The Social Practice of Racehorse Breeding

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that the stories that thoroughbred breeders tell about racehorse reproduction can contribute to an understanding of their ideas about relatedness between humans. It examines the thoroughbred pedigree as it is presented in the English sales catalogue as a locus of complex ideas about heredity, fertility, and procreation. It argues that resistance within the industry to new reproductive technologies, including artificial insemination, can be understood in terms of ideas about relatedness between horses and, by implication, between people. This paper is based upon extensive participant observation conducted within the horseracing industry based in the town of Newmarket, England.

Thoroughbred racehorses can run a mile in 1 minute 35 seconds and reach speeds of up to 40 miles an hour. They are the fastest breed of horse in the world, and my informants would like me to add that they are also the very best. Thoroughbreds change hands at public auction for vast sums of money. The majority are sold as unraced yearlings who will not reach the racecourse until their two-year-old season. In the absence of any racing “form,” yearlings are assessed according to their pedigree and their conformation.
The most expensive yearling ever bought was sold to Sheikh Mohammed of Dubai at Keeneland in Kentucky for $13.1 million in 1985. At the public auction held by the Keeneland Association in Kentucky in 2000, 130 yearlings were sold over three days for a total of $80,732,000. These figures represent demand at the very highest levels of the bloodstock industry, where a small number of individuals compete to buy the best-bred yearlings of the annual crop.

All modern thoroughbreds are able to trace their ancestry to one of three founding stallions, the Byerley Turk, Darley Arabian, and Godolphin Arabian. This origin story forms one of the explanations for the perceived excellence of the breed. To quote a pedigree analyst:

[T]he existence of three initial progenitors, and their continuation by not more than one progenitor each and three progenitors in all, far from being a matter of course which every student of the Thoroughbred has always taken for granted as one of the curiosities of history, is instead a dramatic punctuation of the essence of the Thoroughbred as an elite animal destined to be influenced at every stage by an amazingly small number of individuals. (Varola, 1974, p. 7)

The breeding record of the thoroughbred racehorse, *The General Studbook* (1751), claims to be the first record of any breed of any species and predates the compulsory recording of human births and deaths in England by more than 46 years (Morris 1997, p. 10). It has survived, uninterrupted and in virtually unaltered format, until the present day. The stud book is closed: Thoroughbreds are therefore born and not made.

**Method**

I work with the men, women, and animals involved in the international sport and industry of horseracing. I have conducted participant observation during the past six years within the racing industry in Newmarket, England—described by its inhabitants as the “Headquarters” of international flat racing—and in the Bluegrass of Kentucky, where the majority of the most expensive thoroughbred stallions are based. During this time, I have worked at training stables, on thoroughbred studs, at auctions, and on racecourses. I am able to ride racehorses and handle them in relative safety, a skill that has enabled me to become part of this society to a degree not easily attainable by a nonrider.
Despite its apparent orientation toward gambling, to many individuals within the industry the purpose of the spectacle of racing is to test the thoroughbred breed. The racecourse test merely establishes the relative merits of each member of each generation and thus enables decisions to be made regarding its selective breeding. Of course, this view would not be that of the small-time punter huddling under the stands on a wet Wednesday at Southwell, but it is a view supported by many of the more traditional owners, trainers, breeders, and officials in Britain. Racehorses perpetually are assessed according to their pedigrees.

Unsurprisingly, similar concerns inform ideas of human relatedness in Newmarket, as this informant makes clear: “Racing is in our blood. My father was a trainer and his father before him. My grandfather was a real stayer. I can spot a good horse a mile off and you won’t beat me in a close finish.”

