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A Perfect Nicking Pattern

Almost a generation ago, Bruno Latour's trenchant long essay, *We Have Never Been Modern*, proposed as its governing hypothesis that the ideological fiction of "modernity," under which we had long engaged our actions, was itself dependent on the simultaneous deployment of two complementary practices, which he termed "purification" and "translation." To be fully modern, according to this formulation, was to openly avow the productions of those works of purification that separated the social world (realm of the human) from the natural world (realm of the non-human), while simultaneously disavowing those hybrid productions resulting from translation:

So long as we consider these two practices of translation and purification separately, we are truly modern — that is, we willingly subscribe to the critical project, even though that project is developed only through the proliferation of hybrids down below. As soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridization, we immediately stop being wholly modern, and our future begins to change. ([11](#))

Latour was right about that, and our future has begun to change. This essay suggests that the breed of horse now designated as "thoroughbred" constitutes a particularly apt and valuable avatar for the ideological fiction of "modernity:" simultaneously non-human natural "other" and nature-culture hybrid of human artifact and management, the real flesh and blood animals pawing the turf today are inextricably intertwined with the cultural phantasms of purity, hybridity, racialized breed identity, registries, and those cultural apparatuses and inscription practices that police, promote, protect, and valorize certain formulations of modern identity formation. Such an undertaking is too ambitious at anything beyond a suggestive level, a provocation to further thought; and even here I want to restrict myself to considering the implications that can be teased out of close attention to one particular term: "nicking."

In the largest sense of the term, I use "modern" in this essay in a manner consistent with the sense invoked by Latour's use of the term in *We Have Never Been Modern* where it refers to an era that begins in the late Renaissance and continues until roughly the end of the twentieth century; such a usage is consistent with, for instance, the debate of "Ancients vs. Moderns" carried on among intellectual historians at the end of the seventeenth century. One can further mark in this essay what might be thought of as secondary division within the modern period, separating the "Early Modern" (from late 16c to late 18c) from what might be thought of simply as the "Modern" or "High Modern" era (late 18c to late 20c). Much of the secondary literature on breed deals with only the second of these eras — often doing so as though there is only one "modern" period. By highlighting the distinction, I hope to make clear the stakes in trying to distinguish "Early Modern" from "Modern," while simultaneously viewing them both (from a non-Modern perspective) as shaping the "modern" fantasy from which we are (I hope) only now emerging. In the context of this essay, it is probably most useful to see as hallmarks of the onset of the fully "Modern" era such related developments in managed animal breeding as: the publication of a *General Stud Book*; the emergence of the term "thoroughbred" as distinct breed identity (and the various other modern breed identities that then followed); the concept of fixing a breed type as put in practice by Robert Bakewell; the concept of "pure breed" that followed and the supporting sciences of Race and Breed that developed over the next two centuries and gathered greatest influence at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those

developments not only consolidated but to very great degree altered in the process of consolidation an Early Modern practice of managed breeding that in many respects was antithetical to some of the presuppositions and practices that distinguish modern animal breeding.¹

A longstanding truism of modern horse-breeding — one that seems to have originated near the end of the nineteenth century, and still survives today (though in somewhat diminished form) — is “breed the best to the best ... and hope for the best.”² When horse racing enjoyed its greatest global popularity in the first half of the twentieth century, that truism achieved a widespread popular acceptance by leavening a doctrine of eugenic elitism with a dash of democratizing randomness, a kind of “screwball comedy theory of breeding” that allowed one to have one’s upper crust and eat it, too. The rise of a lucrative commercial breeding marketplace in the last third of the twentieth century transformed the landscape of thoroughbred breeding, chasing away most of the old-money dynastic homebred operations that had dominated the sport for more than a century, creating new commercial powers within the industry, and in the process, downplaying the doctrine of elite prestige encoded in the “best to the best” locution.

