac equinum ignorante ea datum fuerit ad bibendum et postea statim vir eius cum ea coierit, frequenter concipit”¹⁸ [if a woman cannot conceive, and the milk of a mare is given to her to be drunk unknowingly, and immediately afterwards a man copulates with her, she frequently conceives.] The dissimulation surrounding the use of the milk — the woman needs to be tricked into drinking it — makes the association, once again, a vaguely negative one. In many ways, the mare elicits a form of wariness from all those authors, though her portrayal is more positive in Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s text than in Brunetto Latini’s, for instance, due to the former’s insistence on motherly love.

This ambiguous portrayal, oscillating between an emphasis on the negative, lustful qualities of the mare and a description of her as an ideal representation of maternity echoes the treatment of women who were assimilated in turn to Eve or to the Virgin Mary, especially by clerical writers.¹⁹ Eve and Mary represent two extremes of

¹⁵ Jean Corbechon, *Livre des propriétés des choses*, ed. by B. Prévot, in B. Prévot, B. Ribemont *Le Cheval en France au Moyen-Âge : sa place dans le monde médiéval ; sa médecine : l'exemple d'un traité vétérinaire du XIV^e siècle, la 'Cirurgie des chevaux'*, (Orléans, Caen : Paradigme, 1994), 449.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Albertus Magnus, *De Animalibus libri XXVI nach Kölner Urschrift*, ed. Herman Stadler (Munster: Aschendorff, 1920), 1399.

¹⁹ Frances and Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Crowell, 1978), 37.

medieval femininity, the lascivious temptress and the saintly mother.²⁰ The fact that this portrayal of women infects the imagery surrounding mares reflects the level of anthropomorphism to which horses were subjected at the time. There is a clear, gendered identification between the human and the animal, explained by the physical and emotional proximity between humans and equids at the time. However, it is likely that this gendered anthropomorphism circulated mostly in the intellectual, elite setting from which it originated. In other contexts, mares would have been considered mostly from the point of view of their capacity for work, their usefulness for breeding giving them additional value. In an agricultural context, the female equine stock would be used as a reservoir for both working and breeding animals.²¹

The pejorative perception of femininity certainly influenced the portrayal of mares, but the medieval authors' insistence on their lustfulness could also have had roots in their natural behaviour. Mares in oestrus — ovulating and sexually receptive — can be very demonstrative, urinating in the presence of stallions, squealing, and winking, a stance where they expose their clitoris, tail raised.²² During clitoral winking, which is accompanied by a characteristic wide-legged stance with which the mare invites the stallion to mount her, the lining of the vestibular wall is exposed, its pink colour contrasting with the darkness of the labia.²³ The sexuality of this position is obvious to the onlookers and could have explained or confirmed the interpretation of mares as lustful beings, actively seeking intercourse with stallions. The close relationship between humans and horses and high level of human intervention in the breeding of equids would have put men in close contact with the mare's sexual behaviour, maybe uncomfortably so from their point of view.

The participation of humans in horse-breeding may also have influenced the view of mares as good mothers, since it would have enabled them to observe their behaviour towards their foals. Indeed, mares are very protective of their foals, not letting humans or other animals near them after parturition.²⁴ They bond intimately with their offspring and the relationship can sometimes be maintained after the foals reach adulthood.²⁵ The statement concerning the adoption of foals is not always true in real life, since fostering orphan foals to other mares can prove difficult, though there are documented instances of mares trying to mother foals not belonging to them after having lost their own.²⁶ It can be noted that mares will form long-lasting bonds with one or two other mare(s) over the course of their life-time.²⁷ This preferred partner can be one of the mare's now adult fillies.²⁸ Mare companions will

²⁰ Dyan Elliott, "Gender and the Christian Traditions," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Judith Bennett and Ruth Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²¹ John Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation: The Use of Draught Animals in English Farming from 1066-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 86.

²² George Waring, *Horse Behavior (Second Edition)* (Norwich, New York: Noyes Publishing, 2003), 184–185.

²³ D. Mills and S. Redgate, "Behaviour of Horses," in *The Ethology of Domestic Animals. An introductory text (Second Edition)*, ed. Per Jensen (Boston, Massachusetts: CABI, 2009), 143.

²⁴ Waring, *Horse Behavior (Second Edition)*, 204, 206.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 79.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 208.

²⁷ D. Mills, S. Redgate, "Behaviour of Horses," 141.

²⁸ Waring, *Horse Behavior*, 222.

stay together for most activities, including mutual grooming, feeding or resting.²⁹ This behaviour could easily have been observed during the Middle Ages, since medieval mares were often kept in herds, sometimes even free-ranging ones. Indeed, there is much textual evidence to the presence of *equae sylvestres* (forest mares) in Europe; there are, for instance, mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086).³⁰ The mares were protected as beasts of the forest and left to roam in wild conditions, with a small degree of human intervention.³¹ Due to this management, the horses would have been able to express their natural behaviour patterns and bond with their chosen companions. In the context of the anthropomorphism to which horses were subjected, the mares' tendency to do so, may have been associated to loyalty and faithfulness. As such, it could have nourished the more positive aspects of their portrayal.

