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The Unicorn Tapestries: Religion, Mythology, and Sexuality in Late Medieval Europe

Stephanie Rianne Pansini

A Thesis in the Field of Anthropology & Archaeology

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

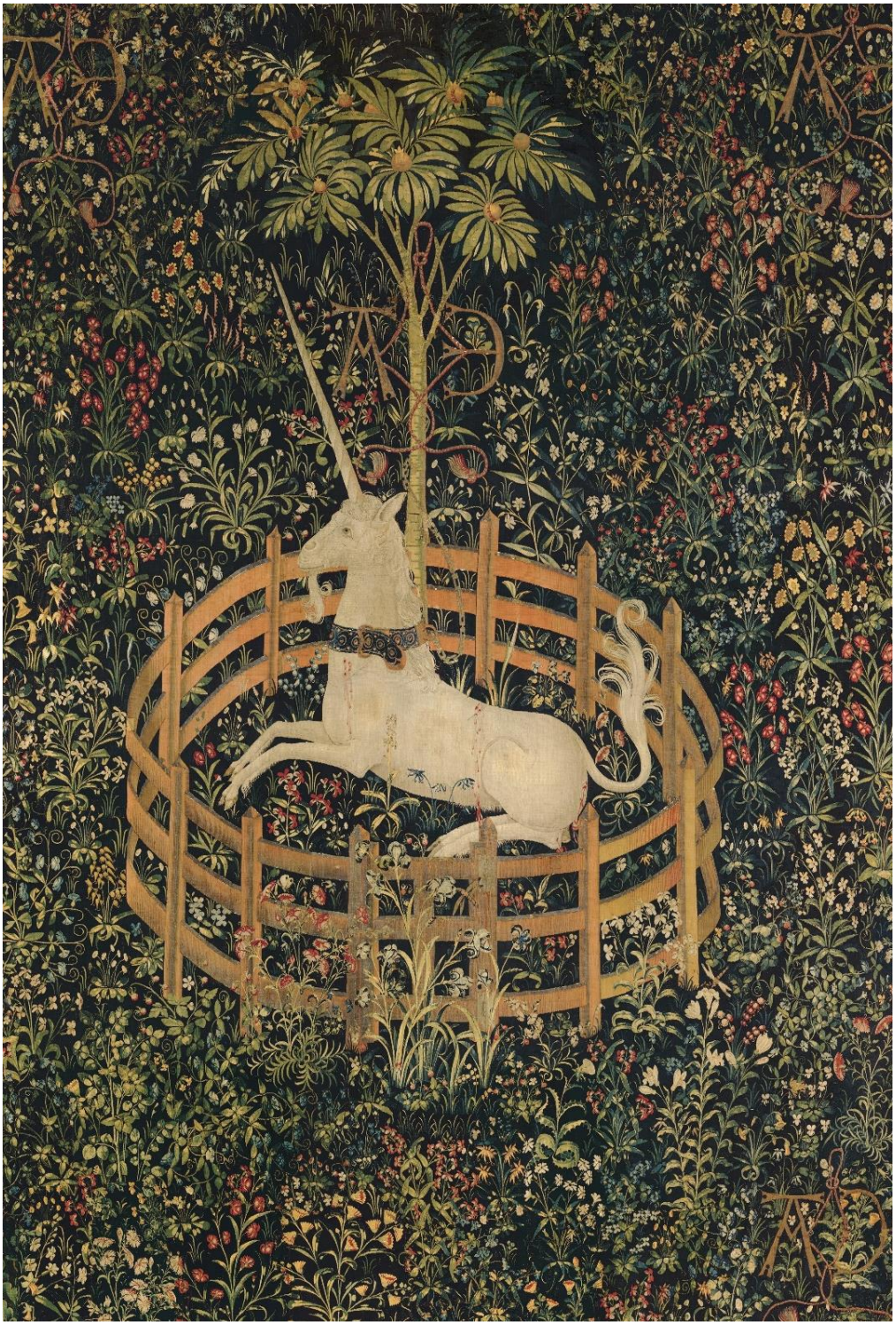
March 2021

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Abstract

The *Unicorn Tapestries* are a set of seven tapestries, located at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Cloisters in New York, of Parisian design and woven in the Southern Netherlands in the late Middle Ages. It has baffled scholars for decades. These tapestries are shrouded in mystery, especially considering their commissioner, narratives, and sequence of hanging. However, for whom and how they were made is of little importance for this study. The most crucial question to be asked is: why the unicorn? What was the significance of the unicorn during the late Middle Ages? The goal of this thesis is to explore the evolution of the unicorn throughout the Middle Ages as well as important monarchal figures and central themes of aristocratic society during the period in which the tapestries were woven. Only then can some light be shed on the mystery of why this mythological beast was chosen as the ultimate symbol of chivalry, knighthood, heraldry, and Christ.

Frontispiece



Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my father, from whom I inherited my passions.

Acknowledgments

Frontispiece: *The Unicorn in Captivity*. Southern Netherlands, 1495-1505. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1937

Firstly, I would like to thank my dogs, Sophie, Callie, and Cooper who supported me with their never-ending love and need for attention. Secondly, I would like to thank my parents, Jill and David, who had supported me whilst I earned my degree and worked diligently on my thesis. Thirdly, I would like to thank my sisters, Sloane and Madison, who listed to me when I discussed my research with them, though it is not of a topic of their interest, and my dear friend Lauren who had ventured with me to the Cloisters to view the *Unicorn* Tapestries. Lastly, I would like to thank my thesis director, Amy Hollywood, PhD, and my research advisor, Donald Ostrowski, PhD for their encouragement, enthusiasm, and assistance throughout the entire process. All for whom without I would not have been able to complete this work.

Table of Contents

Frontispiece iv

Dedication v

Acknowledgments vi

List of Figures ix

Introduction 1

Chapter I. The Medieval Unicorn 9

The *Physiologus* 10

Bestiaries 11

The Horn of the Unicorn 14

Representations in Art 17

Chapter II. The *Unicorn Tapestries* 27

The Three Narratives 39

The Hunt 40

The Virgin 42

The Passion 44

Chapter III. Chivalry, Knighthood, and Heraldry 48

Chivalry 49

Knighthood 54

Orders of Knighthood in Late Medieval Europe 56

Knighthood in Medieval Romances 59

Heraldry 63

Conclusion 67

References.....72

List of Figures

Figure 1. Painted Box for Game Pieces (first animal on the left). 18

Figure 2. Casket with Scenes from Romances. 19

Figure 3. Bowl with The Virgin and the Unicorn and arms of Matthias Corvinus and Beatrice of Aragon. 19

Figure 4. Portrait medal of Cecilia Gonzaga (obverse); Innocence and a Unicorn in a Moonlit Landscape (reverse). 20

Figure 5. Portrait of a Woman, possibly Ginevra d'Antonio Lupari Gozzadini. 22

Figure 6. Aquamanile in the Form of a Unicorn. 23

Figure 7. Horae, B.M.V. use of Rome. 24

Figure 8. Seated Lady Holding a Shield with an Unicorn. 25

Figure 9. Unicorn Doorway. 26

Figure 10. The Hunters Enter the Woods 29

Figure 11. The Unicorn Is Found 30

Figure 12. The Unicorn Is Attacked 32

Figure 13. The Unicorn Defends Itself 33

Figure 14. The Mystic Capture of the Unicorn (Fragments 1 and 2) 35

Figure 15. The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle 36

Figure 16. The Unicorn in Captivity 38

Introduction

The unicorn is an ancient beast. The word *unicorn* can be traced to the third to second century B.C. due to an error in translation from Hebrew to Greek.[1] The term first appears in the Septuagint, an early translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek.[2] In the Hebrew Bible there is reference to a biblical beast called *re'em*, a wild ox.[3] The *re'em* has been identified by scholars as an urus, a large, fierce species of wild ox that are the ancestors of domestic cattle.[4] By the time of the Greek translation, the urus was unknown outside of the northern forests of Europe, and thus there was no equivalent Greek word for *re'em*; it was translated as *monokeros* which was later translated in Latin to *unicorn*.[5] Once translated into Latin, the unicorn "earned a permanent place in the Bible, which later served as irrefutable proof of its existence, and an important role in most subsequent Christian writing, where the unicorn was firmly identified with Christ."[6]

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[1] Adolfo Salvatore Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), 21.

[2] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 21.

[3] J. L. W. Schaper, "The Unicorn in the Messianic Imagery of the Greek Bible," *Journal of Theological Studies,* N. S. 45, no. 1 (April 1994): 125.

[4] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 21.

[5] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 21; Avishai Margalit, "Meaning and Monsters," *Synthese* 44, no. 3 (July 1980): 315.

[6] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 21.

