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Abstract
Reviews the symbolism of the unicorn in mythology, literature, and as portrayed in tapestry, including Christianity.

Additional Keywords
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The fierce, solitary and beautiful unicorn has appealed to man's imagination for centuries. The animal with a single spiralled horn figures in legends from all over Europe and the Near East; it even appears as far east as China, where it is called the Lin. The Lin is regarded as a heavenly, spiritual beast that appears at the birth of a sage.1 In medieval Europe, the unicorn was thought to be an actual animal which, like the elephant, lived in India and was so rare that he was rarely seen.2 Although the unicorn was real to many people in the Middle Ages, a complex system of legends built up which gave the beast a mystic significance.

There were many conceptions of the unicorn's appearance. Ctesias, a Greek naturalist of the fourth century BC, described him as similar to a wild ass, but having a single horn, the lower third of which was white, the middle third black, the upper third red.3 By the medieval period, however, artistic convention picturing him in this way was forgotten. The unicorn was generally portrayed as a white beast, having the head and body of a horse, the board of a goat, the tail of a horse or a lion, and the legs of an antelope, which terminated in cloven hooves.4

The unicorn was noted for his wild, proud nature; he was impossible to capture without the help of a virgin girl. In the presence of a maiden, the beast would become so humble that he would kneel and rest his head in her lap. If there were a virgin girl in the area, he would go to the girl and fall asleep in her lap. If the girl were not a virgin, the unicorn would kneel and dip his horn into the poisoned water; if she were beautiful, but all agreed on one thing—he must be a virgin. If there were no virgin in the area, he would go to the girl and fall asleep in her lap. If the girl were not a virgin, the unicorn would either ignore her or, according to some medieval accounts, run her through with his horn.5

Medieval bestiaries suggest possible reasons why unicorns are attracted to virgins. One explanation is strictly sexual—the lovely maid woman arouses the unicorn. Authors who favor this view often tell of the unicorn sucking the girl's breasts and attempting other sexual familiarity before falling asleep with his horn in a very symbolic position. Another theory is advanced by the twelfth century writer Alanus de Insulis. He based his explanation on the then-popular medical theory of opposing humours.6 The fiery dry “humour,” or nature, of the unicorn is drawn to the cool, moist air which is caused by the virgin's cold, pure humour. This change in temperature makes him so comforable that he decides to take a nap.

By far the most common explanation of the Virgin-Capture lies within the virgin herself. The unicorn, it is theorized, is attracted to the “odor of virginity.”7 For some reason—accounts differ as to whether it is the unicorn’s purity or his lewdness—he is drawn to this aura of chastity. Trust and love for the pure young girl overcomes the unicorn’s elusiveness, and he falls into sort of an enchanted sleep.

This lovely tale may have been derived from a mundane, even slightly bawdy, hunting story. In the early seventeenth century, Fray Luis de Urreta, in his book, Historia de los Grandes y Notables Reynos de la Etiopía, Monarchia del Emperador Preste Juan, told how hunters in northern Africa claimed to capture rhinoceroses with the help of a trained female monkey. The monkey would distract the rhinoceros by biting its tail and robes. Eventually the rhinoceros would lie down and stretch out to more fully enjoy itself. At that point, the hunters could creep up and stab it in the belly. In The Lore of the Unicorn, Odell Shepard suggests that this story travelled from North Africa to the Middle East, and from there to Europe. As it travelled, the rhinoceros changed to a unicorn—an animal equally familiar to Europeans of the day; the monkey turned into a human girl.14

The early Christians apparently found this legend a perfect vehicle for allegory.15 To what had been a relatively simple story, they added layers of meaning, and new symbolism born of their creed. Indeed, it did not take long for the Christians to adopt the unicorn as a symbol of Christ Himself.

Saint Basil, an early Church father, wrote, "The unapproachable nature of God is likened to that of a unicorn."16 Saint Ambrose said, "Who is this Unicorn but the only-begotten Son of God?"17 God was born on earth in the person of Jesus Christ, through the Virgin Mary. In effect, He, like the unicorn, was captured by a maiden. As the proudest and most aloof of beasts was tamed by a virgin, God Himself became the little child of the Virgin.

