

# Riding out the Plague Years with Eroika

Cyborgs, Goddesses, and the Reparative Force of Big Mare  
Energy

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## Abstract

Can BME (Big Mare Energy) be a Reparative force to help us become more comfortably present in female bodies (cyborg, goddess, human, nonhuman) that exist in space across time, recognizing that some limitations open new avenues for growth that moves beyond a hermeneutics of suspicion even if you are nervous and touchy? This personal narrative about a middle-aged Victorianist and a middle-aged Lipizzaner mare pays tribute to Donna Haraway, Vicki Hearne, Eve Sedgwick et. al as it tries to disentangle the blurred lines between gender and species, sex, biology, and society in seeking a feminism for plain ordinary creatures occupied with mud and manure during a time of profound global upheaval.

**Keywords:** mares, gender, COVID-19, Haraway, menopause

*for Gala Argent, the loveliest embodiment of Big Mare Energy*

I think we learn to be worldly from grappling with, rather than generalizing  
from, the ordinary. I am a creature of the mud, not the sky.

– Donna Haraway

During the plague years, we were out of time but rooted in space. An entire planet on stall rest tormented by restrictions on movement and forced separation from the herd, euphemistically described as social distancing.

A boastful few learned a new language, mastered the crust-to-crumbs ratio on a baguette, and wrote that Great American novel. Most languished in a listlessness behaviorists call learned helplessness as we zoomed until our eyes ached. We cribbed, we weaved, we doomscrolled into the helpless and hopeless passivity that will take years to break.

As the lockdowns went on, mourning became melancholia – the distinction for Freud being that the latter was gripped with fear of punishment. In the US, Fauci became the law of the father who meted it out. Fights raged over mask mandates, school closures, church attendance, and family funerals. A new cultural mode took over, a bizarre shift where we saw paranoia writ large on an entire world. Such distrust frequently sprang from profound sorrow; I certainly grieved losing the energetic community found in the humanities seminars I have had the pleasure of teaching over the last couple of decades.

Fortunately, I quarantined with Great Danes, Baroque horses, and hundreds of books on 10.21 acres. Our backyard abutted thousands of acres in the Hoosier National Forest, home to deer, wild turkeys, raccoons, bobcats, and, if a few locals are to be believed, Bigfoot. We were a feral lot, and days stretched into weeks where my only physical contact was the leaning in of an immense dog, a bump from a horse asking for a carrot, or the weight of a well-worn book on my lap.

No doubt it was a tumultuous moment for all, but I felt anger at restrictions placed on the young bodies of my students, robbed of expressing their animal vitality, transformed into passive cyborgs on TikTok or Zoom School, which has left too many more anxious and less curious than ever before. They could not even share the joys of the typical freshman's rite of passage: congregating at large tables over cafeteria food. Everywhere, the companionship from sharing a meal in public spaces was broken. We were divided by plastic shields or dutifully removed, then replaced masks that camouflaged our faces.

Gratefully, I never ate alone in my little yellow home, a word-encompassing library, kennel, and stable in my idea of family. Contemplating the meaning of companion species led to revisiting dog-eared copies of authors who previously challenged everything I had thought about the world in graduate school: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Vicki Hearne, and particularly Donna Haraway, who was sometimes friend and other times frenemy.<sup>1</sup> 'Companion', she reminds us, 'comes from the Latin *cum panis*, with bread'. I heartily laugh

1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pioneered queer readings of Gothic and Victorian literature. Poet, philosopher, and horse/dog trainer Vicki Hearne revolutionized how we think about animals and language. Feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway challenged patriarchal conceptions

when Haraway observes that messmates ‘at table are companions’ as I hear echoes of her own messy boundary crossings – culinary and other – with her beloved bitch Cayenne Pepper.<sup>2</sup> I have shared the same apple bite for bite with my proud Lipizzaner mare, Eroika, under the mulberry tree more than once, polishing off saliva with a sweat-stained shirt after one too many imperfect circles for her liking or had Piper, an elegant fawn Great Dane who is the canine embodiment of Elle Woods, stick her nose into the front seat of the car politely demanding her share of whatever the drive-thru had to offer. Like Haraway, I see *species* as both the ‘relentlessly “specific” or particular and to a class of individuals with the same characteristics’ that ‘contains its own opposite in the most promising – or special – way’ as debates about whether they are ‘earthly organic entities or taxonomic conveniences are coextensive with the discourse we call biology’ or ‘the dance linking kin and kind’.<sup>3</sup>