The first verbal account of the iconic, mythological unicorn was given by the Greek physician, Ctesias, from tales told by travelers who had been to India.[7] In his work, *Indika*, he describes the unicorn:

> I have heard that there are wild asses in India no smaller than horses which have a white body, a head which is almost crimson, and dark blue eyes. They have a horn on their brow one and a half cubits in length. The lower portion of the horn is white, the upper part is vermilion, and the middle is very dark. I hear that the Indians drink from these multicoloured horns, but not all the Indians, only the most powerful…They say that the one who drinks from this horn will never experience terminal illnesses. No longer would he suffer seizures or the so-called holy sickness nor could he be killed with poison.[8]

In addition to Ctesias, there have been numerous classical descriptions of the unicorn, including by Aristotle and Julius Caesar.[9] There are seven references to the unicorn in the Old Testament and King James version of the Bible, two in the Pentateuch, one in Job, one in Isaiah, and three in the psalms.[10] The unicorn has been mentioned in non-biblical literature, but only in imaginative literature.[11] There appears to be only one reference in medieval romances, in *Le Chevalier du Papegau* or *The Knight of the Parrot*—an Old

[7] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 19.

[8] Andrew Nichols, *Ctesias: On India* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011), 73-74.

[9] David Hunt, "The Association of the Lady and the Unicorn, and the Hunting Mythology of the Caucasus," *Folklore* 114, no. 1 (2003): 76.

[10] Odell Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn* (New York: Dover Publications, 2012), 41.

[11] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn*, 81.

French Arthurian romance in which a female unicorn appears toward the end of the romance.[12]

According to Odell Shepard, "the unicorn has a less prominent role in the romances of the Middle Ages than one might expect, considering his potentialities, but this fact merely reminds one again that he was not regarded as exceptionally romantic or wonderful."[13] While the unicorn may not be a romantic literary figure, it does embody a romantic narrative as I will show in Chapter III. The unicorn is not, then, widespread as a biblical or literary figure, yet it was considered an ordinary animal during the Middle Ages.[14] There are numerous artifacts on which the unicorn is represented, however, and the focus of my research is on the representation of the unicorn within the *Unicorn Tapestries.*

The *Unicorn Tapestries* are a famous set of tapestries from the late Middle Ages, woven between 1495–1505,[15] that are on display at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's (MET) Cloisters in New York. The set is made up of the following seven tapestries (see Figures 10-16:

1. *The Hunters Enter the Woods*
2. *The Unicorn Is Found*
3. *The Unicorn Is Attacked*

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[12] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 85.

[13] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 84.

[14] Geneviève Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century: An Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) 101.

[15] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,*7, 11.

4. *The Unicorn Defends Itself*
5. *The Mystic Capture of the Unicorn* (Fragments 1 and 2)
6. *The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle*
7. *The Unicorn in Captivity*[16]

The cartoons (full-scale colored pattern)[17] for the tapestries were most likely designed in Paris and woven in Brussels[18] on a low-warp loom, which was the only method at the time that could reproduce cartoons with complex details.[19] The sequence and narrative of the tapestries are unclear and, among the seven tapestries, *The Hunters Enter the Woods* (Figure 10) and *The Unicorn in Captivity* (Figure 16) may have been designed by a different artist and woven in a different workshop as they are in a different style from the others.[20] In fact, they may have been added to the set at a later date or they may not even be a part of the set at all.[21]

[16] Peter Barnet and Nancy Wu, *The Cloisters: Medieval Art and Architecture* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012), 168-175.

[17] Thomas P. Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002), 5.

[18] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters,* 168.

[19] Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry*, 78.

[20] Helmut Nickel, "About the Sequence of the Tapestries in 'The Hunt of the Unicorn' and 'The Lady with the Unicorn.'" *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 17 (1982): 9.

[21] Nickel, "About the Sequence," 9; Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry*, 69.

The *Unicorn Tapestries* are not the only set of late medieval tapestries to feature a unicorn. At the Musée de Cluny in France, there is a set of six tapestries, representing the five senses, called the *Lady and the Unicorn*, most likely woven on a high-warp loom:[22]

1. *Touch*
2. *Taste*
3. *Smell*
4. *Hearing*
5. *Sight*
6. *A Mon Seul Désir*[23]

According to the museum, the sequence is "based on Medieval texts which established a hierarchy of the senses according to their proximity with the spiritual sphere, starting with touch, followed by Taste, Smell, Hearing and Ending with the Sight," with the last tapestry raising questions such as whether or not there is a sixth sense.[24] While the *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries are unrelated to the *Unicorn Tapestries*, they do share similarities in their artistic design.[25] Unlike the *Unicorn Tapestries*, they were "designed to tell a story, and its sequence can be arranged accordingly."[26] The theme of the *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries, the senses, is relatively straightforward and allegorical,

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[22] Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry*, 78.

[23] "The Lady and the Unicorn – History and Iconography," Musée Moyenage, accessed May 17, 2020, https://www.musee-moyenage.fr/media/documents-pdf/fiches-de-salles/fichesalle13damelicorne-histoireiconographie-ang.pdf.

[24] "The Lady and the Unicorn – History and Iconography."

[25] Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry*, 78.

[26] Nickel, "About the Sequence," 12.

depicting the heraldic unicorn,[27] whereas the *Unicorn Tapestries* may be fragments of different stories, making it near impossible to establish a clear narrative. Regardless, the existence of at least two sets of tapestries in which the unicorn plays a key role suggests that the unicorn was an important figure for those of high status that could afford to have expensive textiles decorating the walls of their abode.

The *Unicorn Tapestries* are first documented in 1680 after the death of François VI de La Rochefoucauld, when a complete inventory of his property was taken.[28] The inventory states "hangings of tapestry of *haute lisse* representing a hunt of the unicorn in seven pieces" were located in the grande chamber of his town house on the rue de Seine in Paris.[29] In 1728, inventory of the La Rochefoucauld château of Vereuil was taken after the death of Duke François VIII stating that five of the tapestries were hanging in a "large bedroom of the new building" while the remaining two were hanging in a "hall near the chapel, presently serving as a storage place for furniture" and were described as being worn and torn.[30] Years later, during the French Revolution, the tapestries were looted from the château in Verteuil, [31] but astonishingly survived the Reign of Terror (1793-1794) in which works of art bearing symbols of royalty and the aristocracy were

[27] Margaret B. Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976), 63; and Nickel, "About the Sequence," 12.

[28] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 13; and Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters,* 13.

[29] Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 220.

[30] Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 220.

[31] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters,* 168.

destroyed.[32] Since then, "the tapestries remained out of sight for another two generations" and "people in the neighborhood claimed that the hangings were being used to cover espaliered trees and to protect potatoes stored in barns from freezing."[33] Cavallo further states that, during this time of neglect, "the tapestries lost approximately 3 feet, 8 inches (1.12 meters) of their height and 15 feet, 11 inches (4.79 meters) of their combined width."[34] In the 1850s, the tapestries were recovered by Count Hippolyte de La Rochefoucauld and his wife, Countess Elizabeth, when they began to search for the family's lost possession and buy back what they could.[35] When a peasant's wife informed Countess Elizabeth that her husband had "old curtains" covering vegetables in their barn, the Count and Countess purchased them and they were, indeed, *The Unicorn Tapestries*.[36] Mystery has shrouded these tapestries since they were recovered and restored, especially since there is no documentation concerning the tapestries' early history, including their commission and the sequence in which they should hang.[37]

There are three possible narratives interpretations of the tapestries, each to be discussed in detail in Chapter II: the hunt, the virgin, and the Passion

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[32] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 13.

[33] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 14.

[34] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 14.

[35] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 14; and Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 223.

[36] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 15-16; and Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 223

[37] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters*, 168.

The narratives are vastly different from each other and are seemingly unrelated, yet I will argue that they come together to formulate a unique story with themes seen in medieval romances. Several sources also indicate themes of chivalry and knighthood, especially considering the unicorn was an image of heraldry.[38] However, I have not come across a source that focuses on all of these narratives and themes with direct reference to the unicorn, but rather on the tapestries as a whole. How can a story be told with three different and seemingly unrelated narratives with different themes? Why was the unicorn, a common animal, an important figure during the late Middle Ages? I would like to explore the unicorn in the *Unicorn Tapestries* as the epitome of chivalry, knighthood, heraldry, and Christ and as a visual medieval romance—a story that was never written—a story that needs no words to be told. As a result of this study, it is my hope that my research will extend the knowledge of the mystery surrounding the *Unicorn Tapestries*.

[38] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 73.

Chapter I.

