

Écuyères and “doing gender”

Presenting Femininity in a Male Domain – Female Circus Riders 1800–1920

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyse gender relations in equestrianism from the beginning of the 19th to the first decades of the 20th century. Focus will be on the female horse riding circus artists, the écuyères. The fact that women were circus riders at this time is interesting as in many parts of the world and in many epochs, horses have played a significant role in the lives of men. Traditionally men used horses in agriculture, forestry, the transport sector and in the army and a real man was a horseman. Widespread practices and, in particular, the symbolic correlation between masculinity and horsemanship conveys the impression that women had nothing to do with horses. This is true for many situations. The circus arena, however, seems to have been an exception as women could perform there. At the heart of the performances was not only equestrianism, but also the notion of gender. It is even likely that “doing gender” was an indispensable part of the show, as the allure of the écuyères depended on the embodiment and presentation of seemingly incompatible features: beauty, grace and femininity as well as mastery of an art that was a traditionally male domain.

Key words: gender, equestrianism, horse, circus, female riders, écuyères, history

Introduction

A picture taken at the Olympic Games 1900 in Paris shows an elegant woman, sitting side saddle on a beautiful horse. Who was she? This picture is interesting since no horse riding woman is mentioned in textbooks and studies about Olympic history from this time. A starting point for this article is that previous research on Olympic history has made some participants and competitions invisible. This is probably a consequence of some early competitions not being included in later Olympic programs, but may also be a result of the male and female cultural norms at that time, which did not acknowledge women as sportswomen.

The woman in the picture was Miss Elvira Guerra who competed in the equestrian discipline “hack and hunter combined”. On her horse Libertain, Guerra finished 9th among the 51 participants, consisting mostly of cavalry officers. Equestrian sport made its Olympic debut in the Games held in Paris 1900. As many other events at the 1900 Olympics, however, “hack and hunter combined”, a competition in which the rider showed the horse in walk, trot and gallop on the flat and jumping over some obstacles, was later taken out of the Olympics. The equestrian events that are part of the Olympic program today – show-jumping, dressage and three-day-eventing – were established as the Olympic equestrian disciplines in 1912.¹

The fact that Guerra competed is interesting from two perspectives. Firstly, in many parts of the world and in many epochs, horses have played a more or less significant role in the lives of men. Traditionally men used horses in agriculture, forestry, the transport sector and in the army, and a real man was a horseman (Hedenborg, 2011). Widespread practices and, in particular, the symbolic correlation between masculinity and horsemanship conveys the impression that women had nothing to do with horses. This is true for many situations, where the use of horses was a privilege of men. However, women’s connections to horses varied considerably depending on the social and cultural context. In 19th century Europe horse riding was a very popular and prestigious leisure activity for members of the aristocracy. Both men and women demonstrated their wealth by showing off horses, but also through their audacity in hunting on horseback and their skills in carrousel. Secondly, women’s

1 <http://www.sok.se/olympiskhistoria/olympiskaspel/olympiskaspel/aten1896.5.18ear6851076df6362280009952.html>, <http://users.skynet.be/hermandw/olymp/equi1900.html>, 20110215.

participation in the Olympics was still a contested issue in the early 20th century. Female riders were not allowed to participate in the dressage until 1952. They had to wait until 1956 before they were allowed to take part in the show-jumping competition; and it was 1964 before women could compete in the three-day-eventing competition (Pfister, 2000; Hedenborg, 2009). Therefore Guerra's participation in the Olympics raises questions. Where did she learn to become an advanced-level rider? Was she the only woman in a masculine equestrian world or did she have female companions and/or competitors?

Sources on women and equestrianism from that time are few, but it is possible to find references to Guerra. She is described as an "écuyère", a circus rider and a member of the "circus aristocracy". Her grandfather was Alessandro Guerra who founded and owned several famous circuses in various European cities.² Therefore, in order to answer the questions posed we have to enter a sphere where the extraordinary has always been ordinary: the world of circus.

Aim, demarcations and sources

The purpose of this article is to analyze gender relations and the role of women in equestrianism from the beginning of the 19th to the first decades of the 20th century. Focus will be on the female horse riding circus artists, the écuyères, their performances, their role in society and their lives. In order to analyze gender relations and negotiations in sporting activities such as equestrianism a "mapping out" of the écuyères, their biographies, skills and performances is necessary. This is done by asking the following questions: Who were these women, how did they acquire their skills, what was their social situation and their social status, what were their everyday lives like? In addition, questions related to their performances in the arena are posed: What was the nature of their performances, what images and messages did they convey, and what meanings did these performances acquire? Based on this information it will be discussed how gender relations are constructed inside and outside of the circus arena focusing on the question: *How could these women participate in such a masculine activity as (skillful) riding at this specific time?* What was their image, and were they accepted not only in the circus, but also in

2 <http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/athletes/gu/elvira-guerra-1.html>, 20110215.

the outside world? How could they navigate between femininity and expertise in a male domain?