As the comparison of the unicorn to Christ became more widely accepted, theologians found other points of comparison. Tertullian, another Church father, likened the upright part of the Cross, the section above the crossbeam, to the unicorn's horn.18 The horn points up to Heaven, as the Cross does both literally and figuratively. Another allegory, one that apparently had its origins in actual folklore, is that of the water-conning. In ancient times, and throughout the Middle Ages, it was believed that snakes could poison water sources during the night.19 In the morning, other animals would see the venom floating on top of the water. Since they could not drink, they would await the arrival of the unicorn. The unicorn would kneel and dip his horn into the poisoned water; this would rid the water of the snake's venom. Churchmen explained that the snake was the Devil, and the water which had been poisoned was the world, because of his purifying horn, represented Christ the Redeemer, saving the world from the poison of the Evil One.20

In medieval accounts of the Virgin-Capture, the virgin is often described as grasping the unicorn's horn as he is captured by the hunters. One medieval writer explains that Jesus has "raised—a horn of salvation...by the intercession of the mother of God..."20 Medievalist Margaret Freeman puts it, "The animal's submission to the virgin maid is an allegory of the Annunciation and Incarnation.21 To the Catholics of the Middle Ages, who were constantly devoted to the Virgin, this legend has a special appeal. As the cult of the Virgin grew in popularity, the legend inevitably grew with it. Eventually, the Virgin-Capture legend took on many of the trappings of an actual stag hunt. This more complex
allegory is known as the Holy Hunt, and virtually every aspect of the Hunt has religious meaning. The chief huntsman is the Holy Spirit acting through the Angel Gabriel; he drives the unicorn to the virgin, who tames it. Gabriel is the angel of the Annunciation, and to this point, the legend represents the Annunciation and Incarnation. When the other hunters kill the unicorn, this represents the Crucifixion. In this version, the unicorn itself is described as a small animal about the size of a kid; its size represents Christ's humility. Its one horn, which may represent the unity of the Father and the Son, is an antidote for poison, and this is why the unicorn is killed. Christ's death, like the unicorn's, is so humans may "live."

Despite the popularity of the Virgin-Capture/Holy Hunt legend as an allegory of Christ, the legend's original sexual significance was not lost. The version of the Virgin-Capture story told in Provencal bestiaries was more like a unholy hunt. The unicorn attempts to sexually molest the virgin, and so is sacrificed by the hunters. In this version, the story is an allegory of lust overcome by spiritual love, or perhaps the Devil, in the form of the unicorn, overcome by purity.

In later medieval times, as the ideal of courtly love became widely accepted among the upper classes, the unicorn became a symbol of the good side of physical love. Richard de Fournival, in the mid-thirteenth century, wrote a long romantic poem which described courtship using a series of comparisons with the animal kingdom. One example which he used was the story of the unicorn and the maiden. The unicorn represents a young suitor who is mistreated and betrayed by his lady, but it also stands for the man who is finally conquered by love. By the fourteenth century, the unicorn had become an accepted symbol of the courtly lover, who undergoes many hardships and trials before winning—or being won by—his lady.

The unicorn functions both as a Christ-symbol and as a symbol of the lover in the famous tapestry series The Hunt of the Unicorn. This set of seven tapestries was probably woven in or near Touraine, France, in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. All but the first and seventh tapestries are believed to have been made in celebration of the marriage of Anne of Brittany and Louis XII of France, which took place in 1497; the first and seventh are apparently not part of the original set, and may have been made for the wedding of Anne's daughter, seventeen years later.

There is no definite documentation as to the date or original ownership of the tapestries, but several clues support the Anne of Brittany hypothesis. In the sixth tapestry, the Lord and Lady of the castle are shown, wearing a long-breasted, sleeveless gown, which looks very like a young man d efies society. The unicorn is decorated with a wreath of holly and oak leaves. The proud man-tamed by the love of a pure-woman is a fitting theme for a set of tapestries intended as a wedding gift, and so the theme of courteous love is not ignored in the tapestries. The wild fierce unicorn defies the hunters, as a young man defies society. The unicorn is tamed by the maiden, as a young man is tamed-bound by love and marriage. The unicorn tamed symbolizes marriage as well as malely purity; therefore, the widow-bride Anne taking the part of the virgin is not as unlikely as it may seem. She is a sort of symbolic virgin.

When the lover-unicorn is killed, the general interpretation is that the lover has been betrayed by his lady. In the tapestries, however, the unicorn is butchered far from the virgin; she seems less an accomplice than a pawn. The promise of the Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, who wrongly took the maiden, hints that the unicorn was not the only one betrayed. Perhaps, in this context, the murdered unicorn represents a man crossed in love by the world in general.

