

THE VIRGIN CAPTURE MYTH IN THE HUNT OF THE UNICORN DURING THE MIDDLE AGES

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Introduction

Mythical identities exist in contemporary cultures as a form of commercial entertainment for diversified publics and transversal consumers. However, during the High Middle Ages most people readily accepted the supernatural and the uncanny as part of the everyday. In addition to being part of the collective unconscious of Western Europe, mythical beasts like the unicorn were engaged with as concrete realities. Their systematic appearance in Bestiaries and medical treatises testifies to their widespread popularity throughout the continent. *Physiologus*, father of all Bestiaries, gave them a Christian interpretation, guaranteeing their incorporation into the writings of the great theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The popularity of the hunt of the unicorn by a virgin in the visual arts is a product of this tradition. It was assimilated both in secular and religious art and was often associated with courtly love and the cult of the Virgin Mary. The unicorn was thus threaded into a complex allegorical hunt which saw it both as lover and as Christ incarnate. His character, indomitable by nature, could be pacified only thanks to a virgin, who had the power to lull the creature into a profound sleep. It is almost impossible to overlook her duplicitous nature, as object of purity and betrayer of the unicorn. The intent of this study is to examine this specific female polarity from psychoanalytic and iconographic perspectives, by selecting specific images, which testify to the figure's dual nature. The first part of this survey will provide a historiographical account of the unicorn from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. We shall then proceed to analyse the virgin capture myth and its psychoanalytic interpretations, finally we will take into account images of the unicorn and attempt to address the female perspective.

The unicorn in literary sources

The unicorn makes his first appearance in 400 B.C. in the writings of Ctesias (c. fifth century) (Nichols 2011: 73-74; Bigwood 1989: 302-16), a Greek physician working at the Persian court

of Artaxerxes II (465-424 B.C.) and Darius II (423-404 B.C.). In his book, *Indica by Photinus*, he gives a vivid description of the beast, claiming that in India there are:

certain wild Asses which are as large as horses and even larger. Their bodies are white, their heads dark red, and their eyes dark blue. They have a horn in the middle of their forehead and this is one cubit in length; the base of this horn is pure white (...) the middle part is sharp and vivid crimson and the upper part is black. There is no way to capture them than this: when they conduct their young to pasture, if they are surrounded by many horsemen, they refuse to flee, thus forsaking their offspring. (...) They cannot be taken alive

Ctesias in Freeman 1976: 14¹

Ctesias describes some of the unicorn's characterising features: it has a large single horn protruding through his brow, it is indomitable by nature unless hunters resolve to using devious methods (Cherry 1995: 46). Although Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) considered Ctesias unreliable, he believed in the existence of a one-horned animal and included him in the *Historia Animalium*². Julius Caesar (100-44B.C.) in *De Bellum Gallico* mentions the existence of a single horned animal in the Hercynian forest and so does Pliny the Elder (23-79 A.D.) in the *Naturalis Historia*, introducing for the first time the term *monoceros* (Shepard 1930: 37). However it is Aelian (170-235 A. D.), a prominent Roman scholar, who is the first to mention how the unicorn's wild nature is pacified by female influences: 'it likes lonely grazing grounds where it roams in solitude, but at the mating season, when it associates with the female it becomes gentle and the two even graze side by side' (Aelian 1958: LCL, 446) This particular inclination of the unicorn will have a tremendous impact in the formulation of the virgin-capture myth.

The Septuagint refers to the mythical unicorn. The Hebrew beast re'em, also re'em (Hebrew: רֵאֵם) was translated into Greek as μονόκερως - or one horned and in the Vulgate either as *unicornus* or *rhinoceros*. The Septuagint was generally perceived as divinely inspired and therefore the unicorn was accepted in the realm of God's divine creatures. When the Old

¹ Freese, J. H. (1920). *The library of Photius*. London, UK: Society for promoting Christian knowledge and New York City, New York, USA: The Macmillan Company, p. 95. Lavers, C. (1999). The Ancients' One-Horned Ass: Accuracy and Consistency, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 40: 327-352.

² a major treatise on biology, one of the great classics of Western scientific and philosophical thought, and through a long tradition has inspired our current idea of nature.

