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Given a free rein? Representations of power in the stables at Houghton Hall, Norfolk, and John Wootton's *Sir Robert Walpole with his Hunter and Groom*

When Sir Robert Walpole first rose to political power from humble origins, he had much to prove to the world. In order to consolidate his position as Prime Minister against the backdrop of the new Hanoverian dynasty, Walpole capitalised on extravagant displays of power, impressing political peers and local squires alike by inviting them for entertainment and hunting at his estate at Houghton Hall, Norfolk. This was hardly coincidental: although relatively unexplored in scholarship, historically, horses served as vehicles to showcase a man's elite social standing and ability to govern. However, it was also important for Walpole to recognise the limits of his power in order to demonstrate that he was no threat to the monarchy. This study examines the stable architecture at Houghton Hall and the equestrian portrait of Walpole by John Wootton (1726) in order to demonstrate the extent to which equestrian representations could function as a metaphor for both power and submission, which is particularly pertinent when applied to the hierarchical relations between Prime Minister and King.

Writing to the Prince of Wales on July 14, 1731, Lord Hervey would remark that Sir Robert Walpole's Houghton Hall in Norfolk was a paradigm of 'taste, expense, state and parade.'¹ This comment in itself is perhaps unsurprising – country houses, after all, have always been about display, founded and embellished as part of a conscious mission to establish a dynastic 'line'.² However, what makes this comment so interesting in Walpole's case is that as the first Prime Minister, Walpole was essentially a commoner who had risen to power. Satirists of the day delighted in deriding his flagrant display of riches and honours.³ Yet as a *parvenu*, Walpole relied on traditionally aristocratic tropes of power - notably the idea of chivalry - to consolidate his political image against the backdrop of the new Hanoverian line of kings. Walpole's establishment of the Order of the Bath in the name of the King, for example, clearly aligned Walpole with the medieval tradition of knighthood - formerly the preserve of monarchs alone to promote loyalty among

¹ Qtd in Joan Thirsk, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 612.

² Jeremy Musson, *How to Read a Country House* (London: Ebury Press, 2005), p.8.

³ Paul Langford, *Walpole and the Robinocracy* (Cambridge: Cadwyck-Healey, 1986), p. 25.

their subjects.⁴ Walpole was therefore trying to strike a delicate balance between asserting his own power while still showing his submission to King George I (and later George II). One way of exploring this tension is to examine Walpole's own methods of signifying his power to political peers: notably the way in which he invited influential politicians and local squires to Houghton Hall for what Giles Worsley describes as an 'orgy of politicking, entertaining and hunting.'⁵ Equestrian activities had long been a key signifier of elite status and prestige, and were thus an integral part of creating Walpole's public political and social image, yet there have been few studies to actually explore the presentation of Walpole's power through the lens of horsemanship. In Walpole's case, this is particularly pertinent, as this is a man who allegedly opened letters from his huntsman before any other correspondence.⁶ This study will aim to explore the stable architecture at Houghton Hall to reveal how far Walpole invested in impressing his peers and asserting his position. At the same time, by looking at the equestrian portrait by John Wootton (1726), I hope to demonstrate the extent to which the horse could function not only as a metaphor for power, but also for submission, which is particularly pertinent when applied to the hierarchical relations between Prime Minister and King.



Figure 1. The Stables at Houghton, photograph, from Country Life.

Today, it is easy to overlook the importance of stables when the horse has been replaced by the motor car and stable buildings have been converted for commercial purposes. Architectural historians, too, have neglected this topic, and although Giles Worsley's pioneering work *The British Stable* does redress this, by focusing purely on stable architecture, it does not place stables in a wider cultural context. In this study, however, I wish to examine the stables at Houghton in the context of aristocratic display in the eighteenth century. When it was first built in the 1720s, Houghton Hall

⁴ Andrew Hanham, "The Politics of Chivalry: Sir Robert Walpole, the Duke of Montagu and the Order of the Bath", *Parliamentary History*, 35.3 (2016): 262-297, <10.1111/1750-0206.12236> [accessed 5 January 2017] (293).