The intervention (or lack of) of humans in horse breeding and herd management raises the question of the horses' choice of sexual partners. Bartholomaeus Anglicus's chapter on the horse contains an anecdote, taken from Aristotle, about horses' attitude towards incest:

Un roy de septentrion avoit une belle jument qui ot un trop beau cheval que elle avoit porté ; et pour la beauté de la mere et du filz, le roy vouloit avoir un poulain de eulx deux, et fist couvrir la teste de l'un et de l'autre, tant que le filz eust sailli sa mere. Et quant ilz furent descouvers, le filz se jetta dessus une haulte montaigne a terre et se tua de courou que il ot de ce qui avoit sailli sa mere.³²

[A king of the north had a beautiful mare who had a very beautiful horse that she had carried; and because of the beauty of the mother and of the son, the king wanted to have a foal from the two, and he had both their heads covered, while the son copulated with the mother. And when their heads were uncovered, the son threw himself from a high mountain and killed himself, from the chagrin of having copulated with his mother.]

Though both horses must have their heads covered for the copulation to take place, implying that neither would comply if they realised the identity of the other, only the colt feels such shame at the breaking of his taboo that he kills himself. Nothing more is said about the mother. It appears that male horses have the exclusivity of the anthropomorphised qualities of morality and courage, and that female horses, and their attitude towards taboos, elicit less interest. This may reflect a real-life attitude towards mares in the context of breeding: they are passive, sexual objects, valued for their womb and their ability to carry a foal, preferably a male one.

Despite their anthropomorphised qualities, male destriers sometimes fall short of the ideal and fail their riders. An example of that is found in the biography of Louis IX written by Jean Joinville (1224-1317):

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 229.

³⁰ Gladitz, *Horse Breeding in the Medieval World*, 143-144.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Jean Corbechon, *Livre des propriétés des choses*, 448.

Or avint que mon seigneur Gauchier d'Autreche se fist armer en son paveillon de touz points. Et quant il fu monté sus son cheval, l'escu au col, le hyaume en la teste, il fist lever les pans de son paveillon et feri des esperons pour aler aus Turs. [...] Or avint ainsi que avant que il venist aus Turs, il chaï et son cheval li vola parmi le cors, et s'en ala le cheval couvert de ses armes a nos ennemis, pour ce que le plus des Sarrazins estoient montez sur jumens, et pour ce trait le cheval aus Sarrazins.³³

[It happened that Sir Gautier d'Autrèches was armed inside his tent. And when he was on his horse, his shield suspended to his neck, his helm on his head, the panels of his tent were raised and he spurred his horse to charge the Turks. But before he reached the Turks, he fell off, and his horse galloped over his body, still bearing his weapons, and went to our enemies, because most of the Saracens were riding mares, and that is why the horse ran to the Saracens.]

Here, the destrier, instead of fitting the ideal of loyalty and courage, tramples and abandons his rider, driven by his lust. It is interesting that the presence of the mares is explicitly stated as the reason behind the horse running to the enemy. Though no judgement is explicitly passed, it is tempting to think that the onlookers, the readers of the chronicle, and maybe Joinville himself, would have blamed the Saracen mares for luring the stallion to the other side. The resulting loss involves not only the valuable destrier himself, but also the weapons he was carrying, as well as the rider, who died later because of the accident. This anecdote highlights the dangers of riding an uncastrated male horse in battle. It is not stated if the horse deliberately unseated his rider, or if the fall was due to the knight's lack of skills. Anyhow, the animal's reaction highlights the insufficiency of his training.

In this occurrence, the stallion is shown as lustful, but the mares are implicitly blamed for his loss. There is a passage in the first chapter of Jordanus Rufus's *De medicina equorum* where the presence of mares is described as potentially harmful to the colt, once he has passed two years of age, as shown here in the French translation given by a thirteenth-century manuscript:

Puis que li poulains est nez naturelment il doit suivre sa mere uisques a tent qu'il ait .ii. ans ne plus ne mains, pource que s'il avoit passe .ii. anz naturelment voudroit saillir si com les austres estalons. Et pource il enpireroit legerement ou il se pourroit mehaignier en aucune partie de son cors.³⁴

[After the horse is born, he must naturally follow his mother, until he is two years old, no more, no less, for if he were older than two, he would naturally want to copulate, like the other stallions. And because of that, he would worsen slightly, or he could be injured in some part of his body.]

³³ Jean Joinville, *Vie de Saint Louis*, ed. Jacques Monfrin (Paris: Garnier, 1995), 250.

³⁴ BnF, MS fr. 25341, fol. 1^v.

The ideal destrier would refuse to copulate with his mother, since this would be immoral. However, Rufus is conscious that a real colt would have no hesitation in covering his own mother once he has reached sexual maturity. The use of the word *naturelment* negates the literary fantasy of the ideal destrier. In a natural herd setting, where horses are grouped in a harem band containing mares, foals, and a stallion, a sexually mature colt would be less likely to try to mount the mature mares due to the presence the stallion.³⁵ The management of horses in groups with only mares and their offspring heightens the risk of uncontrolled breeding, of which Rufus may have been conscious. He does not mention whether the colt trying to mount his mother (or other mares) would be undesirable in the context of controlled, selective breeding because the young horse is yet unproven as a warhorse. The colt has not yet reached his full potential and, at two years old, it would be difficult to tell if he has conformational and temperamental traits that would be worth passing on to his offspring.