Testament eventually appeared in vernacular the appellation unicorn was finally consolidated. In the King James Bible, the unicorn is mentioned in several passages, Numbers 23:22; Deuteronomy 33:17; Job 39:9-11; Psalm 92:10 Vulgate Psalm 91; Book of Daniel (8: 5-7, 21) (Freeman 1976: 15). The mythical beast of early Christianity is described with majesty and reverence, associated with Christ as early as the second century by Tertullian (c. 160-225), who commented on a passage from the book of Deuteronomy, claiming that Christ is denoted by the unicorn and that his horn is symbolic of the messiah's death on the cross (Ad marc iii, 18: MPL I, 346; Freeman 1976: 15). St Ambrose (340-397), Bishop of Milan, makes the same analogy while the Bishop of Caesarea, St Basil (330-379), claimed that Christ is the power of God, therefore he is called the unicorn on the ground that he has one horn, that is one common power with the father (Cherry 1995: 48).

However, the lore of the unicorn was not established until the third century with the appearance of the *Physiologus*, written by an anonymous writer in Alexandria, and considered by modern historiography as the father of all Bestiaries. The object of the *Physiologus* was to discuss the properties of animals as vehicles for Christian morality. A number of different versions of the text exist, testifying to its widespread popularity throughout the Mediterranean basin. According to the *Physiologus*, the unicorn is a small kid-like animal that can be captured only through the agency of a virgin. The unicorn is attracted by her scent and once it sees her jumps into her lap and falls asleep. Only at this point can the hunters proceed with his capture, leading him forth to the palace of the king. A miniature from a tenth century *Physiologus* vividly portrays the capture of the unicorn by a maiden (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Detail of a miniature from a manuscript of the *Physiologus*, tenth century A.D. MS. 10066-67, fol. 147. Bibliothèque Royale Albert I, Brussels.

The allegorical implications of the capture claimed that Jesus through the intercession with Mary, sacrificed himself on the cross for the salvation of the people of the World (Shepard 1930: 49). To a certain extent the *Physiologus* authenticated the virgin-capture myth as a metaphor for the incarnation of Christ. This can be observed in a number of illustrations such as the Byzantine miniature from the Theodore Psalter dated (1066) at the British Library in London (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Detail of a miniature from the *Theodore Psalter*, 1066 A.D. MS. 19352, fol. 124. British Library, London.

This illustration shows the capture of the unicorn by a virgin and relates it to the circular medallion found in the upper right corner, which portrays the Virgin and the Christ child. An interesting somewhat different account of the virgin capture myth is offered by the Syriac version of the *Physiologus*: ‘they lead forth a young virgin (...) to whom, when the animal sees her, he approaches, throwing himself upon her. The girl offers him her breast, and the animal begins to suck the breast of the maiden (...) Then the girl, while sitting quietly reaches forth her hand and grasps the horn on the animal’s brow’ (Curley 1979; Ryan 2012: 53; Pansini 2021: 13; Shepard 1930: 49). A similar account is found in Philip de Thaur’s *Bestiary* (ca. 1100) in which the virgin is advised to keep her breasts uncovered. A miniature from an English thirteenth-century book of beasts clearly portrays this belief, showing a virgin completely naked with a unicorn in her lap (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Detail of a miniature from the *English Bestiary*, thirteenth century A.D. Roy 12 F. XIII, fol. 10v. British Museum, London. Vellum.

According to Odell Shepard, in addition to the *Physiologus*, Isidore of Seville's (d. 636) *Origines* was a determining influence for medieval readings of the unicorn. His description of the unicorn was greatly revered and copied extensively by all the great naturalists of the medieval era. The great mystics of the twelfth century also took a keen interest in the unicorn. Honorius of Autun (1106-1135) for example, extremely influential amongst the German territories, used on the several occasion the virgin-capture myth as a metaphor of the incarnation (Jung 1953: 423). In *Psychology and Alchemy* Carl Jung stresses this analogy and quotes a passage from the *Speculum de mysteriis ecclesiae* by Honorius:

the very fierce animal with only one horn is called unicorn. In order to catch it, a virgin is put in a field; the animal then comes to her and is caught, because it lies down in her lap. Christ is represented by this animal, and his insuperable strength by its horn. He, who lay down in the womb of the Virgin, has been caught by the hunters; that is to say, he was found in human shape by those who loved him

Jung 1953: 423

A visual rendition of the Christian allegory may be observed in the *Mystical Hunt of the Unicorn* by the painter Martin Schongauer (1450-1491) (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. *Altarpiece of the Dominican Order: The Mystical Hunt and the Unicorn* by Martin Schongauer (2 of 8 panels), c. 1475 A.D. Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar. Painting on Wood.