The discourse of personalities in Newmarket includes both horses and humans, and the tendency to blur these categories is one of the most distinctive features of this society:

I have always been fascinated by the way—and it’s simply a habit not an insult—that racing people tend to refer to women as though they are horses. I remember once asking Fred Winter about what he thought of a certain trainer’s mistress and he replied, “Oh, she’s very moderate”. (Bernard & Dodd 1991, p. 58)

Racing people are concerned with breeding, both human and equine. Racing is also a strongly male-dominated industry. One of my informants had previously worked in the mining industry and told me that he found Newmarket slightly more chauvinistic than a coal pit in South Wales. Women in Newmarket often told me of the pressure they were under to conform to gender stereotypes, as this schoolteacher (whose husband was a stud groom) described:

I operate in the more common sphere where more or less people judge you on your own merits. But because I won’t adhere to the fixed class infrastructure I’m not accepted. Because I won’t tug my forelock. My official role is to look over the stable door and say “Ahh.” It is a sexist industry and it’s because of being a woman. I won’t stay in and answer the phone like the last two stud groom’s wives. This world isn’t like a job. It’s like a culture or a way of life.
The male dominance of this way of life can be found at all levels, except for that of the racing “lad” where industry statistics show that the number of women has finally overtaken that of men. A senior racing figure described the situation as follows:

We get quite a number of women trainers and there are no restrictions in operation. I don’t really know why there aren’t more women, they have equal opportunities. There are a lot of female administrators, 11% in the Jockey Club for example. It manifests itself more in the press room where on a day to day meeting you wouldn’t get a single girl (sic).

Not surprisingly, women who “make it” in racing are often described as unfeminine, “You wouldn’t like her one bit Rebecca, she’s a real tough old thing.” The only woman capable of short circuiting this association is the Queen. In her case, class and status “compensate” for gender.

In order to investigate these dynamics further, I shall discuss the findings of fieldwork that took place at racehorse auctions, where pedigree and breeding are of paramount importance. The best-bred racehorses will attract the highest bids. Talking to buyers and sellers about just what it meant to be “well bred” revealed concerns about horses that made sense of the concerns about humans that I have just outlined. The major thoroughbred racehorse auctions in England and the United States are held publicly at Tattersalls, Park Paddocks in Newmarket and at Keeneland in Lexington, Kentucky. Baudrillard’s (1981) argument that, “The essential function of the auction is the institution of a community of the privileged who define themselves as such by agonistic speculation upon a restricted corpus of signs” (p. 117) is graphically illustrated at the sales. The ideas of heredity expressed by this “community of the privileged” form the subject of the next section.

Results

In discussions between bloodstock professionals, relatedness amongst thoroughbreds is expressed both in human family terms and in terms of blood, presented as the substance of heredity. Thus, foals by the same dam and sire will be described as full siblings. Foals by the same dam but different sires
will be half siblings. Foals by the same sire are not identified as half siblings and so “half siblingship” has come to be identified with relatedness on the dam’s side. A stallion’s offspring will be discussed in terms of a “get,” the entirety of individuals he has “sired.”

Aside from relations modeled on human families, foals may also be, for example, “own sisters in blood” by virtue of their dams’ having been full sisters (Figure 1).

Foals may also be, for example, “Three parts brothers in blood,” as Molesnes and the bay colt below (Figure 2).

Many other calculations can be made according to which all sorts of fractional relationships in blood can be claimed. The limit to these tends to be in the third generation, after which the sales catalogue records such innocuous claims as “bred on similar lines to . . .” in order to claim a famous relative. The substance of heredity can thus be separated from the individuals who serve as its vehicles. The most expensive unraced yearlings will be those who can claim the greatest number of illustrious relatives either through blood or directly. The closer the relationship between the yearling and his esteemed relatives the more valuable he is likely to be.

In addition to discussing blood and familial relationships, breeders have also begun to engage with ideas of heredity based explicitly on genetic endowment. These ideas rely upon a biometrical theory of genetics that states that the proportion of genes in the overall genome of an offspring will be half of each parent, quarter of each grandparent, and so on. As the breeder Rae (1990) states confidently, “It is a law of genetics that the foal will inherit 50% of its genes from the sire and 50% from the dam, and no amount of agonizing over the covering will change that” (p. 4).