We part ways as Haraway sees the Latin *specere* as part of the visual rather than the gustatory register that grounds *cum panis* since it has tones of ‘to look’ and ‘to behold’. She argues it ‘refers to a mental impression or idea, strengthening the notion that thinking and seeing are clones’.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, Haraway’s contemplation of the visual register spends too much time in the company of Derrida and his cat, who never exists beyond haecceity in ‘And Say the Animal Responded’.<sup>5</sup> Derrida’s desire to deconstruct the Cartesian distinction between bestial reaction and linguistic response is sidetracked by an anxious focus on his nudity in the bathroom encounter with the little feline. Ultimately, the philosopher seems more interested in occupying the to-be-looked-at-ness easily recognizable by any female who lived her life under the watchful state of men from her first blossoming into puberty into her last metamorphosis into a potentially blissful post-menopausal invisibility (the former was so exhausting). Your gaze, the philosopher appears to say to the little cat, hits the side of my face.<sup>6</sup> More than a parody of Barbara Kruger’s iconic piece that superimposes gendered

of objectivity and fundamentally what it means to be human in a rapidly shifting world of technological advance.

2 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 17.

3 *Ibid.*, 17.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Jacques Derrida, “And Say the Animal Responded,” in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Carey Wolfe (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

6 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*, 1981. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

language about the nature of looking over the profile view of a statue of a classically beautiful woman, the encounter lacks the fundamental curiosity between one old man and his little cat – preferring the philosophical to the sentimental stereotypically associated with doting middle-aged women.

John Berger might have been a better ally for urgent work that, in Haraway's words, 'still remains to be done about those who inhabit the troubled categories of woman and human, properly pluralized, reformulated, and brought into constitutive intersection with other asymmetrical differences'.<sup>7</sup> Berger's groundbreaking BBC documentary *Ways of Seeing* was adapted into a little book in 1972 that was the seed of feminist film theory. What strikes me as relevant are the parallels drawn between structures of looking, women, and animals. One need not be a horse lover to note that their beautiful bodies are a significant part of artistic expression globally. Like the female, they symbolize desire and possession – the asymmetries of how beautiful things became the property of powerful men (and sometimes powerful women).

Less distance exists between ways of seeing for Haraway and Cayenne Pepper as both share the look of the predator, whose eyes set in the front of the skull permit a laser as they pursue the sport of agility with the carnivorous call to Shut Up and Train! It is not as if Haraway is unaware that being 'a middle-aged white woman with a dog playing the sport of agility' can be problematic vis-à-vis the increasing focus on intersectionality her *Cyborg Manifesto* engaged with decades ago, nevertheless she persists in sharing what she has learned with/from this brilliant Aussie bitch.<sup>8</sup> What is glorious about her worldview is that she sees situated knowledges as a multispecies epistemology that acknowledges that ethical relations can co-exist despite power imbalances! Accepting these contact zones as messy affairs that leave all involved forever changed, sometimes for the worse ('full of waste, cruelty, indifference, and loss') and often for the better ('joy, invention, labor, intelligence, and play') is the first step in learning how to 'narrate this cohistory and how to inherit the consequences of coevolution in naturecultures'.<sup>9</sup> I would humbly like to follow Donna and Cayenne Pepper to contemplate what ways of seeing between a woman and mare might offer a feminism for plain ordinary creatures occupied with mud and manure as we play in the pasture and dressage arena.

7 Haraway, *When Species*, 17.

8 Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 103.

9 Ibid.

Eroika, like other herbivores, is a prey animal with eyes set on the side of her skull, permitting an almost 360° range of vision to see the approach of danger. My predator's eyes are set in the front, allowing greater depth perception.<sup>10</sup> If ways of seeing and thinking are indeed clones, how do predator and prey find an ethical interspecies look? Exuberantly, Haraway answers the 'lovely part is that we can only know by looking and looking back. *Respecere*, a possibility strengthened because women and girls inhabit a hybrid status between predator and prey that culture has repressed but not eradicated'.<sup>11</sup> Many women have wished they had eyes in the back of their heads as they walked down a lonely street. Many a mare would like their own Barbara Kruger moment where her rider looks her respectfully in the eye! What does Eroika see when she looks at me? I hope this middle-aged woman can live with the answer.