⁵ Giles Worsley, *The British Stable*, (London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 3.

⁶ Donna Landry, *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking, and Ecology in English Literature, 1671-1831* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 67-8.

was considered to be one of the most impressive estates of its time, originally designed by Colen Campbell in the fashionable neo-Palladian style. The original designs still survive in Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus*, although it is difficult to tell from these designs what the original stables would have been like.⁷ What is known is that, almost as soon as the stables were completed, Walpole decided that they obstructed some of the best views of the landscape and had them demolished in 1732, claiming that they had been badly built in the first place.⁸ The stables that can be seen today are the result of this. While they are built in Palladian style, it is important to note that the stables depart from Palladio's *Quattro Libri*, which recommends that 'stalls and stables...must be far from the principal house, because of the ill smell of [horse's] dung'.⁹ Walpole clearly had no such intention to follow this advice, building his stables to be conspicuous as a prominent feature of Houghton Hall. While Palladio's suggestion is indeed practical, it nonetheless reduces the horse to a dirty, dung-producing beast. By contrast, horsemanship manuals at the end of the seventeenth century had already begun to ideologically construct the horse as a noble creature. The writer A.S. Gent believed that 'the horse is a naturally proud beast, and delighteth in cleanness' and instructed that 'the dung must not by any means lye close to the stable'.¹⁰ Instead of regarding horses and the stables in which they were sheltered as serving a purely utilitarian purpose, it is likely that Walpole saw them as a status symbols to be exhibited and admired. Indeed, it remained a Houghton tradition until the 1930s for the family to pass through the stables and admire the horses on their way to church every Sunday.¹¹

In fact, not only did Walpole elevate his horses by providing them with stables in the stylish Palladian design, but by choosing a quadrangle structure, Walpole was also making a political statement. As Giles Worsley notes, it was standard in the early eighteenth century for stables to be located in the wings of the houses, whereas the quadrangle had previously only been used for royal stables, such as Henry VII's stables at Greenwich Palace, James I's at Theobalds, Charles I's country house at Wilton and Charles II's hunting stables at Lyndhurst.¹² Worsley even goes on to argue that 'if quadrangular stables had traditionally been a demonstration of royal power, the stables at Houghton and its successors were a telling illustration of where power lay in Georgian Britain: no longer with the monarch but with the landowning classes, with Parliament, and specifically with the Prime Minister'.¹³ There is certainly a tension here between royal and ministerial power, which becomes evident in the appropriation of architectural styles. The royal stables may have informed William Kent's designs

⁷ Colen Campbell, *Vitruvius Britannicus* (London, 1715), pp. 83-4.

⁸ Giles Worsley, 'Riding on Status', *Country Life* 184.39 (1990): 108-111, *Country Life Archive* <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1513133860?accountid=13042>> [accessed 4 January 2017] (108).

⁹ Andrea Palladio, *The architecture of A. Palladio, in four books*, trans. Nicholas Du Bois, (London, 1715), *Archive* <<https://archive.org/details/architecturePal00Pall>> [accessed 28 January 2017] (21).

¹⁰ A. S. Gent, *The Gentleman's Compleat Jockey* (London, 1700), *Early English Books Online* <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 28 January] (5).

¹¹ Giles Worsley, 'Riding on Status', p. 111.

¹² Giles Worsley, *The British Stable*, p. 133.

¹³ *Ibid* p. 133.

for the new stables at Houghton, but considering that Kent was later commissioned to design the Royal Mews in 1731-33 and the Horse Guards in Whitehall in 1748, one might infer that the stables at Houghton had by that point established a new, neo-classical 'royal' precedent. Certainly, the neo-classical elements of both the exterior and interior of the stables lend themselves to creating what might be considered an equestrian temple. On the outside, each of the four facades has blank arcading with Diocletian windows, broken by a central pedimented entrance block, with octagonal cupolas in each of the four corners (figure 1). On the inside the tall, brick-vaulted stables have giant Ionic columns, topped with balls at the head (figure 2). In such a setting, Walpole and his horses must have been a spectacular sight.