Ideas of heredity in contemporary Newmarket depend upon the notion of preformation, which maintains that genes are insulated from environmental influences. They also reflect the influence of the one gene—one trait model of Mendelian genetics rediscovered at the beginning of the twentieth century. As one racehorse breeder told me of one of his foals, “His dad had the go-faster gene and it’s just 50:50 whether he’ll have it too.” The idea that an ability to run fast is a trait that could be determined by a single gene remains strong in Newmarket.
Recent work within biology has undermined the separation between genes and the environment that this thinking depends upon, creating an epigenetic approach that acknowledges the two-way traffic between genes and the sociocultural milieu inhabited by the individual organism. As the biologist Ho (personal communication) explains, “environmental regimes influence the physiology of the organism, and these organismic influences leave physiological traces that may also be passed on, as hormonal/nutritional status, maternal effects, and sometimes, as alterations in the genes themselves.” Put simply, the influence of environmental factors may have been mistaken for evidence of heredity. As the equine geneticist Bowling (1996) suggests, “When family members share an environment the effects of non-genetic factors may mimic the appearance of an inherited trait” (p. 141). In Newmarket, evidence of the influence of nature is “seen” with far greater alacrity than that of “nurture.”

The resilience of such pedigree thinking in the racing industry cannot be explained on the results it achieves, since, as breeders reluctantly admit,

> The only certainty of pedigrees is that they will confound you. No animal species is better documented than the Thoroughbred, yet, after two centuries of controlled racing and breeding, the laws of reproduction decree that luck will always be a major factor. (Rae, 1990, p. 40)

Although Rae urges caution in predicting the outcome of a particular covering, studies of horse genetics go further, in questioning the effectiveness of selective breeding itself. Bowling (1996) argues that, “So little is known about the genetics of desirable traits, it is premature to suggest that any general technique of structuring pedigrees consistently produces either better or worse stock” (p. 140).

Some have used the lack of any improvement in race times through the modern era of thoroughbred racing as evidence that the breed has reached the limits of useful selection.7 The record books are studded with famous failures—expensive, beautifully bred horses who have had little or no ability. Most notorious of all is the case of Snaafi Dancer, the yearling who was bought by Sheikh Mohammed for $13 million. He had perfect looks and a perfect pedigree, but he was too slow ever to run in a race. His English trainer, John Dunlop, employing the understatement that is typical of his profession, described him as “quite a nice little horse, but unfortunately no bloody good.”
The idea that a racehorse’s pedigree determines its ability is, however, remarkably resilient and insulated from criticism by a number of conventions. Pedigrees are employed in a piecemeal fashion, with little effort made to maintain consistency or to pursue the contradictions to which they unfailingly give rise. For example, in discussing Anabaa, a precocious sprinter, and winner of the July Cup at Newmarket in 1996, Willett (1996), a “Bloodstock expert,” writing in *Horse and Hound*, stated that: “The specialist speed of Balbonella and the speed which Anabaa has inherited could not have been anticipated from her pedigree” (p. 27). Despite this, Willett goes on to suggest that the colt may well stay a mile on the basis that his great grand dam, great grand sire, and great great grand dam were “stayers”.

Absence of an objective measure of performance further protects pedigree. The “racecourse test” contains so many variables that even expert assessments of ability will vary dramatically. Every racecourse in England is topographically unique, few use sectional timing, and there is no way of comparing performances on one racecourse with those on another. The most common factors used to explain the inconsistencies of racehorse performances are interrupted preparation for a race, poor opposition, jockey or trainer error, race conditions (weather, surface conditions, interference during running), injury, and bad luck. Thus, poor opposition may lead to a horse being overrated or injury may prevent a horse from fulfilling his or her potential. The quality of a racehorse’s pedigree (or any of its opponents) may be disputed on any number of grounds, none of which can be objectively established. This is summarized in the television pundit’s opinion that “you could run this race five times and have five different winners.” It is, of course, this terrific uncertainty that makes horseracing such an attractive betting medium.

