



WHERE ARE THE HORSES? THE EQUINE TROPE IN ANNE McCAFFREY'S *BLACK HORSES FOR THE KING*¹

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ABSTRACT. Mario Ortiz Robles argues that non-human animals are reduced to tropes in literature, lacking a material referent (2016: 21) and thus facilitating their systematic exploitation (Adams 2010: 69). One type of literature in which the other-than-human has traditionally been present but marginalised is Arthurian romance. During the Arthurian revival (1980s-1990s), we find Anne McCaffrey's *Black Horses for the King* (1998), a text that attempts to rewrite this myth and pay homage to the equines of the genre. My aim, therefore, is to discern whether McCaffrey's focus on horses suffices to resist their exploitation as symbols within the anthropocentric and often dualistic Arthurian tradition. Additionally, I scrutinise whether the human/non-human dualism also reinforces, and is reinforced by, the Christian/Pagan difference.

Keywords: Animal trope, Anne McCaffrey, Arthurian romance, contemporary Irish fiction, ethical encounters, horses, re-writing.

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¿DÓNDE ESTÁN LOS CABALLOS? EL TROPO EQUINO EN *BLACK HORSES FOR THE KING* DE ANNE McCaffrey

RESUMEN. Mario Ortiz Robles sostiene que los animales no humanos son reducidos a tropos en la literatura, careciendo de un referente material (2016:21) y facilitando así su explotación sistemática (Adams 2010: 69). Un tipo de literatura en el que los no humanos han estado tradicionalmente presentes pero marginados es el romance artúrico. Durante el renacimiento artúrico (década de 1980-1990), la obra de Anne McCaffrey, *Black Horses for the King* (1998), intenta reescribir este mito y rendir homenaje a los equinos, el núcleo del género. Mi objetivo, por lo tanto, es discernir si el enfoque de McCaffrey en los caballos es suficiente para resistir su explotación como símbolos dentro de la tradición artúrica antropocéntrica y a menudo dualista. Además, analizaré si el dualismo humano/no humano también refuerza, y es reforzado por, la diferencia cristiano/pagano.

Palabras clave: tropo animal, Anne McCaffrey, romance artúrico, ficción irlandesa contemporánea, encuentros éticos, caballos, reescritura.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mario Ortiz Robles points out that non-human animals have always been part of literature and, paradoxically, “as marginal as [...] constant” (2016: 16), often used to construct human ontologies. Margo DeMello argues that one reason for this might be that non-human animals are “like us, but also unlike us”. Because of this, DeMello explains that they have a great metaphorical potential to represent human behaviours, desires, and dreams without threatening human(ist) identities (2012: 305). Carol J. Adams similarly argues that by reducing animals to metaphors, they cannot but become the “absent referent”² and, in Ortiz Robles’ choice of words, “disappear”. In this sense, Ortiz Robles argues that “[t]he history of modern literature is [...] the history of an absence; an absence made all the more poignant by the cultural embeddedness of animals during the same period” (2016: 20). One consequence, Adams explains, is that “[a]nimals [have] become metaphors for describing people’s experiences” within a “human-centered hierarchy” (2010: 66-67). In other words, the material existence of the more-than-human is denied. It is in this context that Tzachi Zamir contends that to bring the non-human animal under the spotlight, that is, to front them as key characters in narratives, might cause a “present” referent, highlighting their materiality and resisting anthropocentrism (2011: 1062).

² Here, Adams acknowledges that she first encountered the concept of the absent referent in Margaret Homan’s *Bearing the World* (1986) (2010: 13).

One literary genre in which non-human animals are generally present, although paradoxically absent, is the Arthurian romance. In Derek Pearsall's introduction to Arthurian romance, the medievalist defines romance as "the literature of chivalry", a literature that "exists to reflect, celebrate and confirm the chivalric values by which its primary consumers, the noble or knightly class, lives or purpose to live" (2013: 31). This way, Arthurian romances uphold the figure of the knight, best exemplified through the character of King Arthur. The genre revolves then around this very specific human figure, usually marginalising non-human animals or, at best, using them to construct the chivalric characters. Perhaps because of this, İfakat Banu Akçesme argues that the Arthurian world is extremely anthropocentric and androcentric, holding "man" as its centre as well as biophobic, which is not too surprising, especially given that these stories are generally set in medieval England (Akçesme 2018: 6). Moreover, Akçesme states that the Arthurian romance tends to focus on the erroneous act performed by one man against another man. These acts include killing a knight or a lady by mistake, both judged as a sin. Tellingly, Akçesme denounces that "[n]o act towards animals or other natural entities in the forest is morally and ethically judged, though" (2018: 31). That is, the more-than-human reality is often dismissed in Arthurian romances.

The late twentieth century witnessed profound transformations across Western societies. This period encompassed pivotal milestones, such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act in the United States, heralding civil rights advancements (Hersch and Shinall 2015: 425). Concurrently, the era saw the ascendancy of environmental consciousness, epitomised by the "animal turn," which underscored the focus on animal ethics (DeGrazia 1999: 111). These societal shifts served as a catalyst, potentially compelling authors to undertake the captivating task of reimagining the enduring Arthurian tradition.

Scholars have keenly recognised and scrutinised this intriguing phenomenon. Ana Rita Martins contributes significantly to this discourse through her exploration of the captivating reimagining of the Holy Grail within *Camelot 3000*, published in 1984 (2016: 24). Additionally, Susan Aronstein's insights add to the richness of the discussion, as she contends that both Star Wars and the Indiana Jones saga loosely incorporate elements of Arthurian conventions into their narratives (1995: 3). Yet, amidst the myriad rewritings of the Arthurian tales in the twentieth century, one literary gem emerges with particular prominence and influence: Rosemary Sutcliff's bestseller, *Sword at Sunset* (1963). This seminal work has garnered immense popularity and has left an indelible mark on the reshaping of the Arthurian legacy. Taken together, these compelling observations reveal a sweeping trend of authors daring to revisit and reinterpret the cherished Arthurian stories and texts during this transformative era. The allure of the Arthurian tradition has proven timeless, resonating with contemporary sensibilities and prompting writers to explore its timeless themes in ever-refreshing ways. As the literary landscape continues to evolve, the Arthurian legend stands resilient, continually inspiring creativity and captivating audiences across generations.