St Hildegarde (1098-1179) too picked up on the legend of the unicorn taming the story considerably for the novices of the convent in her treatise on natural history *Physica* (Beer 1977: 78).

The popularity of the virgin-capture myth was contemporary to the growing cult around the Virgin Mary, and to the emergence of courtly literature in Europe during the thirteenth and throughout the fourteenth century. The secularisation of the virgin capture myth and its adoption into Courtly Love poetry exacerbates women's problematic role inside the legend, and its misogynistic reading by contemporary sources. The virgin is both an object of purity and the betrayer of the unicorn ultimately pushing forward the *Eros/Thanatos* tandem so dear to courtly literature (de Rougemont 1977; de Fournival *Bestiare d'Amour* trans. and ed. by Beer 1986). The distressing virgin-whore dichotomy is present yet again in a medieval setting, and is not resolved by courtly love circles, which frequently acknowledges the fatal sentiments of the unicorn towards the virgin. The medieval female body - religious or secular – still lacks a thorough reassessment of women's place and space is often devalued as a result.

The unicorn: a purely phallic conception?

This has been partly addressed with the inclusion of psychoanalytic readings in Art History as a discipline. From early on, as far as unicorns are concerned, scholars who have not necessarily explored the psychoanalytic implications of the beast, frequently comment on how certain illustrations have a strong phallic quality. Sutherland Lyall, a unicorn expert, claims that 'anyone educated in the post-Freudian era, is quite incapable to avoid the evident connection between the unicorn's horn and male sexuality' (Lyall 2000: 142). In relation to horned animals in general Géza Ròheim suggested that:

they appear to be simply the penis displaced upwards; and it seems that this displacement upwards, this erection displaced to the head, is a necessary fore-pleasure phase, an introduction to the coitus in the case of some animals.

Röheim 1930: 228

In 1923 Ernst Jones, elucidates the intimate connection between the study of religion and that of aesthetics. In relation to the Madonna's conception through the ear, Jones takes into account the figure of the unicorn in Holy Hunt cycles³, suggesting that it is intimately connected to the breath of God and therefore it is both 'and emblem of the Christian Logos [and] a purely phallic conception' (Jones 1923: 330).

Post-Freudian scholarship, especially in so far as the Feminist and the Gender currents are considered, has habitually pushed forward a sexual reading in the study of aesthetics, ascribing either a phallic connotation or an association to the coitus with little discretion. As an art historian it is necessary to treat these interpretations with great care. Although a psychoanalytic reading has undoubtedly fostered a departure from mainstream Eurocentric male oriented readings, its principles can often be misinterpreted. It is fair to say that certain representations of the unicorn inevitably bring to mind associations with the phallus and were probably conceived as licentious forms of erotica. This at least seems to be the case for the fifteenth-century engraving (Fig. 5) from the Offentliche Kunstsammlung in Basel depicting profane and sacred love, for what was likely an intended male audience.

³ In Holy hunt Cycles the unicorn is Christ, the virgin the Virgin Mary and the Hunter the Archangel Gabriel, please refer to Freeman 1976: 48-51.



Figure 5. *Naked Woman and Middle Class Woman with Unicorns* by an Upper Rhineland Master, late fifteenth century A.D. Offentliche Kunstsammlung Kupferstichkabinett, Basle. Engraving.

Having said this, the duplicitous depiction of women in the virgin capture myth calls for a more complex interpretation, of what appears to be a deeply rooted ambivalence towards the female sphere. During the High Middle Ages, we have several instances of this phenomena which range from Basilian Icons of the Virgin Mary to sculptures of the black Virgin, highlighting what superficially appears to be a *fil rouge* tied to the relationship between the mother and the infant.