I first read Haraway in a cubicle at the Herman B. Wells library in Bloomington, Indiana, when texts were on reserve as emailed PDFs were not yet available. Being in Comparative Literature, I was bombarded by "theory": Lacan, Foucault, Baudrillard, Kristeva, Butler, and others. My enthusiasm for these new ideas did not extend to Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*.<sup>12</sup>

Although Haraway was certainly not the only one to challenge 'woman' as a category, her manifesto rubbed me the wrong way: 'There is nothing about being female that naturally binds women together into a unified category. There is not even such a state as "being" female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices'.<sup>13</sup> Part of this disdain lacked intellectual rigour. How could anyone who had recently seen James Cameron's *Terminator 2* embrace the cyborg as the symbol of female liberation? Arnold Schwarzenegger's sympathetic reprisal of the T-800 sacrificing himself on the altar of humanity did not assuage the fear inspired by the absolutely heartless T-1000. For me, it was Linda Hamilton's Sarah Conner who stole the show. The full-screen image of a muscle-bound woman clad in a wife-beater doing pull-ups in her locked room in the insane asylum (Cyborg eradicator meets Victorian

10 Sally Swift, *Centered Riding* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985). Swift's fans will nod their heads along, saying yes: SOFT EYES is the attempt to bridge this divide as we mount up!

11 Haraway, *When Species*, 164.

12 Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, 13. As a lonely child in a disordered family who found friendship with four-legged friends sacred, I was deeply troubled by statements like this: 'The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling. Bestiality has a new status in this cycle of marriage exchange'.

13 *Ibid.*, 16.

Angel in the House sans yellow wallpaper) is forever emblazoned on my psyche. She is a MOTHER writ large who hardens herself into the warrior needed to protect her son and Earth (in that order). It is the same image of a particularly feminine strength that fuels my admiration for Eroika: the challenge to essentialist notions of female as *only* prey. Haraway wanted the cyborg to be 'a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves', yet deconstructing dualism is not so easy in a world of goddesses and cyborgs as Haraway later realizes as she comes under the sway of the Animal Turn.<sup>14</sup> Although recognizing 'both are bound in the spiral dance', she unequivocally chooses sides in one of the most famous utterances of theory: 'I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess'.<sup>15</sup> In her zeal to undermine the gender binary via the cyborg, Haraway had not yet anticipated all of the ways her anti-essentialism might ultimately harm the 'goddesses' aligned with female nature she prematurely repudiates.

Even if I concede #notallwomen #notallmares, does that preclude that some category exists that is useful for understanding shared experiences across a large enough sample? Can we still recognize the importance of social construction and intersectionality while acknowledging that there is something recognizably female about women and mares?

Due to my abiding interest in Victorian Studies, I need no reminder of the horrors of biological determinism vis-à-vis race, class, and gender. Random primary documents from medical practitioners declaring that study or exertion interfered with the fragile mind of the female (woman as breeding animal) scared the daylights out of me as much as the casual racism that could even be found in a friendly letter between Charles Darwin and Charles Kingsley (author of *The Water Babies*) calmly discussing racial genocide.<sup>16</sup> Please bear this in mind as you read the critique of sex positive feminism that is to come. As we navigate ourselves out of the complications of this new excess predicted by Erica Jong's 1973 bestseller *Fear of Flying*, celebrating anonymous sex (the 'zipless f\*ck' as the epitome of

14 Ibid., 67.

15 Ibid., 68.

16 For a complex discussion of women as breeding animals in Victorian art, science, and literature, see Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). The chapter entitled 'Evolution and the Brain' particularly surveys the problematic discourse about gender, monstrosity, and maternity. The correspondence between Charles Darwin and Charles Kingsley where the former exclaimed 'It is very true what you say about the higher races of men, when high enough, replacing & clearing off the lower races. In 500 years how the Anglo-Saxon race will have spread & exterminated whole nations; & in consequence how much the Human race, viewed as a unit, will have risen in rank' can be found at <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-3439.xml>.

enlightenment), it is vitally important to not return to a world where the fate of Victor Hugo's fictional Fantine is all too real – where punishment for a young woman enjoying her sexuality led to exile or worse.<sup>17</sup> Never forget Mary Wollstonecraft's suicide attempt failed because suicides such as pregnant unmarried women drowning themselves were so common men with boats were paid to drag them out (no other care for child or mother came once they were back on shore).<sup>18</sup> Remember when Susan Sontag had an illegal abortion, the doctor turned up the radio to drown out her screams instead of providing pain relief.<sup>19</sup> Recall that as the keynote for the Taking Nature Seriously conference, even a would-be cyborg like Haraway was reminded that 'she was a woman [...] something class and color privilege bonded to professional status can mute' after being subjected to the fantasy of her 'own public rape by name in a pamphlet distributed by a small group of self-identified deep ecology, anarchist activists'.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, we cannot socially construct our female bodies out of sometimes being prey. Nevertheless, I would still rather be a goddess than a cyborg.