Less well-known outside the sport, but both older and more persistent, is the concept of the “nicking pattern.” The concept of a “nick” originated in the eighteenth century, and today if you are contemplating which stallion offers the greatest value in return for his stud fee to service your mare, there are bloodstock consultants who you can hire to advise you; one of the services provided in their analysis is likely to be a “nicking pattern” of various candidates. Jargon is language of specialized use, and while it is commonly derided for its opacity and inability to communicate meaningfully to those outside a small coterie of initiates, it always has real value within that coterie. Such specialized use of language may serve to set a barrier between those inside a knowledge community and those outside it, but that is only a secondary characteristic. The primary function of such language is to enable more nuanced and effective communication within the knowledge community, frequently in response to practical concerns important to those active in the community that remain merely esoteric abstractions to those outside the community. The cognate concepts of “nick,” “nicking,” and “nicking pattern” illustrate this sense of jargon. So one way to map the history of such a knowledge community is to pay attention to how understanding of jargon within the community changes, for what a “nicking pattern” is today, and how it works, is fundamentally different than it was in the eighteenth century; and the very sense of what it means “to nick” has changed over time.

Let’s start with how it is widely understood when used today. In contemporary usage, the most frequent use of “nicking” terminology is as a measurement of success in pairing certain sire lines with broodmares or broodmare sire lines. One of the most widely respected commercial providers of nicking information and analysis is a company called True Nicks; they offer this concise explanation at the blog they maintain at their website:

If you're not completely familiar with the basic premise of sire-line nicking, here it is in a nutshell:

Specific affinities of stallions of one male line for mares from other sire lines — called nicks — have made a profound impact on the development of the Thoroughbred. Today's powerful data-processing computers have now made it possible to measure and rate nicks. (Rogers)

Like most things — and especially like most things involving a commercial element — the claim that your mare “nicks well” with a particular stallion is identified as a marker of success, or at least potential for success. And in a world where almost everything seems driven by metrics and scorecards, it is possible to get an analysis of a nicking pattern that will provide a simple score (“A+” to “F”) that is derived from anywhere from dozens to thousands of actual prior matings. And those matings are being analyzed in terms of how much racing success resulted from these prior matings. That is, these forms of big data analysis are rooted in an abstracted notion of “success,” one that effectively ignores actual physical traits of individual animals,

concentrating instead on the scorecard of wins and losses, money won, frequency and quality of racing success, etc., regardless of physical attributes of any given animals.

As with most metrics designed for commercial applications, the governing presumption is that what buyers seek is a reliable predictor of likely future success, predicated on prior patterns of past success. Again, True Nicks provides a useful example. The language on their website is characteristic of such attempts to determine patterns of success: “Generally, extremely high scores are the result of a mating which has had considerable success with limited opportunity. The best guide to the potential success of the nick is the letter rating which has been evolved through careful study of the relationship between the general population and the stakes winning population” (“[Frequently Asked Questions](#)”).

Such an attitude is entirely in keeping with contemporary business philosophy, so much so that one may wonder why I even give so much attention to a focus on success. Why would one, after all, measure anything else? A truism of modern business is that one measures what one desires. At one level, of course, there is legitimacy to such a view point.

Rebecca Cassidy’s discussion of recent theories identifies three strands of theory as particularly significant to thoroughbred breeders — one sire-centered, one dam-centered, and a third that emphasize the importance of effective “crossing” to maximize the positive influence of both sire and dam. In all three approaches, the goal of the theory’s predictive power is to accurately anticipate how much racing success may be realized by the progeny of a well-planned mating:

Three guiding influences that breeders consistently referred to during my fieldwork were dosage theory, the figure system, and the work of Federico Tesio. Dosage theory attempts to predict ability based upon the analysis of superior male ancestors in a horse’s pedigree and is used by gamblers and breeders to forecast the likely distance over which a horse will excel. The figure system identifies individual horses as members of particular families, or female lines, in a hierarchy where family number one is the most highly valued. Federico Tesio’s theories concentrate on the heat and energy of a particular cross between individuals and between particular lines. ([37-38](#))

Arguably the foremost breeder of the twentieth century was Federico Tesio, whose *Breeding the Racehorse* (1958) remains a lasting testament to his idiosyncratic approach. In Tesio’s book, one confronts a dizzying mélange of crude genetics and mystical doctrine and belief that no one has ever been able to follow, but that all concede produced for Tesio remarkable success. More than any other single authority, Tesio might be cited as the most influential voice identifying “nicking” as the crossing of bloodlines according to a metric predicated on an abstract notion of racing “success,” even as he shrouds such success in a cloak of mysticism beyond the reach of scientific reason:

“Nicks”

It is an interesting fact that every now and again two particular strains are found to give their best results when crossed with each other. Generally this is first discovered by chance, then other breeders follow up the initial success until that particular cross becomes the fashion. ([55](#))³

If in our modern era it makes commercial sense to measure success in order best to imitate it, from another perspective it makes sense to note that there are other things to measure; and that in other times, a different ideology might generate a different set of measurements. Any attempt to measure an abstracted notion of racing success like the model described above places a premium on quantifying certain kinds of racing success as being of greater significance than other kinds of racing success. There are thousands of races of different kinds contested around the world every year; and these races are classified in various ways, with the

most difficult tending to be the most lucrative, and with a generally agreed-upon (though by no means uniform) system of classification used to identify those stakes races where success is awarded the greatest premium. The grading of a nick, according to such a system — whether it follows the True Nick methodology or some competing version — seeks to measure how often horses produced by matings between these sire and dam lines have outperformed the “general population” in terms of frequency of success in these most demanding races.

In the eighteenth century, of course, there were far fewer races contested; the variation in quality of competition was considerably less uniform and predictable; the total sample size was dramatically smaller; the conditions of racing were significantly different; and the extensive patterns of family performance that contemporary analytics seek to quantify were too scant and scattered to be subject to analysis. What, then, constituted the basis for their “nicking patterns” when they created the term, and what notion of success, if any, was involved?

Early capitalism was no less interested in success than late capitalism. But it did, indeed, have different ideological presuppositions as to what generated success. The notion of a “nick” in the eighteenth century alluded to what we might today think of as a “cancel.” The word was understood to be the mark — sometimes a strikeout, sometimes a check or some other mark — entered when an item was to be struck off a list — a debt paid, for instance. And the specific application of the term to breeding livestock, especially horses, was in the service of a belief that one sort of male when paired with one sort of female was likely to produce “a nick in the cross,” with one extreme physical trait “cancelling” the complementary extreme physical trait in the partner. “Nicking,” then, was closely aligned with the belief that one should shun extremes, follow moderation, and strive to achieve success by achieving something like a golden mean. In his *Dissertation on the Breeding of Horses* (1760), Richard Wall invokes the already prevalent terminology of “nicking” to describe how many breeders seek a successful pairing:

It is very common with some of them to reason thus ... such a mare to such a horse because he is strong and boney, and the mare is small, therefore the cross may nick. — Some put mares that are speedy, but soft, to horses that are slow and stout, thinking that method may nick. (21)

Here, the term “nick” already has the connotation of success, but it is one that arises directly from its sense of cancellation, with success imagined to occur in a moderate blending of extreme traits where the progeny will avoid the complementary defects of the parent. And the traits that are nicking are physical traits, or at least abstract qualities that are identified as being linked in some way to physical traits: large and small may nick; “speedy, but soft (ie, lacking endurance)” may nick with “slow and stout,” producing in the next generation a better blend of speed and stamina.

The phrase attributed to Madden at the start of the twentieth-century — “breed the best to the best ... and hope for the best” — is often rendered in shorthand form, giving only the opening clause. That doctrine is heard by many as straightforward endorsement of the elitist eugenic impulses embraced by aristocratic classes of that era. And undeniably that endorsement is there, even when tempered by the wry wisdom of the second clause. It may, however, be worth recalling that this doctrine arose in no small part as a way of advocating the importance of performance over the promise of pedigree. At the time that Madden coined the phrase, orthodoxy — especially among the more “scientific” approaches to breeding theory — divided sharply over the relative virtues and drawbacks of breeding “in-and-in,” “outcrossing,” or seeking a compromise position via “line breeding” or other strategies to mitigate the risks believed to be posed on the one hand by incestuous matings and on the other by diluting influence. A century earlier, the managed breeding programs that Robert Bakewell had introduced to livestock management had emphasized the importance of breeding “in-and-in” as a means of establishing a breed type. Over the next century, the ensuing interest in developing scientific theories of inheritance had motivated breeders to focus increased attention on the rigorously recorded pedigrees, and on the ever more nuanced analyses of that information that were produced.⁴

When the sport of horse racing began to take shape under royal and aristocratic sponsorship in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, nothing like a systematic recording of pedigree existed, much less a national registry of such pedigrees. But by the end of the eighteenth century, after several false starts and failed attempts, a General Stud Book was brought forward by the Weatherby family with the support of the Jockey Club; and for the next two centuries, that family continued to maintain and update the registry. At first merely a record of pedigrees of “those horses of note on the turf,” the success of the project became self-perpetuating; and it had become in practice, though not in fact, a breed registry.