Jung suggested that in alchemical treatises the unicorn stands for the *spiritus mercurialis*, the untamed male and was the first to recognize that the capture of the unicorn by a virgin is a ‘barely disguised form of mother-son incest’ (Jung 1953: 446). Unicorn horns were crafted into magical receptacles usually cups or vessels – subliming the masculine and the feminine into what Jung aptly recognises as a uniting symbol which ultimately expressed the ‘bipolarity of the archetype’ (Jung 1953: 476). Adolf Zeckel affirms that the unicorn’s relationship to the maiden is either one of compliance or of excitement, and that ultimately on a final and deepest level is an unconscious manifestation of parricidal fantasies (Zeckel 1951: 355). According to Zeckel the virgin

had to be deceitful for it is the son’s desire that she basically detest the father, that she only pretends to love him, that she remains chaste and have no intercourse with him.

Zeckel 1951: 357

Several virgin capture cycles tied to the theme of the Holy Hunt take place inside a *Hortus Conclusus*⁴ a symbolic stratagem which works on several levels. On the one hand it represents the Virgin's chastity, on the other hand it suggests an inside and an outside, two worlds which cannot coexist unless they are sublimated through primordial instincts. Ildiko Mohacsy refutes this interpretation *tout court* claiming that the unicorn is a manifestation of the paranoid-schizoid position as elucidated by Melanie Klein (Mohacsy 1984: 387; Segal 1973: 13-22). By adopting a Kleinian interpretation of the virgin capture myth she claims that the legend of the unicorn acquired popularity because it aptly condensed the:

connection between female duality and residual Oedipal guilt [...]The result is an unhealable division, persisting through adulthood, in the perception of the love-object, and above all in male perceptions of the female love-object. Misogyny is thus shown to be the product of archaic conflicts, strengthened by the oedipal crisis

Mohacsy 1984: 388; 401

Therefore, the unicorn is not the father, but the son. While Zeckel (1951) and Mohacsy (1984) correctly outline the existence of multiple perceptions of the figure of the virgin, they give contrasting interpretations to the symbol of the unicorn. Both interpretations are deemed in my opinion viable. The interest of this article, however, lies not so much whether the virgin capture myth is a manifestation of parricidal unconscious fantasies or a misogynistic by-product of the paranoid-schizoid position, rather my intention here is to examine the different sometimes problematic roles played by women in medieval society and their surviving representations.

The unicorn in medieval iconography

During the Middle Ages unicorn imagery reached its zenith. Ivory boxes, misericords, tapestries and paintings testify to its widespread use in the visual arts. As a consequence of the regulations originating from the Council of Trent in 1563, the unicorn lost part of its momentum. However, its glory persisted both in secular and heraldic contexts. For the purpose of this study only images created between the twelfth and the sixteenth century will be considered, specifically the ones depicting the capture of the unicorn by the maiden. Inherent in these works is the ambiguity around the duplicitous role played by the woman. Art historians

⁴ The archetype of the enclosed garden represented by a walled garden which denoted virginity, chastity and modesty. Herbert McAvoy, L. (2021). *The Enclosed Garden and the Medieval Religious Imaginary - Nature and Environment in the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer.

too, have often commented on this especially in the context of the Holy Hunt, where the unicorn is Christ the virgin is the Virgin Mary and the mother-son relationship is made explicit. For example, in relation to the adoption of the virgin capture myth as an allegory for the Incarnation, John Williamson notes that ‘it seems rather alien to Christian mythology in so far as it suggests the idea of the Virgin betraying her own son’ (Williamson 1986: 163). Odell Shepard too, acknowledges the deceitful quality of the virgin capture story, but resolves it by saying that any allegation against the Virgin ‘might have been regarded as impious’ (Shepard 1930: 59). While Sutherland Lyall with respect to the figure of the virgin simply denotes ‘as a virgin she is both pure and duplicitous, passive but powerful’ (Lyall 2000: 8). It is nevertheless ‘quite difficult to reconcile the quiet Madonna like calm of the lady in the paintings and engravings with the apparent betrayal of her unique gift’ (Lyall 2000: 152). This is indeed the case in most representations of the virgin capture legend. Although the virgin is witnessing the brutal slaying of the unicorn, she seems passive and detached. To a certain extent this may be explained as a perception of women in general during the High Middle Ages. In courtly love circles where the legend gained momentum, it is interesting to note that the lover unicorn dies at the hands of the virgin in the quest for love, her position nevertheless is still described as fixed and immutable (Beer 1986: iv). She is a passive bystander, a chess pawn in the *Hortus Conclusus*, without any hope of redemption.