**Representing Pedigrees—the Sales Catalogue**

At the sales, each horse that is to be sold has a page of the catalogue devoted to breeding. The structure of the catalogue page determines the quantity and nature of information offered to the buyer by the vendor. The catalogues are so repetitive that envisaging alternatives and thinking about what they would mean becomes virtually impossible. The catalogue page devotes a disproportionate amount of space to the dam (female) line, also referred to as the bottom line, or tail line (Figure 3). This was explained to me on the grounds
that the dam line is the weakness that must be shored up by being associated with successful relatives, as if to reassure potential buyers that the mare will not detract too much from the ability of the stallion in his offspring.

Although a large proportion of racemares go on to have careers at stud, very few colts go on to have careers as stallions having retired from racing. Thus, while a stallion’s quality is made evident by his very presence at stud, mares are at stud by default, simply on the grounds that they are female and too old or slow to race. Selection of racehorses is thus sharply skewed, stallions are intensively selected on the basis of their pedigree and racecourse performances, while mares are often “given a chance.” It is estimated that, “94% of colts and 48% of fillies do not contribute genes to the next generation” (Bowling, 1996, p. 127). The characterization of the racehorse as the quintessentially selectively bred domestic animal is thus only partially true.

The top section of pedigrees found in catalogues are “read” from left to right. They also possess a shorthand whereby they may be summarized by either their “top” or “bottom” line. The top line charts the sire and sires of sires, the bottom line the dam and dams of dams. The top line is said to represent the “strength” of the pedigree, the bottom line the “weakness.” Of course, it is possible to have a weak top line or a strong bottom line, but these are relative to the overall top:bottom bias. The most common shorthand for summarizing a pedigree is that of mentioning the sire and the dam’s sire. Thus, for example, Zafonic, who is “by” Gone West, “out of” Zaizafon, who is “by” The Minstrel, will be described as “Zafonic (Gone West, The Minstrel).” Everyday discussions of yearlings would thus refer to Zafonic as “a Gone West colt out of a Minstrel mare.”

The proportion of the catalogue assigned to the dam line and the idea that the dam line is the “weakness” in the pedigree relate to ideas regarding racehorse fertility. The relevant image of procreation is that the stallion will bring a substantial but finite amount of talent to the mating. If most of this talent must be “used up” in trying to bring the mare up to the standard of the stallion, then very little will be left to pass onto the foal. The mare is thus described as “empty” before she is covered.

This image can be extended to apply to the entire catalogue that becomes a map representing the annual distribution of blood embodied by each yearling crop. “Blood” is thus presented as a limited substance, distributed accord-
ing to an equation that balances the amount of talent brought by the stallion against that used up by the mare in their production of a foal. In this way, there are no real additions to the English Thoroughbred, just novel combinations of blood, relative to each successive generation.

The image of the thoroughbred racehorse perpetuated by its breeders supports the contention of Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) that origin stories are “a prime locus for a society’s notion of itself” (p. 2). Thomas’s (1983) characterization of the three founding stallions of the English thoroughbred as “a kind of equine Adam, Noah or William the Conqueror” (p. 59) fails to mention the most significant feature of the story: the omission of its female protagonists. The mares who functioned as catalysts in order that the breed might be established are rarely mentioned. Because only the male ancestors of this species are visible, the original blood is gendered and, thus, diluted when combined with female blood in order to create a foal. The representation of male and female racehorses in the catalogue can thus be explained. The inherent weakness of the dam line is protested against by the presence of illustrious relations in the catalogue, and the small number of stallions at stud serve as highly concentrated sources of the limited quantity of “noble blood.” The patriarchal stallion myth can be deduced from the structure of the catalogue page.