It was only in the early twentieth century, in response to the challenge posed by American-bred horses (some with suspect pedigree) winning races in England that the Jockey Club passed the Jersey Act (named for Lord Jersey, the chief steward at the time). That act specified for the first time that to be registered in the General Stud book, a horse must be able to show direct descent from animals previously recorded in the GSB for at least six generations. This act, passed just before the first World War, was repealed shortly after the second; though for all practical purposes the “thoroughbred” has been a nature/culture hybrid whose pedigree paper trace is inextricably linked to the animal’s breed identity since the term “thoroughbred” entered common usage in the early nineteenth century.

Madden’s somewhat puckish formulation — breed the best to the best and hope for the best — was in one sense a challenge to British aristocratic notions of lineage mounted on behalf of American emphasis on performance. But the ambiguity inherent in the term “best” is, and always has been, available for multiple interpretations. A no-doubt apocryphal — but delightfully mid-twentieth-century — anecdote attributes a related exchange when Marilyn Monroe is supposed to have propositioned Albert Einstein on their first meeting: “With your brains and my beauty, think what children we could have.” The physicist is said to have declined out of concern that “the poor child might have your brains and my beauty.”

One way to think of the centuries-old experiment that is thoroughbred horse racing is as a test of the relation between pedigree and performance, where the sport is the proving ground over which the claims of pedigree made on paper are put to the test by real animals. At another pragmatic level, Madden was challenging the underlying premise of that experimental procedure by privileging in his breeding program those who had enjoyed racing success over those whose individual careers had been disappointing but carried forward a pedigree inherited from their more successful ancestors.

If pedigree and performance were directly correlated and consistently transmitted, both breeding and racing would be tediously predictable; conversely, if no such correlation existed and inheritance proved to be utterly random and fortuitous, the entire sport would have long ago devolved into a lottery rather than an athletic competition. And over the decades and centuries, participants in the sport have advocated, with varying degrees of success and failure, each of these extreme convictions and a wide range of theoretical positions in between.

The dynamic relation between pedigree and performance keeps alive a fundamental — and fundamentally vital — definition of the sport’s participants as nature/culture hybrids, defined neither exclusively by the specific physical traits and attributes that materially constrain the physical limits that define these horses as a “breed” distinct from others of their species, nor by the specific paper trace of pedigree that guarantees the accurate recording and registry of such breed identity, but rather by the hybridizing conjunction of the two.

Such a conjunction defines “breed” in a way that might be thought of as paradigmatically “modern,” entirely consistent with modern deployment of the racializing identity politics of such nature/culture hybridity in the modern geopolitical world; and at the same time quite distinct from the ways in which “race and breed” were most frequently deployed before the eighteenth century, when the phrase almost invariably alluded to a specific human agent responsible for the selection and development of particular animals, frequently (but not invariably) related to one another in the sense of an expanded family relationship. So, for instance, an owner

might record in a pedigree that a horse's dam was "Extroynary [sic] fine, out of Fenwick's breed," as a way to indicate that she had been acquired from the stud managed by Sir John (or Sir William) Fenwick.

My research indicates, and I think that this is more than coincidence, that such denominations — "of Fenwick's breed," "of a Leedes mare," "of Darcy's breed" date generally to an era before the systematic recording of breedings through the form of a stud book came to be commonplace; and gave rise to the project of General Stud Book at the end of the eighteenth century that then could — and did — become almost immediately the prototype for a breed registry, rapidly imitated in the recording of various breed — and racial — identities.