This idea seems especially convincing in light of the seventh tapestry. Here the unicorn is miraculously raised from the dead. Although his wounds are not fully healed, they are not disfiguring; they almost heighten the beauty of his milk-white coat. He is the lover captured and captivated by his lady, and restored to life—society—by her pure love.

The fifth tapestry strengthened the association of the unicorn with the Virgin Mary by the use of several of her symbols. The calf was taken in a fenced garden, or hortus conclusus. The hortus conclusus was a symbol of Mary, and the Incarnation, as well as representing chastity in general. The apple tree in the garden symbolizes the Holy Ghost coming to Mary at the Annunciation. The apple's sweet flesh is a symbol of sexual pleasure—a reminder of the two meanings of the unicorn.

Throughout the tapestries, the unicorn is clearly an allegorical representation of Christ. In the water-conning tapestry, he is tamed by the Lady of the Rock and但从 the horse's mouth. In the fifth tapestry, the unicorn is raised from the dead, as is Christ. In the sixth tapestry, he is decorated with a wreath of holly and oak leaves. While the leaves of the oak, the strongest of trees, represent the endurance of the Christian faith, the apple tree in the garden symbolizes the Holy Ghost coming to Mary at the Annunciation. The apple's sweet flesh is a symbol of sexual pleasure—a reminder of the two meanings of the unicorn.

Not so the huntsman sounding his horn in the fourth tapestry, and later in the fifth, i.e. death-knell, in the sixth. His face is understanding and compassionate, and well it should be, for he represents the Archangel Gabriel, the angel of the Annunciation. His scabbard bears the inscription Ave Regina Coelorum, "Hail, Queen of the Heavens!" While these are not the actual words of the angel, they are the title of a well-known hymn to the Virgin. People would have understood the intended point.

When the unicorn is killed and brought to the castle, he is decorated with a wreath of holly and oak leaves. The holly's prickly leaves are an illusion to the crown of thorns, while the leaves of the oak, the strongest of trees, represent the endurance of the Christian faith. The unicorn is thus the crucified Jesus. In the last tapestry, the unicorn, like Christ, is resurrected. In the words of Margaret Freeman, the tapestries depict the "Whole divine plan for man's Redemption."
love. The golden collar and chain which he wears represent marital bonds; he is chained to a pomegranate tree, which symbolizes fertility and the consummation of marriage.\textsuperscript{43} Despite his bonds, the unicorn wears a blissful expression.

The blissful expression is suited to a newlywed, but, if one interprets it another way, it is also suited to the resurrected Christ. The \textit{hortus conclusus} in which he rests here may be Paradise. The pomegranate, as well as being a fertility symbol, is also a symbol of life after death,\textsuperscript{44} while this may seem like an odd combination. What are children but a kind of immortality?

The seventh tapestry culminates the development of two seemingly opposite legends. The unicorn's meanings, however, are not as contradictory as they may appear. The unicorn in the Virgin-Capture/Holy Hunt cycle represents Christ, the personification of divine love. In the lover-unicorn legend, the unicorn represents the courtly lover, and ultimately a loving husband, a personification of human love. Human love and divine love are vastly different concepts, but the fact remains: the unicorn is an embodiment of love.

\textbf{NOTES}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., p. 27.
\item Turner Bailey and Pool, p. 203.
\item Shepard, p. 50.
\item Turner Bailey and Pool, p. 149.
\item Graves, p. 50.
\item Shepard, p. 50.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid., p. 67.
\item Ibid., p. 69.
\item Ibid., p. 81.
\item Ibid., p. 282, footnote 36.
\item Fingersten, p. 146.
\item Shepard, p. 48.
\item Shepard, p. 49.
\item Freeman, p. 9.
\item Horner, p. 174.
\item Diamonstein, p. 69.
\item Horner, p. 25.
\item Freeman, p. 26
\item Ibid., p. 14.
\item Ibid., p. 35.
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\item Ibid., p. 38.
\item Freeman, p. 37.
\end{enumerate}

\textbf{Unicorns}

Perhaps the greatest proof of our decadence
Is that unicorns have become trite.

Somehow
They've managed to commercialize
Unicorns!

Cocktail napkins, children's toys-
Unicorns are hot sellers.

...And the real tragedy is,
They've become comic-
Shetland ponies with a horn.

Once only a virgin could
Achieve a unicorn;

Today any little whore who can plunk down the money
Can have one
Plastered across her overworked chest
In metallic colors.

What can be used for a culture
Which sells Christ symbols
At Fays
For seven-fifty?

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