Assessment of the thoroughbreds at each of the most significant stages of their careers—at the sales, on the track, and at stud—reflects the disproportionate influence with which the stallion is credited. Breeders and pundits discussing a two-year-old will predict his ability in relation to his sire: “Like all Sadler’s Wells, he’ll appreciate getting his toe in” (horses by Sadler’s Wells are thought to run faster on softer ground), “He’s by Ela Mana Mou, so he should get the trip.” (Ela Mana Mou is thought to be “an influence for stamina”). “He’s just got geed up in the paddock, like a lot of Diesis do.” (Diesis is thought to pass on a nervous disposition). At first glance, the racing industry could almost be mistaken for a society in which maternity was denied or went unnoticed.

This image of reproduction is similar to that described by Delaney (1991) in relation to rural Turkey, an image she refers to as monogeneticism, “The theory of procreation can be stated very simply. The male is said to plant the seed and the woman is said to be like a field” (Delaney, 1986, p. 496). Perhaps the most explicit statement of this version of reproduction within the blood-
stock industry is found in the work of Italian thoroughbred breeder Tesio, the “Wizard of Dormell.” He was an authority referred to by several informants. His theories were many, but had consistent themes:

[T]he mare is like a sack which gives back what has been put into it . . . The female is by nature weaker. The purpose of her existence is the state of pregnancy. As soon as she becomes pregnant the nervous—almost neurotic—symptoms of virginity disappear. (Tesio, 1958, p. 10)

Foals are “by” their sires, and merely “out of” the mares who carry them. Thoroughbred breeders are therefore able to combine monogeneticism and biometric genetics because though the foal is said to be “50% its sire and 50% its dam” the contribution made by each is complementary but different in kind. The stallion is seen as contributing those traits that are most valued by racing society, those mystical qualities that affect racing ability: “presence,” “courage,” or “heart.” The mare’s contributions often are either temperamental or mundane. As Delaney (1986) observes of rural Turkey, “Paternity is not the semantic equivalent of maternity” (p. 495).

**Discussion: Artificial Insemination, Horse Love, and the “Stallion Drain”**

During fieldwork, one of the most productive loci for discussing ideas about heredity could be found in resistance to reproductive technologies and in particular to artificial insemination (AI). The rules of the International Stud Book currently ban AI:

A horse is not qualified to be entered for start in any race unless it and its sire and dam are each the produce of a natural service or covering, and unless a natural gestation took place in, and the delivery was from, the body of the mare in which the horse was conceived. (Ruff’s Guide to the Turf 1996, p. 124)

The Chairman of the National Stud, Peter Player, recently responded to a government report that suggested that the stud should widen its remit by saying:

As long as I’m chairman, there will be no unacceptable veterinary research, in any form, carried out at the stud—in other words, practices contrary to those allowed in the worldwide breeding of thoroughbreds. Those that
spring to mind include artificial insemination, embryo transfers, cloning and, particularly, genetic engineering. No Dolly the sheep. You couldn’t possibly have any of that going on alongside the stud being open to the general public and acting as a shop window for our industry. We’re thoroughbred through and through, and should stick rigidly to that principle. We must not mix oil and water. (Smurthwaite, p. 13, 2000)

The most sustained opposition to AI that I experienced came from a thoroughbred breeder who had recently retired from riding in amateur races at the age of 73. She told me:

The semen used for pigs in Holland has become diseased and the farms in this country are using bulls again for a ‘top up’. How is a mare’s instinct to be covered going to be satisfied? By the vet and some semen in a false vagina? The best winners I have ever bred have been by sires whose legs really pump away like pistons during copulation—I’m sure that some transfer of energy is capable of improving the chances of getting a good energetic foal. What will fulfill that criteria in AI? A vet with a long sleeved glove? I’m very worried about it.

This breeder also told me the story of the conception of a great racehorse that was the result of two horses “falling in love.”

It was when the horses were walked everywhere before the horsebox, and the stallion was being led along the road, and passed a mare on her way to something else, I mean, she wasn’t even going to this horse. And they looked at each other and that was it. They overcame their handlers and made love on the Cambridge Road.