The results presented here are preliminary, not least as there is little previous research in this field and the sources on these women, many of them in French, are few and far between. This contribution is, therefore, based mainly on books detailing the history of the circus and circus riders, with reference to the few journal articles available where appropriate. An important source is Baron de Vaux's publication *Écuyers et Écuyères. Histoire de Cirque D'Europe (1680–1891)* published in the late 19th century. In his book 32 female and 6 male circus riders are portrayed.³ Another excellent source is Joseph Halperson's *Buch vom Zirkus* (1926) which is a treasure trove of circus stories. According to Halperson there were hundreds of écuyers and écuyères in the 19th century as all circuses had equestrian acts. Determining the exact number of performers is, however, difficult as only a few left traces in the source material.

The information in these and similar books focuses on the “professional” competencies of the riders, their horses and their performances in the arena. In addition, this study was able to analyze articles and pictures in journals such as *Sport im Bild* (Berlin) and a similar publication *Sport und Salon*. There are also other sources that may give insight into circus life. The écuyères, their beauty, their performances and their fates, have inspired numerous artists, painters as well as poets and writers, who made them the heroines of their art work. These sources have not been analyzed here because it is likely that they reveal more about the imaginations of the artists than about the lives and performances of the circus riders.

There are several obstacles to obtaining knowledge about the female circus riders and their backgrounds. One problem that has presented itself is the focus of the source material. A good example is the case of Caroline Loyo, one of the first and most important écuyères, who made her debut in Paris at the Cirque Olympique as early as 1833. Baron de Vaux mentions that she had left her home with her black horse to join the circus in Paris and that she was instructed by experts such as Jules-Charles Pellier and François Baucher. Baron de Vaux also emphasizes that she kept her horses not at the circus where she performed, but in the stables of her instructor, Pellier, where she groomed and trained them herself. During her career she had several excellent horses. In addition,

3 De Vaux's book seems to have been used as a source for several more popular books and texts on the history of the circus.

Vaux provides us with information on her performances in and outside the arena, e.g. on a race with officers in one of the parks on the outskirts of Paris. Loyo won it easily.

Loyo's story is intriguing in many ways. It has the nature of a fairy tale and raises numerous questions. For example, why did she leave her home and why did she come alone to Paris? Was it her dream to gain fame as a circus rider? How could she expect to be accepted in a men's domain? How could she afford horses and riding instruction? Did she have a wealthy background? Did the fact that she owned horses ease her way into the circus world as horses were a precious form of "capital"? Contemporary sources indicate that *écuyères* had to own at least three horses – one of which had to be a hunter (Nelson, 2001). The material only tells us that Loyo owned one horse at the beginning; is it possible that she was able to borrow horses from horse trainers such as Pellier and that she bought her own horses later with the income she earned as a famous *écuyère*? Unfortunately many of these questions are not addressed in the accessible sources that instead focus on the horseback performances, on the beauty and behavior of the riders and, most importantly, on the quality of the horses. Some of these questions therefore have to be left unanswered in this article, not only when it comes to Loyo but also in the case of other *écuyères*. Even so, it seems that some patterns can be established in regards to the biographies and roles of *écuyères*. These will be elaborated below.

The details about female artists in the circus books tend to be quite brief and rather stereotypical. Many are described as "the most famous" acrobats of their time. One woman is depicted as a "real lady" with an amiable character, another is said to have "radiated energy and grace", a third to be attractive because of her "charm and noblesse". Baron de Vaux' portrayal of Elvira Guerra is slightly more detailed. Here she is described as a woman with a strong will and self-determination. Also, her main interest does not appear to have been in the commercial side of circus entertainment, but rather in riding for the sake of the art. De Vaux underlines that she loved her profession passionately, that she did not compromise and that she was a highly independent woman. Although brief, this description does give some insight into the character of Guerra, whereas the depictions of the other *écuyères* in these sources say very little about the women's personalities. Despite this lack of detailed information, the brief descriptions may throw light on the kinds of images and stereotypes attributed to the *écuyères*. Epithets like "real lady", "ami-

able”, “grace”, “charm” and “noblesse” seem to suggest that the writers felt the need to underline that these women – despite their public performances in horse riding, otherwise seen as typically masculine behavior – were “real” women. Labeling the skillful riders as “ladylike” helped to fit them and their activities into the traditional gender order. Toward the end of this article the analysis will return to a discussion of whether the *écuyères* contested the established norms and ideals of femininity at the time.

Historical background of circus entertainment

The modern circus emerged from horse shows and trick riding exhibitions in the second half of the 18th century.⁴ Former cavalry officer Philip Astley who founded a riding school in London and exhibited his “feats of horsemanship” to increasingly large audiences had a decisive impact on its development (Thétard, 1947; Cederberg, 1981; Wählberg, 1976 & 1978; Nelson, 2001, Ivarsson Lilieblad, 2009). In contrast to most other trick riders he rode in a circle, initially on an open field but from 1779 and onwards he rode in a building that he called “Astley’s Royal Amphitheater of Arts”. In the first period of the circus, equestrian acts were the main element of the shows. The arena, a circle with a diameter of 13 meters, was built to accommodate riders and horses. Soon the program was extended and acrobats, musicians and clowns entertained the spectators between the equestrian acts. Because of the shape of the arena, the term circus emerged and was soon transferred to other enterprises of this kind. Astley was very successful and founded several circuses in various European countries; among these was the “Cirque Olympique” in Paris (Thétard, 1947; Nelson, 2001). In 19th century Europe, several circus dynasties competed for fame and audiences, new circus buildings were erected and the circus became a place that attracted large crowds from all social classes (Cederberg, 1981; Günther & Winkler, 1986; Nelson, 2001; Bouchet, 1993). Horse dressage was practiced by the upper class, and this gave the modern circus a sense of high class and quality (Cederberg, 1981).