The expression *aucune partie de son cors* — the part of his body that the colt could injure — could refer to a number of places, including his limbs or his genitals. Unreceptive mares can kick out when being mounted, resulting in injuries to the young stallion. Those injuries could impede his breeding potential, either due to physical damage — the penis could be afflicted in such a way that erection becomes impossible, for instance, or the legs could be maimed, resulting in lameness — or to psychological inhibition.³⁶ The expression *il empireroit* could refer to a physical injury as well. It could also mean that the horse's temperament will be affected, either because he has broken a human taboo or, more likely because, having acquired a taste for sexual intercourse, he will seek it again. In that case, he could become more difficult to control in the presence of mares, like Gautier's horse.

In the French translations found in other manuscripts, the phrasing of this passage is even more condemnatory of the foal's sexual desire for his mother, and uses the ambiguous word *delit* which means both pleasure and crime: “apres se il ensuit sa mere assiduelment legierement empireroit, dou delit dou saillir avec sa mere, ou avec aucun de son genre feminine”³⁷ [then, if he continuously follows his mother, he could slightly worsen, because of the pleasure/crime of copulating with his mother or with any female.] Here, as with Gautier's horse, mares are portrayed as the cause of a destrier's downfall, taking on the role of temptresses and making him stray away from his righteous path. There is a generalisation in this version of the text, with all female horses, and not just the mother, being potential sources of ruin for the colt. It can be noted that unlike Brunetto Latini, Bartholomaeus Anglicus describes all horses, regardless of gender, as lustful: “aiment moult le fait de luxure plus que autres bestes”³⁸ [like the lustful act more than other beasts.] Even male horses are capable of lasciviousness, though the blame falls on the mares rather than on them, in those texts written by male authors in a male-dominated world. The fact that what is described as “lust” in the encyclopedias finds echoes in real life shows

³⁵ Waring, *Horse Behavior*, 215.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 175.

³⁷ BnF, MS NAL 1553 fol. 2r.

³⁸ Jean Corbechon, *Livre des propriétés des choses*, 448.

that the texts give an anthropomorphized perception of horses' natural behavior. However, they could also influence this perception and partly determine horsemen's attitude towards horses, and especially mares.

III. The Veterinary Treatment of Mares in the Context of Breeding

Encyclopaedias give a literary vision of the mare. Was their ambiguity reflected in the practical treatment of female horses? What portrayal is given of mares in practical horse-husbandry treatises? In the first chapters of Jordanus Rufus's *De medicina equorum*, which focus on the breeding and training of a colt (male foal) destined to become a destrier, the mare only appears as the mother of the foal. The cultural choice to train and ride a colt contrasts with what is found, for instance, in Ibn al-Awwam's twelfth-century training method, which can be applied to both male and female horses.³⁹ In the *De medicina equorum*, the mare's health is only a concern in the sense that it could potentially affect that of the foal, as shown in the advice given about her ideal weight:

Et la iument qui est empreinte ne doit estre ne trop grasse ne trop meigre, pource que se la iument estoit trop grasse li poulains ne se pourroit deliter dedenz le ventre de la mere, car la crassete estreindroit trop le lieu ou le poulain seroit, et pource il en seroit plus petiz de cors et plus soutiex des membres. Et se la iument estoit trop meigre elle ne porroit donner souffisantment nourrissement a son poulain. Et pour ce il en nestroit meigres et faibles.⁴⁰

[And the pregnant mare must be neither too fat, nor too thin, for if the mare was too fat, the foal could not develop himself inside his mother's womb, because the fat would restrain the place where the foal is, and because of that, he would have a smaller body and finer limbs. And if the mare were too thin, she would not give sufficient nourishment to her foal. And because of that, he would be born thin and weak.]

It is for her foal's sake that she must be in good health, rather than for her own. The colt is at the centre of the author's preoccupations: throughout the first chapter, Rufus worries about the possibility that the colt will not have reached his full growth potential at the moment of his birth, or even that he should not be carried to term. Because the colt is, at this stage, inaccessible, being in his mother's womb, the men awaiting his birth find themselves totally reliant on her, and no amount of veterinary knowledge can change that. Though Rufus gives lengthy indications on how to feed horses depending on their age, he says nothing about the mare's nutrition. He does point out that the foal should be born in the spring, so the grass is rich enough to help the mare produce good milk, but again, the colt, not the mother, is at the centre of his preoccupations. He does not emphasise that the mare needs good nourishment

³⁹ See, for example, Ibn Al-Awwam, *Le Livre de l'Agriculture d'Ibn Al-Awwam (Kitab Al-Felahah)*, translated from the Arabic by J.-J. Clément-Mullet (Paris: A. Franck, 1867).

⁴⁰ BnF, MS fr. 25341, fol. 1^v.

to meet the high demands of lactation on her health and energy, though he must have been conscious of those. He appears to be entirely uninterested in the mare, even in the context of breeding, and his attitude is tinged with unease.

