

## Off the High Horse: Human-Animal Relations on Public Monuments

This month, the suit concerning the removal of the equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee in Richmond, VA will proceed to trial. A different way to deal with a troubling monument is to place another one nearby to convey an opposing message, and several such corrective statues have appeared near Monument Avenue over the past twenty-five years. In this paper I explore two of these, focusing on the role of the horse. Although the spirited stallion in Kehinde Wiley's "Rumors of War" (2019) stands in marked contrast to the emaciated beast of burden in Tessa Pullan's "War Horse" (1997), I argue that both depictions have their roots in antiquity: the former in monumental art, the latter in literature. Thus Wiley's sculpture adapts the tradition of the equestrian statue, popular in both Greece and Rome, using the animal to showcase the power and superiority of the human rider, while Pullan's invites viewers to reach beyond the social constructs of friend and foe as well as boundaries of species between human and animal in a manner reminiscent of Homer.

In an equestrian statue the horse serves multiple functions; from a practical perspective, it elevates the honoree to a point of greater visibility, while on a more symbolic level it can illustrate characteristics of the rider. In the statue of Marcus Aurelius from the Capitoline Hill, for example, both horse and rider assume a calm and balanced posture, while Wiley's ensemble exaggerates the impetuous movement of his model, Moynihan's equestrian statue of Stuart (1907), but also evokes more distant predecessors, from Mills' groundbreaking depiction of Andrew Jackson (1853) all the way to the Alexander Mosaic and the cavalcade on the Parthenon freeze. These individual differences notwithstanding, however, all equestrian statues show a human being mastering a creature considerably bigger and stronger than himself, and the rider's

relationship to his horse can be viewed as indicative of his relationship to other human beings. (In the Middle Ages, equestrian statues were shunned as a display of *superbia*.) “Rumors of War”, then, poses an innovative and inclusive antidote to the monument of Lee on his favorite horse Traveler in two respects, by replacing a white man with a black one, and by replacing the portrait of elite individuals—both horse and rider—with generic figures. At the same time, however, Wiley’s composition also perpetuates certain hierarchical traditions typical of the genre, namely in its celebration of a powerful masculinity and in its subordination of the animal to the human.

“War Horse”, by contrast, focuses attention on the animal by showing a pack horse without human accompaniment, and its body is too pitifully worn out to make the viewer wonder about its sex. Moreover, being dedicated to Confederate and Union horses, Pullan’s creation deserves notice as one of the rare monuments honoring victims from both sides of a conflict, anticipating Prost’s awe-inspiring “L’Anneau de la Mémoire” for victims of WW1 (2014). While this eradication of the line between friend and foe is new on monuments, in literature it goes back all the way to the *Iliad*. The emphasis on the Greeks’ and Trojans’ shared human nature reaches its climax in the encounter between Achilles and Priam in Book 24, but it is present implicitly throughout in the fact that heroes on both sides are compared to (the same kinds of) animals. In addition, while on the equestrian statues human and animal are cast as distinct and in a state of tension, the similes of the *Iliad*, through the very process of likening the one to the other, to some degree dissolve this separation. The same is true also in the narrative when in Book 16 Homer uses the mortal trace-horse Pedasus as a foil to his human driver, Patroclus. Reading “War Horse” in this Homeric spirit, we can see the sculpture not only as a memorial to

the many equine casualties of the Civil War that are usually ignored, but as an invitation to extend the same inclusive attitude by mourning for Confederate and Union dead alike.

In sum, “Rumors of War” cleverly adapts the monumental tradition of the equestrian statue inherited from antiquity to challenge the message of white supremacy inherent in the statue of Robert E. Lee, while “War Horse” follows in the wake of the *Iliad* by reminding us that suffering is the common lot of us all, friends and foes, humans and (other) animals.