Anne McCaffrey, an Irish-American writer, stands as one author profoundly influenced by the Arthurian rewritings that emerged towards the end of the twentieth century. McCaffrey's literary pursuits have consistently delved into exploring the profound bonds between humans and a myriad of non-human animals³, including dragons⁴, cats⁵, and horses⁶. Notably, she achieved acclaim with her prize-winning fantasy series, *Dragonriders of Pern* (Roberts 2007: 7)⁷. However, despite such accolades, her works beyond the *Pern* series have regrettably not received the deserved attention within academic circles.

An illustrative example of these underappreciated works is *Black Horses for the King* (1998), a young adult rewriting of the Arthurian romance. Tellingly, the author explicitly expresses her intention to pay homage to horses within the Arthurian tradition in the novel (McCaffrey 1998:2), perhaps influenced by works such as *Black Beauty* (1877)⁸. Interestingly, McCaffrey herself acknowledges that *Black Horses for the King* drew inspiration from reading *Sword at Sunset*⁹, positioning her novel within the trend of rewriting the Arthurian in response to other rewritings. Set in a medieval England fraught with a continuous Christian/Pagan conflict, McCaffrey's novel is narrated through the perspective of Galwyn Varianus, a Christian character orphaned and apprenticed to his Pagan – and abusive – uncle. The tale takes a momentous turn when Lord Artos arrives at their village in search of black horses for his army, introducing the novel to the Arthurian romance through the symbol of the warhorse, the emblem of knighthood *par excellence* (Ropa 2022: 345). Impressed by the narrator's understanding and empathy for the horses, Lord Artos accepts him

³ McCaffrey's writing often focuses on the close connection between her female protagonists and different forms of alterity, including dragons in the *Dragonriders of Pern*, where the protagonist becomes mentally linked to a dragon until their death, and crystal in the *Crystal Singers* trilogy, where the protagonist's body is blended with a symbiont that turns her into a formidable singer able to resonate with crystal (Roberts 2007: 11).

⁴ The presence of dragons in McCaffrey's writing can be best seen in her famous *Dragonriders of Pern*. Here, dragons and riders live in a co-dependence that, if one of them dies, results in the suffering of the survivor until their death (McCaffrey 1968: 122).

⁵ McCaffrey and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough wrote *Catalyst: A Tale of Barque Cats* (2010: 2010). Here, Tuxedo Thomas, a Maine coon cat, is the captain of a ship and a cat crew.

⁶ Roldán Romero contends that horses are central in McCaffrey's writing. In *The Lady*, for instance, horses are crucial in the construction of Irishness in "Irishness" and the *Equine Animal* (2022: 307).

⁷ McCaffrey was the first woman to win both the Hugo and the Nebula awards in 1968, and she became the first science fiction writer to have a book on the New York Times best-seller list in 1978 (Roberts 2007: 7). The awards did not cease, as she kept being awarded throughout her literary career until her death in 2011. She received the Margaret A. Edwards Awards for Lifetime Literary Achievement in 1999 (Roberts 2007: 7) and the prestigious Grand Master Award in 2005 (Roberts 2007: 214).

⁸ Ortiz Robles explains that "*Black Beauty's* most significant literary innovation is not that it is written from the perspective of a horse; rather, it is that the story of the horse is written as a Bildungsroman" (2016: 61).

⁹ The influence is quite straightforward in elements like Arthur's name. McCaffrey retrieves *Sutcliff's* use of "Artos" to refer to Arthur, for instance (1998: 2).

as a new addition to his group of men. Throughout the novel, the main character's role revolves around tending to the equines, both ponies and horses, whom he claims to love dearly.

According to Maria Pramaggiore, the horse is one of the most relevant animals in western thought and especially in Ireland, where the author lived since 1970 until her death in 2011. Pramaggiore explains that the horse is not simply a trope that has functioned as a compelling symbol within Irish culture; it is also a trope that permits the Irish to navigate between past and contemporary culture (2016: 141). Perhaps because of this, the main issue at play in the novel is the tension between the anthropocentric literary tradition underlying the Arthurian romance genre and the author's attempts to rewrite it towards post-anthropocentrism, as she has been described as an ecofeminist (Roberts 2007: 139). The role of McCaffrey's equines as cultural mediators as well as their close interaction with the human protagonist and, especially, the life-threatening-injuries and the eventual murder of a pony could provide the ideal vehicle through which anthropocentric constructions of the human(ist) subject are challenged.¹⁰ The close interaction and arguably quasi co-dependence between the species could respond to Jeffrey Cohen's thesis in *Medieval Identity Machines*, where the academic argues that "the body is likewise a site of unraveling and invention in medieval texts of numerous genres," (2003: 13). Perhaps then for this reason, the bodily proximity between the narrator and the horses can result in a posthumanist¹¹ ethics whereby other-than-human animals are turned into subjects with ethical consideration and humans become ethically accountable. Moreover, by rejecting anthropocentrism and exploring equine characters, the non-humans might resist their reduction to symbols used by the human characters, common in Arthurian romance and its twentieth-century rewritings (Akçesme 2018: 32). In this sense, it is relevant that McCaffrey's novel was written as a young adult work, as some academics have argued that this genre is also the perfect vehicle to explore resistances against oppressive systems (Ventura 2011: 100) and that the ideology defended in these works cannot help but influence their young adult readers, who are still in the process of becoming matured humans (Nikolajeva 2015: 86), highlighting the political importance of McCaffrey's attempts to move beyond anthropocentrism. Because of all the above, I aim to discern whether McCaffrey's focus on the horses suffices to resist their reduction to symbols within the anthropocentric Arthurian tradition. To this end, I shall apply Ortiz Robles' critique of absent non-human animals, Judith Butler's understanding of vulnerability, Matthew Calarco's view of ethical encounters, and Banu Akçesme's ecocritical analysis of Arthurian romance to McCaffrey's novel.