There are several reasons why equestrian acts played such a central part in early modern circus. First of all there was the importance of horses in

4 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/118480/circus/254866/Equestrian-acts,20110215>; see also http://www.circopedia.org/index.php/Philip_Astley,20110215.

everyday life: especially in agriculture, forestry and the transport sector. The horse had a special position among domestic animals and a good horse provided its owner with status. Second, the significance of mounted troops in the various military confrontations of this period is likely to have had a role. The cavalry was the most prestigious unit and serving as cavalry officer guaranteed high social status. In addition, hunting was a traditional form of entertainment for the upper classes. Throughout the 19th century, horsemanship was highly valued by the European "upper classes", the male members of which were as a rule active or former officers as well as enthusiastic hunters. In the second half of the century, modernization and industrialization created a new bourgeois upper class of engineers, bankers and business men (and their families) who developed an interest in horseback riding as conspicuous consumption (Weil, 1999). In addition, horse races had become an important sport, not least because of the fascination for betting (among others Hedenborg, 2008; Vamplew & Kay, 2005). The majority of the riders in such races were professional jockeys, but there were also upper class riders who gained fame through their riding skills and their excellent horses.

In several countries and particularly in France, interest in circus entertainment declined at the end of the 19th century (Bouchet, 1993). Many of the big circuses in France closed between 1895 and 1914. But interest in circuses did not disappear entirely from Europe. While the French circuses were closing down, the popularity of the circus was rising in Germany and Sweden, for example (Cederberg, 1981; Wählberg 1978; 1992). In these countries the interest did not diminish until the first decades of the 20th century. There is little concrete information about why interest in the circus declined in some parts of Europe. It is possible that the acts had become repetitive, that innovations were rare and sensations lacking. Meanwhile bicycle races, car races and the first airplanes were capturing the public's imagination. Other forms of entertainment such as the music hall were also attracting the crowds. It is also possible that the decline in interest in some countries was connected to the horse losing its importance in everyday life. This is, however, difficult to prove, and in Sweden, for instance, these two developments did not coincide chronologically.

Theoretical considerations

A gender perspective is essential when answering the questions posed above. Using a constructivist approach to gender, we can define “gender as a process of social construction, a system of social stratification, and an institution that structures every aspect of our lives because of its embeddedness in the family, the workplace and the state as well as in sexuality, language and culture” (Lorber, 1994). In these domains gender related norms, ideals and “scripts” are produced. They influence thinking and behavior as well as perceptions, interpretations and evaluations, for example those that govern what are considered to be culturally acceptable female activities or bodies.

Connell (2002) emphasizes the role of bodies and of “social embodiment” in gendering processes. According to her, gender is a specific form of social embodiment. People are categorized as belonging to social groups and also to one or other of the sexes by means of their bodies, their dress, their hairstyle or the way they move. Gender, furthermore, is not something we are or have but something we produce and do. “Gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and it is the texture and order of that social life ... it depends on everybody constantly doing gender” (Lorber, 1994). The gender order and the way gender was and is performed changes in the context of social transformations, depends on the prevailing socio-economic and cultural conditions and is an issue of power, but also of negotiation. Sport is one of the areas of Western culture in which the body plays a decisive role. Therefore sport is a place, or more precisely a stage, where bodily differences, gender differences and gender as a whole are presented and re/produced. At the same time, sport is ruled by a relatively strict separation of the sexes: men and women compete in separate classes, and the various sporting activities have been and may be still labeled as male or female domains.

Strict and gendered rules regulate sport – right down to the dress code. Although in some aspects circus is like sport, in that many performances are about the body and many require the same physical skills as those exhibited by athletes, in other ways circus is different. It is not only the difficulty of the performance that “counts” in circus, but also the way in which the performance is presented. Circus acts aim to entertain and that allows or even demands a deviation from the “normal”. Circus artists are always presenting skills that “normal” people do not possess; they

are presenting their bodies and conveying an image in a "circus specific" way. They are "doing" or even "playing" with gender. Drawing on the gender concept presented above we will investigate the lives and the acts of the écuylères.

As indicated above, gender relations were and still are intertwined with the social structures and hierarchies in society whereby horizontal and vertical stratifications are interlaced (a differentiation between the masculine and feminine and the setting of the masculine as the norm), (among others Scott 1999). From this perspective, the gender order can be seen as a social contract between unequal partners, who both gain something through this acceptance. The subordinated partner/group may gain social acceptance and/or some security. It has been suggested that sport offers opportunities for challenging the gender hierarchies (Hargreaves, 1994; Pfister, 2010). In this article we will explore if the circus world with its own specific norms and rules was an arena for defying the gender norms and contracts. In addition, it seems that the socio-economic and cultural contexts of certain periods in history seem to facilitate gender negotiations (Hedenborg & Wikander, 2003). This raises the question of whether the female circus riders were successful in a time in which the gender order was disputed and negotiated.