As has been evidenced by Mohacsy, however, her evil side appears to be displaced on secondary figures, usually bystanders, a virgin’s female attendant or the hunters. Another element of note in representation of the virgin capture legend is the remarked eroticism embodied by the virgin. At times she is shown half naked, at others fondling with the horn of the unicorn. Even if we evade a psychoanalytic framework these pictures appear to be licentious, almost institutionalised, forms of erotica. If we take these representations and strip them of all their symbolic meaning and layering, we are bound to remain with a depiction of sex. The double register which is offset by the representation of the mythical beast both in lay and religious contexts is cause for reflection.

The erotic quality of the encounter is justified by the mother-son relationship which seems to be at the core of most psychoanalytic readings of the cycles. It can be observed in a number of images in which the unicorn is portrayed as being small, meek and fragile. It is not the great beast described by Ctesias, but rather the one we encounter in the *Physiologus*. The maiden often embraces him with both hands in an act that recalls the gesture of *La Pietà*. In a religious

context the Virgin is holding her son, who is bound to die in order to redeem humanity from its sins; while in a secular setting, the unicorn needs to be sacrificed for the beneficial properties of his magical horn. The hunt of the unicorn seems to have been extremely popular in English misericords. Misericords were used as support during the celebration of the liturgy. The subject matter one encounters in this medium is extraordinarily diverse and not necessarily confined to the religious sphere. The position within the church allowed the artist and the patron in charge of the iconographic program a certain degree of freedom, making them an important testimony for the understanding of certain subtleties which are less apparent in a formal religious setting (Grossinger 1998: 144-46). The misericord inside Ely Cathedral (Fig. 6) appears to be purely secular in content and neatly shows the maternal quality elucidated by Zeckel (1951) and Mohacsy (1988).



Figure 6. *The Capture of the Unicorn* c. 1340 A.D. Ely Cathedral. Wood.

The three groups are carved with attentive scrutiny and precision, especially apparent in the central part of the arrangement which is occupied by the virgin and the unicorn. The latter is shown completely enveloped by her. It has been reduced to a lamb like creature, identifiable as a unicorn only thanks to the spiralling horn protruding from his brow. His expression is meek and quiet, and his eyes appear to be almost closed as if it is gently falling asleep in her arms, bringing to mind the image of a baby cradled by a mother. This moment of intimacy is both contrasted and interrupted by the presence of the hunter and the knight, which are carved in the supports of the misericord. The hunter appears to be the assistant to the knight, who is portrayed in full armour, carrying a sword, an axe, and a shield highlighting the idea that the hunt of the unicorn was a sport reserved for the noble gentry. The interesting aspect of this representation is the complete absence of violence. In contrast to the miniatures we encounter in Bestiaries, which were the main source of inspiration for this motif, the hunters are not shown in the act of killing the defenceless beast. The duplicity of the virgin remains unresolved

because although she appears to be protecting the unicorn, she is in fact an accomplice to the hunter and the knight. The intimate mother-son relationship is further exemplified by a set of miniatures dated to the twelfth century found in the *Bible of Floreffe* the *Averbode Gospels* and the *Stammheim Missal* (Figs. 7-9).



Figure 7. Incipit of St Mathew in *Floreffe Bible* c. 1153 A.D. MS. 17738, fol. 168. The British Library, London. Tempera, gold, and silver on parchment.



Figure 8. St John, the Virgin and Unicorn, and Job from the *Averbode Gospels*, c. twelfth century A.D. MS. lat. Bibliothèque de L'Université, Liege. Tempera, gold, and silver on parchment.