Our contemporary culture's deployment of "nicking patterns" as a tool supporting managed breeding decisions along the lines advocated by consultant services like True Nicks plays to our cultural moment's commitment to the idea that "success breeds success." The patterns being analyzed quantitatively by such programs offer to answer questions about where successful pedigree and successful performance reinforce one another; how can one intensify the impact of prior success?

The approach advocated by the aphorism attributed to Madden — "breed the best to the best ... and hope for the best" — began by advocating the conjunction of pedigree and performance, but concluded by falling back on randomizing hope; in that era, and with respect to those breeding questions, hope was a method. What current nicking analysis seeks to do is harness the tool of big data analytics to distinguish which combinations of successful pedigrees can be significantly correlated with greater than expected performance success. The governing drive is all success-oriented: success breeds success but does not do so invariably and uniformly; neither, however, is its distribution random, but rather conforms to patterns that may be anticipated with more than rough approximation.

Such a pursuit removes (or at least minimizes the weight of) the randomizing conclusion of the "best to the best" aphorism, seeking to focus instead on the opening clause's expression of a desire associated with those elitist, aristocratic partisans of bigger walls, gated communities, and higher membership fees. That ideology has been long associated with horse racing, and not without reason, as the pageantry of large hats, champagne, and fancy dress surrounding premier events reminds us on a regular basis. Indeed, that dimension of the sport is much older than the aphorism itself, and we can detect such aristocratic impulses at work from its very foundation, even before Charles II famously lent the sport the benefit of his royal patronage during the Restoration. Among seventeenth-century aristocrats, none was more zealous in asserting his own status in horsemanship than William Cavendish, (ultimately) first Duke of Newcastle, and while he preferred the haute école discipline of the manège, he was also eager to stake his claim as proficient in horse racing:

Let me tell you, that Running-Horses are the most easily found, and of the least Use, commonly they run upon Heaths, (a Green Carpet) and must there run all upon the Shoulders, which in troublesome Grounds is ready to break one's Neck, and of no Use; Though I love the Sport of a Running-Horse very well, and think I am as good a Jockey as any, and have ridden many hundred Matches, and seen the best Jockeys, and studied it more than I think they have done.

(80)

It is worth noting that Cavendish considers "the sport of a running horse" — as he does all other feats of horsemanship — as principally human activities, placing greatest emphasis on the role of "jockey" in the modern sense of a "rider," a role that he claims to know well by both study and experience. Elsewhere, he explicitly disowns what was for the time period the more usual sense of "jockey" — someone involved in the trade of buying and selling horses. For Cavendish, horse ownership (the expense of which he knows well and addresses often) is a form of aristocratic display, in which expenditure is an investment in status, not a commercial investment. So, while he considers the ability to ride well in the sport of a running horse a

necessary part of the repertoire of a complete horseman, he values the act of riding more than the animal being ridden. He prefers less specialized, slower, stouter horses, more capable of carrying weight over demanding terrain, and less susceptible to the injuries often incurred by running horses, who he dismisses as “of the least use.”

It is also worth noting that the terminology Cavendish employs (standard for his generation) designates the animal in question metonymically by purpose, rather than by any sort of concept of breed identity. A horse whose purpose is running is a running horse, just as those who pull a coach, a cart, or a plow would be respectively, a coach horse, a cart horse, or a plow horse. The designation “thoroughbred” (and its various cognates “thro’ bred,” “true bred,” etc.) begins to crop up in correspondence and advertisements as early as the reign of William and Mary, but does not become widely accepted until after the publication of the General Stud Book in the nineteenth century. Throughout the eighteenth century, even as the importance of pedigree came to be considered as contributing to the value of an animal, that metonymic designation continued to hold sway with “race horse” gradually supplanting “running horse,” and with identity generally seen as defined by function. So, for instance, a common trope in sentimental narratives at the end of the eighteenth century would have a horse begin as a pampered “running horse” in his youth, but then decline by degrees as he ages, serving as a hunter, and then a coach horse, before his final degradation into a cart horse, where he is often destined by sentimental codes to die in harness; these designations are status signifiers, labels of privilege and pathos, not pedigree and breed identity.