¹⁰ Perhaps because of McCaffrey's strong love for her horses (Roberts 2007: 177) as well as the regular presence of the horse trope in her writing—*Ring of Fear* (1971) and *The Lady* (1988) just to mention a few—the author may have picked up on the heavy anthropocentrism of the Arthurian romance.

¹¹ Posthumanism here is understood as a post-anthropocentric and *zoe*-centred philosophy in which the human(ist) subject ceases to be the focus of study and the human/nonhuman hierarchy is rejected (Braidotti 2013: 194).

2. ANTHROPOCENTRIC ARTHURIANA

Anthropocentrism¹² may constitute one of the concepts that most intimately informs dualistic constructions of identity in western societies, usually to justify the otherisation and exploitation of the more-than-human. Val Plumwood argues that anthropocentrism leads to a “sense of power and autonomy” (2002: 120) that is based on a hierarchical human/Other distinction. One common justification for human superiority is the attribution of certain traits, such as intelligence and agency, to humans only, but Plumwood highlights how this hyper-separation between the species “produce[s] typical hegemonic constructions of agency” that allow the dominant party to “forget’ the other” as long as they remain useful to the dominant group (2002: 110). Jacques Derrida similarly contends that reason is often used to otherise certain groups, both within and beyond the human species. As Derrida provocatively proposes:

It is not just a matter of asking whether one has the right to refuse the animal such and such a power (speech, reason, experience of death, mourning, culture, institutions, technics, clothing, lying, pretense of pretense, covering of tracks, gift, laughter, crying, respect, etc.—the list is necessarily without limit, and the most powerful philosophical tradition in which we live has refused the “animal” all of that). It also means asking whether what calls itself human has the right rigorously to attribute to man, which means therefore to attribute to himself, what he refuses the animal, and whether he can ever possess the pure, rigorous, indivisible concept, as such, of that attribution. (2008: 135)

Derrida’s incisive critique of classical philosophical oppositions, which unveils their entanglement in violent hierarchies rather than promoting peaceful coexistence (1981: 41) resonates with Judith Butler’s comprehensive outlook on anthropocentrism and dualisms. Butler vehemently highlights that anthropocentrism negates the shared material vulnerability of all living beings, perpetuating hierarchies that privilege the dominant Self (2016: 2). Through discursive othering, anthropocentrism constructs a deceptive notion of purity and ontological protection for those considered superior. Thus, both Derrida and Butler shed light on the inherent violence and power dynamics that permeate philosophical and anthropocentric frameworks.

Moreover, at the heart of Butler’s exploration into vulnerability is the probing query of who warrants the designation of grievable, as the value and care for a life become apparent only when the possibility of loss exists. According to Butler, grievability is a subjective determination in which we choose which lives matter and are worthy of consideration. As Butler states, “[p]recisely because a living being may die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live. Only under conditions

¹² Elisa K. Campbell explains in the article “Beyond Anthropocentrism” (1983) that the word “anthropocentrism” was first coined in the 1860s, when Darwinian theories of evolution were first discussed. Here the term refers to the assumption that humans are at the centre of the universe.

in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters" (2009: 15). This emphasis on the question of grievability exposes the connection between anthropocentrism and its subsequent implications for how other species are ethically considered.

Delving further into her study of vulnerability, Butler links these pernicious dichotomies to the very essence of anthropocentrism. She argues that the interconnectedness of dualism and anthropocentrism arises from the commonality of material vulnerability shared by all living beings, a vulnerability paradoxically denied and obscured by anthropocentric hierarchies. In her words, the potential threats posed by each body to others, all inherently precarious, inevitably lead to forms of domination (2009: 31). This notion gains further traction through Joyce E. Salisbury's insights into medieval society, which reveal a pronounced hyper-separation between humans and other species. This chasm is exemplified in the thoughts of intellectuals like Saint Augustine (1994: 3). The ramifications of anthropocentrism's consequences are perhaps responsible for motivating Calarco's assertion that "the genuine critical target of progressive thought and politics today should be *anthropocentrism* as such" (2008: 10).

In the context of McCaffrey's *Black Horses for the King*, I contend that vulnerability and domination significantly shape the medieval framework and its understanding of inter-species relationships. Within this narrative, the intricate dynamics of power and vulnerability influence the interactions between humans and horses, echoing the broader themes addressed by Derrida and Butler. The significance of horses in the narrative is apparent not only through the title, which directly references them, but also in the novel's opening scene, where Lord Artos' group of men is depicted traveling with their newly acquired black horses. The narrator vividly portrays the awe-inspiring nature of these equines, captivating all travellers on the road. Tellingly, he explains that the only reason no one dared to steal the horses was "the sight of Prince Cadour's armed men as well as Bericus' casual mention Comes Artos owned the horses" (McCaffrey 1998: 77). This observation underscores an unsettling reality - the horses are reduced to mere commodities, existing to be bought and sold. They are subjected to othering, stripped of their inherent value as sentient beings and instead viewed through the lens of utilitarian ownership. This portrayal echoes a recurring theme in the novel and, more broadly, in medieval contexts, where power dynamics heavily influence human interactions with other species. Fear of reprisal from the male characters in charge of the group serves as the horses' only shield from theft, a stark reminder of the domination humans exercise over these noble creatures. By highlighting the commodification and exploitation of horses, McCaffrey's narrative draws attention to the ways in which vulnerability is manipulated within an anthropocentric society, further reinforcing the hierarchies that subordinate non-human beings to human interests.