Figure 2. Stables at Houghton Hall, photograph, from Country Life.

Nevertheless, satirists of the day also sought to undermine such signifiers of power. Recognising the importance of horsemanship as a metaphor for effective governance, they often chose to challenge those in power by reversing this representation. In *The Statesman's Fall or, Sir B--b in the Dust*, although Sir Robert is not named explicitly, the political allegories suggest that he is almost certainly the butt of the satire. In the song, the statesman is thrown from his mare, which the song then parallels with his fall from political power, concluding that the knight 'who steers,/ Who eke the Mare of Government,/ Has Switch'd these many Years:/Yet thick in Skull, in Judgement addle,/ He scarce knows how to sit in Saddle.'¹⁴ It is interesting how far this satirical song works to undermine and even emasculate the statesman/Walpole. According to the late seventeenth-century writer J. Gailhard in *The Compleat Gentleman*,

¹⁴ Anon, *The statesman's fall: or, Sir B--b in the Dust*, (London, 1740) *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* < <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/>> [accessed 5 Feb 2017] (6).

‘...Horsemanship is a very manly thing, and ‘tis no small matter to manage so strong and courageous a Creature as Horses are, so to curb and hold them in, or else to put on, tame, and govern them, as to make them useful and serviceable to us...’¹⁵ Even here in the language of horsemanship manuals, the verb ‘to govern’ appears, and it is no surprise that the riding metaphors should so readily illustrate man’s ability (or lack of) to keep order and demonstrate his authority. In *The Statesman’s Fall*, the final rhyming couplet ends on a feminine rhyme so that the cadence falls mimetically to suggest the statesman’s/Walpole’s falls from power. More than this, the sonic contract between “addle” and “saddle” further implies that far from being an orderly pursuit, the obsession with hunting could addle the brains of those in power. In another more explicit caricature of Walpole’s power, *The Norfolk Congress: or, A Full and True Account of Their Hunting, Feasting and Merrymaking*, it ironically comments on how ‘comfortable it is unto the People to see their Governors indulge themselves in Ease, Diversions and Pleasures...’¹⁶ Clearly then, although equestrian imagery could be used to demonstrate the abundance of power, satirists could also rework this to signify a power reversal and depict Walpole as an incompetent horseman, and, by extension, a poor governor over the country.

The fact that satirists chose to target Walpole through equestrian imagery reveals much about its crucial role in signifying those in power. Indeed, it was an expectation for anyone with significant political power to build impressive estates to consolidate their social standing. There were other means too by which persons of rank could convey their influence, and studies have certainly been done to show how far Walpole was able to manipulate public opinion through the power of the press, for example,¹⁷ but none of these are quite as heavily symbolic as visual representation in the arts. Hence in this study, I would like to draw attention to Walpole’s equestrian portraiture, which has hitherto been unexplored in scholarship. Instead of looking at the stable architecture and equestrian portraiture from a purely aesthetic perspective, or, what the historians Jon Stobart and Mark Rothery term as a ‘*Country Life view*’,¹⁸ I hope to demonstrate that Walpole was in fact very much aware of the signifying political power invested in the arts. Considering that the court of the Hanoverians no longer dominated artistic and literary life through patronage, there was clearly scope for eminent politicians such as Walpole to use this to their advantage and commission artists to depict them as they wanted to be seen.¹⁹ However, we should also be careful about assuming how far Walpole attempted to appropriate formerly royal signifiers of power for himself. As Andrew Hanham notes, when Walpole returned to office in

¹⁵ J. Gailhard, *The Compleat Gentleman, or, Directions for the Education of Youth* (London, 1678), *Early English Books Online* <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 28 January 2017] (50).