I am not thinking of Aphrodite or Athena. It is Epona, the Great Mare so like my own, who evokes a regal female power too majestic to be hobbled by misogyny and too wise to repudiate her maternal and materteral roles. (Imagine a heaven where the Celtic goddess allows no one but Vicki Hearne to mount her.) I chose this path facing the final throes of my greatest physical

17 Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (New York: Signet Publishing, 1973), 417. It is worth noting that *Fear of Flying's* Isadora Wing, the Second Wave heroine who anticipates *Sex and the City's* Samantha Jones' desire to f\*ck like a man, ultimately rethinks her desire for anonymous sexual encounters after she is assaulted on a train: 'It wasn't until I was settled, facing a nice little family group – mother, daddy, baby – that it dawned on me how funny that episode had been. My zipless f\*ck! My stranger on a train! Here I'd been offered my very own fantasy. The fantasy that had riveted me to the vibrating seat of the train for three years in Heidelberg, and instead of turning me on, it had revolted me! Puzzling, wasn't it? A tribute to the mysteriousness of the psyche. Or maybe my psyche had begun to change in a way I hadn't anticipated. There was no longer anything romantic about strangers on trains'.

18 Charlotte Gordon, *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley* (Prince Frederick: Recorded Books, 2015), audiobook, 13:85. The Royal Humane Society had recently developed a policy of paying rewards to those who rescued suicides. Of course, there are a multitude of reasons for any suicide, and even Mary Wollstonecraft's were complicated by her lover's rejection as much as her being pregnant out of wedlock. Nevertheless, the social stigma on such women bore hard on even this most revolutionary of women.

19 Sophie Brickman, "Is it possible to be a mother and pursue a creative life? Yes, but it is never easy," *The Guardian*, July 6, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jul/06/mother-creative-life-abortion#:~:text=When%20Susan%20Sontag%20had,radioto%20smother%20her%20screams>.

20 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 10.

shift since puberty: fatigue, brain fog, migraines, sleeplessness, and anxiety. The tyranny of endocrinology, the oft-cruel mistress who reminds us of the veracity of Horace's decree, 'You may drive nature out with a pitchfork; she nevertheless comes back'. Yes, something primordial, even stronger than the ramifications of a global pandemic, was happening to me, and by extension of my changing body's intimacy to hers, to Eroika. Never was the fact that we were both mammals more evident than when humans were discouraged from being a herd species.

Did the pandemic allow me a more 'natural' way to experience menopause? A desire not to overburden the system coupled with a growing distrust in the contradictory messages from the Center for Disease Control removed medical discourse from the equation. I do not live outside the history of aging women, and this hinge moment let me experience my body differently when even old standards like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* seemed suspect.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, the slowing down of the great reset permitted a relaxed schedule that allowed for interruptions of hormonal rhythms: I was not compelled medically to push beyond comfortable limits into productivity even as I was experiencing the typical changes I frankly did not welcome.

At the same time, Facebook, my primary window on the outside world, began to circulate various Karen memes. As a middle-aged white woman committed to understanding social relations in an intersectional framework, I shuddered at the condescension and cruelty in many of these unfortunate interactions where the Karen wielded the privileges of race and class. Yet, sometimes, callous misogyny seemed at the heart of the encounter, with some women vilified for not defying nature and accepting the changes of time by dutifully becoming invisible (neither seen nor heard).<sup>22</sup>

Then came the mare memes; Epona's id unleashed in images of ears pinned flat with captions such as 'Mares, social distancing before it was cool' or 'Don't understand the concept of social distancing, consult a mare'. I found pure joy in looking at representations of BME (Big Mare Energy). I have no doubt if Eroika had her own social media account, she would also have delighted in mare memes.

21 Judy Norsigian and Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York: Atria Books, 2011). This updated feminist classic grew out of consciousness-raising circles in the early 1970s.

22 Margot Harris and Palmer Haasch, "Videos of people labeled Karens have flooded the internet, drawing curiosity, condemnation, and criticism. Here's how they took over our feeds during quarantine," *Business Insider*, June 2020. <https://www.insider.com/karen-compilation-timeline-white-women-racism-2020-6>.