Early in the novel, the protagonist explains that his ability to spot high-quality horses stems from his father's business of breeding and training horses. He has not capitalised on this skill since his father's death, partly because his uncle gave him

no opportunity to do so and partly because thinking about horses is too painful as they remind him of his dead father. The narrator closely relates his skills with horses to his Christian childhood, both erased after his father's passing and his apprenticeship with his Celtic uncle. In this context, the arrival of Lord Artos to purchase horses offers an exceptional opportunity for the main character to flee his uncle and join Lord Artos and his group of men (McCaffrey 1998: 14–15). When the narrator succeeds in helping Lord Artos buy the best horses available, Lord Artos praises him, and the narrator replies, “[m]y honour, Lord Artos, my honour” (McCaffrey 1998: 16). Such emphasis early in the novel on honour suggests that the human character's motivation to assist Lord Artos arises not from a desire to contribute to the wellbeing of the equines, but from his desire to join Lord Artos and become some sort of knight. This way, despite the importance of horses in the narrator's life, he is more interested in the human character of Lord Artos, as is often the case in Arthurian romance, already framing the novel within the anthropocentric bias of the tradition.

Moreover, before joining Lord Artos' group and their journey back to Camelot with the newly bought horses, the narrator purchases a pony whom he names Spadix (McCaffrey 1998: 21). His decision is presented as rational; after all, he would not be able to join Lord Artos' group of men without the pony, as everyone else was on horseback (McCaffrey 1998: 25). And yet, the pony is not only the means through which the main character gains material access to Lord Artos' group of horsemen. The pony is also central for Lord Artos and the other Christian characters to approve of him. At some point, Lord Artos abandons the group and the stallion he was riding, Cornix, leaving the narrator as the human in charge of leading his horse. The narrator explicitly explains that he would not be able to guide Cornix without his pony, who has a soothing effect on the stallion. The character who benefits from Lord Artos' decision is the human, not the pony (McCaffrey 1998: 38). The value is clearly social, especially after the narrator acknowledges that their leading of the stallion is “the mark of both Comes Artos' favour and *my* status” (McCaffrey 1998: 111) (emphasis added). This emphasis on the prestige that equines provide humans with in McCaffrey's text is in line then with the Arthurian romance, probably because, as Luise Borek states, “the horse [...] functions as a status symbol” (2022: 143). Consequently, although the narrator's anthropocentric instrumentalisation of the equines might initially be justified by his desperation, anthropocentrism continues to shape his behaviour.

Perhaps the most straightforward evidence of anthropocentrism shaping the novel can be found in the name of Lord Artos' stallion and the narrator's pony. In the case of the pony, he is named Spadix, a Latin name chosen by the protagonist. Accordingly, the pony would serve to emphasise his owner's ideological affinity with Roman, and implicitly Christian, values as well as his rejection of Celticity and Pagan. The other equine that is continually mentioned in *Black Horses* is the stallion Cornix. Similar to Spadix, the name is Latin, clearly Roman-influenced. This time, the human who chooses the name is Lord Artos, who explains that the name is a reference to ravens, which, for those from Comes Britannorum such as him, is a “good omen” (McCaffrey 1998: 36). Once again, the name gives no information

about the horse, but about his rider and beliefs. Moreover, that the stallion is named in relation to the symbolic reduction of ravens points to that the material reality of non-human animals in general is dismissed. The naming of the equines cannot help then but reinforce species dichotomic boundaries.

3. A CHRISTIAN/PAGAN DIFFERENCE

Akçesme explains that Arthurian romances are no stranger to dualisms; after all, they often represent a world erected on a culture/nature opposition in which culture is associated with knights and order while nature stands for chaos and challenge for the knights (2018: 25). The most striking dualism in the novel is indeed the human/non-human one, which is parallel to, and perhaps reinforced by, a Christian/Pagan dualism. The alleged anthropocentrism of Christianity in contrast with Paganism is not an uncontroversial issue, though. Salisbury, for instance, explains that, “in spite of evidence that many classical thinkers dignified animals with human qualities and regularly saw humans acting as animals, there is no evidence that they treated animals any better than [Christians]” (1994: 7). On the other hand, other academics like Akçesme contend that Christianity “is the most anthropocentric religion” with “Man” as its centre. According to Akçesme, one consequence of the arrival of Christianity was the end of animistic Pagan culture, which fostered some level of respect towards the more-than-human world (2018: 21). In the case of McCaffrey’s text, we find a clear clash of Christian and Pagan culture through the horses, as is common in modern Arthurian romance (Łaszkiwicz 2017: 133). To examine the role of horses in this conflict, however, is not a common occurrence (Ropa 2019).

John Darrah’s *Pagan in Arthurian Romance* examines a number of animal tropes in the genre; interestingly, the academic argues that most of them, especially horses, are heavily Pagan-influenced if not Pagan themselves (1994: 150). However, *Black Horses* seems to depart from this tradition. Although the horses in the novel are not represented using direct religious descriptions, they are continuously associated with their human riders and their religious beliefs. Within the novel, the most unarguably central and magnificent horseman is Lord Artos, the figure the protagonist admires most. Lord Artos is a “purely”, albeit somewhat tolerant, Christian character. When the main character first joins him and his human companions, he hears them use typically Christian expressions such as “Hallelujah!” and “Amen”. The Christian faith of the group is, along with his admiration towards Lord Artos, the main reason why the main character wants to follow them. For instance, when the group are discussing the next time they will be able to hear mass, the narrator is positively shocked by their open Christianity: “I said nothing then, mindful that Lord Artos and his companions wore the crosses of the Christian ethic and spoke of God, rather than gods, and of this I was glad” (McCaffrey 1998: 29). This way, Lord Artos and his human companions are Christian characters whom the protagonist feels admiration for.