Cavendish’s ideas about breeding were thoroughly in accord with orthodox views of Galenic geohumoralism, according to which the physical traits and governing temperament of an individual (horse or human) were largely determined by the climate of origin and the climate of origin of the individual’s parents. And in his view, this meant that an Englishman breeding in the cold northern climate of England mares who were themselves the product of that cold, northern climate should seek always to invigorate the blood of those mares by putting them to recently imported stallions from hot, southern climates. Chief among these potential stallions were Spanish Ginetes and African Barbs. If a Spanish stallion were crossed with suitable mares, he believed the match could provide good horses for schooling, cavalry, riding, hunting, and racing. Cavendish and his contemporaries, for a variety of specialized purposes — including ambling, pacing, and the “running horse” — advocated the use of a Spanish stallion, or, failing that, what was often termed a “bastard.” This sense of “bastard” is directly linked to what will be subsequently theorized as a “nick,” and it is significant that far from the notion of breed purity that will develop in the nineteenth century, the sport of the running horse is, for seventeenth-century breeders, best served by hybridizing outcrosses. Michael Baret provides a useful illustration: “it is holden that the Spanish Jennet, the Irish hobby, and Arabian Courser is held both by Maister *Blundevill*, and Maister *Markham*, to be the chiefe for pacing: And the next unto them is the bastard Stallion, begotten by one of them, on our English Mares, which doth exceed either of them in toughnesse, by reason of the apt composition of the purity of their substance, in respect of their hot clime, and the humidity of our more temperate zone” (4-5).

Cavendish believed that the Barb would be himself a better horse for the school exercises of the *Manage*, because he was less “wise” or independent than the Spaniard, but not quite as effective as a stallion. And, in keeping with the overriding elitist ideology of his practice, he conceived of their relative abilities in terms of aristocratic rank; in her *Life* of her husband, Margaret Cavendish wrote that he believed “Spanish horses were like Princes, and barbs like gentlemen, in their kind.” Moreover, in emphasizing the need continually to reinvigorate northern mares with Spanish stallions, Cavendish makes clear that his version of geohumoralism is intended as a prophylactic against the otherwise inevitable deterioration that one must expect in horses bred in a northern clime:

I must tell you, that you must never have a *Stallion* of your own Breed, because they are too far removed from the Purity, and Head, of the Fountain, which is a pure *Spanish Horse*: Besides, should the Stallions be of your own Breed, in three or four Generations they would come to be

Cart-Horses; so gross, and ill-favoured would they be: or at least, just such *Horses* as are bred in that Country, so soon will they degenerate: Therefore, have still a fresh *Spanish Horse* for the Stallion.⁵

In this sense — that the role of human agency is to ward off natural decline — Cavendish’s thoughts on horse breeding clearly align not only with the position of a staunchly Royalist cavalier and aristocrat, but also with the “Ancient” position in the seventeenth-century debate intellectual historians have described as the “Ancients and Moderns controversy.” That debate, which raged through the libraries of France and England (a feature literalized for ironic effect in Jonathan Swift’s *Battle of the Books*) turned on the very question that is now sometimes used to distinguish study of “the Renaissance” from study of “the Early Modern Period.” The former term is often associated with a rebirth of classical learning, while the latter term tends to be associated with the innovations that ushered in modernity as a consequence of that rebirth. For seventeenth-century intellectuals (and aristocrats) the question was whether culture flourished more fully in classical antiquity (the Ancient position) or in the contemporary moment (the Modern position). By the end of the seventeenth century, this debate had tended to polarize the traditional “liberal arts” with “Ancients” championing the literary, philosophical, and artistic triumphs of the classical age, and “Moderns” pointing to dramatic advancements in learning from revolutionary developments in mathematics and the sciences. And arcing over this entire debate was a fundamental question about culture and history: is the path of history, as classical texts and the Ancients assert, a story of decline from a “Golden Age,” when people were closer to the God (or Gods) who created them; or, as the Moderns would have it, a story of progress and improvement, advancing toward fulfilling the destiny of philosophies of perfectibility?