The Medieval Unicorn

To understand the unicorn within the *Unicorn Tapestries*, it is important to look at the evolution of the unicorn throughout the Middle Ages and how the unicorn was thought of during this period. There are two works that raised the significance and popularity of the unicorn during the Middle Ages: the *Physiologus* and bestiaries. According to Michael A. Ryan, "the most important ancient authority on the unicorn, however, which laid the foundation on which all subsequent bestiaries built their own collections, is the second-century Alexandrian compilation of beasts, the *Physiologus.*"[39] Bestiaries were popular, illuminated manuscripts that described various animals—both real and mythological—accompanied by an allegorical text that was a nearly verbatim copy of the *Physiologus*.[40] As the predecessor of medieval bestiaries, the *Physiologus* was not only popular, but it was one of the most widely read books of the Middle Ages.[41]

[39] Michael J. Curley, ed. and trans., *Physiologus* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979) as cited in Michael A. Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic: Mapping the Contours of Authority and Religiosity in the Late Medieval Crown of Aragon," *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 1, no. 1 (2012): 53.

[40] J. L. Schrader, "A Medieval Bestiary." *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 44, no. 1 (1986): 2.

[41] Curley, *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, ix.

The *Physiologus*

While bestiaries described animals, the *Physiologus* was a book on nature and was not limited to the animal kingdom. Legends regarding stones and trees are also found, allegorized, in the *Physiologus* as they were also a part of folklore.[42] The author, who is anonymous, "infused…venerable pagan tales with the spirit of Christian moral and mystical teaching, and thereafter they occupied a place of special importance in the symbolism of the Christian world."[43] Thus, this text became a source of "Medieval sacred iconography and didactic poetry and was used in the preaching manuals and religious textbooks of the later Middle Ages."[44]

The original text, which was composed of forty or so chapters, was transformed into Latin bestiaries, some of which containing over a hundred chapters, all of which were inspired by the *Physiologus*.[45] The *Physiologus* was so popular that it circulated throughout Europe, with translations in every vernacular—including Old English and Icelandic—thus obtaining a wide audience.[46] Although the *Physiologus* was comprised of simple tales of beasts and nature, bestiaries allowed for the expansion these tales as they were readily adaptable "to a variety of cultural contexts, religious as well as secular."[47] The *Physiologus* was essentially the beginning of the retellings in bestiaries which added

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[42] Curley, *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, ix.

[43] Curley, *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, ix.

[44] Curley, *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, ix.

[45] Curley, *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, x.

[46] Curley, *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, x.

[47] Curley, *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, ix.

more complex detail and morals into the stories over time. In A.D. 496, official Christianity tried to reject the bestiaries, claiming them to be the works of heretics.[48] These attacks were relatively common, such Pseudo-Hugh of Saint Victor's criticism of the chapter on vultures, who were believed to have the ability to breed without fertilization, thus enabling him to "reaffirm dogma about the Virgin Birth of Christ".[49] Despite attempts to reject, the text continued to be highly influential, and familiar, for well over a thousand years throughout Christendom.[50] It was bestiaries that were "responsible for scattering the image of the unicorn throughout Europe, making him familiar where books were never read, contorting his shapely limbs on corbels and cornices and miserere seats, depicting him in stained glass and on tapestry, lifting him finally to the British Royal Coat of Arms."[51]

Bestiaries

Animals, both real and mythological, have always played an important role as sacred symbols and in lore, and bestiaries provided a model of morality that could be understood by both clergy and laity. According to J. L. Schrader, "to the medieval mind, the animal kingdom provided a means of gaining perspective on the human condition and on the individual's place in the universe. It served as a reminder of humanity's oneness

[48] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 46.

[49] Schrader, "A Medieval Bestiary," 7.

[50] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 46.

[51] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 47.

with God and his creations"[52] and observations of animals "yielded… desired behavior as well as warnings against misbehavior or evil."[53]

The theme of good and evil were treated as combatant forces, where animals were described as either "sympathetic" or "antipathetic,"[54] and one could even say Christ-like or non-Christ-like. In the *Physiologus,* the unicorn is described, in Deuteronomy, as:

> a small animal like the kid, is exceedingly shrewd, and has one horn in the middle of his head. The hunter cannot approach him because he is extremely strong. How then do they hunt the beast? Hunters place a chaste virgin before him. He bounds forth into her lap and she warms and nourishes the animal and takes him into the place of kings.[55]

The hunt of the unicorn is filled with allegorical meaning that was universally understood in the High Middle Ages as it was symbolic of the Incarnation of Christ.[56] This positive theme is represented in numerous medieval works, especially in courtly allegories.[57]

While many bestiaries follow this description, such as the thirteenth century *Bestiaire* by Pierre de Beauvais, others "emphasize the deeply sexual undertones in the narrative surrounding the hunt for, and ensnaring of, the unicorn."[58] Prior to the twelfth century, the unicorn was considered to be a wicked, diabolical, and dangerous animal that

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[52] Schrader, "A Medieval Bestiary," 3.

[53] Schrader, "A Medieval Bestiary," 2.

[54] Schrader, "A Medieval Bestiary," 6.

[55] Curley, *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, 51.

[56] Christian Heck and Rémy Cordonnier, *The Grand Medieval Bestiary (Dragonet Edition): Animals in Illuminated Manuscripts* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2018), 20, 412; Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 48, 69; and Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry*, 69.

[57] Heck and Cordonnier. *The Grand Medieval Bestiary (Dragonet Edition)*, 20.

[58] Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic," 53.

people should be wary of, as it was often associated with vices and demons by Christian theologians.[59] In addition to this, the horn of the unicorn is described as "being extremely large, by virtue of which it could easily be taken as a symbol of pride… or lust as it evokes another kind of appendage" in which the hunt of the unicorn, in courtly context, can be interpreted as an act of love.[60]

In the Syriac version of the *Physiologus*, the virgin offers the unicorn her breasts and "the animal begins to suck the breasts of the maiden and to conduct himself familiarly with her."[61] This is further emphasized in the *Bestiaire d'Amour*, the oldest thirteenth-century bestiary in Old French by Richard de Fournival. In this version, de Fournival "stresses the sexual physicality of the hunt by positing a pheromone linkage between the virgin and the unicorn: it is the particular scent of the virgin that attracts the beast to her lap."[62] In courtly context, the virgin holding firmly holding the horn can be associated with the act of love.[63] The unicorn could also be associated with temperance in representation of cardinal virtues, or temperance in carnal desire due to the "virginity attributed to the woman who takes it on her lap."[64]

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[59] Heck and Cordonnier. *The Grand Medieval Bestiary (Dragonet Edition)*, 412; and Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic," 53 and Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 49.

[60] Heck and Cordonnier, *The Grand Medieval Bestiary (Dragonet Edition)*, 412.

[61] Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic," 53; and Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 49.

[62] Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 181 as cited in Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic," 53.

[63] Heck and Cordonnier. *The Grand Medieval Bestiary (Dragonet Edition)*, 415.

[64] Heck and Cordonnier. *The Grand Medieval Bestiary (Dragonet Edition)*, 415.

Number symbolism also played a role in bestiaries, such as the single horn of the unicorn.[65] According to the *Physiologus,* the unicorn has one horn because Christ is also a unicorn, spiritually, as he said "I and the Father are one."[66] However, according to descriptions of the unicorn by Ctesias, the horn had explicit magical potential.[67]

The Horn of the Unicorn

The horn of the unicorn was both symbolic and was believed to have prophylactic properties capable of rendering poison harmless, purifying water, curing diseases and epilepsy/convulsions.[68] The prophylactic properties alone inspired medieval kings to commission goblets made of unicorn horn.[69] Unicorn horns were very real during the middle ages, and were a commodity only the rich could afford, as they sold for twenty times their weight in gold.[70] How could the horn of the mythological unicorn be real? It is, and it is not.

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[65] Schrader, "A Medieval Bestiary," 7.

[66] Schrader, "A Medieval Bestiary," 7; and Curley, *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, 51.

[67] Francesca Tagliatesta, "Iconography of the Unicorn from India to the Italian Middle Ages," *East and West* 57, no. 1/4 (2007.): 117-118.

[68] John Tyler Bonner, "The Horn of the Unicorn," *Scientific American* 184, no. 3 (1951): 42; Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 19; Margait, "Meaning and Monsters," 315; Nickel, "About the Sequence of the Tapestries in 'The Hunt of the Unicorn' and 'The Lady with the Unicorn," 9; Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic," 55; and Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 20.

[69] Bonner, "The Horn of the Unicorn," 42.

[70] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 20.

The culprit behind the real unicorn horns, or alicorns, are the tusks of narwhals. In twelfth-century Europe, trade developed of the "extended upper left tooth of a male narwhal" which were "identified and sold as unicorn horns" and "continued to be valued in parts of Europe through the eighteenth century."[71] These tusks varied in length from "three to eight feet in height…were as thick as a man's wrist at the base" and "horns of a good size weighed about 15 pounds."[72] Many royal treasuries and churches throughout Europe contained them.[73] During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they were worth ten times their weight in gold, and Scandinavians were the largest suppliers.[74] While tusks were often collected as a whole, they were also "cut up and used in the construction of drinking and eating utensils, or in fragments, as proving pieces to dip into suspect liquids."[75] Sometimes, the tusks were used for other purposes, such as in the case of Frederick III, king of Denmark and Norway who had a throne constructed of them.[76]

The magical ability of the unicorn horn is a trait described in the Greek bestiary which, according to Odell Shepard, claims that:

> when the animals assemble at evening beside the great water to drink they find that a serpent has left its venom floating upon the surface...They see or smell this venom and dare not drink, but wait for the unicorn. At last he

[71] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 21.