From the start of the treatise, Rufus assumes that the foal will be male. This is logical since his original text focusses on the training of a future warhorse. Not all foals would have been male, however. Nothing is said about what should be done with the fillies (female foals). It is possible that they were simply left with the herd, unlike the colts who needed to be separated to avoid uncontrolled reproduction. Or they could have been separated as well, to keep track of which filly had been sired by which stallion and avoid inbreeding. A likely hypothesis is that the fillies were captured and brought to the stables just like the colts, to receive the basic handling described in the second and third chapters of the *De medicina equorum*. Indeed, even if they were not destined to be ridden, the young mares would still need to be haltered, led, and tied. Their feet would have to be handled. They should be able to receive essential care, be that for simple maintenance or for veterinary treatment. The absence of precisions suggests that Rufus assumed the readers of his treatise were knowledgeable horsemen who would know what to do with the fillies and how to tame and handle them. The lack of mention of fillies does not necessarily reflect that Rufus did not value them, since they would have been essential assets for breeding. However, if the goal was to produce a destrier, the birth of a filly could have led to disappointment. At any rate, Rufus's training method does not concern itself with female horses.

Mares are mentioned in the chapter on breeding, however, and there is an interesting passage about the way in which the pregnant mare should be kept. One of the French versions of the text states that she should not be enclosed, lest she should abort:

La iument qui est empreinte ne doit estre retenue enclouse encontre sa voulante ne par iour ne par nuit pource que la faim et la soif ou le retenir contre sa voulante feroit geter son poulain par aventure avant que le temps fust.⁴¹

[The mare who is pregnant must not be kept inside against her will, neither by night nor by day, for hunger or thirst or being kept against her will will make her lose her foal before its time.]

The same sentence appears in Guillaume de Villiers's reinterpretation of Rufus's first chapters in his 1456 veterinary treatise.⁴² The important phrase in both those examples is *contre sa voulante* (against her will). This expression is not used in all the French translations. The manuscript BnF, MS NAL 1553, for instance, only says "ne la mere dou cheval entrante encloustrés en nule maniere, ne de iour ne de nuit"⁴³ [the mother of the horse must not be enclosed, neither by day nor by night], without

⁴¹ BnF, MS fr. 25341, fol. 1^v.

⁴² "Item la jument qui est prains ne doibt estre retenue ny enclouse contre sa volente soit par jours ou par nuyt, pource que la faim et la soif ou luy retenir contre sa volente et luy ferons son poulain par adventure gecter devant son terme" (BnF, MS Fr. 1287, fol. 7^r).

⁴³ BnF, MS NAL 1553, fol. 2^r.

giving a reason or anthropomorphising the mare. The anthropomorphism found in the other manuscripts is not a positive one: it reflects a disturbing perception of the mare as an antagonist against the birth of her own foal. She must be appeased for the unborn colt to be protected, as she would be capable of thwarting men's plans for him should her wishes remain unfulfilled. She is thus treated with a mixture of care and wariness. Men must give in: she forces them to grant her freedom and escapes their control, maybe because of her dual feminine and animal nature. Does the belief that she could lose the foal should she be kept enclosed have any reality? If the mare was kept in feral, or semi-feral conditions, or was simply used to grazing freely on large pastures, a sudden change of lifestyle could indeed be detrimental to both her and the foetus. It is interesting that, in some manuscripts, the justification of this course of action, instead of being physiological, gives the mare agency.

Many of the changes Guillaume de Villiers makes to Rufus's original text are about the mare. He adds the following statement: "ne doibt l'en point faire saillir la jumens sant que y luy en viengne plaisir"⁴⁴ [the mare must not be covered if she does not take pleasure in it]. The importance given to the mare's pleasure is, once more, justified by the desire that she should prove fertile and carry the pregnancy to term. Losing the foal would be detrimental, given the time and finances invested in its conception and birth. This results in the anthropomorphising of the mare that echoes the portrayal of the lustful female horse by thirteenth-century encyclopaedists. Mares are described as capable of sexual desire. And, according to Guillaume, the fulfilment of that desire is an essential condition for the pregnancy to be successful. This could reflect an application of Galen's theory on sexuality (second century CE) to female horses, considering that they play a part in the conception of the foal just as much as the stallion: indeed, Galen believed that women possessed internal testicles.⁴⁵ At any rate, the mare is considered by Guillaume as an independent being with a will of her own that must be respected.

Another of Guillaume's additions is a trick to facilitate the covering of the mare using the juice of *squille* (fol. 6v), which he describes as a herb but is actually a type of shrimp. This passage is originally found in the Latin author Varro: "si fastidium saliendi est, scillae medium conterunt cum aqua ad mellis crassitudinem: tum ea re naturam equae, cum menses ferunt, tangunt"⁴⁶ [if the copulation is difficult, shrimps are crushed with water until they have the consistency of honey: then the vulva of the mare is touched with that thing, when her menstruations happen.] Had Guillaume direct access to Varro's text? Or did he use quotations found in other treatises, such as Pietro de Crescenzi's *Opus ruralium commodorum*, which used Varro as a source? The mistake in the description of the *squille* could indicate the latter. Interestingly, Guillaume recommends the use of this trick if the mare is unwilling: "se la jument ne veult souffrir l'estallon"⁴⁷ [if the mare will not suffer the stallion]. This gives the mare

⁴⁴ BnF, MS fr. 1287, fol. 6^v.

⁴⁵ Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages*, 51.

⁴⁶ Varron, *De l'Agriculture, Livre II*, in *Les Agronomes Latins, Caton, Varron, Columelle, Palladius, avec la traduction en français*, ed. M. Nisard (Paris: Dubochet, 1864), 120.

⁴⁷ BnF, MS fr. 1287, fol. 6^v.

more agency than in the Latin original where it is not specifically stated that it is her unwillingness that hinders the mating.