Cavendish seems to have managed his stud on the principles advanced by the partisans of the Ancients, putting into practice what experience and study teach in order to hold in abeyance as best one can a process of inevitable decline and deterioration. But drawn up in battle as it were on the opposing side of this debate was the very man who had led forces successfully into battle against him at Naseby: Thomas, Lord Fairfax, who had commanded the Parliamentary forces in that decisive battle. There are a surprising number of convergences and similarities, as well as oppositions, between the two men, not least of which is that Fairfax, too, retired from public life to manage his stud. But though the two men agreed both on geohumoral theories based on the influence of climate and on the belief that extremes were to be avoided in favor of “the middle (where virtue lies),” Fairfax adopted a Modern, rather than an Ancient position on the larger question of “improvement.”

The geohumoral climate theory of breeding underlying the practices of Fairfax, Cavendish, and their contemporaries placed the highest value on “balance.” Each of the four humors was correlated to its appropriate climate: Hot and dry; dry and cold; cold and moist; and hot and moist. When no one humor was predominate, the result was a perfect blend of humoral composition. What was to be avoided was an excess of one particular influence; and so in a cold, damp climate like England’s, the influence of stallions imported from hot, dry climates was particularly valued. This notion of a cross in which opposing influences balance one another and cancel each other out is what gave rise originally to the terminology of “nicking in the cross,” in the manner described by Wall earlier. But while Cavendish and earlier breeders sought such balance as a means of preserving an always perilous status quo, Fairfax fully embraced “Modern” notions of perfectibility and improvement, informed by both an ideological commitment to the potential of future development and to a protestant doctrine that drew heavily on the parables in the Gospel of Matthew.

The Fairfax and Cavendish families knew one another well, and in the 1630s, well before the battle of Naseby, Fairfax’s grandfather wrote to Cavendish, in part to thank him for an earlier loan of a stallion: “I have received somme Talents from you and I will be glad that you will take an account how I have employed them. I have not been negligent in improving them” (BL, Add MS 70499 fo. 170).⁶ The elder Fairfax is quite literally repaying Cavendish in kind, but he is also alluding explicitly to Matthew’s parable of the talents, and

the explicitly Christian injunction there to improve what we are given. When, following the Restoration of monarchy, the younger Fairfax came to write a manuscript on the breeding of horses that he left behind at his death in 1673, he began it with an allusion to two other parables from the gospel (the parable of the wise and foolish builders, and the parable of the sower): “*He that would build well must lay a good foundation. He that would reap good Fruits must plant good Trees; for no Man can gather Grapes from Thorns, or Figs from Thistles*” (1-2).⁷

Like Cavendish, Fairfax advocates the use of a stallion from a southern clime — barb or Spanish Jennet — and like Cavendish, he urges such crosses to cancel or nick with the opposite tendencies of northern mares. But unlike Cavendish, and in keeping with the parables in the gospels and their doctrine of improvement, he specifically imagines a series of such crosses in a planned series of mating over at least three generations in order to, as the phrase became, “improve the breed”: “and having made your Race thus perfect you may for many Descents breed of the most perfect of them and have better and better Horses and shall not need to seek Stallions or Mares from the best Races in Christendom” (6). It is not at all insignificant that the Eclipse line, the most significant bloodline in the modern thoroughbred, traces back in significant degree to mares originally bred in the stud of Lord Fairfax, according to the pattern he outlines in his manuscript treatise.

And this, finally, is what I would suggest is the most powerful sense in which the thoroughbred epitomizes “a perfect nicking pattern” that establishes a living nature/culture hybrid as a most appropriate avatar for modernity: finding a paradoxical way to reconcile those contradictory impulses arrayed on Naseby field. On one side, under the banner of the Ancients, were arrayed those seeking to preserve the elitist aristocratic doctrine of privilege that was aligned in the Royalist defending “the best of the best.” Across that field they faced a rebellious onslaught, enlisted under the banner of the Moderns, advancing a modern doctrine of progressive improvement derived from the hybridizing vigor imparted by deliberate outcrossing. The original Early Modern sense of a “nick” was to cancel or balance potentially destabilizing extremes in pursuit of that idealized moderate position “where virtue lies.” The underlying dream would seem to be to postpone indefinitely a decisive conflict between these opposing views by finding a way to escape the narrow sense of “cancel” that devolves into the merely mediocre, instead uniting the opposing forces in pursuit of “a more perfect future.” This endless oscillation between a preservation of an ideal state menaced by disruptive external influences and the active valuation of those invigorating hybrid crosses that stimulate new, improved, more perfect futures is at the heart of what we consider to be our modern world, in which so many of our defining political struggles take shape around the anxieties, possibilities, defenses, and desires that are figured by the nature/culture hybrid of racialized identities, both human and non-human.