[72] Bonner, "The Horn of the Unicorn," 42.

[73] Bonner, "The Horn of the Unicorn," 42.

[74] Bonner, "The Horn of the Unicorn," 42.

[75] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 21.

[76] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 21.

> comes, steps into the water, makes the sign of the cross over it with his horn and thereby renders the poison harmless.[77]

This theme of water-conning was not often brought together with the theme of virgin-capture. In the middle of the sixteenth century, however, Natalis Comes wrote a poem on hunting that incorporated a significant amount of unicorn lore into an incredibly short section.[78] Odell Shepard translates the key passage:

> Far on the edge of the world and beyond the banks of the Ganges,
> Savage and lone, is a place in the realm of the King of the Hindus.
> Where there is born a beast as large as a stag in stature,
> Dark on the back, solid-hoofed, very fierce, and shaped like a bullock.
> Mighty and black is the horn that springs from the animal's forehead,
> Terrible unto his foe, a defence and a weapon of onslaught.
> Often the poisoners steal to the banks of that swift-flowing river,
> Fouling the waves with disease by their secret insidious poisons;
> After them comes this beast and dips his horn in the water,
> Cleansing the venom away and leaving the stream to flow purely
> So that the forest-dwellers may drink once more by the margin.
> Also men say that the beast delights in the embrace of a virgin,
> Falling asleep in her arms and taking sweet rest on her bosom.
> Ah! but, awaking, he finds he is bound by ropes and by shackles.
> Strange is the tale, indeed, yet so, they say, he is taken,
> Whether it be that the seeds of love have been sown by great Nature
> Deep in his blood or for some more hidden mysterious reason.[79]

This short passage is a fantastic example of the complexity of the narratives surrounding unicorn lore—which will be further discussed in Chapter II—the hunt, the capture of the unicorn by a virgin, and the Passion of Christ. While it would appear, at first glance, that these three narratives are separate from one another, they can be read together as one.

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[77] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 60.

[78] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 61.

[79] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 61.

Having explored the evolution of the unicorn throughout the Middle Ages, it is time to look at representations of the unicorn in art.

Representations in Art

In 2013, for their 75th anniversary, the MET hosted an exhibition called *Search for the Unicorn* in which they featured a great deal of unicorn artifacts from Europe and the Middle East, ranging from the twelfth to eighteenth century. The MET described this exhibition as an opportunity to view the *Unicorn Tapestries* "as the finest expression of a subject widely treated across cultures, and in both European art and science, from the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance."[80] This exhibition was a great way to bring unicorn artifacts into the same space and show the different interpretations of the unicorn's appearance.

The unicorn can be seen on objects used in daily life, for those who could afford them, such as on the *Painted Box for Game Pieces* (Figure 1), or even on jewelry boxes. While the unicorn is represented along with forest animals on the *Painted Box for Game Pieces* and has no allegorical meaning, other representations are filled with allegories of courtly romance. Such as in the case of the *Casket with Scenes from Romances* (Figure 2), a jewelry box depicting scenes from stories of Alexander the Great, Arthurian legends, and other medieval tales that attest to the power of love.[81] The unicorn can be

[80] "Search for the Unicorn," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed May 17, 2020. https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/search-for-the-unicorn

[81] "Casket with Scenes from Romances," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed on May 17, 2020. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464125?&exhibitionId=%7b9302f8ac-f691-48ff-a8e0-

seen in the lap of a virgin while a hunter pierces it with his spear. The theme of the unicorn captured by a virgin is portrayed directly next to a depiction of Tristan and Isolde. In this instance, the Hunter represents Love and the unicorn represents the Lover.[82]



Figure 1. Painted Box for Game Pieces (first animal on the left).

Upper Rhine region, Germany, ca. 1300. Wood, polychromy, and metal mounts. 3 1/8 x 10 3/8 x 3 5/8 in. (7.9 x 26.4 x 9.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, by exchange, 1976.

[82] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 38.



Figure 2. Casket with Scenes from Romances.

Paris, France, ca. 1310-30. Elephant ivory. 4 5/16 x 9 15/16 x 6 1/4 in. (10.9 x 25.3 x 15.9 cm). Top: 5 7/8 x 9 7/8 x 5/16 in. (15 x 25.1 x 0.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917; The Cloisters Collection, 1988.



Figure 3. Bowl with The Virgin and the Unicorn and arms of Matthias Corvinus and Beatrice of Aragon.

Detail (right). Italian, Pesaro, ca. 1486-88. Maiolica (tin-glazed earthenware). 4 × 18 7/8 in. (10.2 × 47.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1946.



Figure 4. Portrait medal of Cecilia Gonzaga (obverse); Innocence and a Unicorn in a Moonlit Landscape (reverse).

Pisanello (Antonio Pisano), Italian, model 1447. Bronze (copper alloy with warm brown patina under a worn layer of black wax). Diam. 8.4 cm, wt. 142.55 g. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975.

In addition to courtly love, the unicorn was also used in metaphors for betrothal and marriage. In the *Bowl with The Virgin and the Unicorn and arms of Matthias Corvinus and Beatrice of Aragon* (Figure 3), the unicorn represents the king of Hungary and the maiden represents Beatrix of Aragon, who was to be his wife.[83] On the reverse side of the Italian aftercast of the *Portrait medal of Cecilia Gonzaga* (Figure 4), the unicorn can be found in the lap of a maiden in a moonlit landscape. The artist who created the medal, Pisanello, used this theme as a metaphor for Cecilia Gonzaga's refusal to marry and her choice to serve as a nun of the Order of Saint Clare and remain a

[83] "Bowl with The Virgin and the Unicorn and Arms of Matthias Corvinus and Beatrice of Aragon," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed on May 17, 2020. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/199737?&exhibitionId=%7b9302f8ac-f691-48ff-a8e0-030b3299e284%7d&oid=199737&pkgids=221&pg=0&rpp=20&pos=10&ft=*&offset=20.

maiden.[84] While the association of Christ with the unicorn resonates in this scene, the " crescent moon is apparently a reference to the classical virgin goddess Diana."[85] In the *Portrait of a Woman, possibly Ginevra d'Antonio Lupari Gozzadini* (Figure 5), which had been painted as a celebration of betrothal or marriage, a unicorn, which can be seen on the lower right, is drawn to a maiden as the lover is drawn to his chaste bride.[86]

[84] "Portrait Medal of Cecilia Gonzaga (obverse); Innocence and a Unicorn in a Moonlit Landscape (reverse)," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed on May 17, 2020. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/461522?&exhibitionId=%7b9302f8ac-f691-48ff-a8e0-030b3299e284%7d&oid=461522&pkgids=221&pg=0&rpp=20&pos=9&ft=*&offset=20.

[85] "Portrait Medal of Cecilia Gonzaga."

[86] "Portrait of a Woman, possibly Ginevra d'Antonio Lupari Gozzadin," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed on May 17, 2020, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/459038?&exhibitionId=%7b9302f8ac-f691-48ff-a8e0-030b3299e284%7d&oid=459038&pkgids=221&pg=0&rpp=20&pos=5&ft=*&offset=20.



Figure 5. Portrait of a Woman, possibly Ginevra d'Antonio Lupari Gozzadini.

Maestro delle Storie del Pane, Italian, late 15th century, possibly 1494. Tempera on wood. Overall 19 3/4 x 14 5/8 in. (50.2 x 37.1 cm); painted surface 19 1/8 x 14 1/8 in. (48.6 x 35.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975.



Figure 6. Aquamanile in the Form of a Unicorn.

Nuremberg, Germany, ca. 1425-50. Metalwork-Copper alloy. 15 1/2 × 11 1/2 × 4 7/16 in., 6.8 lb. (39.4 × 29.2 × 11.3 cm, 3085g). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1964.

The mercantile city of Nuremberg, Germany produced aquamanilia in animal form—vessels used at the tableside to dispense water for handwashing—and a few of those that have survived are unicorns (Figure 6).[87] The people of Nuremberg were familiar with unicorn lore to the extent that the unicorn had been used as an image for heraldry where "local families emblazoned their coats of arms with images of the beast."[88]

[87] "Aquamanile in the Form of a Unicorn," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed on May 17, 2020, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/468634?&exhibitionId=%7b9302f8ac-f691-48ff-a8e0-030b3299e284%7d&oid=468634&pkgids=221&pg=0&rpp=20&pos=46&ft=*&offset=20.