Guillaume de Villiers was a marshal and farrier practising in rural Normandy.⁴⁸ This context differs from the chivalric one which was the background for the original Latin text of the *De medicina equorum*. The non-military situation is hinted at in the first chapter on the birth of the foal, where Guillaume makes the following statement about the mare:

Et gardez bien que quant la jument sera prains qu'elle ne soit point fort travailler pour faire chevauche ne pour trop grant faiz ne pour estre mise en estroit lien car toutes cestes choses pourroient faire avorter la jument et fuir le poulain ou ventre.⁴⁹

[And be careful that when the mare is pregnant, she should not be worked too much to be ridden or to carry burdens or tied tightly, because all those things could make the mare abort and the foal escape from her womb.]

No such indication about not overworking the pregnant mare is originally given by Rufus. Indeed, it would not have been relevant to his treatise: in the military context of a royal stud, mares were solely used for breeding. Destriers and palfreys were always uncastrated male horses. Most authors, such as Albertus Magnus, refer to riding horses as male, be they stallions or geldings: “bellicorum autem equorum est non castrari” (warhorses must not be castrated), “palefridorum [...] est non castrari ne effeminentur” [palfreys must not be castrated, so as not to become feminine], “currilium equorum [...] castrantur” (coursers must be castrated).⁵⁰ It is interesting that castration is denigrated as making horses too feminine: once more, unadulterated maleness appears as an essential quality in the most highly valued horses of the elite. In his treatise, Rufus declares that the stallion used for breeding should be kept carefully and not overworked: “mes li estalons doit estre gardez diligentment de chevaucher et de labour”⁵¹ [but the stallion must not be ridden or worked]. In Guillaume’s text, the mention of the mare as a potential riding or working horse is at variance with this but it is not surprising: it reflects the realities of daily life in a non-elite context where any horse needed to have a practical use, regardless of gender.

The necessity of advising against overworking pregnant mares implies that riding them was, if not usual, at least done. Again, in a context where horses were essential tools, it would be quite logical, if dangerous for the mare’s well-being and for the health of the foetus. Though this well-being is taken into account by Guillaume, he was probably more concerned with the welfare of the foal and the economic consequences of its potential loss. Even though the rural context implies that there would not have been the same dynamics of importation and selection of the sire and

⁴⁸ Yvonne Poulle-Drieux, “La Médecine des chevaux ou « Maréchalerie » dans l’Occident Latin au Moyen-Age,” *Bulletin de la société française d’histoire de la médecine et des sciences vétérinaires* 7 (2007): 12.

⁴⁹ BnF, MS fr. 1287, folio 6^v.

⁵⁰ Albertus Magnus, *De Animalibus libri XXVI nach Kölner Urbschrift*, 1378.

⁵¹ BnF, MS fr. 25341, fol. 1^r.

dam as in a princely stud, the foal would still be precious as a working or riding horse, maybe all the more so since the owner of the mare may have had just one horse available. The economic consequences of losing of a few months of work from the mare are weighed against those of losing the foal. Was the marshal's advice followed or were the pregnant mares worked regardless? As in Rufus's text, the foal is assumed to be male, due to the use of the masculine to describe him. In the *De medicina equorum*, it is because he is destined to become a warhorse. In Guillaume's treatise, this use of the masculine may have been copied regardless of whether it reflected real-life practices. Given that this text was applied in a rural or agricultural context where mares were potentially ridden, it is possible that here the training method he describes could have been applied to female horses as well and that the young horse could have been a filly. This shows the gap between theory and practice and gives a glimpse into the real world where mares were treated as useful animals, rather than literary representations of femininity.

IV. A Ridden Mare in Literature: The Example of the *Roman d'Alexandre*

Be it in encyclopaedias or in veterinary treatises, the perception of mares was conflicted. It was also the case of their use: though in elite settings they were mostly valued for breeding, they were ridden in other contexts. Mares as riding horses sometimes appear in literature: one makes a cameo in the *Roman d'Alexandre* by Alexandre de Paris (c. 1180). Wanting to play a trick on his enemy, Porus, Alexander disguises himself, changing his clothes and replacing his destrier, Bucephalus, by a mare:

Montés est Alixandre, au marchié veut aller
 De sor une jument, nus hom ne vit sa per.
 N'estoit noire ne blanche ; ne vos sai deviser
 De quel poil ert la beste, onques ne sot ambler.
 Qant li rois fu dessus et il s'en veut torner,
 El n'ala mie avant, ains prist a reculer.
 Des espérons la fiert li rois qui tant fu ber,
 Et ele commença molt fort a regiber,
 En travers a saillir et des piés a geter.
 « Comment ! dist Alixandres, dont ne voit ele cler ?
 –Oïl, dient si home, mais ele veut jouer. »⁵²
 [Wanting to go to market, Alexander is riding
 A mare, of which men never saw the like.
 She was neither black nor white; and I cannot tell you
 What colour her coat was, and she could not amble.
 When the king is on her and wants to turn,
 She does not go forward and starts to go backwards.
 The king spurs her on,

⁵² Alexandre de Paris, *Le Roman d'Alexandre*, 390–392.

And she starts to balk strongly,
Jumping to the side and kicking out.
“Why!” says Alexander, “doesn’t she see clearly?”
“She does,” say his men, “but she wants to play.”]