¹⁶ Anon, *The Norfolk Congress. Or, A full and true account of the hunting feasting, and merry-making* (London, 1728), p. 4.

¹⁷ Simon Targett, “Government and Ideology during the Age of Whig Supremacy: The Political Argument of Sir Robert Walpole’s Newspaper Propagandists”, *The Historical Journal* 37.2 (1994): 289-317. *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2640204>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

¹⁸ Jon Stobart and Mark Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 6.

¹⁹ Marilyn Morris, *Sex, Money and Personal Character in Eighteenth-Century British Politics*, (London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 14.

1721, he and the senior secretary, Charles Townsend, endured a ‘gruelling struggle’ to maintain George I’s favour. Walpole must have been aware that to compare himself too closely to the King would have put him in an increasingly unfavourable position, and it is no surprise that when he established the Order of the Bath, it was publicised as an initiative of the King. It is at this point that I would like to turn to John Wootton’s *Sir Robert Walpole with his Hunter and Groom* (1726; figure 3). Painted before the impressive stables at Houghton were built, the painting effectively demonstrates Walpole’s acute self-awareness about how he represented himself. On one level, this is a highly stylised portrayal; Wootton painted hundreds of horse portraits and was indeed the pioneer of the equine portrait in England, so at a first glance, it would seem to be another of his fashionable, yet generically aesthetic portraits of the English thoroughbred. Walpole’s equestrian portrait is not celebrating an individual horse (unlike, for example, Wootton’s *The Bloody Shouldered Arabian* or George Stubb’s *Whistlejacket*), so one might infer that it is intended instead to signify something about the Prime Minister himself. It is significant that the title of the painting names Sir Robert Walpole, but the horse has no identity other than the fact that it is his property. Like the groom, its purpose is to serve Walpole.



Figure 3. John Wootton, *Sir Robert Walpole with his Hunter and Groom*, 1726, 40 ¼ x 50 ¼ in, oil on canvas, Christies.

Consequently, on the surface there is much to suggest that *Sir Robert Walpole with his Hunter and Groom* is nothing more than a panegyric to Walpole. However, on closer inspection, there are some subtle details in the painting which serve to undermine such a reading. Certainly, the Palladian-style building in the background, like the stables at Houghton, provide an impressive neo-classical setting, but one might ask why Wootton chose to depict a generic Palladian building instead of Walpole’s Houghton Hall. One might hazard a suggestion that it is the old stable block that was pulled

down in 1732, although this is unlikely since the narrowness of the building and the steps by the entrance would hardly have been practical for stabling and manoeuvring horses. By contrast, there was, after all, precedent for equestrian portraits to include specific landmarks in the backdrop, such as the engravings in William Cavendish's *A New Method, and Extraordinary Invention, to Dress Horses, and Work Them According to Nature* (1667), which feature the Duke's impressive stables at Bolsover and Welbeck.²⁰ For Cavendish, the riding house was the theatre for his dressage performance as he and his horses took the limelight as the stars of the show. By depicting a more generic, pastoral scene, Wootton takes the focus away from aristocratic display and focuses instead on rural simplicity. According to the art historian Roy Strong, the return to the pastoral in eighteenth century portraiture was a means of disguising social rank and recognising that nobility was first and foremost a question of sensibility and virtue.²¹ In the case of *Sir Robert Walpole with his Hunter and Groom*, I would argue that the pastoral setting helps to neutralise Walpole's position as a Prime Minister. This is not to say that Walpole was lowering his status exactly, but in fact defusing his apparent power and ambition to demonstrate that he had no intention to disrupt the social or political hierarchy.