[88] "Aquamanile in the Form of a Unicorn."



Figure 7. Horae, B.M.V. use of Rome.

Thielman Kerver, Paris, August 6, 1504. Printed on paper. 8vo (168 x 102 mm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1920.

Thielman Kerver, publisher of the *Book of Hours,* was so fascinated by unicorns that he called the house of his business "At the Sign of the Unicorn."[89] Unicorns appeared on either side of his merchant's mark (Figure 7) and his motto read, "Greatly beloved son of unicorns."[90] Other examples, that portray the unicorn as an image of heraldry are in the

[89] Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 199.

[90] Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 199; and The Cloisters, Museum label, *Book of Hours,* Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Seated Lady Holding a Shield with an Unicorn (Figure 8) and the *Unicorn Doorway* (Figure 9) which featured the coat of arms of the head of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem for the region of Auvergne.[91]

The representations of the unicorn in art bear similarities to the description in the *Physiologus*, although, some appear to look more horse-like while others are more goat-like. Regardless, the unicorn is always small, with a long, spiraled horn. While the unicorn appeared in many forms of art, and was a common beast, its image and story flourished. From the *Physiologus* to the bestiaries, the unicorn migrated throughout Europe, making an appearance in portraits, coat of arms, architecture, and tapestries.



Figure 8. Seated Lady Holding a Shield with an Unicorn.

Martin Schongauer, Germany, ca. 1435-1491. Engraving. Sheet (Trimmed): 3 1/16 × 3 1/16 in. (7.8 × 7.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1928.

[91] "Unicorn Doorway," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed May 17, 2020, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/471316?&exhibitionId=%7b9302f8ac-f691-48ff-a8e0-030b3299e284%7d&oid=471316&pkgids=221&pg=0&rpp=20&pos=42&ft=*&offset=20.



Figure 9. Unicorn Doorway.

Auvergne, France, early 16th century. Volcanic stone. 126 x 65 in. (320 x 165.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1948.

Chapter II.

The *Unicorn Tapestries*

The seven tapestries that make up the *Unicorn Tapestries* (1495–1505) have been subject to a mystery that has eluded scholars for centuries. As one of the last works of art from the late Middle Ages that features the unicorn, it shows a glimpse of late medieval concepts before all of Europe was consumed by the Reformation. There are three narratives within these tapestries that have also been central to medieval life and literature: the hunt, the virgin, and the Passion. However, prior to discussing the narratives, it is important to observe the tapestries individually. While there is no agreed upon sequence of the tapestries, they will be presented, in this thesis, in the traditional arrangement.[92]

First and foremost, it is important to note, especially for the discussion in Chapter III, there is one thing present on all seven tapestries, and it is not the unicorn that has been one of its many mysteries: the initials, AE which appears in multiple places on each tapestry. These initials are what binds *The Unicorn Tapestries* together, even though it is not known quite how. In 1942, there had been "a great deal of evidence that was regarded as valid" which supported the theory that the initials belonged to Anne of Brittany, and that the lord and lady in the right foreground of *The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the*

[92] Nickel, "About the Sequence," 9-10. The traditional sequence has been established in publications by James Rorimer and Margaret Freeman and it is the generally accepted order amongst scholars. However, Geneviève Souchal separates *The Start of the Hunt* and *The Unicorn in Captivity* as the first and second pieces of a separate tapestry series, while the remainder of the tapestries belong to the same series.

Castle (Figure 15) are portraits of Anne and King Louis XII.[93] However, it is not conclusive that *The Unicorn Tapestries* were made for her.

Of the seven, *The Hunters Enter the Woods* (Figure 10), is the only tapestry that does not depict the unicorn as it is the start of the hunt, featuring only hunters with their lances and hounds. This tapestry and *The Unicorn in Captivity* (Figure 17) are the only two to be set against a millefleur background: a background comprised of flowering plants.[94] Although *The Hunters Enter the Woods* bears the same AE initials as the other tapestries, it is highly probable that it came from an entirely different set of tapestries representing a stag or a boar hunt.[95] Regardless of whether *The Hunters Enter the Woods* is part of a different set or not, its hunting theme sets the stage for *The Unicorn Is Found* (Figure 11).

[93] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 10.

[94] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 24.

[95] Nickel, "About the Sequence," 9-10; and Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry*, 69.



Figure 10. The Hunters Enter the Woods

Southern Netherlands, 1495-1505. Wool warp, wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts. 145 x 124in. (368.3 x 315cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1937.

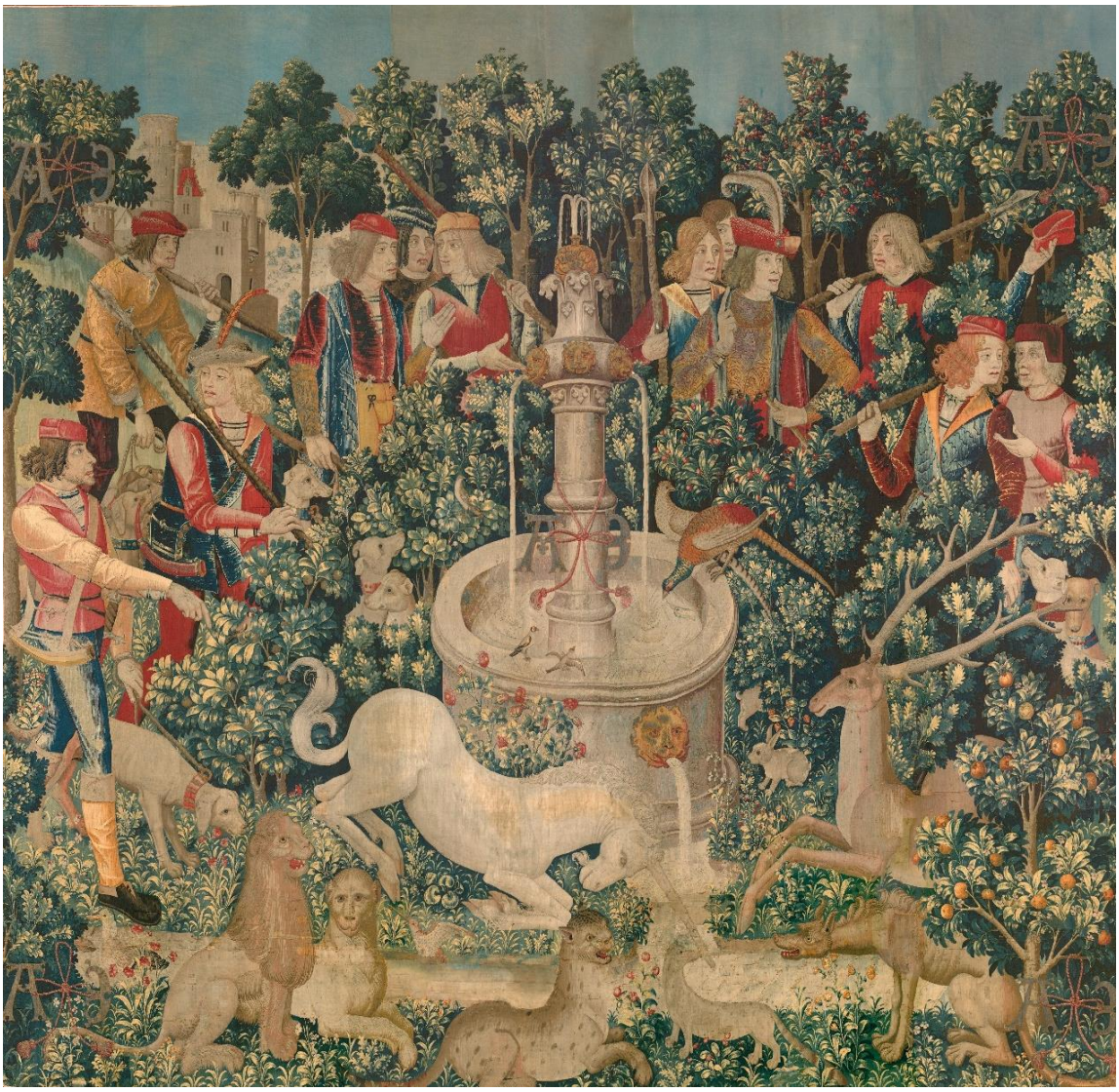


Figure 11. The Unicorn Is Found

Southern Netherlands, 1495-1505. Wool warp, wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts. 145 x 149in. (368.3 x 378.5cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1937.