This joy co-existed with truths I had learned in ecofeminist Julia Johnson's insightful essay 'Mareitude: Misogyny in the Horse World', which examines the 'gendered stigma in the horse world' and how 'it affects how we treat animals'.<sup>23</sup> She observes that the 'gendered oppression mares experience is enhanced due to human stereotypes linking femininity to erratic emotions', a view that played no small part in my own doctoral dissertation. Johnson persuasively analyses sexist language in veterinarian Grant Miller's online article 'Cranky Mares', which describes the 'cyclical battle to achieve harmony amid a hormonal roller coaster'.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, she sees echoes of the same wording used to market supplements such as Mare Magic and SmartMare. The latter promotes their pellets containing raspberry leaf, chamomile, and passionflower to 'help maintain a calm disposition' and 'support normal hormone levels and a balanced temperament in mares'.<sup>25</sup> These are the same herbs given to women to calm their disposition, help them sleep, and decrease their anxiety: 'There is a parallel here where women are expected to police their own hormonal expressions, leading to a kind of warped solidarity with their mares – seeing it as a normal thing to police their mare's hormones as they are expected to police their own'.<sup>26</sup> Johnson highlights the irony 'that menopausal women who suffer from biological, hormonal fluctuation and also from insults, jokes, and offensive humor regarding their midlife transition are prescribed a drug from an animal that is also *deemed* emotionally unstable'.<sup>27</sup> An activist temperament underwrites her scholarship: 'For feminism to be completely realized and implemented in our society, contemporary ecofeminists and ethicists need to examine how we treat nonhuman animals, especially female animals. Only then will both mares and women be liberated from our gender-oppressive system'.<sup>28</sup> This is a lovely sentiment, and who does not want better lives for all females, regardless of species?

I cannot pinpoint exactly when I began to doubt a perspective I had held for decades, but the shift is rooted both in knowledge that grew out of the contact zone between Eroika and me as well as my aforementioned distrust of institutions like the Center for Disease Control that developed during

23 Julia Johnson, "Mareitude: Misogyny in the Horse World," in *The Relational Horse: How Frameworks of Communication, Care, Politics, and Power Reveal and Conceal Equine Selves*, eds. Gala Argent and Jeanette Vaught et al. (Boston, MA: Brill, 2022), 132.

24 *Ibid.*, 121.

25 Quoted in Johnson, "Mareitude," 125.

26 *Ibid.*, 125.

27 *Ibid.*, 130.

28 *Ibid.*, 132–33.

the pandemic. Much of the credit for my not going absolutely mad goes to rediscovering Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Her pioneering work in Queer Theory opened stunning ways of understanding Victorian literature.<sup>29</sup> Here she was, again blowing my mind with an eerily prophetic essay about plagues and paranoia, which opens with a conversation with AIDS activist Cindy Patton:

After hearing a lot from her about the geography and economics of the global traffic in blood products, I finally, with some eagerness, asked Patton what she thought of these sinister rumors about the virus's origin. 'Any of the early steps in its spread could have been either accidental or deliberate,' she said. 'But I just have trouble getting interested in that. I mean, even suppose we were sure of every element of a conspiracy: that the lives of Africans and African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that gay men and drug users are held cheap where they aren't actively hated; that the military deliberately researches ways to kill noncombatants whom it sees as enemies; that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes. Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things – what would we know then that we don't already know?'<sup>30</sup>

Sedgwick brooded over Patton's suggestion of 'the possibility of disentangling [...] some of the separate elements of the intellectual baggage that many of us carry around under a label such as the hermeneutics of suspicion', which possess a 'stultifying side effect [...] that may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any piece of knowledge and its narratological/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller'.<sup>31</sup> Her work was an anchor at a time when I watched too many friends (left and right in that terrifying horseshoe effect) drowning in understandably paranoid responses to how they moved their bodies in the world that had some different players than the pandemic of my youth but equally tragic results. Here was Fauci again, maligned when I joined friends in Act Up at a Pride March on a hot sunny day in Atlanta in the 1980s, now the darling, then maligned again in a confusing reconfiguration of positions on the epidemiological and ideological board. Having been

29 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 818. This provocative essay launched Sedgwick into the culture wars of the early nineties.

30 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123.

31 *Ibid.*, 124.

trained in critical theory, my brain was primed to 'do my own research'. But to what effect? The growing paranoia in the world seemed as hard on the fragile immune systems of everyone suffering from disconnection as the virus we were trying to evade. Our first global experiment in sociability in the simulacrum did not go well.

I certainly could have applied this hermeneutics of suspicion to the changes in my body. What caused the fatigue I experienced after push mowing an acre or cleaned several stalls and brought down hay? What made my focus dart about reading more than a short article an act of will (shocking for a Victorianist who had loved triple-deckers her whole life)? What made my nerves vibrate at an accelerated pace when nothing was wrong? What caused mood swings even stormier than I was used to? Of course, culture plays a role in how I interpret these signs, but I cannot accept that brain fog, hot flashes, nervousness, and fatigue are just symptoms of internalized patriarchy. Even if they were, that does not help in any practical way: Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things – what would we know then that we do not already know?