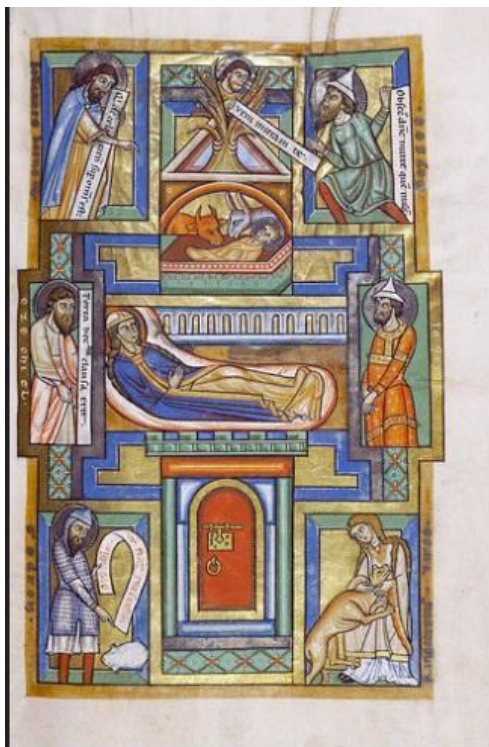


Figure 9. Christmas icon from the *Stammheim Missal* c. twelfth century A.D. MS. 64, fol. 92. Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Tempera, gold, and silver on parchment.

According to Elizabeth Teviotdale (2001) former curator of manuscripts at the Getty Institute in Los Angeles, images of natural history were frequently juxtaposed to those of Salvation this was especially true in twelfth-century miniatures where the legend of the unicorn is juxtaposed

against a scene from the nativity. In all three miniatures the unicorn is used as an allegory of the Incarnation of God. In order to symbolise his great humility, it is always shown as being extremely meek and gentle, completely enveloped by the tender embrace of the Virgin. Once again, these representations are sanitized from violence, making the Virgin's encounter with the unicorn both private and domestic.

To a certain extent the only instant in which her duplicitous role is accounted for is when she is shown openly deceiving her son, the unicorn. According to Zeckel 'the son is fondled by the mother, is sexually excited and then handed over to a man [the Father?] to be killed' (Zeckel 1951: 355.) This observation is particularly evident in courtly love literature, where the passion for the lady is mortal and the *Eros/Thanatos* relationship is explicit. The child invests the virgin/mother with libido; however, in his view she cannot reciprocate his sentiment because she belongs to someone else, the father. An image from a thirteenth-century English Bestiary appears to offer further evidence of this claim (Fig. 3). The illustration shows a naked virgin with a brightly painted red face. The unicorn is placidly resting in her lap, his massive horn penetrating the boarder of the composition. The sexual innuendo is particularly clear if we take into account the fact that the unicorn has his mouth directly above the virgin's genitals, reminding of the infant's Kleinian fantasy of introjecting libidinal objects through the mouth. While the unicorn is depicted fast asleep, the virgin is engaging with the chain-mailed hunter, signalling to him with her right hand, it is represented with a grim, malevolent expression. There is a stark contrast between the two groups which is further augmented by the state of wilderness of the virgin and the beast during the climactic moment of the hunt: the killing. If we accept Zeckel's interpretation, this illustration may be viewed as a symbolic castration of the child by the father's penis through the agency of the mother.

As previously stated, Holy Hunt cycles are especially representative of the mother-son relationship, one in which the mother is represented as a *virgo intacta* and the figure of the Father is far removed (Zeckel 1951: 355). The virginal conception's inherent contradiction resolves itself as a mechanism formulated by the child's immature ego to preserve his mother's virginity. By the end of the Middle Ages the mystical hunt of the unicorn acquired an extraordinarily complex iconographic program. Its symbolism was derived from a number of disparate sources including Mystery Plays, theatrical adaptation of Biblical Parables for the lay congregation. The growing devotion towards the Virgin Mary promoted new eschatological readings of the Song of Solomon. While the figure of God the Father is secluded to a remote