The Unicorn Is Found depicts the water-conning theme in which the unicorn dips its horn into the stream, purifying it of poison. There are several plants near the stream such as sage, pot marigolds, and orange, all plants that were prescribed during the Middle

Ages as antidotes for poisoning.[96] These plants are visual cues about the magical properties of the unicorn horn for the observer, and could also be read as an allegory for the Passion of Christ.[97] There are twelve hunters, which can be representative of the apostles, and a rosebush behind the unicorn, which had been symbolic of martyrdom during the Middle Ages.[98] In the left foreground, there is a hunter pointing his finger at the unicorn and engaged in conversation with the hunter to his left. According to Adolfo Salvatore Cavallo, "the metaphor of the stag hunt enters the iconography at the point where Judas betrays Christ. It is legitimate to ask, then, whether this pointing hunter…is meant to represent Judas in allegorical terms. If that is so, it may be assumed that this hanging, and not some lost one depicting the hunters setting out, serves as the beginning of *The Hunt of the Unicorn as an Allegory for the Passion.*"[99]

After the hunters find the unicorn at the fountain, they make their move in *The Unicorn Is Attacked* (Figure 12). According to Adolfo Salvatore Cavallo, while the men in this scene are not the same as those in *The Unicorn Is Found*, it is to be assumed that they are the same hunting party.[100] The hunters pursue the unicorn with the use of hounds to scout, chase, and attack the quarry—typical practice of medieval stag hunts—until it jumps into the river to cool down and try to escape.[101] Unfortunately, the attempts of the

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[96] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters*, 170.

[97] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters*, 170.

[98] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 57; and Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters*, 170.

[99] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 57-58.

[100] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 58.

[101] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 58; and Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters*, 171.

unicorn are futile and it has been injured. Three scent hounds have followed the unicorn into the water, and hunters, with their greyhounds, have "positioned themselves on the far embankment to engage the unicorn as it emerges from the river."[102]

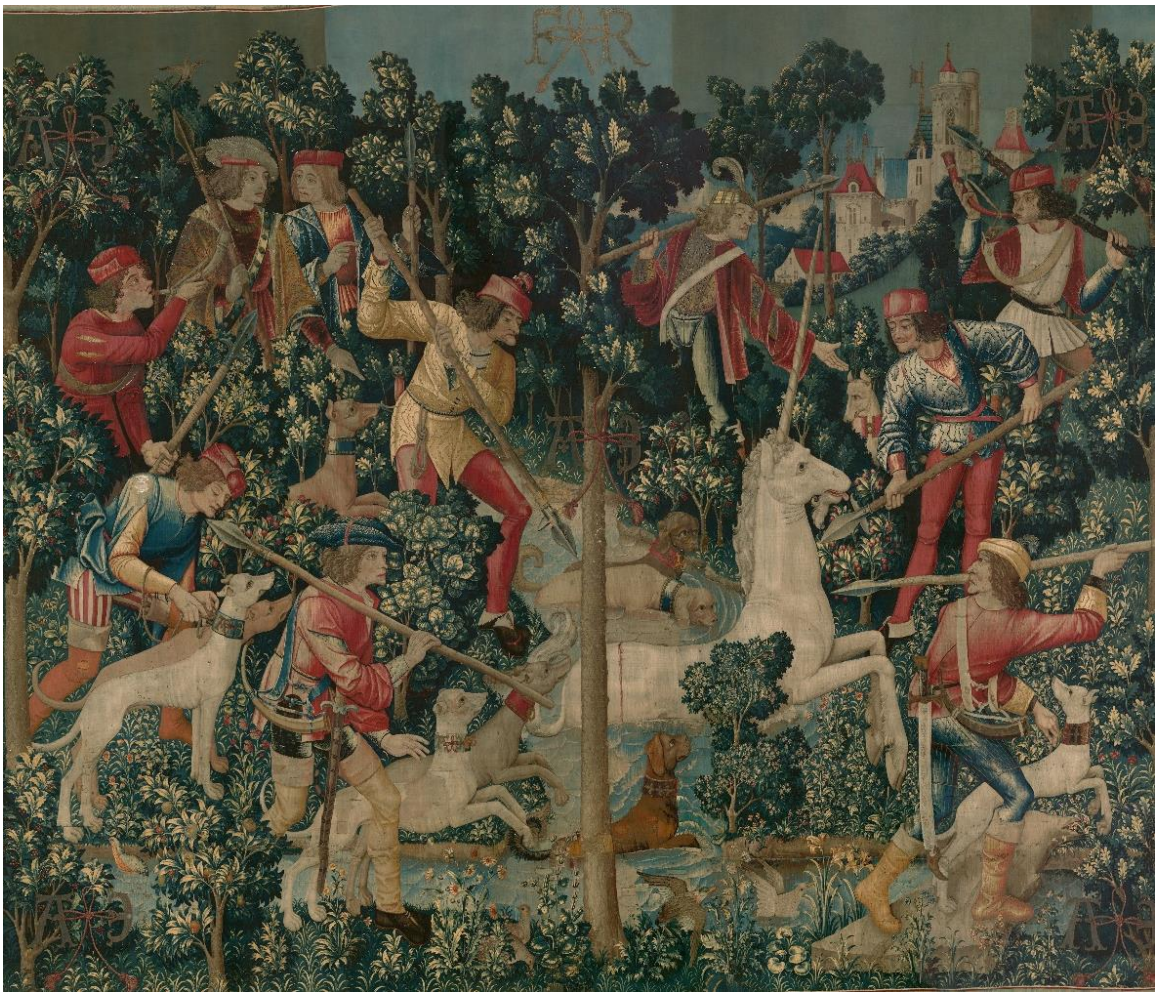


Figure 12. The Unicorn Is Attacked

Southern Netherlands, 1495-1505. Wool warp, wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts. 145 x 168in. (368.3 x 426.7cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1937.

[102] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 61.

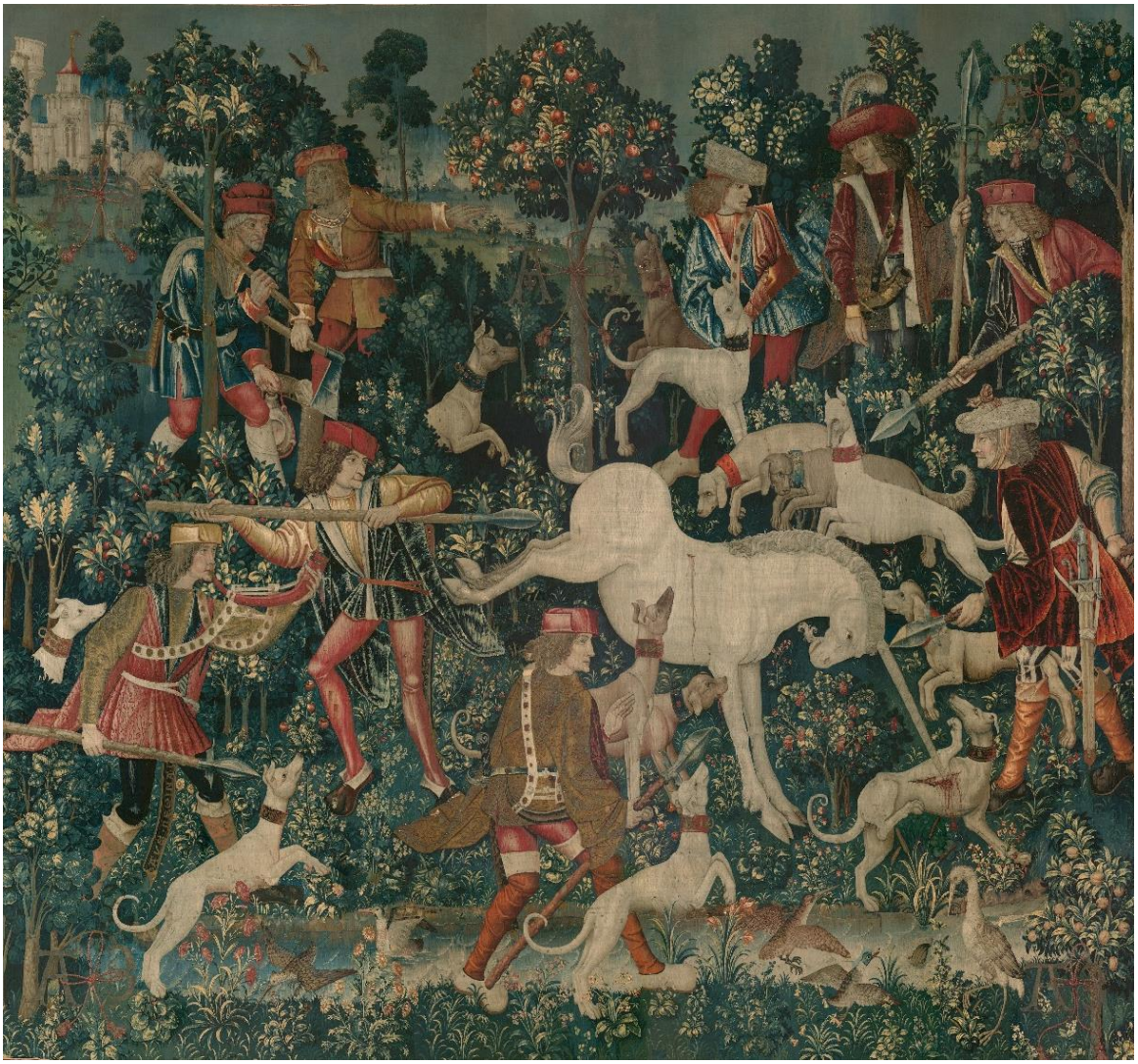


Figure 13. The Unicorn Defends Itself

Southern Netherlands, 1495-1505. Wool warp, wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts. 145 x 158 in. (368.3 x 401.3cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1937.