Socioeconomic and cultural context

The 19th century is full of paradoxes when it comes to women's rights and the various constructions of femininity. Demands for gender equality were raised as early as the late 18th century. These demands did not, however, have much of an impact in a time when philosophers, anthropologists and physicians preached the myth of women as the weaker sex (Schiebinger, 1989; Honegger, 1991; Laqueur, 1990; Pfister, 2005). Even so, women's rights expanded during the century: some women gained legal majority, the right to enter into legal contracts, to own property and – in some countries – to conduct a trade or profession, at least as long as they were not married. Yet, women did not have access to higher education or to academic positions, something which caused long and intensive discussions where men, especially male physicians, defended themselves against female competition using the argument of female weakness. Women were excluded from political power, e.g. the right to vote and to stand for office. Family laws made women legally subordi-

nated to their husbands who, as heads of the family, were responsible for all decisions concerning the family (Frevert, 1986). Above all, the norms of propriety and fashion restricted the opportunities and activities of girls and women greatly.

Before WWI, the notion of the “weak sex” was prevalent among large parts of the population in Western countries and legitimated by physicians via countless statements and publications. Some of them firmly believed that girls and women had to be spared all exertion and danger and should thus be barred from gymnastics and sport. Others argued against denying women the health benefits of physical exercise. However, both groups agreed that women in many respects were inferior to men and should not be exposed to strenuous activities given the physical and mental qualities attributed to women as well as what was considered to be their “natural” and predestined roles. However, there were some exceptions: in particular, female physicians emphasized the positive effects of physical exercise and recommended sports and games (Pfister, 1990).

Despite the widely held impressions of women, towards the end of the 19th century an increasing number of women began to practice gymnastics, German gymnastics/Turnen as well as sports. Sport, and especially competitive sport was regarded as particularly unfeminine, but women did take up various sporting activities ranging from cycling to skiing. Cycling, in particular, soon became very popular among women, not least as it offered a formerly unexplored opportunity for freedom. The cycle manufacturers encouraged this trend and even sponsored women’s cycling competitions. However, after the turn of the century, even though bicycles had become firmly established as a means of transport, resistance to what was described as this “shameless” spectacle grew and women’s cycle races stopped (Pfister & Langenfeld, 1982).

In most other sports, too, women were confronted with specific problems, reflecting established opinions about the abilities and competences of the so-called weaker sex on the one hand and society’s expectations for women and men on the other. Swimming was problematic because women in bathing suits supposedly undermined public morals and defied the laws of propriety. And, since rowing was believed to be too strenuous, women rowers were restricted to competitions in style that focused on exact movements rather than speed. Athletics was considered especially unfeminine because it was competition-oriented and thus believed to exceed women’s physical as well as mental capacities. Only

after some heated arguments were women's athletics introduced into the Olympic program in 1928 (Pfister, 1996). Also, as has been discussed above, women were the "other" sex in the various areas of equestrianism. As such, they had only limited and regulated access to horses and horseback riding.

The female circus riders lived and performed during a period of relatively strict hierarchical gender order and in a context where women were constructed as the "weak sex" and excluded from various areas of the societies. However, it was also a time when this order was being contested and change was on the horizon. In this context, two main questions emerge which will be discussed below: How did the gender order influence the lives of the *écuyères*, and did their lives have an impact on the existing gender ideals and arrangements?

Origins and upbringing

The female circus artists basically came from three different types of background. Firstly, a majority of them grew up in circus families. The sources show that most of the *écuyères* were likely to have learned how to ride even before they could walk properly, or at least that is how their story is told. In addition, the tradition of the circus families played an important role in the education of their children. As equestrianism was at the core of the circus the families transferred the valuable knowledge of horses and horse riding to their children so that they could take over their profession and, in some case, their companies.

Secondly, some circus artists had close connections to these families although they themselves did not grow up in one. Many of these women learned the tricks and how to ride from their acquaintances in circus entertainment. Thirdly, some were women from a middle class or upper class background that seemed to have loved horses and longed for the circus life. Several of the riders, in particular those who did not grow up in a circus, became the students of famous riding masters such as François Baucher, Charles Pellier or James Fillis. Caroline Loyo, who may have had some experience of horseback riding when she arrived at the circus, received instruction from both Pellier and Baucher. Baucher was also the teacher of Pauline Cuzent. Diane Dupon, an actress, was discovered by the director of the hippodrome and was taught by James Fillis (Halperson, 1926). Elise Petzold, a novice, learned how to ride from

the famous master of dressage Gustav Steinbrecht (Nelson, 2001). In addition, the *écuyères* seem to have combined different ways of learning depending on age, experience, skill and available teachers. An example is Elvira Guerra who was introduced at the beginning of this article. She learned how to ride as a child from her father (Thétard, 1947), and later took lessons with an English instructor who taught her to ride without using stirrups or reins (Nelson, 2001).