space of the composition and vaguely suggested by the iconography, symbols relating to Mary's virginity are reinforced, first and foremost the *Hortus Conclusus* which creates a double register between the inside and the outside world, uncoincidentally it is sometimes shown closed by portals, the porta clausa, the porta coeli and the porta aurea (Mohacsy 1984: 398). Aesthetically this is conceived at all effects like a stag hunt. The hunter is personified as the Archangel Gabriel preceded by a pack of hounds associated with Mary's virtues namely Truth, Justice, Peace and Mercy (Schiller 1966: 53-55). All these elements may be observed in Martin Schongauer's *Altarpiece of the Dominican Order*, a northern Renaissance masterpiece of Christian art densely packed with Mariological symbols denoting her purity, chastity and virginity namely the well of life, the ivory tower and the shut gate. The same may be observed in the altar frontal tapestry in the church of the Mrienkirche of Gelhausen (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. *Middle Rhenish Altar Frontal* c. 1500 A.D. Marienkirche, Gelnhausen. Tapestry.

While the Holy Hunt narratives offer a relatively straightforward reading, the unicorn-virgin dynamic is seemingly more elusive in a lay setting. According to Mohacsy 'in most unicorn paintings the virgin's goodness is unquestioned; her evil is displaced onto her accomplices, the hunters' (Mohacsy 1984: 399) or onto her female attendants. This displacement is also in part the consequence of the aesthetic medium which does not lend itself to the presentation of these opposing polarities into a unified whole. The fragmentary hanging of *The Hunt of the Unicorn* at the Metropolitan Museum is an effective example of this. *The Unicorn Tamed by a Maiden* (Fig. 11) depicts the animal in a flowering *Hortus Conclusus* gazing intently into the eyes of a virgin whose hands and sleeves are the only parts that have survived.

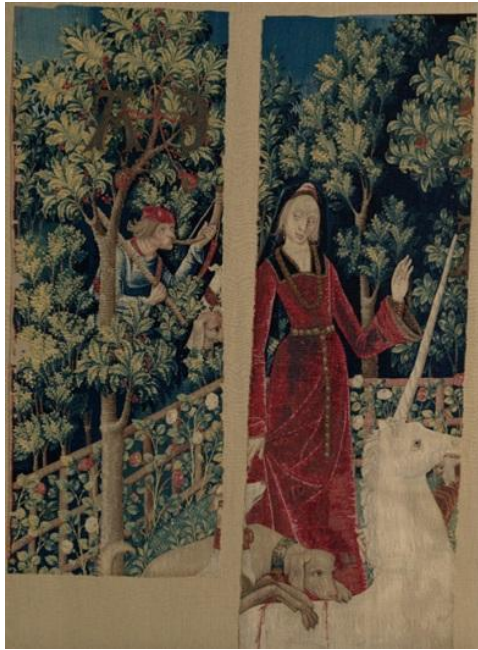


Figure 11. *The Unicorn Tamed by a Maiden*, late fifteenth century A.D. Metropolitan Museum, New York City. Tapestry.

As aptly synthesized by John Williamson ‘the female companion of the central lady has survived almost intact, her appearance is not particularly flattering as she is depicted with a sly deceptive look’ (Williamson 1986: 161). She is looking cunningly into the direction of the huntsman, who appears on the right blowing his horn. The whole scene takes place in front of an apple tree testifying to the contrasting life and death symbolism of the legend. While there are obvious limitations to Mohacsy’s theory first and foremost the fragmentary nature of the artefact, the visual displacement is rather undeniable. As is the juxtaposition between the virgin-capture and the tryst between Tristan and Isolde in the ivory love casket at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore (Fig. 12). Again, Mohacsy affirms that

of all unicorn images this is perhaps the paradigmatic illustration of the underlying split. You look from one fact to the other – from the virgin’s face to the spear and you can in no way reconcile the two

Mohacsy 1987: 97



Figure 12. Detail of *Casket with Scenes of Romance* 1330-1350 A.D. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore. Ivory.

Love and death: a dead unicorn and an unresolved virgin

Although the Council of Trent undoubtedly put a stop to the unicorn's popularity in a Christian setting, it never quite lost its allure in popular culture. Today, it is a symbol of a seemingly lost fantastic realm, during the Middle Ages it reached the height of its diffusion both in secular and religious contexts. The lore of unicorn in western civilization, was established by the ultimate sublimation of love, death and life ultimately underscoring the adoration for despondence of the Occident. The overpowering tension between *Eros* and *Thanathos* in the virgin capture myth, played a decisive role in shaping courtly literature, which in turn established (at least in part) the basis of European literary culture. Thus, the unicorn is emblematic of several trends, an effective magnifying glass to foster a deeper understanding of medieval but also contemporary society.