Everything Johnson says is valid and yet THE central challenge of my present life IS 'to achieve harmony amid a hormonal roller coaster'. It affects everything I do, from teaching students to making spaghetti to riding my mare. When our hormonal roller coasters collide, they can be unpleasant or even dangerous. If I mentally check out, she will bolt. That is frankly terrifying. If I am in command of myself, I can sympathetically readjust the plan for our time together in sympathy with the challenges our emotions can place on our bodies so that we both have fun and get the exercise that middle-aged, grey easy keepers desperately need. If it is her turn to be the one in control, she can set the rhythm for how our arena time will go. This requires tact and understanding from both of us. Why does acknowledging these physical facts of sex and time in women and mares have to result in oppression?

Such discourse seriously troubled poet and animal trainer Vicki Hearne:

Gender theory has always been a nerve-racking business for me because whether it was the old gender theory, which is now called sexism, or the new gender theory, which is now called feminism, I keep turning out not to be a woman no matter who is doing the theorizing. I don't mean that I turn out to be a man, just not a proper sort of woman.<sup>32</sup>

32 Vickie Hearne, *Bandit: Dossier of a Dangerous Dog* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 202.

For Hearne, sexism and feminism strangle the possibility of the heroic feminine in a battle where the ideology du jour trumps the body – human and animal: Naturecultures turn on her idea of proper, which can pervert the nobility of womanhood into something sickly and, as Mary Wollstonecraft also saw it, potentially parasitical. Both of these women saw femininity as more than feelings but an embrace of the rational and the physical. The cyborg also seems to run as far as possible from the emotional life of women, perhaps fearing the stigma of sentimentality (there are so many ways for a woman to be improper).

Similarly, in the ‘Afterword’ to the rendition of her groundbreaking *Sexual/Textual Politics*, feminist philosopher Toril Moi shares that it never occurred to her to ‘take women to be the mere effects of gender discourses’ or ‘the mere victims of sexist circumstances’.<sup>33</sup> Her answer is in the remarkably clear prose of common sense in a book that grapples with the convolutions of ‘theory’:

To avoid essentialism and biological determinism, all we need to do is to deny that biology gives rise to social norms. We don’t have to claim that there are no women or that the category ‘woman’ in itself is ideologically suspect. This is not to deny that sexist try to impose all kinds of ideologies on the word ‘woman’.<sup>34</sup>

This approach to improving the daily lives of women and mares around the world is a variation on the theme of animal welfare vs. animal rights discourse. The latter always seems to demand moral purity abstractly terrific but beyond the capabilities of the current or, perhaps, any world. Consider Kari Weil’s profoundly moving discussion of Gary Francione’s call to eradicate through total reproductive control the existence of pets like dogs and cats due to their suffering.<sup>35</sup> I do not doubt that Francione’s desire to end the pain of so many animals stems from good faith, although I am sceptical of the inability to deal with the sometimes-inexplicable paradoxes of life. Dystopias are built with good intentions that have disastrously unintended consequences.

I sometimes wonder if moves to eradicate women as a category is akin to Francione’s project of the total erasure of pets as the response to end future

33 Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 177–78.

34 Ibid, 178.

35 Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), see Chapter 8, “Animal Liberation or Shameless Freedom” in particular.

harm, and it helps us understand the desire for women to evolve into cyborgs able to transcend the limits of the female body. Those whose commitment to a radical justice cannot accept that there will, to some extent, always be suffering in this world cannot abide the ‘waste, cruelty, indifference, and loss’ that too often accompany the ‘joy, invention, labor, intelligence, and play’ in the co-evolution of Companion Species.<sup>36</sup> We must fight the former without losing the ability to embrace the latter, a central feature in Sedgwick’s idea of the Reparative: ‘The desire of a reparative impulse [...] is additive and accretive. Its realistic fear is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self.’<sup>37</sup>

### Biology Is Not Destiny, But It Is Gravity.

Mary Harrington is the loudest among a growing chorus of voices sceptical of the technologies designed to defy that gravity.<sup>38</sup> Railing against what she deems the cyborg theocracy of transhumanist technologies (she uses the earlier Horace quote as an epigraph), Harrington fully sides with the goddesses, taking Artemis and one of her noble hounds as the cover image of *Feminism Against Progress*. The breadth of this ‘slightly odd *Bildungsroman*’ is stunning in its challenge to late-stage capitalism’s repetition of the Enclosure Acts on the human: ‘Up to the point where I got pregnant, I’d taken for granted the notion that men and women are substantially the same [...] and “progress” meant broadly the same thing for both sexes: the equal right to self-realization, shorn of culturally imposed obligations, stereotypes or constraints’.<sup>39</sup> With British discretion, Harrington alludes to the negative impact of a promiscuous past encouraged by sex-positive feminism in search of Erica Jong’s ‘zipless f\*ck’ as the most elusive form of enlightenment. Earlier, Katherine Dee had already warned of the ‘coming wave of sex negativity’ in a prophetic Substack entry, ‘Mark my words: Next financial crisis, we’re diving headlong into something that’s been simmering in the background since 2013–2014 [...] sex negativity’. Here are highlights from her listicle:

36 Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, 103.