The circuses of the 19th century were mostly “family enterprises” where all members played their parts in and out of the arena. For a circus it was logistically and economically convenient to have a group of people like a family performing together as they could fill large parts of a circus program. The children grew up in the circus, were trained from an early age in various genres and performed together with their siblings and parents. Learning to ride at an early age was very important because it took many years of training for the riders to master *haute école* (dressage) or acrobatics on horseback (Halperson, 1926).

Elvira Guerra is an example of an *écuyère* who was part of a circus family. She was a member of the Guerra circus dynasty and was born in St. Petersburg in 1855. There, her grandfather Alessandro Guerra was head of the travelling circus company, and had erected a circus building in 1845, ten years before she was born. Four of his children seemed to have worked in the circus. His son, Rudolfo Guerra, Elvira's father, played opera music on a flute standing on a galloping horse. Elvira's mother, Josephine Leeb, was an *écuyère de panneau* (a circus performance, in which the *écuyères* were dressed as ballet dancers, and danced and did acrobatic tricks on horseback). Olga, Elvira's sister, was also an *écuyère*; she worked with Elvira for many years in Zirkus Renz (Halperson, 1926). The Guerra Company's main attraction is said to have been the beautiful and skilled female riders, many of them family members.⁵

In a similar way, the Jolibois-Cuzent family that was later known as the Cuzent-Lejar family formed a family business. The four Cuzent children, three daughters and one son, were important contributors to the circus's program. Paul Cuzent and two of the sisters, one of them Antoinette, later to be called La Belle M^{me} Lejars, performed acrobatics on horseback whereas Pauline, who had a slight limp, became a musician.⁶ Antoinette celebrated her first great triumphs as an *écuyère de panneau*

5 http://www.circopedia.org/index.php/Russia%27s_First_National_Circus, <http://www.circo.it/alessandro-guerra-il-furioso>, 20110215.

6 http://www.circopedia.org/index.php/Russia%27s_First_National_Circus#The_Cuzent-Lejarses.E2.80.99, 20110215; *Cirque de Paris*; Nelson 2001:64–65

at fourteen when she showed tricks which, up to then, had only been conducted by men. Pauline, who spent as much time as possible with her siblings, is said to have been longing to become a horse rider herself. She took lessons with the famous master of the French Haut École, François Baucher, and debuted successfully in 1835 (Haerdle, 2007). The Cuzent family (including the husbands of two of the sisters) trained, performed and travelled together.

There are numerous other examples of circus families who travelled, supported themselves and worked together and who because of this were able to survive the ups and downs of circus life. One of them was the Annato family: François and his sisters, Catherine, Maria, and Palmyre. Palmyre Annato is described as the undisputed star of the family and she was said to have made her mark in Russia and elsewhere as the prettiest and most elegant écuycère de panneau ever. The Annato family was engaged in Russian Imperial Circus in St. Petersburg in 1851. However, Palmyre married a Russian Singer and left the company and this incident seems to have been the end of the family enterprise.⁷ Another example of an écuycère growing up in a circus was Baptista Schreiber. Her father was Baptiste Schreiber, a famous circus écuycers and her mother, Bertha Schreiber (Lindberg), was a Swedish actress who left her family to run away to the circus life. Baptista started to ride when she was only five years old (Cedercreutz, 1946, Ljungström, 1935).

Not all children growing up in circus families were the biological offspring of circus people. Some circus families had foster children whom they taught to become artists. Examples from the Swedish circus are Alvida and Elvira Bergman and Viola, Betty and Antonia Mundeling, all of them écuycères (Enevig, 1982; Wählberg, 1976; 1978).

Among the écuycères who did not grow up in circus families, yet had close connections, Clotilde and Emilie Loisset as well as Anna Fillis stand out as exceptionally good riders (Nelson, 2001). The mother of Clotilde and Emilie was Amalie Loisset, daughter of the celebrated écuycer Baptist Loisset, married to an innkeeper in Helgoland.⁸ Her uncle François Loisset was a famous circus rider and her aunt was the celebrated Caroline Loyo who taught haute école riding to her nieces.⁹ Anna Fillis was trained by her father, James Fillis (Nelson, 2001). He was considered one of the "gods" of the equestrian world, a gifted trick rider and horse

7 http://www.circopedia.org/index.php/Russia%27s_First_National_Circus, 20110215.

8 <http://theahamburg.wordpress.com/category/helgolands-geschichte/>, 20110215.

9 http://www.circopedia.org/index.php/Russia%27s_First_National_Circus, 20110215. According to Nelson (2001) it was Francois Loisset who taught them.

trainer. He seems to have influenced riders all over Europe around the turn of the 20th century and his book *Breaking and Riding*, published in Paris in 1890, came to be regarded as a “bible” of equestrianism. Anna underwent hard training with her father and debuted at 15 years at the Cirque de Champs-Élysées (Nelson, 2001).