Moreover, Lord Artos' stallion, Cornix, is aligned with his Christian rider and so he can embody Christianity. After Lord Artos leaves his stallion with the group and moves faster on his own, the issue of who shall ride or lead Cornix arises. The narrator and his pony are the ones chosen to lead the stallion (McCaffrey 1998: 38). Tellingly, the narrator is a clearly Christian character, much like Lord Artos, and the name he ascribes to his pony, Spadix, is more related to Christian than to Pagan values. That the narrator is the character chosen to lead the stallion could then be related to that the stallion recognises the Christianity in the pony and the human and would, consequently, accept them. In other words, both stallion and pony might be constructed through a human character, but only to the extent to support the Christian/Pagan dualism and the dismissal of their material dimension. This instrumentalisation is further and more clearly elaborated through two (human) Celtic characters. One of them is the narrator's uncle, a "purely" Celtic and Pagan figure. When the narrator reflects on his uncle after first meeting Lord Artos' group, he describes his relative in the following terms:

My uncle and his crew were Pagan in their superstitions and I had never had a chance to hear Mass in my uncle's employ. At that, I was exceedingly grateful my uncle was not my blood kin, but my mother's younger sister's husband. My mother had looked down on that marriage as beneath what her sister could have achieved. Only now did I realize that my mother had done very well indeed to have attracted the substantial man my Christian father had been. He had adored her and given her everything she desired. (McCaffrey 1998: 29-30)

The narrator's abusive uncle clearly identifies with Paganism,¹³ whereas both the protagonist's father and Lord Artos identify with Christianity. Through this excerpt, the narrator identifies Christianity with human characters he admires, while he identifies Pagan with those he hates, outlining a fairly obvious Christian/Pagan dualism. The narrator's rejection of non-Christian beliefs for supposedly moral reasons is deepened through the description of the other Celtic character and his main foe, the Cornovian character of Iswy¹⁴. The Celt is described as hostile towards the protagonist from the outset, who first describes him in the following terms: "[m]y first impression of him was that of a sly and devious fellow, envious of any attentions which he did not get to share" (McCaffrey 1998: 63). Interestingly, this quite detailed description of the Celtic character is made within minutes of meeting him, before they even engage in conversation. And yet, the main character makes a quick moral judgment of his foe based on his distinctly Celtic name, acknowledging only his riding abilities as positive.

¹³ That the protagonist of McCaffrey's novel is an orphan with an apparent openness to horses who is forced to go work for his Pagan uncle could echo one of the most important medieval texts, *Bevis of Hampton*, and its protagonist, orphaned and forced to work for Pagan kings. Tellingly, Susan Crane explains that this text is far from anthropocentric (2013: 154), perhaps pointing to McCaffrey's intention to go beyond anthropocentrism.

¹⁴ The Cornovii were a Celtic People of Iron Age and Roman Britain (Ellis 2013: 29).

The foe's "Celticity" is not limited to his name or birthplace, both of which are circumstantial and not his choice. The foe is however more comfortable speaking in Celtic than in Latin. Once the narrator is already part of the group, he observes the Celt while eating dinner and resting. Here, he notices that his foe and his Celtic friends were "frequently lapsing into the Celtic" (McCaffrey 1998: 69). This way, the foe character's actions are deeply shaped by his Celtic culture, which he fully embraces. Moreover, right after noticing Iswy speaking in Celtic, the narrator states that, unlike the Celt and his friends, he had "been taught to speak a *purer* Latin that they could follow" (McCaffrey 1998: 69) (emphasis added), as if trying to reassert his superiority in the Christian anthropocentric hierarchy that we find in the novel.

The negative presentation of the Celtic character cannot be separated from equines and his obsession with riding Lord Artos' stallion Cornix. Because the Celt is first denied his request to ride the stallion and the group decides instead that the narrator will lead him, the foe threatens human and other-than-human characters alike. The Celt's threats do not remain verbal; on the same night his request is denied, he wounds the protagonist's pony, so that Cornix is left with nobody to lead him, making a rider necessary to continue the journey (McCaffrey 1998: 81). The main consequence is that the Celt is finally allowed to ride the stallion; and yet, his success is short-lived. When he finally rides Cornix, the other-than-human character "abruptly twisted" and "sen[t] Iswy ploughing his length in the dust" (McCaffrey 1998: 85). More importantly, the narrator states that:

There was a silence while I stood motionless lest Iswy know that I had overheard his humiliation. Then he began a flow of soft cursing such as I had never heard before: viciously promising vengeance from Pagan gods on the high and mighty Lord Bericus for denying Iswy his simple request. (McCaffrey 1998: 79)

Tellingly, this paragraph conflates Iswy's viciousness and his Paganism. In other words, Celtic people are described as vicious and traitorous in the novel, capable of harming the non-human animals they should protect, according to Lord Artos and his second in command, Bericus (McCaffrey 1998: 85). Consequently, the narrator reinforces the Christian/Pagan boundary whereby Celts who refuse to follow Christianity are morally inferior, hereby justifying their otherisation. Although it is true that some academics have argued that in medieval texts we can find instances of horses throwing humans away as proof of their agency, as Marieke Røben has argued in her analysis of two medieval texts: "Casus Sancti Gali" and "Decem libri historiarum" (2021: 72), I contend that this is not the case in McCaffrey's text. Despite the large number of riders and horses, this is the only moment when we read of an equine throwing a rider. It is then not an instance of agency but a moment in which the equine is reduced to a trope and a narrative device to highlight the foe as the non-Christian Other. Furthermore, the narrator describes the Celt's reaction as soon as he stands up from the fall as follows: "[t]he look on the Cornovian's face as he sprang up from the roadway was vicious. As he followed the stallion back to Spadix, I saw his hand go briefly to the slingshot looped over his belt" (McCaffrey 1998: 86). That is, the Celt resorts to violence as soon as he realises that he has been rejected.