37 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 132–33.

38 Mary Harrington, *Feminism Against Progress* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2023).

39 *Ibid.*, 13–14.

4. People do not want to be atomized. They do not want to be neutered. Sex dolls are unsustainable. Nobody wants this dystopia. It WILL be painted as anti-tech, but it is not necessarily “about” tech. **THIS IS THE REAL CULTURE WAR.**

11. As I have been tracking on Twitter, women like ProfitFromTrauma will become increasingly common. We have been lying and have been lied to about the realities of things like sex work.

14. New life will be breathed into traditional gender norms.<sup>40</sup>

These authors suggest there is a perverse reversal in women’s roles – at least from Wollstonecraft’s time. While many women are doing increasingly better in the public sphere –something the doctrine of separate spheres once deemed unnatural, the private sphere has become more problematic. Hook-up culture fuelled by the ubiquity of increasingly sadistic porn is something women must take seriously, as the lines between consent and coercion can be very blurred. On the other hand, the fall of *Roe v. Wade* and the subsequent battle to propose increasingly insane penalties for violating abortion restrictions is equally terrifying. As stated earlier, punishing female sexuality with the ferocity of Margaret Atwood’s Aunt Lydia is not an appealing answer either. I cannot resolve these conflicts here, and there is much work to be done with a more global scope than this essay. My small contribution is to explore what we might learn from mares to pass on to the next generation of fillies.

This might seem absurd, but stick with me. When we think of the Darwinian dictum degree, not kind, are there ways in which a woman’s hybrid prey/predator status has co-evolved with the mare to open the possibility of a Reparative take on biology linking kin and kind? Splicing the best of Haraway, Sedgwick, Hearne, and Moi into a more mindful concept of nature that categorically rejects the way biological determinism was used to exclude women from the public sphere and dominate them in the private sphere but does not reduce them to mere effects of performativity either. Moreover, it might allow us to look to the mare for something too many women still need despite decades of feminism: the ability to say no and mean it.

Naturecultures are hard to disentangle, and like Hearne, what still ‘puzzles me are the gender differences between animals and people. Consider’, she writes, ‘that a bitch [or mare] never needs to learn that she can say

40 Katherine Dee, “The Coming Wave of Sex Negativity,” <https://defaultfriend.substack.com/p/72-the-coming-wave-of-sex-negativity>.

no if she isn't in the mood, and does not need to fake orgasm, is immune to any attempts to convince her that she should or should not. Nor does she read magazine articles about how to get herself into the mood if she isn't'.<sup>41</sup> Imagine how Hearne would respond to the ways women's 'progress' has evolved from the relatively tame Helen Gurley Brown's *Cosmopolitan* into the mainstreaming of violent pornography where the unwillingness to play makes you vanilla, or worse, a bigot guilty of kink shaming if you happen to desire *not* to be strangled by a relative stranger after appetizers at Applebee's. (I refuse the euphemism choking; that is what happens when you take too big a bite, not when a typically larger predator uses his hands to cut off your air supply.)

Hearne's description of the equine sexual dance emphasizes the mare's demand for respect:

In the period where the female is becoming interesting to the male but is indifferent herself to the arrows of Eros, he makes a proper nuisance of himself, jumping about, pleading, poking, pawing at her, or dashing around splendidly with his hooves high, his nostrils flaring, and his voice reverberating, in the case of horses. And the mare says, 'Yuck! Forget it!' while turning her hind end dangerously and rejectingly rather than invitingly in his direction.<sup>42</sup>

An admiration for the mare's commitment to her own bodily autonomy also informs a similar response by Lipizzan breeder Connie Micheletti to the Frequently Asked Question 'Speaking of mares, I hear that Lipizzan mares are very difficult to train':

Mares of any breed present a greater challenge than either stallions or geldings, and with good reason. But if you understand and are considerate of the nature of a mare, you will find the rewards are great. A well-trained Lipizzan stallion or gelding will die for you, but a well-trained mare will kill for you! It is the nature of a mare to say, 'No!' and to mean it. After all, in the wild she lives with a sex mad maniac in the form of the herd stallion that's always wanting to show her his etchings. She must say no 11 months out of every year, and she must convince him that she means it. Consequently, when you train a mare, she's going to be more determined in her resistance [...] When a mare's resistance is met with patience and

41 Hearne, *Bandit*, 210–211.

42 Hearne, *Bandit*, 210.

persistence she will eventually acquiesce. The really nice thing about a mare is that once she says, 'Yes!' she means that too.<sup>43</sup>