Similarly, a stud groom told me,

The mare needs to feel the weight of the stallion on her back, and for the energy of the covering to go into her. Using a test tube won’t produce the same effects and you can’t fool these old mares. They know what’s natural.

These ideas echo the work of Tesio and his followers. In fact, the foal bred on the Cambridge Road belonged to Tesio and was called Signorinetta. She won the Derby in 1908. Tesio’s (1958) explanation for her undoubted talent extends the same reproductive themes:
In the case of Signorinetta, it is not unlikely that the issue was affected by the circumstances of the unplanned encounter between her parents. The arrows of an equine cupid roused the sexual urge to a maximum of tension which endowed the resulting individual with exceptional energy ... this result is never achieved with artificial insemination because the parents are cheated of their pleasurable spasm with its violent nervous release. (p. 93)

Star of Naples, full sister to Signorinetta and the product of a planned mating, proved untalented, the product of a lacklustre covering due, according to Tesio, to the embarrassment of the dam and sire following their previous exploits.

Bob McCreery, chairman of a group commissioned by the British Thoroughbred Breeders Association to investigate the potential impact of AI remains bemused, “I have never known why AI provokes such controversy. To people who know about breeding and animal husbandry it is not so shocking” (Hislop, 1997, p. 17). It seems that McCreery does not realize how shocking AI is to those who believe that the stallion is the essential part of reproduction, because the heat and weight and energy of intercourse must go into the mare for conception, or at least good conception, to occur. The quality of covering is thought to affect the quality of the offspring thereby produced, and AI is not an energetic process. To use Delaney’s analogy, the energy involved in the act of planting the seed is lost. The field does not produce the right sort of energy (creative, individuating), and so a lacklustre heir is produced. The foal produced by AI is too much the docile, nurturing (i.e. female) expression of its parents and not enough the powerful, singular (i.e. male) elements.

Breeders also worry that AI would prompt the depletion of the gene pool. The theory of pedigree rests upon the ability of breeders to maintain the “purity” of the breed by witnessing coverings and blood typing foals. The depletion of the gene pool constitutes a loss of blood, offending those who see themselves as its custodians, responsible for determining its distribution. This loss is often imagined through stories in which blood crosses international boundaries and is thereby lost to a malign foreign influence:

According to the Duke (of Devonshire), “fanciful stories” arose about vials of frozen semen being shipped around the world at will, making for priceless bargaining chips allowing an elite band of stallions to cover hundreds of mares at the expense of others. The impact on the gene pool would be unimaginable. (Smurthwaite, 1997, p. 7)
The blood of the stallions no longer in demand would be lost. These are stories about loss and loss of control, in which blood no longer would be mapped or limited, and so, being unrecorded, would lose its capacity to explain ability.

The loss of blood is also the theme of the “stallion drain,” the export of stallions that is a current concern of the British bloodstock industry. The terms in which it is described again reflect the threat that export constitutes to the national identity of English blood by resonating with xenophobia, as in this extract from an article in The Guardian newspaper:

> It is hard to see in these Japanese incursions much more than mere acquisitiveness, a desire to possess comparable with the desire to buy great works of art, many of which now languish unseen in the Tokyo bank vaults. At the Houghton Sales in Newmarket last week, I have rarely seen people look more bored than the phalanx of Japanese who sat around the auction ring dressed in perfect English county clothes but carrying cameras rather than binoculars. Like the art works, the horses that go to Japan are disappearing into a black hole...we see no more than the occasional foal by Generous who returns to run in Britain, bringing with him a wealth of memories and a terrible sense of loss. (Thompson, 1996, p. 6)

It seems that, as in the eighteenth century when the blood of a thoroughbred reflected positively on that of his aristocratic owner, it is necessary to be of the right blood oneself in order to be favored by, rather than condemned or mocked for, this association. The pedigrees of the founding stallions of the breed express this point clearly, by running forward to the English thoroughbred, rather than backward to the Barb, Turk or Arabian.

