Chapter 2

Marlowe’s War Horses: Cyborgs, Soldiers, and Queer Companions

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Tamburlaine. Marlowe’s excessively gory two-part war play, has drawn exhaustive attention from critics for its dramatization of the protagonist’s project of global violence and subjugation as Tamburlaine marshals hordes of soldiers to the battlefield, and the conqueror penetrates, cleaves, and slaughters his way to worldwide domination. Yet as much as the play “brings a world of people to the field” (Tamb. 2 1.1.67), it also harnesses a multitude of horses, and the latter often glean more attention than the former. While men certainly outnumber horses, which would be verisimilitude, given that by the 1590s gunpowder greatly reduced the practicality of heavy cavalry in warfare, it is to the bodies of equines that both exemplary and wannabe soldiers hitch their most lavish violent and erotic longings. Few of the play’s many male soldiers are described in detail, yet its horses “sweat with martial spoil” (Tamb.1 1. 2.190), foam with “rage and high disdain” (Tamb. 1 1.1.63), and prance “disdainfully / With wanton paces” on the battlefield (Tamb. 1 4.1.23–4).

Further, many of the episodes of violence in Marlowe’s play that have attracted critical attention deploy animal tropes in processes of masculine subject formulation based on abjection and animalization of the Other. Tamburlaine tortures Bajazeth by caging, leashing, and “training” him; the sadistic slaughter of the virgins of Damascus

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is executed by lance-bearing horsemen; the murder of Calyphas is preceded by a discourse on horsemanship, and the abjection of the “pamper’d jades of Asia” spectacularly transforms men from masculine agents into animal beasts of burden. Marlowe’s Tamburlaine yokes men and horses within a masculine economy of violence predicated on subjugation of the Other through bestial acts of dominance and abjection. The play stages relations of men and horses united in scenes of violence, and even men as horses drawn in tableaus of subjugation, as sites that highlight the linkage between nonhuman subjects and masculine subjectivity. In this comingling of man and animal subjects conscripted into projects of violence, Tamburlaine repeatedly evokes, only to destabilize, martial masculine subjectivity as it was commonly linked to chivalric and classical tropes of the horsed soldier—a masculine exemplar meant to signify both martial prowess and mastery over both his beast and his bestial nature. In these disruptions, the play reveals the inhuman, violent, and even queer underpinnings of martial manhood by unsettling commonplace contemporary associations of normative masculinity with controlled subjectivity.

In this chapter, I investigate the specter of bestiality that unsettles the stable masculine military subject in Tamburlaine. I rely on Colleen Glenney Boggs’s understanding of bestiality “in its broader use, as a synonym for any act of sodomy,” but more importantly “as a mode of embodied animality, that is, of human interaction with the animal body and an animalization of human bodies.” Through its evocation of horses and horse–man relations, Marlowe’s play evokes chivalric masculinity, and its erotic valances, only to reveal the violent, bestial core of the martial subject position. In so doing, the play ultimately reduces violent masculine subjectivity to brute animalism. Tamburlaine investigates the confluences and contrapositions of man and beast in a culture in the throes of a masculine, violent, militarized ethos, one that conscripts men, animals, and weapons into the service of hypermilitarist and hypermasculine economies of war. As synecdoche for this imaginary, the horse embodies both the idealized fantasy of normative martial chivalric honor and the profound anxieties over its queer, violent, and bestial underpinnings. The play’s representations of martial masculinity at specific locales of animal–human interactions exposed the slippages between human and nonhuman, hetero- and homo-subjects, and the impossibility of stable masculine subject formulation, thereby rendering the military subject as inherently unstable and decidedly queer.

In the tension between an idealized evocation of the mounted soldier, and an awareness of his capacity for bestiality, are fantasies