In this passage, the mare is described as the total opposite of the ideal horse. First, because she is female. Then, because she is not well-trained: she cannot amble, she does not know how to respond to the spurs and does the opposite of what Alexander asks of her. Her colour is also indefinite, unlike the destriers who appear in the text and are often associated with a specific colour, such as, for instance “el cheval noir que on claime Pierne”⁵³ [the black horse that is called Pierne]. She has no name either, contrary to many of the warhorses. Yet, her very inappropriateness makes her the ideal accomplice for Alexander’s trick: the noble Bucephalus would not have been the right mount to take part in what is a form of treachery. The gender reversal of the king’s horse echoes Alexander’s disguise and his transition from hero to trickster. It paints the whole scene, and Alexander’s character, in a negative light. The mare’s behaviour also ties in with the portrayal of female horses in encyclopaedias: it is characterised by dissimulation and opposition to men.

At first glance, this unnamed mare is the opposite of Bucephalus who, for medieval authors, represented the ideal warhorse, due to his exclusive loyalty towards his master.⁵⁴ However, she is not so much his opposite as his negative, female counterpart. This can be shown by the description of Bucephalus before his taming:

Or n’a en tout le siecle cheval issi felon.
Onques hom ne vit beste de la sieue façon :
Les costés a bauçans et fauve le crepon,
La queue paonnace, faite par divison,
Et la teste de buef et les ieus de lion
Et le cors de cheval, por ç’a Bucifal non.⁵⁵
[There has never been such a ferocious horse,
No man has ever seen such a beast:
His flanks piebald, his rump dun,
His tail is divided like that of a peacock,
And he has the head of an ox, the eyes of a lion
And the body of a horse, which is why he is called Bucephalus.]

Both horses are introduced by the statement that no one has ever seen the like of them. The mare has no colour; Bucephalus has too many. The mare refuses to obey men; Bucephalus, on his part, devours humans and is fed prisoners and criminals by Philip, Alexander’s father. Before his taming, he is a monster, because of his appearance and because of his anthropophagous tendencies. The portrayal of the

⁵³ Ibid. 336.

⁵⁴ Brunetto Latini, *Li Livres dou tresor*, 239: “Bucifalas d’Alixandre [...] puis que li rois i monta, il ne daigna que ame dou monde i montast, ne chevauchast” [Alexander’s Bucephalus, after the king had got on him, he refused that anyone in the world should mount on him or ride him.]

⁵⁵ Alexandre de Paris, *Le Roman d’Alexandre*, 98.

mare echoes his, especially since she is, given her behaviour, an untamed horse, or at least an insufficiently trained one. They are both, in a sense, wild. And though Alexander manages to tame Bucephalus, the mare goes on resisting him. She does not recognise him as her master. His inability to make her do what he wishes could be a reflection of the fact that she is not a fitting horse for him. Due to what is portrayed as her guileful, feminine nature, control over her will go on evading him.

However, if this mare contrasts so sharply with all the other horses in the romance, it is not only because her description is longer than any of theirs, except Bucephalus's, but also because of her striking independence. Her quirks mean that she has more personality than any of the other horses, including Bucephalus after his taming when he acquires the behaviour that is expected of a good destrier. Once he has been broken-in, Bucephalus loses what had made up his individuality in favour of becoming a physical prolongation of Alexander. Knight and destrier become one body, and the objectives and goals of the rider become that of the horse as well. In an untamed or badly trained horse those objectives would be conflicted. Only by the subjugation of the horse's personality to that of his rider can their unique relationship be expressed.

The last sentence of the mare's description is the most striking: when Alexander tries to explain her behaviour by a physical complaint, his men retort that she wants to play. The first conclusion Alexander comes to, supposing that she might be blind could reflect a refusal to subject her to anthropomorphism. It could be linked to denial, on the part of Alexander who cannot believe that a horse would willingly resist him. Though he was able to tame the anthropophagous Bucephalus, he is unable to make the mare do what he wants. Unlike the destrier, she refuses to recognise Alexander as her master. The soldiers' statement that she wants to play gives her agency. The mare acts in the way she does, not because of external factors, not even because of her nature, but because she chooses to. Again, this fits in with the general portrayal of mares as having a will of their own and being capable of taking independent decisions, especially when those decisions are contrary to men's plans for them.

Was there a grudging admiration for this independence? Were, in the context of breeding, some mares valued because they had a rebellious streak? One of the specificities of the medieval Western European attitude towards horses is the importance given to the wild horse in the context of breeding and training. Not only were many horses kept in feral, or semi-feral conditions,⁵⁶ but the training advocated by Jordanus Rufus focussed on a wild, two or three-year-old foal. In the anthropomorphised portrayal of the horse, the wildness became an aggressive bravery in the case of male destriers. In the case of mares, it could have been a reflection of their rebellious independence. This temperament could have been prized as it could have been transmitted to their offspring, making them aggressive enough to be good warhorses.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Gladitz, *Horse Breeding in the Medieval World*.

V. Mares in Financial Records: A Glimpse of the Real Animals?

Due to their ambiguous portrayal and to the almost exclusive focus on male horses in chivalric context, medieval mares can appear to be rather elusive, the real animal disappearing behind the literary one, her portrayal, whether positive or negative, always being symbolically charged. However, the real animals sometimes appear in the list of horses found in financial records, such as the ones for the royal stables of Charles VI of France (1368-1422). The accounts for the year 1400, for instance, enumerates the horses bought at the fair of Compiègne, the fair of Lendit, and in Paris.⁵⁷ The horses bought in Paris, from a dealer called Huguenin de Bezon, are exclusively *coursiers* (coursers, maybe used for hunting, battle, tournament, racing, or travel), costing between 120 and 200 *livres tournois*, and all male. The horses bought at the Compiègne and Lendit fairs are mostly male as well, and *roncins* (rounceys).