A third group of circus riders are women from a middle class or even an upper class background who were obviously drawn to the fame and glamour of life as an *écuyère*, and to the opportunity to work with horses. A career as an *écuyère* seems to have attracted girls and women from the middle or upper classes and inspired them to become circus riders. There were also adult women who joined the circus in the attempt to make a living out of their passion. Some of them succeeded, such as the celebrated Caroline Loyo (Haerdle, 2007). Another example is Fanny Ghyka. She was born in Hungary, grew up on a plantation and loved to ride. She married a Serbian officer but left her husband in order to join a circus, and became an *écuyère* famous for her daring tricks (Nelson, 2001). Perhaps growing up on the plantation gave her advantages, yet not all women seem to have had experience with horses. Some of them actually came from families of crafts people. An example is Ellen Kremzow, daughter of a dressmaker, who debuted in 1843 when she was eight years of age (Halperson, 1926, Haerdle, 2007).

It has already been underlined that it is not possible to provide any background information on many of the *écuyères*. Often only the name of a rider and perhaps her best tricks are known. Some of the *écuyères* are presented by experts such as Baron de Vaux, but often only with very brief background stories. These stories often refer to the parents of the circus riders “to be”. Elise Petzold is an example of this. She was attracted to the circus when watching an *écuyère* performing haute école. Against her parents’ wishes she immediately decided to become a circus rider (Nelson, 2001). According to the source material, even a year in a convent could not break her will and after her return her father gave in and allowed her to take riding lessons, even agreeing to pay for them. After a year of training she began working for the Cirque Loisset. Later she joined the famous Circus Renz where she was enormously successful.

Another example of a woman who was supported by her family was Marguerite Dudley (Nelson, 2001). There are also examples of women supporting their families economically by becoming circus artists. One of them is Jenny von Rahden who published a novel about her life in 1902. She grew up in aristocratic circles in Breslau and learned how to

ride as a child. When her father lost his money on gambling she decided to take up riding at the circus in order to support her family. After two months of hard training she got her first engagement at the circus Salamonsky in Riga (Nelson, 2001; Haerdle, 2007).

The available information about the origins and families of the circus riders reveals different patterns with regard to gender. Circus families introduced their children to their profession, and thus the child's talent rather than its sex determined its future tasks and roles. Girls and women without a circus background seem to have been attracted by the image of the *écuyères*, and it is possible that the mixture between the circus riders' feminine appearance and their masculine skills may have played a role here. The sources do not lend themselves to any conclusions about the reasons for which some parents were averse to the idea of their daughters becoming *écuyères*. One reason for this might be that circus people were often perceived as "outcasts".

Feminine or masculine circus acts

There were different kinds of equestrian acts in circus: *voltige*, where the riders jump off and on the horses; trick riding where the artists stand on the back of one or more horses and perform acrobatics such as vaulting and summersaults; *haute école*, where the horse does specific movements and maneuvers according to the invisible commands of the rider; and *liberty dressage*. The two most important styles for women in the 19th and early 20th centuries seem to have been the performances by the *écuyères de panneau* and the *haute école*.

In the 18th century, however, women doing acrobatic acts on horseback were not unknown. One such rider was Madame Simpson, who accompanied her husband and jumped over a barrier standing on two horses (Halperson, 1926). Philippe Astley's wife was another one and so was Miss Vangable, another artist in Astley's circus. Over the course of the 19th century, specific acts for *écuyères* emerged. The majority of these were the performances by the *écuyères de panneau* who capitalized on the growing enthusiasm for ballet at this time.¹⁰ These women appeared in fanciful costumes, e.g. as cupids, fairies or sylphs, and danced the famous ballets of the time on horseback. Many of them added a bit of sen-

¹⁰ According to the circus historian Hughes Le Roux it was more common for women born into circus families to become *écuyères de panneau* (in Nelson 2001, 112).

sation to their programs as they jumped through paper hoops – the more the better. Others did acrobatics as well, like standing on two horses and jumping over obstacles or picking up flowers or scarves from the ground (Nelson, 2001). An example of a famous *écuyère de panneau* is Pauline Cuzent's sister La Belle M^{de} Lejars who debuted in the circus at the age of 14 in 1834, vaulting and dancing on the horseback. Other examples are Emilie and Clotilde Loisset who started as acrobats on horse back (Nelson, 2001).

Men's equestrian circus performances were purportedly much more difficult and dangerous than those performed by women. It seems, however, that women borrowing tricks from the male performers attracted the largest crowds. One example is the famous act "Mazepa or the Wild horse of Tartary". The act referred to the legend of Ivan Mazepa who later became the leader of the Ukrainian Cossacks. The young Mazepa had a love affair with a countess named Theresa and was punished for this by her husband. He was tied naked to the back of a wild horse that was set free to gallop off. The legend was transformed into a circus act and was performed in different ways during the first half of the 19th century. In 1862, in New York, this scene was for the first time performed by a woman, Adah Isaak Menken. A woman mired in scandals, her presentation became a sensation and the fact that she was dressed in tights seems to have added to its attractiveness (Nelson, 2001; Weil, 1999; Haerdle, 2007). Menken died in 1868 in Paris, after which other women performed the act.