Despite all of this this, the hunt continues in *The Unicorn Defends Itself* (Figure 13). Ctesias, in his account of the unicorn, states that the unicorn fights with its horn, by

kicking, and by biting.[103] Here, the unicorn can be seen fighting just as in Ctesias' account, kicking at one of the hunters while using its horn as a weapon to pierce the side of one of the greyhounds. However, the unicorn is not a beast that can be brought down by lance or hound, which these hunters appear to understand, leading into the next, fragmented, tapestry: *The Mystic Capture of the Unicorn* (Figure14).

Surviving in two fragments, the scene of *The Mystic Capture of the Unicorn* portrays the capture of the unicorn by a virgin. In the second fragment, the virgin can be seen in an enclosed garden (a metaphor for the purity of a maiden) with the unicorn, which appears to have been tamed, as it pays no attention to the hound licking its wound.[104] This tapestry, however, raises some questions within regard to its placement amongst the other tapestries. Firstly, the artistic style and composition of the tapestry differs from the others, indicating that the fragments of this once single tapestry might belong to another set entirely.[105] Secondly, if the hunters were well aware that a unicorn cannot be captured without a virgin, then there would have been no need for the hunting scenes.[106]

[103] Nichols, *Ctesias: On India*, 57.

[104] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters,* 173.

[105] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 45.

[106] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 45.

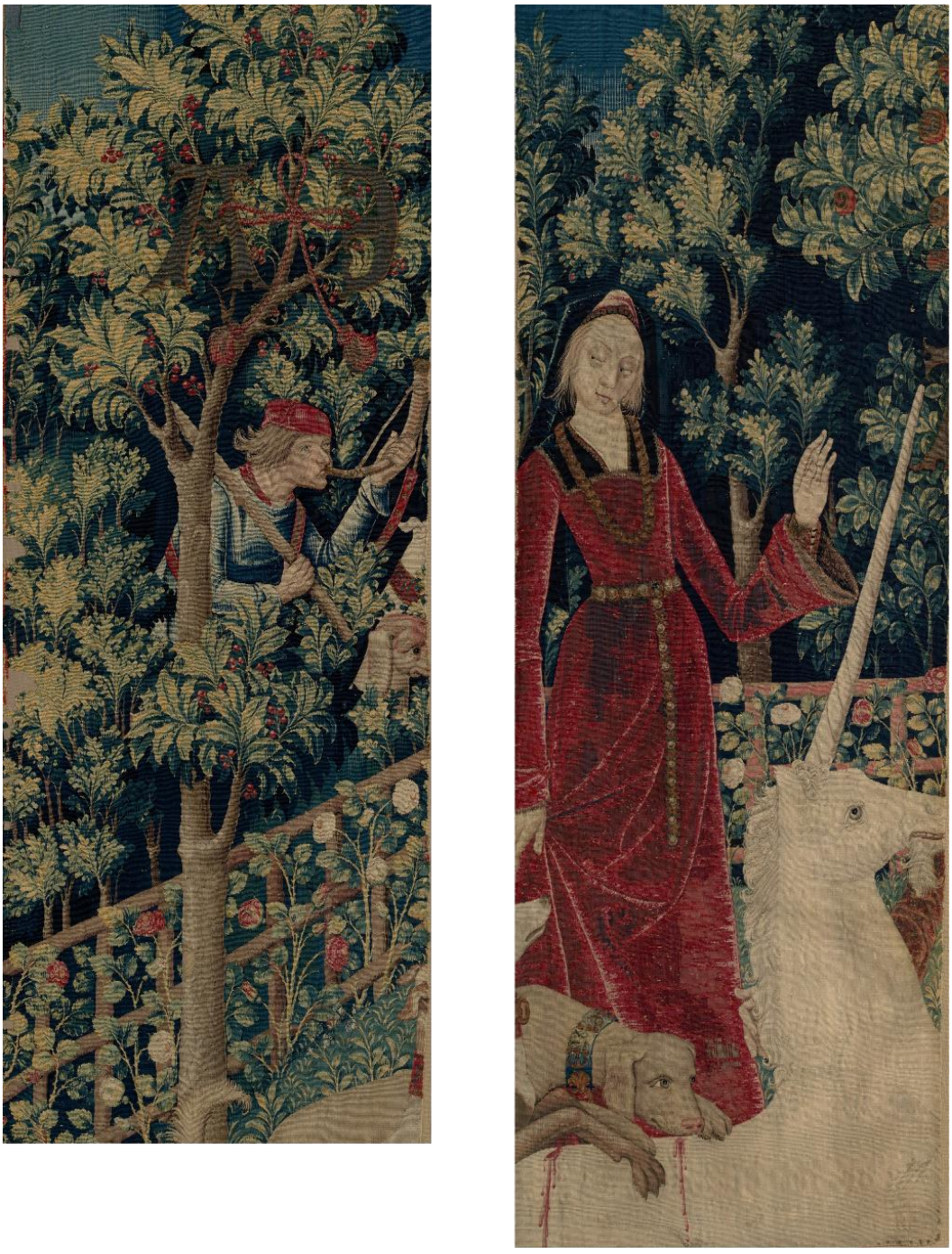


Figure 14. The Mystic Capture of the Unicorn (Fragments 1 and 2)

Southern Netherlands, 1495-1505. Wool warp, wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts. At the left, 66 ½ x 25 ½ in. (168.9 x 64.8 cm). At the right, 78 ½ x 25 ½ in. (199.39 x 64.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1937.



Figure 15. The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle

Southern Netherlands, 1495-1505. Wool warp, wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts. 145 x 153in. (368.3 x 388.6cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1937.

The next tapestry, *The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle* (Figure 15), features two scenes. On the left is the first scene in which two hunters can be seen driving their lances into the neck and chest of the unicorn, while four hounds attack it from

behind.[107] There is a third hunter, the host of the day's sport, who approaches from behind to deliver the coup de grâce.[108] In the foreground, the second scene, the slain unicorn is seen draped over the back of a horse as it is brought to a castle. This is the same way in which a slain stag is brought back after a hunt.[109] Another important allegory in these scenes is the holly, oak, and elm trees behind the unicorn in the first scene, and the hawthorn behind the unicorn in the second scene.[110] Holly and hawthorn are traditionally associated with the Crown of Thorns, and the slain unicorn's horn is tied to its neck by a wreath made of oak branches that have sprouted thorns.[111] In addition to this, "the rosary in the hand of the lady and the three other women standing behind the lord have encouraged a deeper reading of the scene, as a symbolic Deposition witnessed by the grieving Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, and the Holy Women."[112]

[107] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 71.

[108] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 71; and Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters*, 174.

[109] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 71.

[110] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 71.

[111] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 71; and Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters*, 174.

[112] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters*, 174.



Figure 16. The Unicorn in Captivity

Southern Netherlands, 1495-1505. Wool warp, wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts. 144 7/8 x 99 in. (368 x 251.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1937.

The final tapestry, *The Unicorn in Captivity* (Figure 16) is the most mysterious and beloved of them all. This tapestry has a millefleur background, like *The Hunters Enter the Woods,* and the unicorn is resting within a circular fence with a tree bearing pomegranates. *The Unicorn in Captivity* is different from the others as it may have been "a single emblematic piece and not part of a series at all."[113] This scene can be read in numerous ways, but the most common is the unicorn as the Lover.[114] Similarly to other representations of the unicorn in medieval art, this scene can be symbolic of marriage. The unicorn can be seen as a groom who is now bonded my marriage (represented by the circular fence), and the collar represents the lover.[115] The red droplets on the unicorn are not blood, but rather juice that has burst from the pomegranates which were a symbol of fertility during the Middle Ages. While some other plants have secular symbolism, such as bistort and European orchid, which helped women conceive and determine the sex of their unborn child, other plants, such as the Madonna lily and Saint Mary's thistle symbolized the Virgin Mary and the carnation symbolized the Passion.[116]

The Three Narratives

These seven tapestries, regardless of whether they are part of the same series or not, are all part of the same narratives. The most difficult part about the narratives are how the different series can be interpreted. While *The Hunters Enter the Woods* (Figure

[113] Nickel, "About the Sequence," 10.