Micheletti, a skilled horsewoman who also rode and trained to Grand Prix dressage, revolutionized the quality of the American Lipizzaner: With few staff, she managed several breeding stallions, multiple mare lines, and innumerable foals. She did warn me baby Eroika descended from a dam line who, for four generations, have been boss mares of her Oregon fields. The brilliant Lucy Rees has taught me to be sceptical about the imposition of dominance hierarchies on horses, but I cannot discount Micheletti's intimate knowledge of that proud female line.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Ro's father had enough sense of himself to perform in the quadrille at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna: In one of the most unfortunate asymmetries, this mare's nobility trumps my insignificant and insecure status as a bastard born in Carolina. She has much to teach me as I try to enter the final phase of my life with some dignity.

Someone hoping for a more comprehensive ethology of women and mares might be disappointed, but bodily autonomy is crucial to both of our flourishing. Justice, another anecdotal trait associated with mares, demands we seek cultural conditions that allow our individual natures to thrive. As we fight for reproductive rights, we must urgently interrogate not just patriarchy, but the stories feminism has told us that might not no longer serve. Can an overemphasis on social construction be dangerous? Is the 'zipless f\*ck' celebrated by sex positive feminism the height of empowerment (something no self-respecting mare would tolerate)? I am not sure, but the knowledge of the acute mental health crisis in young women is so pervasive it does not need citation. A central question I would ask is why do younger women on Tumblr and beyond feel the need to create entire identities (demisexual, asexual, etc.) that at least partly derive from the simple desire to say 'no'? Have we older mares failed in the stories we bequeathed them? Is it essential to acknowledge that most mares say what they mean and mean what they say? Is this not an admirable quality whether dealing with friends, co-workers, romantic partners, adversaries, or even cyborgs?

Perhaps it takes hinge moments in the world to shake us from what has become conventional wisdom. It did for me when Eroika became a better teacher on how to be a woman than just about any feminist text I have spent my life studying. Cayenne Pepper is probably the conduit that allowed

43 Connie Micheletti, "Frequently Asked Questions", <http://www.tackinthebox.com>.

44 Lucy Rees, *Horses in Company* (Ramsbury: Crowood Press, 1917).

Haraway to see and think about the complexities of the female in a sense that she had not embraced earlier when she leaned too heavily on social construction. Haraway tries not to disavow the cyborg, yet her animal turn seems more profound than she acknowledges. Feminist activist and scholar Sophie Lewis would agree. In her review of *Staying with the Trouble*, she laments Haraway's profound shift: "Though she started off championing the cyborgs of class struggle against the goddesses of technophobia' (her immortal closing line: 'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess'), I suspect that, now, she has gone over to the goddesses."<sup>45</sup>

And we welcome her, especially since she was one of the guides leading us to celebrate Companion Species. Once I heard her intone 'Shut up and Train', I had no doubt that she too had fallen under Hearne's spell. Few of us mere mortals who play in the mud will ever reach the physical and mental excellence Hearne required from those engaged in contact zones or the exalted compassion Sedgwick inspired comforting her friends dying of AIDS while she, like Hearne, was consumed with breast cancer – but it is the attempt that makes us more like these goddesses. Whether it was Haraway's maintaining Cayenne Pepper's focus on the teeter totter or my desire to ride a perfect volte on Eroika, we are called into a better state of femininity by these beautiful bitches and marvelous mares. As the new millennium moves farther and farther from nature, perhaps a Reparative take on essentialism might help us become more comfortably present in female bodies that exist in space and time, acknowledging that some limitations open new avenues for a different kind of growth that move beyond a hermeneutics of suspicion even if you are highly strung. For this, I can think of no better guide than goddesses endowed with Big Mare Energy.

## About the Author

**Angela Hofstetter** shares her rural home in Story, Indiana with giant dogs, plump horses, and assorted flora and fauna from the Hoosier National Forest. She received her PhD in Comparative Literature from Indiana University where she fostered a passion for novels of the long nineteenth century. A senior lecturer at Butler University, Angela's courses reflect her commitment

45 Sophie Lewis, "Chthulhu Plays No Role For Me," <https://viewpointmag.com/2017/05/08/chthulhu-plays-no-role-for-me>. This shift was a profound loss to Lewis as *The Cyborg Manifesto* had been a crucial part of her *Bildung*. Though Lewis and I have staggeringly different world views, she is a lovely writer with a compelling intellect.

to a robust intersectionality that interrogates the moral complexity of all animals – human and other. Her first-year seminar ‘Call of the Wild’ is her absolute favorite course to teach because she gets to spend an entire year with students exploring complex questions about nature, nurture, and justice.