There appear to be a few female horses, designated under the term *haguenee*. *Haguenee*, or *haquenée*, is a term generally understood to designate a small ambling horse or mare, destined for women.⁵⁸ Its use is attested from 1340 and it is believed to come from the English “hackney.”⁵⁹ It is a gendered word, as shown by its later, derivative use to designate an ugly woman or a courtesan.⁶⁰ In the case of the financial record studied here, it is probable that the term was used to designate female horses, possibly also smaller and lighter than the *roncins*, the latter word being applied to male riding and working horses. Indeed, though the term *haquennée/haguenee* was ultimately used to designate lighter, often ambling, horses and mares, it was originally applied to female horses only, possibly imported from England.⁶¹ The word would later have been applied to the offspring of those mares and, after a few generation of those offsprings been applied to both males and females.⁶² The presence of the word in the accounts corresponds to a relatively early occurrence of it; therefore it is likely that its original meaning justified its use. Four of these *haguenees* were bought from a merchant called Perrin Pinçon, for prices between 45 *livres tournois* and 100 *écus*, one was bought from Baudequin Senalart for 90 *écus*, and one was bought from Hennequin Yonquerot for 85 *livres tournois*. Another of the horses, described by the term *galee* also appears to be female and was bought from Jossequin Le Begue for 120 *écus*. This term is a perplexing one. Its meaning in Middle French is that of a ship or vessel.⁶³ As such, it would not be improbable if, in the event of this word not being the result of a copying mistake, it was used to designate a pregnant mare. Five of the seven potentially female horses are described as being some shade of bay, one is black and one is piebald.

⁵⁷ *Comptes de l'Ecurie du roi Charles VI (Vol.2). Le registre KK 35 des archives nationales (1399-1404 et 1411-1413)* ed. Claude Billaud, (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 1996), 97-107.

⁵⁸ <http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/haquenée>.

⁵⁹ <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/haquen%C3%A9e>.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ Philippe Contamine, "Le cheval « noble » aux XIVe-XVe siècles : une approche européenne," in *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 152e année, N. 4 (2008), 1722.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ <http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/galée1>.

Female horses represent 11% of the 65 horses bought that year at the fairs. This small proportion highlights the importance of male horses as riding and working horses in the context of the royal studs. Though mares are a minority, the prices paid for them are not lower than the ones paid for the male horses. For instance, in the lot of male and female horses bought from Perrin Pinçon, the highest price, of 100 *écus*, was paid for a mare, and the lowest, 40 *écus*, for a male rouncey. Like the rounceys, the *baguenees* were destined for different members of the court. One was given to the archbishop of Besançon, another to the Dauphin. Two of them were destined for ladies, Madame de Malicorne and Marguerite, dame de Chateaux, perhaps to be riding horses, as the original meaning of *baguenee* suggests. It is possible that the mares given to men would have been used for breeding. This could explain some of the high prices: it would have been even more important to choose high quality animals who would pass on desirable physical or temperamental traits to their offspring. The age of the animals may have played a role in the prices: older mares, who could be proven good breeders, may have been valued more. Indeed, though riding or working horses would have needed to be young enough to have several years of usefulness left in them, older mares may have been privileged due to the fact that neonatal mortality is higher in the offspring of younger mares.⁶⁴ Loosing young foals would have represented a great economic loss, whether because the mother had had to be kept off work, or because of the financial investment in the breeding – from the importation of the stallion, for instance, to the building of the right infrastructure, in the case of royal and princely studs.

Unlike literary sources which give a subjective portrayal of mares to highlight a certain perception of femininity, financial records such as Charles VI's, in their dryness, allow for a more objective view. The horses are not judged for their gender. Nothing is mentioned about their temperament. Only their price gives an indication of the value attributed to them, but in the absence of more details about the age or conformation of the animals, it is difficult to determine what explains it. At any rate, gender probably did not play an essential role. The similar prices reached by *roncins* and *baguenees* can further confirm that, in the case of those specific accounts the words were used to designate two genders of similar type of horse. Though the use of male and female horses differed, their importance in breeding was the same and a good mare would have been valued accordingly. Moreover, the reliance on the mares in the context of breeding could have been part of what prompted so much speculation on their sexuality and morality. None of this appears to have had much influence when it came to simply buying the mares. The small number of mares being bought, in the 1400 accounts, contrasting with what would have been a numerical superiority in the studs themselves, could signify that unlike working rounceys that would be used and replaced at a relatively quick rate, the female breeding stock would remain relatively stable. The size of a herd is reliant on the number of females, not males, since it is the female that have the capacity to produce more livestock. Therefore, there would be higher demand for mares, increasing their price. When quality mares had been found, they would not be replaced. This could also explain why the

⁶⁴ Waring, *Horse Behavior (Second Edition)*, 316.

numbers of mares being brought — and maybe circulating in the horse fairs and markets — is lower than the number of male horses. And if their use was only for breeding, it would also mean that their career would be less likely to come to an end due to injuries, for instance, or due to being overworked, thus eliminating the need to find replacements.