After the horse avoids the first shot, the Celt is readily dismissed from the group by Lord Artos' second-in-command, another Christian character. Here we find then a clear Christian/non-Christian distinction, positing the Celts as morally inferior in their treatment of horses and, consequently, as faulty knights within the Arthurian tradition.

The Celt's pride and failure to ride a Christian horse can hardly be separated from his otherisation as a Pagan character. When another member of the group asks the Celt why he is so obsessed with riding the stallion, he explains that it is "because no-one else had" (McCaffrey 1998: 78). Although it is not entirely true, as Lord Artos has indeed ridden the stallion, it is true that this Christian character is the only one who has managed to ride the horse so far. Tellingly, the narrator identifies the Celt's obsession with riding the stallion with pride, showing his Christian bias.

However, I contend, the Celt's motivation might be more complex than the text superficially suggests precisely because the Celt is obsessed with a specific horse, Lord Artos' stallion. Iswy's attitude could indeed suggest that he, perhaps unconsciously, resists the hierarchical power dynamics operating in the novel. The symbolic power of the stallion is made explicit when the narrator has finished his training in the shoe-forging and prepares for the last part of their journey back to Camelot, where Lord Artos waits for them. Here, the narrator is told to ride the stallion and lead the pony. The narrator is left speechless because, in his own words, this was one of "my most private dreams" (McCaffrey 1998: 123). In the end, Cornix is turned into a symbol of social prestige, who complements his rider. As an otherised character, riding Lord Artos' stallion, symbol of the highest authority in the novel, could have provided the Celt with the social prestige the protagonist benefits from by leading and later riding the stallion. If Iswy rode the Christian stallion, he would trespass the Self/Other—Christian/Pagan—dichotomy. This is why he must be immediately punished and humiliated for it. Thus, horses become the symbols through which power is negotiated in the novel, once again ignoring their material reality and denying any kind of ethical accountability of the human characters; equines are only relevant in that they contribute to reinforce the Roman/Celtic dualism and their categorisation as the non-human Other. In this regard, it is important to discern whether the text attempts to expose the hierarchies at work in the narrative, perhaps through ethical encounters.

4. INTER-SPECIES ENCOUNTERS

In spite of the ongoing influence of anthropocentrism within both western society and McCaffrey's novel, the emergence of various forms of resistance remains plausible. Drawing on Levina's ethical framework, Matthew Calarco underscores that the Self's perpetual engagement with "others" does not inherently disrupt his egoism; nevertheless, such egoism, often rooted in anthropocentrism, can be subjected to scrutiny and transformation through the conduit of ethical encounters (2008: 65). As the academic explains,

Perhaps I notice someone's deep vulnerability [...] In such moments I encounter the Other as ethically different [...] The Other here issues a challenge to my way of life and allows me to recognize that there are Others who are fundamentally different from me and to whom I unthinkingly do violence in my daily life. (2015: 32)

The ethical encounter with the oppressed Other can thus provide the means to force an acknowledgment of the shared material reality of living beings, human or not and, potentially, to regard the Other as an ethical subject that obligates the Self in ways that cannot be fully anticipated (Calarco 2008: 5). I argue that we can find some instances of ethical encounters in McCaffrey's novel. All of these encounters are of course filtered by the narrator, who is physically close to the equines as their caretaker. This material proximity might echo Susan Crane's analysis of the relation between a knight, the figure of the Arthurian romances *par excellence*, and a horse. Crane argues that this relation is "the most densely represented of all cross-species interactions" in the Middle Ages (2013: 137). McCaffrey's novel goes further and explores not the knight and his horse, but a different version of this figure through the protagonist and his pony, probably because of the author's interest in those in the margins.¹⁵ The narrator does not fight in any battle, as he ends up becoming a horseshoes maker. However, he displays some of the "knightly" traits such as honour and loyalty to the lord (Akçesme 2018: 10). Likewise, the narrator tends to the equines to the utmost detail, as knights in the Arthurian romance are expected to do (Pearsall 2013: 91). The first time the protagonist embarks with Lord Artos' men and horses, he is the only one unbothered by it, being used to sea travelling. At first, he explains that the seasickness that both horses and humans are experiencing is slightly different. The narrator states that the reason for such a difference is that the humans on the ship "simply had no time to be sick" (McCaffrey 1998: 46). Species boundaries seem then to be at best fragile, showing cracks that might be exploited to deconstruct the hyper-separation.

Furthermore, the narrator seems to be a character who sympathises with non-human animals. After the horses embark, the narrator is forced to face the vulnerability of the paradoxically extremely big and strong horses he is forcing to embark for Camelot. Here, the narrator can tell that the horses are terrified. Although their fear does not prevent their forced embarking, the protagonist tries to converse with them soothingly:

"You'll be on land before dark, my lad," I murmured to the stallion. He stood with his head bowed between his splayed front legs, his finely shaped ears drooping to either side of his elegant head, his black coat grimed and rough with sweat though we had groomed him morning and night. Remembering his fine displays on land, it was disheartening to see his proud spirit so low. (McCaffrey 1998: 46-47)

¹⁵ Roldán Romero argues that McCaffrey's writing often revolves around horses, whom the author loved dearly, enabling her to analyse otherised entities and that "human and nonhuman alike" characters manage to connect (2022: 311).