**Conclusion**

Pedigree is the ideology used to police the boundaries within the racing industry, between different classes, genders, and nations. In relation to class-based distinctions, blood maps ability and explains the presence of traits within families. Gender determines relative potency and contribution to the process whereby blood is reconfigured and society reproduced. And blood is owned. It is “ours” rather than “theirs,” enabling discrimination between different groups, including nations.
Focusing upon AI as a case study has enabled me to examine one example of the metonymic contortions by which women and men in the racing industry imagine their lives and those of others through the lives of horses, not to mention the lives of horses through their own. The resistance of the thoroughbred industry to technologies such as AI has generally been explained by recourse to its financial implications for the smaller breeder. This paper has suggested that the threat represented by AI is not only financial but also existential. The moral universe of the racing industry contains both horses and humans. By unshackling procreation from sex, AI undermines the structuring principles of the thoroughbred breed. In doing so, it causes considerable anxiety amongst its human guardians.

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Notes

1 Correspondence should be sent to Dr. Rebecca Cassidy, The Anthropology Department, Goldsmith’s College, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, UK. Thanks to Janet Carsten for all of her guidance. Thanks also to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, and to Kenneth Shapiro for his sound editorial advice. This paper was written during a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge University and at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. Fieldwork took place during an Edinburgh University Postgraduate Studentship. This data will be presented in a slightly different form and at greater length in a forthcoming publication with Cambridge University Press entitled, *The Sport of Kings: kinship, class and racehorse breeding in Newmarket*.

2 Conformation refers to the muscular and skeletal structure of the yearling. There are no objective measures for assessing conformation, and the ability to select talented yearlings is described as having ‘an eye’ (for a horse). This form of assessment warrants its own investigation but this will not be undertaken here.

3 Thoroughbred stallions are periodically valued at more than their weight in gold. Fusiachi Pegasus, for example, the runaway winner of the 2000 Kentucky Derby, recently changed hands for £60 million. The value of a stallion depends upon the covering fee he can command. Storm Cat, the most expensive stallion in the world today costs $400,000 (£277,000), per covering, about double that of his closest rival. If he produces 70 live foals this year (a conservative estimate) he will earn his owner $28 million (£19.4 million).
In fact, the embodied practice that constitutes “horsemanship” is a virtual necessity in a society in which people are constantly testing your ‘credentials’. You might be asked for example, to “just grab hold of that mare for me,” or “hand me that scraper.” If you can’t perform the task, identifying the item in question, or having the confidence to take hold of the horse, you establish your status as an outsider in a very obvious way.

Other sales held in England include those at Ascot and Doncaster racecourses, and in Kentucky at Fasig-Tipton. There are also important sales at Goffs and Tattersalls in Ireland.

This “community of the privileged” is the focus of my work on the bloodstock auction. However, in this context I restrict myself to ideas of racehorse procreation and their connection to the contemporary resistance to AI by thoroughbred breeders.

See for example, William Hill, Professor of Animal Genetics at Edinburgh University who, in 1988 asked, Why aren’t racehorses faster?

“Stayers” are horses suited to running further than ‘sprinters’ who race over short distances, usually less than a mile.

Racehorses having their 1st run, often as two-year-olds, are most likely to be the subjects of assessment according to their pedigree since they have no existing “form” that may be helpful in predicting their performance.

I was often told that good racemares rarely made good broodmares. Whilst working on a stud, for example, I was told the story of a famous racemare who was “no good” at stud: “She was a right bitch, she wasn’t having any of it. She thought that she was a stallion. I suppose that’s why she was so good. She was used to beating colts and she didn’t want to be a mother.” The good racemare is an anomaly because she excels in a male dominated sphere. My informant attributed her failure at stud to her own gender confusion.

References