Whatever tricks the acrobatic acts included it seems that the stars of the circus were not the *écuyères de panneau*, but the *écuyères de haute école*. Haute école performances were introduced at the Cirque Olympique at the turn of the 19th century and dressage acts soon came to be absolutely essential to circus entertainment. In order to uphold an image of respectable femininity, the female haute école riders performed sidesaddle, in contrast to men who rode astride and could use both legs. Riding sidesaddle demands the rider to influence the horse with their legs on one side, and a long whip on the other side. However, *écuyères* used a specific saddle invented in the 1830s crafted so that the rider's right leg surrounded the top pommel while a second pommel curved downwards and held the rider's left thigh. In this way the riders had a firm seat, allowing women to gallop and jump as well as do tricks in the circus without violating the social norms of decency.¹¹

11 See e.g. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sidesaddle#Two_pommel_design, 20110215

The costume of the *écuyère de haute école* was classic and austere, it consisted of a fitted top and a long skirt, mostly in dark colors. The skirts covered the legs of the female riders. The simple elegance of the costume is likely to have drawn attention to the art of riding and separated these riders from the other circus artists. It is possible that these female riders were given special attention and admiration as their dresses and behavior complied with the femininity ideals of the time. This was not so much the case for the circus riders performing acrobatics or dancing on horseback, who dressed and acted in a way that made it difficult to uphold public respectability and who clearly represented the "demimonde".

According to Baron de Vaux, Caroline Loyo, Pauline Cuzent, Fanny Ghyka and Emilie Loisset (who turned to *haute école* after a fall) were among the best *haute école* riders at the time and were greatly admired for their horsemanship. While praising the performances of these women, Baron de Vaux also described and evaluated their riding techniques. He sometimes showed some reservations in his respect for the women. For example, he criticized Elise Petzold for not restricting her performance to classical dressage but showing "these German tricks" and making "concessions to the public" (Nelson, 2001). Apparently, she let her horse bow. Vaux also criticized Guerra who, despite being considered a fine *haute école* rider, had not gone through the French classical school of equitation (Nelson, 2001).

Two sides of the coin – entering high society and/or experiencing hardship, death and poverty

In the 19th century, the circus was a place where rich and poor enjoyed entertainment together. They marveled at the artists' tricks and experienced the thrill of authenticity as the performers put their health and even their lives at stake. It seems that the fame, air, appearance and the skill of the *écuyères* broke down class demarcations and allowed some of the circus riders a permanent or at least a temporary position in high society. One common interest of the *écuyères* and the upper class in European countries was "*haute école*". The *écuyères* excelling in the upper class art of *haute école* were in many ways the embodiment of a specific ideal that radiated strength, competency and femininity at the same time. Many were – said to be – admired by men who had a passion for excellent horses, perfect riding and beautiful women. It even seems that it

was socially acceptable to adore or even marry an *écuyère*: Ellen Kremzow married the Austrian Count Mensdorff-Pouilly; Emilie Loisset was engaged to a rich Hungarian aristocrat when she died; and her sister, Clotilde was themorganatic wife of the Prince de Reuss.¹²

In addition, the fact that the haute école riders appeared in the glossy sports magazines read by high society indicates that they were socially accepted. An example is found in *Sport im Bild* from 1898:51, in which there is a beautiful picture of the haute école rider Baptista Schreiber and her horse Good Boy performing at Zirkus Schumann.

But the glitz of the circus world and the glamour of the *écuyères* mean that some of the darker sides of life as a circus entertainer are overlooked. Whereas the members of a “circus dynasty” who were supported by their families had good chances of coping with hardships and even of making a lasting career for example as female circus directors, many of the other artists had to cope with a multitude of everyday problems. Jenny de Rahden’s autobiography provides insight into life behind the scenes and shows the other side of life as a celebrated *écuyère* (Nelson, 2001; Haerdle, 2007). Rahden led a comfortable life as a member of the aristocracy until her father squandered away his fortune. Instead of entering into a marriage of convenience, she decided to become a circus rider. Rahden managed to get an engagement only to find out that the circus owners did not pay her salary. She reports about the envy and hate from other women, the permanent struggle to keep her job and the fear of losing the favor of the audiences. Although she celebrated triumphs and gained fame, her salary was eaten up by her expenses: as an *écuyère* she had to own high-quality horses as well as feed, train and transport them, and was also required to show off glamorous clothes and a luxurious lifestyle (in order to prove the connection to the upper class). In addition, Rahden had to support her aunt, her father and her husband who were travelling with her.

Because Rahden took great risks she also earned a lot of money. Her most sensational performance was making the horse rear and walk on its hind legs while leaning back on the horse’s croup to touch the horse tail with her floating hair. This was a very dangerous act and critics accused her of sensation seeking instead of presenting the art of riding. After the death of her husband, Rahden lost the will to live, suddenly went blind,

12 <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F70B16FD3B5A11738DDDAF0994D8415B8184F0D3,20110215>.

and had a terrible accident that ended her circus career. Later in life she had a second career as a blind singer (Haerdle, 2007).