Despite the stallion's lack of verbal communication, the narrator does pick up on some of his non-verbal communicative items, such as his bowed head, his dropped ears, and his sweat after being recently groomed. All these aspects allow the narrator to imagine, if not know for certain, what the stallion thinks, wants, or feels. That is, the narrator does not make the anthropocentric assumption that ethical considerations should be applied exclusively to human animals on the basis of reason and articulated language. Instead, he acknowledges that equines are not devoid of emotions and, more importantly, that they deserve to be soothed instead of simply tossed aside. Similarly, the narrator speaks to the horses perhaps because he is somewhat aware of the fact that, as Crane explains, "human speech produces physical effects in the speaker that another species can grasp" (2013: 159), enabling inter-species communication. In other words, he does not deny the inter-connection and messy influences between the species, in clear resonance with Donna Haraway's "relating"¹⁶ and her advocacy for interspecies kinship.

The establishment of this kinship emerges as an especially pivotal consideration. As underscored by Haraway's thought-provoking imperative to "Make Kin Not Babies!", this imperative holds substantial implications. To forge a path toward a more sustainable global future, one that safeguards both the planet and its inhabitants from the deleterious effects of human-animal anthropocentrism, it becomes imperative to foster a network of "posthumanist allies." This entails a radical reimagining of our interrelationship with other animals, turning them into subjects of ethical consideration (2015: 161). In a parallel vein, Braidotti accentuates the critical significance of nurturing empowerment while recognising the intricate web of interconnections that facilitates the formation of alliances grounded in the tenets of non-anthropocentrism (2009: 530-31). Consequently, these alliances, emancipated from anthropocentric biases, assume a profound capacity to confront and undermine the marginalising tendencies that inherently reside within anthropocentrism. Hence, the way in which the protagonist engages with the equines here could display some form of posthumanist ethics and so a non-anthropocentric comprehension of human/other-than-human relationships.

The narrator explains that the sea trip results in both equine and human characters, all being bruised and exhausted. He does not pay much attention to his human companions and instead elaborates on the condition of the horses, who right after the landing "were barely able to drink water when it was offered to them" (McCaffrey 1998: 57). Here, the non-human animals are beyond exhaustion, which is recognised by the narrator and another Christian character, Lord Artos' second-in-command, Bericus. Right after the landing, Bericus commands: "[n]ow, let's get these poor creatures to the pasture before they fall down on the hard wharf stones." (McCaffrey 1998: 59). This way, the text presents the narrator as a sympathetic character who builds inter-species bridges based on their common vulnerability to

¹⁶ Donna Haraway contends that inter-species relatings is "a messy, difficult love which seeks to inhabit an inter-subjective world that is about meeting the other in all the fleshy detail of a mortal relationship with all its inevitable comic and tragic mistakes in the permanent search for knowledge of the intimate other" (2003: 34).

sickness, exhaustion, and sentience. In this context, ethical encounters might provide a useful context to blur anthropocentric hierarchies and boundaries.

Unlike the narrator and Bericus, other human characters are simply not sympathetic towards the equines. The protagonist's foe, Iswy, offers an example of this. The Celt first hurts the narrator's pony to earn the right to, albeit momentarily, ride Lord Artos' stallion (McCaffrey 1998: 85). He likewise ambushes the narrator with a group of horsemen and tells them to target the equine he is riding (McCaffrey 1998: 181) and, finally, he murders the protagonist's pony (McCaffrey 1998: 192). This is not too surprising in the context of young adult fiction, for, as Patty Campbell argues, non-human animals, especially pets, are usually murdered to dramatize just how bad the bad guys are" (2010: 56). Death and vulnerability, explored within the realm of corporeal existence, reveal the interconnectedness shared by human and nonhuman animals. Gilles Deleuze posits that becoming-animal blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman, primarily due to their shared vulnerability in material reality. This leads us to realise that "every man who suffers is a piece of meat. Meat's the common zone of man and the beast" (2003: 23). Hence, through the forced ethical encounter and the destabilisation of ontological hierarchies, provoked by the proximity of the main character to the death of the non-human in the text, can the human be potentially decentred of the established order and explore other frameworks of thought and life and become "meat," a concept typically reserved for farm animals. Such shock could therefore permit the protagonist to open his vision of the relationship between humans and non-humans and embrace an ontology that rejects the artificial hyper-separation between animal species. To acknowledge shared vulnerability and materiality denies *anthropos* the sovereign, central position in the anthropocentric human/non-human. The Celt's mortal revenge is performed by the end of the novel, while everyone else is busy getting ready for the upcoming battle. Once the protagonist arrives at the stables where the pony is killed, it is too late to save his life: "I knelt beside my faithful old pony and closed his eyes. Then I yanked the knife from his skull" (McCaffrey 1998: 192). Death becomes then not only an abstract motif related to the protagonist's deceased father, but a material phenomenon, through the murder of the pony. The pony's death raises the question of whose passing is grievable, which Butler argues is a political and social practice (2009: 29). Although the protagonist might regard the pony as grievable and even worthy of revenge, this is not the case for all the equines in the novel.