Many artworks depicting the hunt of the unicorn also include erotic undertones. The unicorn is attracted by the virgin's smell, she is often represented naked striking the beast's mane or caressing his horn. The scene is witnessed both by the hunter and the viewer, ultimately the intended recipient of the object. In a Christian setting where the unicorn embodies Christ, the element of male virginity is an added aspect, the encounter in the Hortus Conclusus therefore represents a supreme state of spiritual purity. The presence of a third party-represented either by the hunter or the intended viewer – also evokes a threesome sexual fantasy. The virgin and the unicorn represent an interchangeable object of desire. This ultimately bears witness to a consensual non-monogamy non-binary relationship amongst the sexes. What seems to prevail

is a diversion from a binary male-female tandem, a complex sexual awakening, resulting in a knowledge of Good and Evil. This epiphany unfortunately is short lived as the unicorn is sacrificed and dies.

Indeed, Ryan Scoats asserts that behavioural patterns inside threesomes 'resist and maintain norms of monogamy, serve important roles and functions for individuals and relationships, and are both highly desirable but potentially risky (Scoats 2020). Within a medieval Christian context which might be considered the epitome of monogamist society, one would imagine that a representation of consensual non-monogamy should be perceived as being problematic. The underlying element of jealousy and negotiating exclusion has dramatic consequences, for the virgin-unicorn-hunter encounter resolves into the tragic sacrifice (death) of one of the parties. The threesome iconographic stratagem, leading to the inevitable death of the unicorn, is in reality a ploy to protect the binary relationship. Therefore, while the threesomes may offer couples a sexual release, allowing access to extra-dyadic sex, they ultimately confirm the primacy of their committed relationship (Schippers 2016; Scoats 2020). As far as medieval iconography is concerned might this shared enjoyment between the actors ultimately reinforce societal standards in sexual behaviour within the prescribed norm?

Through the analysis of unicorn imagery and psychoanalytic interpretations of this phenomenon, I have attempted to make sense of the seemingly disturbing relationship which exists between the virgin and the mythical beast. The evident contradiction which endures between the virgin as an object of purity, a symbol of Mary and her duplicitous nature has a variety of interpretations which range from oedipal fantasies to Kleinian theory. While these readings are effective, they tend to offer a point of view which is always masculine in content and intent. We are left wondering and bound to ask ourselves the problematic question: What about the V/virgin?

Both art historical and psychoanalytical analyses consider only the point of view of the unicorn, the unquestioned male protagonist of the narrative. It is portrayed as the active victim in an ostensibly uncontrolled chain of events, which evade his and our understanding. The female perspective, the virgin's point of view or her motives for that matter are never questioned. This is a recurring historiographic problem. While I do not wish to push forward a victimization of women's role, I believe it is essential as contemporary viewers/recipients to ask ourselves certain questions, and attempt to acknowledge where possible an alternative perspective. What

is the virgin's relationship towards the unicorn? How can we interpret the ambivalence from her point of view? Is she protecting herself from a wild beast who is sexually aroused by her smell and is potentially dangerous? Is the woman forced into an object/subject of seduction by need of self-preservation? Is it possible that we should engage with the female sphere rejecting the role of woman as mother/wife/daughter altogether, and ultimately view these images as a manifesto of women's mature sexuality independent of men? Can we propose a reconciliation of the two? While a Kleinian interpretation undoubtedly offers a tidy understanding of an outwardly unjustifiable gesture, it might be worth pushing forward the analysis and set new agendas for research to acknowledge a female side unconstrained by her duties/roles towards the male sphere. The distressing virgin-whore dichotomy is too simplistic and is in urgent need of a contemporary revision.

Abbreviations

Ad marc. *Tertullian. Adversus Marcionem. Patrologia Latina* (ed) J.-P. Migne 1844-55.

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