Rahden was not alone in her misery. The more spectacular the stunts were, the more danger was involved. In order to please the audience, circus riders took great risks and accidents were frequent. Emile Loisset died because of a mishap in an act that involved jumping over a table with burning candelabras. Her horse refused to jump, went wild and fell over crushing Emile with its body. She was badly injured and died two days later (Nelson, 2001). Another fatal incident befell Fanny Ghyka whose foot was caught in the stirrup when she fell from her horse. She was dragged around the arena and died later from gangrene (Nelson, 2001). Accidents were one threat to the health and life of the artists, the hard life another. Many died young and entire families faded away, one example being the Cuzent family that consisted of a brother and three sisters who died over the course of one decade. Although the family was financially successful in the 1840s, Pauline Cuzent was poor when she died of tuberculosis in 1852. Her fortune had dwindled away, not least because of the high costs of keeping horses and presenting an affluent life style (Nelson, 2001).

Concluding discussion

The purpose of this article was to analyze gender relations and the role of women in equestrianism from the beginning of the 19th century to the first decades of the 20th century, focusing on the female horse riding circus artists, the *écuyères*. Despite source material being scarce, an attempt has been made to demonstrate that women were important artists in the circus at this time. Many of them were brought up in circus families, some of them, however, were "outsiders" who had been attracted to circus life and the equestrian acts for various reasons. They learnt their skills and acts from other family members or from the riding masters who often also trained their horses, and women performed a variety of acrobatic and dressage acts. Their life stories show that *écuyères* could win great fame, but also be faced with hardships and poverty. *Écuyères* belonged to the circus aristocracy, not least because the equestrian acts were at the core of circus entertainment at this time. As various sources indicate, female circus riders had a positive image and high social status,

at least as long as they were successful, and some even managed to enter high society via marriage.

At the heart of the circus riders' arena performances there was not only equestrianism, but also the notion of gender. It is even likely that "doing gender" was an indispensable part of the show, as the allure of the *écuyères* depended on the embodiment and presentation of seemingly incompatible features: beauty, grace and femininity as well as mastery of an art that was a traditionally male domain. They presented a mixture of audacity, strength and will power on the one hand, and the qualities of a perfect lady (at least the *haute école* riders did) on the other. In this way, the circus riders simultaneously confirmed and refuted traditional gender roles, and gender play was an essential part of their show. In addition, many *écuyères* took over men's roles by being "business women" who owned horses and earned their own money, not only as circus riders but also by giving riding lessons and being in control of their own employment.

Sources suggest that *écuyères*, like other circus artists, did not adopt the norms and rules of the traditional gender order outside the arena. The circus director Paula Busch even emphasized that "the circus artist was the first emancipated woman ... She is maybe the only woman who unites male daring with feminine grace ..." (quoted in Haerdle, 2007). In addition, the circus offered a space for women to develop unusual visions of life and to pursue hopes and dreams that other women could not even think of.

However, it has to be discussed if and how the circus artists actually influenced the gender order of society. Here it is important to remember that these artists were exceptions. They lived and worked in a separate sphere governed by specific norms and rules. In the circus women could display strength, courage, skills and ambitions in the arena without being accused of being unfeminine. As artists they were at the center of attention and as entrepreneurs they earned their own money. The circus offered the opportunity for alternative plans and dreams. In no other occupation did women have the same rights and opportunities as men. They were allowed to carry out performances, take risks and exercise power. Because the circus was a separate world, the gender order of the society could be turned upside down. Yet, circus entertainment did not entirely belong to another world. Even though some of the *écuyères* had to overcome the resistance of their parents, many of the families seem to have accepted the profession or even the mission of their daughters – at

least this is what the sources indicate. It may have been the case that the respected status of female circus riders, the opportunity to gain fame as well as the high salary contributed to social acceptance for the *écuyères* and their way of "doing gender".

It also has to be emphasized that not all acts challenged the gender order to the same extent. It is likely that a woman, riding sidesaddle in haute école, was not as controversial as the women performing acrobatic acts. It can also be assumed that the female haute école riders were able to challenge the gender coding of equestrianism because they appeared in a specific time period during which the riding style practiced in European armies was much debated. One style was based on the idea that an ideal army rider ought to be able to ride classical dressage in the manège on a collected horse performing difficult movements. The other style was based on the idea that riders and horses would be better equipped for war if they were trained in galloping fast. It is possible that this disagreement on the best way to train and ride horses opened up for decoding and recoding of the gender order of equestrianism.

Finally, Elvira Guerra who inspired this article about the history of female circus riders was obviously not the only woman in a masculine equestrian world. She did have female companions and/or competitors, even though it appears that she and her companions have been made invisible by previous academic sports research. The conclusion of this article is that research on the history of the circus can provide important and interesting insights into how sports have developed as well as how sports and gender were defined. The circus provided an arena, which allowed or even demanded a re-construction of gender and a subversion of femininity inside and outside of the arena. In particular the acts of the *écuyères* can be interpreted as "gender play", a mixture of feminine elegance and masculine performances. Observing their presentations, the audiences could experience how «doing gender» functions and could catch the riders' femininity constructions in the act. The female circus riders could be classified "gender trouble makers", in the sense of Butler, whose messages may have been effective because they used traditional gender codes and were admired by the audiences. Because *écuyères* were socially accepted and even crossed the borderlines between circus and society, they may have had an impact on the femininity ideals and gender arrangements in the society at large. To verify these assumptions and to clarify the impact of circus artists in general and the circus riders in particular on the gender arrangements, more research is necessary.

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