Early in the novel, when the human characters are still leading and riding the recently purchased equines, one of the foals breaks a foreleg. The reaction of the human characters is devoid of sympathy, and no attempts to treat the injured animal are made. Instead, the narrator says almost in passing: "[o]ne foal broke a foreleg and had to be destroyed" (McCaffrey 1998: 52). Although one might argue that to kill this pony is almost an act of mercy, as they would be unable to continue walking at the rhythm required of them to arrive to Camelot on time, the choice of words, "destroyed", eliminates any regard for the equine's material existence. This telling wording illustrates the naturalisation of anthropocentric discourse and, more

importantly, that the ethical encounters taking place in the novel are not acknowledged but ignored and left to the margins despite the centrality of the equines. The text even engages in a short but vivid description of the pony's slaughter: "Artos himself severed its jugular vein, not wanting anyone else to have such a sad duty. Then the foal was heaved overboard. A sailor swabbed the blood off the deck within minutes" (McCaffrey 1998: 52-53). The death of the unnamed foal serves to construct Artos as an honourable knight who seeks to spare others from hurting the innocent, following the Arthurian tradition (Brewer 2002: 34). Given that Borek argues that "the catalyst function of the horse has proven valid for the dead horse as well as for the living one" (2022: 158), the killing of the foal constructs Lord Artos as a proper knight, dismissing the suffering and death of a living being as well as the potential ethical encounter. Moreover, the narrator explains that the blood is washed away in a matter of minutes; that is, any consequences for the human character are "erased" with the blood, proof of what has just transpired. As Akçesme explains, "Arthurian Romances do not have any bio-ethics [and] 'green' virtues like empathy, nurturance or connectedness to others are completely ignored" (2018: 30). Such seems to be the case in *Black Horses*, where the protagonist, while apparently attuned to the emotions and injuries of the horses, only seeks to avenge the murder of one equine and not another.

In the case of the pony, the protagonist quickly abandons his corpse and goes after his murderer, Iswy, whom he finally murders, avenging the deceased pony (McCaffrey 1998: 200). That is, the pony is appropriately avenged, especially considering that he was perfectly healthy and there was no reason to kill him. Although one might argue that the reason for this difference is that the foal was killed because he was already hurt and so it would be a form of euthanasia whereas the pony was perfectly healthy, the text seems to be a bit more complicated. Considering that equines are often seen in Arthurian romances as symbols of the social status of their riders and that to kill the equine is to dishonour their rider (Brewer 2002: 37) and a threat to the rider's ontology (2022: 140), the killing of the other-than-human character might be motivated not by the pain of losing an equine companion, but to reassert the human's Arthurian honour.

In this regard, although one might be tempted to argue that McCaffrey's text is limited by its genre (Roldán Romero 2022: 317), there exist previous cases of characters in romances able to build inter-species bridges. One example is Bevis, a medieval character in the Arthurian poem *Bevis of Hampton*. According to Crane, this knight defends his love towards his horse without falling into naïve anthropomorphism, acknowledging that their relationship is not symmetric (2013: 160). More importantly, the strong connection between the knight and his horse causes his death right after his horse's (Crane 2013: 166). In the case of *Black Horses*, the narrator remains alive and riding the newly acquired stallion after killing the Celt. That is, the text fails at its attempts to go beyond anthropocentrism, despite the focus on the equines, unlike other works set in similar contexts. In other words, despite the author's attempts to move beyond anthropocentrism, the novel defends

the superiority of the human species, despite the concessions to other species like killing foals to end their suffering.

5. CONCLUSIONS

McCaffrey's novel *Black Horses for the King* undoubtedly enters into a compelling dialogue with the Arthurian tradition, placing a significant emphasis on the equine world. This dynamic interplay between human and horse characters offers valuable insights into the impact of anthropocentrism on human relationships with other-than-human beings within the genre. Yet, amidst the engrossing narrative, certain ambiguities emerge that merit attention.

While the text reflects upon the human/other-than-human relationship, it falls short of fully exposing the materiality of the horses themselves or advocating for their ethical consideration. Instead, the novel utilises the equine characters as mere instruments to shape the protagonist and his adversary. Strikingly, this lack of challenge to anthropocentrism in the narrative is closely tied to the absence of resistance to the dualistic hierarchy between Christianity and Paganism. McCaffrey's work reinforces and is reinforced by the human/non-human dichotomy, mirroring the Christian/Pagan binary. Consequently, the dualisms pervading the text reinforce one another, avoiding any transformative challenge.

Amidst moments that might suggest resistance to anthropocentrism, such as the protagonist's keen attention to the equines' bodily language, these efforts often arise as unintended by products of the instrumentalisation of the horses. The ethical encounters depicted in the novel inadvertently serve to reinforce the supremacy of Christian humans over non-Christian humans, perpetuating the marginalisation of the horses' genuine existence, relegating them once again to mere instruments for human purposes. This portrayal paints a somewhat pessimistic outlook for the reader, suggesting that a mere representation of the more-than-human in literature cannot safeguard them from being reduced to symbolic tropes.

Indeed, focusing solely on other-than-human animals and striving for an ethical encounter between species falls short of dismantling anthropocentrism and the exploitative reduction of non-human beings to tropes. To genuinely challenge the Western dualistic thought system heavily reliant on anthropocentrism, we must dismantle all hierarchical dualisms and truly respect all forms of zoe. In this pursuit, we realise that merely centring on non-human animals may not suffice to achieve a successful ethical encounter and avoid succumbing to anthropocentric tropes in the Arthurian tradition, as Akçesme rightly warns us (2018: 18).

In conclusion, while McCaffrey's novel indeed engages in a thought-provoking dialogue with the Arthurian tradition and highlights the impact of anthropocentrism on human/other-than-human relations, it leaves open spaces for deeper exploration and more transformative encounters. The interplay of ambivalences throughout the text urges a more holistic approach, one that challenges all dualisms to foster authentic ethical exchanges and cultivate an environment for harmonious

coexistence with other species. Hence, while McCaffrey's expressed aim was to honour the equines within the Arthuriana, it becomes apparent that this intention inadvertently results in a variation of anthropocentrism, in line with Calarco's astute critique of the shortcomings of animal rights discussions – a critique that reminds us how such discourse can occasionally generate “a slightly different version of anthropocentrism” (2008: 9).

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