“Nicking” is the perfectly paradoxical theory of modern breeding: at once promising to preserve against deterioration and to always be improving; it achieves balance between contrasting strengths and weaknesses, while perpetually reinforcing proven success; introduced originally as a strategy for the management of hybridizing outcrosses, it has been thoroughly internalized within what is now defined (and regulated) as a “pure breed” as a tool for managing the crossing of particular lines within the breed — lines that only make sense within the larger context of an animal breed thoroughly regulated and recorded by human managers. Escaping from the gendered traps of spermist or ovist theories that seek to privilege the influence of sire or dam, it directs attention to the success with which families cross and intersect, and in doing so, offers an account for exceptions that elude more rigorously predictive model of genetic inheritance. Ad hoc, abstract, subjective, and yet amenable to rigorous quantification, it perches atop the findings of modern science, by turns reinforcing and contradicting those findings, as the fluctuating winds of racing success dictate. Nearly a generation ago, Bruno Latour urged us to become “non-Modern” not by some act of revolution or some failed insistence on privileging hybridity over purification, or purity over hybridity, but by consciously and mindfully “reconsider[ing] our past, [and] understand[ing] retrospectively to what extent” (144) our construct of modernity depends on such figures of impossibly self-cancelling stories of preservation and improvement.

Notes

1. Margaret Derry's work is particularly well known for its contributions to the history of what this essay identifies as a "modern era of animal breeding," dating from after Bakewell. See especially [Bred for Perfection, Horses in Society: A Story of Animal Breeding and Marketing Culture](#), and [Masterminding Nature: The Breeding of Animals, 1750-2010](#). There is something of a tendency to relegate all theories of breeding prior to the rise of a science of genetics as operating without theory altogether: "Theory, had little application, for until the late nineteenth century there was little applicable theory. Not till Mendel's work on heredity became better-known did racehorse breeders begin to act on any explicit theoretical basis" ([Vamplew, 186](#)).
2. The precise origins of this phrase are obscure, but it is generally dated to the late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century, and most often ascribed to John E. Madden who founded Hamburg Place in Kentucky; throughout this essay, I accept that account.
3. A generation after Tesio, Leslie Combs II was quoted to similar effect by James Gill in *Bloodstock*: "First of all, we try to follow the pattern of successful matings of the past. Some blood nicks very well with another cross, and once this has been proved on the track, it's a good idea to follow along" ([229](#)).
4. Wallner et al. find that not only thoroughbreds, but virtually all modern European horse breeds derive from Turkoman horse lineage, dating from well before the managed breeding practices associated with modern breed identity: "the decline of Y chromosome diversity in horses likely started about 5,500 years ago with genetic bottlenecks during the domestication process and was further enhanced by multiple prehistoric and historic waves of migration. Most so-called "modern horse breeds" are the result of centralized and organized horse breeding over the past few hundred years. During this period, inbreeding and line-breeding concepts became popular, and the entire horse population has been strongly affected by these strategies" ([2029](#)).
5. William Cavendish, [A new method, and extraordinary invention, to dress horses](#), 92-93. See also previous related discussions of the Cavendish-Fairfax material that follows in Nash, "[Gentlemen's Recreation and Georgic Improvement: Lord Fairfax on Horse Breeding](#)" and Nash, "[William Cavendish: Riding School and Race Track](#)."
6. The letter from Cavendish to which Fairfax here replies read, in part: "Therefore, if it please your Lordship to accept of my Bay Barb: Though for no other use but a Stallion. I hope he will fit that turn to your Lordship's contentment & the better If you please to let him run with them. When I return from London your Lordship must not deny me a Journey hither to see some horses though not worth your Lordship's Trouble to bring that Noble Gentleman your Grand Childe Mr. Fairfax with you who I hear to my great Contentment is much addicted to that exercise." [spelling modernized].
7. Cf. Matthew 7:16.

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