The composition of *Sir Robert Walpole with his Hunter and Groom* also supports this interpretation. It is especially significant that it is not Walpole at the heart of the painting, but the elevated horse's head. In royal portraiture, such as in Sir Anthony van Dyck's hunting portrait of Charles I, *Le roi à la chasse* (1635), the horse's head is lowered to show its submission to the King,²² whereas in this depiction, the hunter's head is the highest point. The horse is therefore the figure that commands the viewer's attention. Not only this, but Walpole is unmounted, which can be interpreted as a sign of humility. Tellingly, his sideward glance avoids acknowledging the viewer and this renders the scene much more private. Although the viewer is able to behold the scene, there is the sense that Walpole is not making a public statement, but enjoying a moment of private recreation. Walpole is identifiable by his Order of the Garter star, yet the fact that he is standing alongside his grooms suggests that Walpole has no ambitions to be the centre of attention. This is particularly pertinent if we consider that Walpole had an equestrian portrait of George I commissioned to hang at Houghton Hall. Although there is no visual record of this painting, it was described in Horace Walpole's *Aedes Walpolianae: or, a Description of the Collection of Pictures at Houghton-Hall in Norfolk* (1752) as hanging in the common parlour, the place where Sir Robert would have received his visitors. Horace suggests that the 'figure is by Sir Godfrey, which he took from the king at Guilford horse-race. The horse is new painted by Wootton. I suppose this is the very picture which gave rise to Mr. Addison's beautiful poem to Kneller.'²³ Through Addison's ekphrasis, it is possible to glean a sense of the impression of this royal portrait:

²⁰ William Cavendish, *A General System of Horsemanship* (London, 1743).

²¹ Roy Strong, *The Spirit of Britain: A Narrative History of the Arts* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 436.

²² Donna Landry, *Noble Brutes* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 108.

²³ Horace Walpole, *The Works of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford*, (London, 1798), p. 242.

Kneller! With silence and surprise
 We see Britannia's monarch rise,
 A godlike form, by thee display'd
 In all the force of light and shade;
 And, awed by thy delusive hand
 As in the Presence-chamber stand.²⁴

With the 'monarch's rise', it is likely that he is astride a rearing horse, in command of both horse and his people. The deification of the King further suggests that compositionally, he would be the highest, central point of the portrait. The fact that this painting would inspire awe in the viewers suggests that its location in the reception room was a deliberate move on Walpole's part to demonstrate his obedience and loyalty to the King. Even though his visitors may well have been impressed with Houghton Hall (and of course, the magnificent stables), this portrait exemplifies how far Walpole makes a significant hierarchical statement. While the King is clearly the governor in control of the land, in *Sir Robert with his Hunter and Groom*, Walpole literally presents himself as a down-to-earth figure who is another of the King's subjects.

In considering both the stables at Houghton Hall and *Sir Robert with his Hunter and Groom*, it becomes evident that Walpole was able to project different, and perhaps even paradoxical significations of his power. The equine imagery in all these sources acts as a metaphor for governance and obedience, demonstrating a complicated power structure at work. While the stables were an important means of consolidating his image politically and socially, it is notable that such impressive tokens of power were open to satire, which in turn held the potential to damage Walpole's public image. It was also necessary, for the sake of his political stability, to demonstrate his loyalty to the King. Therefore, in *Sir Robert with his Hunter and Groom*, Walpole presents a humble concession of power. One might speculate why Walpole chose to bolster his image through impressive stable architecture after such a humble portrayal in the Wootton portrait: perhaps there was a shift in Walpole's attitude as he settled into his position and gained power and confidence, or perhaps he felt justified in such a flagrant display because he had already proven his humility. Yet ultimately, such suppositions perhaps overlook the complexity of the equestrian metaphors at work in these representations. The relationship between a rider and horse is never one of complete dominance and submission, but a complex dialectical play of power. Thus the stables may have signified Walpole as quasi-royalty, but without respecting the authority of the King, Walpole's signifiers of power are made redundant. Walpole may have been a competent horseman, but without respecting the 'Mare of Government' and suffering from excessive pride, there was always the potential that he could fall.

²⁴ Joseph Addison, 'To Sir Godfrey Kneller on his Picture of the King', *The Poems of Addison and John Phillips*, (London, 1822), p.79.

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