Despite the lack of details, the life and history of the animal herself can sometimes be glimpsed in the dry descriptions accompanying the lists. The accounts of Charles VI of France mention, in the year 1401, the acquisition of a black mare bearing on her rump the scar of a wolf's bite:

A Perrin Pinçon (...) une haguenee noire longue queue, une morseure de
leu en la fesse

250 escuz

Baillee pour le Roy par cedula donnee IIIIe de juillet CCCC et I, signee
Canteleu⁶⁵

[To Perrin Pinçon, a black mare with a long tail, a wolf's bite on her rump
250 ecus

Presented to the king according to the notification given on 4 July 1401,
signed Canteleu]

Not only did this mare cost more than double the price of any of the four other horses, whose prices ranged from 70 to 100 *écus*, bought from this seller, but she is the only one to have been destined for the king: the others, two males and two females, were all given to different courtiers. It can be assumed that she joined a stud and was used for breeding. The story that can be glimpsed through the description of her scar is intriguing. She had obviously been attacked by a wolf, from behind, and survived. This could have happened because she was an *equa sylvestris* (forest mare) kept in feral conditions, like many horses all over Western Europe.⁶⁶ She could have fought a wolf to protect her offspring. The attack may have been witnessed and men may then have taken the time to treat her wounds and help her heal. At any rate, this defect – which might have only been cosmetic but might also have altered her gaits, depending on the severity of the injury – was not detrimental to her sale. It is tempting to think that the story of her fight with the wolf was used as a selling point and explained both her high price and the fact that she was destined for the king himself. There could be two reasons behind the positive light in which the encounter with the wolf is seen. One is that if she fought the wolf to protect her foal, it means that she was a good mother, which is what was expected of a mare. The second is that her behaviour would have been associated with courage: men then could have hoped that she would pass on this trait to her future colts. If that is the case, the story of this mare could tie in with the ferocious independence, eliciting grudging admiration, shown by the mare from the *Roman d'Alexandre*.

⁶⁵ *Comptes de l'Ecurie du roi Charles VI (Vol.2). Le registre KK 35 des archives nationales (1399-1404 et 1411-1413)*, 136.

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Gladitz, *Horse Breeding in the Medieval World*.

There is, in Albertus Magnus's text, a small reference to mares' attitudes when confronted with signs of a wolf: "eua praegnans si super vestigia lupi incesserit, irascetur"⁶⁷ [if a pregnant mare walks over the tracks of a wolf, she will be angry]. Here again, motherhood is linked to aggression. The verb *irascor* anthropomorphises the mare by assimilating her behaviour to a human one. The origins of this statement probably lie in the empirical observation of the reaction of horses when confronted with traces of a predator. It is interesting that it is specifically associated to pregnant mares, as if their impending motherhood was justification enough for this attitude. The assimilation of their attitude to anger could imply that the men believed pregnant mares would actually fight wolves — like Charles VI's black mare. Though they are sometimes perceived in a negative light, mares are described as capable of courage, just like the destriers, perhaps because, at times, the value attributed to horses in general transcends their gender differences, though at others, those differences are insisted upon, as if to mirror those between humans.

VI. Conclusion

Mares appear to represent, for the male medieval authors who anthropomorphised them, all that is ambiguous and difficult to grasp in femininity itself. They are an image of ideal motherhood, making them fitting mates for chivalrous destriers. But they are also highly sexualised and sexually active beings, treated with a mixture of wariness and discomfort. Like Eve, they can become temptresses, bringing destriers, and the knights riding them, to their downfall. This ambiguity also appears in veterinary treatises. While the *De medicina equorum* only focusses on mares in the context of breeding, reinterpretations of the text in a rural, rather than elite, context, as is the case in Guillaume de Villiers's treatise, are not so clear-cut and give a glimpse of mares being ridden and worked, just like any other horse, the care he advises be taken of them reflecting their value. This value, linked to their importance in breeding, influences their portrayal in other sources: though male destriers were described as brave and loyal, a courageous temperament was also valued in mares, probably in the hope that it would be transmitted to their offspring. Mares could be portrayed as demonstrating a striking independence of spirit, grudgingly admired by the authors.

The ambiguous description of female horses may have been influenced by male authors' vision of femininity itself: the complexity of their portrayal reflects that of the authors' attitude towards women in general. This shows that the medieval perception of mares is even more multifaceted than that of male horses. Like them, they are anthropomorphised but their animality and their instincts — represented, for instance, by the focus on lust or by their attachment to their foal — are more present than in destriers: in the case of the latter, efforts are made to erase their animality by giving them human moral standards. This process is not so obvious in the case of mares, who are characterised by duality, and sometimes even by treachery. They are animals, they are female, and as such they escape the grasp men would have

⁶⁷ Albertus Magnus, *De Animalibus libri XXVI nach Kölner Urschrift*, 1400.

on them, in literary descriptions and in real life. The practical treatment of female horses might have been as complex. In Guillaume's treatise, they are indeed apprehended with a mixture of care and caution. In Rufus's, they do not raise much interest. Otherwise, textual sources do not give sufficient information. More clues could be gathered by zooarchaeology: do the osseous remains of horses identified as female show signs of work or of having been well fed? Interdisciplinary research could prove to be a fruitful avenue for future works on the subject of mares.

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