[114] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 40; and Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters,* 175.

[115] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters,* 175.

[116] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters,* 175.

10) and *The Unicorn in Captivity* (Figure 16) are connected to the *The Unicorn Tapestries* by the initials AE, they differ from the other five tapestries in art style and may belong to different series.[117] *The Hunters Enter the Woods* may be from a separate series of hunting tapestries whereas *The Unicorn in Captivity* may have been a standalone tapestry.[118] This is vital when attempting to understand the narratives for the different series, as a whole series, and individually, though there are larger narratives about the unicorn that fit into the tapestries as we have them today. The first narrative is the hunt. It is the easiest narrative to read as it is relatively straightforward. The second is that of the virgin, and the third, the Passion. While these narratives are vastly different from each other, when observed in detail, it is more easily understood as to why medieval people chose these narratives to weave into the tapestries.

The Hunt

In *The Hunters Enter the Woods, The Unicorn Is Found, The Unicorn Is Attacked, The Unicorn Defends Itself,* and *The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle* tapestries, "the huntsmen are engaged in procedures that were typically followed in medieval stag hunts."[119] The type of hunting portrayed was called "by force of hounds" as the hunters relied heavily on dogs to capture the stag, a method that has been described in numerous game hunting treatises in the fourteenth century.[120]

[117] Nickel, "About the Sequence," 9-10

[118] Nickel, "About the Sequence," 9-10

[119] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 29.

[120] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 29.

Gaston III, comte de Foix, better known as Gaston Phébus, wrote a number of books on the subject for those who could afford to hunt game animals, such as royalty and nobility.[121] In his *Livre de Chasse*, a medieval book on hunting, he describes in detail hunting by force of hounds and this was used, not only as a guide for hunters, but for writers and artists who needed to represent the typical medieval hunt in their work.[122]

A detailed example of a written account of the hunt of the unicorn can be found in the *Volkslied*, a medieval German folksong. Translated by Odell Shepard, the *Volkslied* reads:

> I stood in the Maytime Meadows
> By roses circled round,
> Where many a fragile blossom
> Was bright upon the ground;
>
> And as though the roses called them
> And their wild hearts understood,
> The little birds were singing
> In the shadows of the wood.
>
> The nightingale among them
> Sang sweet and loud and long,
> Until a greater voice than hers
> Rang out above her song;
> For suddenly, between the crags,
> Along the narrow vale,
> The echoes of a hunting horn
> Came clear upon the gale.
>
> The hunter stood beside me
> Who blew that mighty horn;
> I saw that he was hunting
> The gentle unicorn—
> But the unicorn is noble,
> He knows his gentle birth,
> He knows that God has chosen him

[121] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 29.

[122] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 29.

Above all beasts of earth.

The unicorn is noble;
He keeps him safe and high
Upon a narrow path and steep
Climbing to the sky;
And there no man can take him
He scorns the hunter's dart,
And only a virgin's magic power
Shall tame his haughty heart.

What would be now the state of us
But for this Unicorn,
And what would be the fate of us,
Poor sinners, lost, forlorn?
Oh, many He lead us on and up,
Unworthy though we be,
Into His Father's kingdom,
To dwell eternally![123]

Evidentially, the hunting narrative was common enough that observers of the tapestries could relate to it in this way. As described in the *Volkslied*, and other sources, the presence of a virgin is crucial to the hunting narrative.[124] While it plays a role in the hunt for the unicorn, the presence of a virgin is not a part of traditional medieval stag or boar hunts, and thus is its own narrative.

The Virgin

The virgin narrative, or capture of the unicorn by a virgin, is depicted in *The Mystic Capture of the Unicorn*. While this is the only tapestry that visually portrays this

[123] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 82-83.

[124] Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic," 53.

theme, it does not dismiss the other six tapestries. The capture of the unicorn by a virgin emphasizes either deeply sexual undertones[125] or biblical allegory.

The capture of the unicorn by a virgin plays a role in the general appearance of the unicorn. According to Christian Heck, the small size of the unicorn had to "harmonize with that of the young woman" and "since virginal purity is the theme associated with this hunt, the unicorn's color is generally white."[126] The unicorn is drawn to the virgin because of her sweet smell, which suggests that there is a pheromone linkage between the unicorn and the virgin.[127] Only when the unicorn has succumbed to the maiden's lap, can it then be killed as it is too swift, wild and strong to be killed otherwise.[128] In the Syriac version of the *Physiologus*, once the unicorn has succumbed to the virgin, she would grasp the horn and then the hunters could approach and kill the unicorn.[129] In fact, if the unicorn is presented with a maiden who is not a virgin, she is killed by the unicorn.[130]

Alanus de Insulis, a twelfth century French theologian, explained this sexual interpretation through medieval science; the power of the virgin had to do with a difference in humours, "the *calidissima natura* of the unicorn being drawn irresistibly to

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[125] Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic," 53.

[126] Heck and Cordonnier. *The Grand Medieval Bestiary (Dragonet Edition),* 412.

[127] Nickel, "About the Sequence," 9; Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic," 53; and Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 54.

[128] Nickel, "About the Sequence," 9; and Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic," 53.

[129] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 49.

[130] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 50.

its opposite, the *femina frigida et humida*."[131] The unicorn "has an excess of fervent spirits or humours" which causes his heart to dilate, but feels relief "when he comes into the pure moist air surrounding the virgin… and is so delighted by that feminine atmosphere that he lies down in her lap."[132]

At the same time, the unicorn in the lap of the virgin is a biblical allegory for the Incarnation, in which the virgin is the Virgin Mary and the unicorn is Christ.[133] In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great promoted the idea of the unicorn as a representation of Christ and almost all medieval bestiaries "agree that Christ is the spiritual unicorn who, descending into the Virgin's womb, was incarnate, was captured by the Jews, and condemned to death."[134] This capture and condemnation to death are scenes portrayed in all the tapestries except for *The Unicorn in Captivity.* Following the allegory of the Incarnation, another biblical allegory was prominent during the Middle Ages: the Passion of Christ.

The Passion

The narrative of the Passion is the most complex as it encompasses the hunting narrative as well as the allegory of the Incarnation presented in the virgin narrative. As

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[131] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 50.

[132] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 50.

[133] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries,* 22; Heck and Cordonnier, *The Grand Medieval Bestiary (Dragonet Edition),* 20, 412; Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 48; and Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry*, 69.

[134] Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic," 54; and McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, 179–80 as cited in Ryan, "The Horn and the Relic," 54.

discussed earlier, *The Unicorn Is Found* can be read as an allegory for the Passion of Christ due to some of the plants and the number of hunters.[135] It has been suggested that *The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle* is an allegory for Christ dying on the cross, especially considering the holly tree which was symbolic of the Passion, thorny oak branches, which are symbolic of the Crown of Thorns, and a group of onlookers at the castle, which might be symbolic of the Deposition.[136] *The Unicorn in Captivity* also features plants that represent the Virgin Mary and the Passion of Christ.[137]

In the fifteenth century, works of art depicting graphic representations of the suffering of Christ and the Passion were in demand,[138] so it would not be unusual if the *Unicorn Tapestries* were created with this narrative in mind. In fact, a significant number of tapestries with this narrative, from 1400 to 1550, have survived.[139] According to Anne E. Wardwell, "interest in the blood of Christ had developed during the Middle Ages as a result of the relics of blood which had been brought back to Europe in crystal vials from the Holy Land by the Crusaders" and, by the fifteenth century, the cult of the Holy Blood had been established and is no doubt the source of inspiration for works featuring the Passion.[140]

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[135] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters,* 170.

[136] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters,* 174.

[137] Barnet and Wu, *The Cloisters,* 175.

[138] Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance,* 26.

[139] Adolfo Salvatore Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries in The Metropolitan Museum of Art,* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), 71.

[140] Anne E. Wardwell, "The Mystical Grapes: A Devotional Tapestry," *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 62, no. 1 (1975): 21.

Fifteenth century literature on the Passion vividly described the suffering of Christ from "how many lashes Christ received, how many thorns the crown of thorns had, how each nail was driven in, and so on and on—often to a merciless and gruesome extent."[141] The purpose of these descriptions was for the "the devotee to participate as completely as possible in Christ's sufferings" as "the more a person identified with Christ, and the more tears he shed over the mere thought of the Passion, the more devoted he was considered to be."[142] If the *Unicorn Tapestries* are to be read as an allegory for the Passion of Christ, then *The Unicorn in Captivity* could be interpreted as the Resurrection as the scene in this tapestry occurs after the hunt has taken place.[143] This Christological reading of the Resurrection undoubtedly makes the most sense if one looks at the seven tapestries as a single series with *The Unicorn in Captivity* as the final tapestry. However, as a standalone tapestry, the Resurrection does not fit so well to the modern observer, but for the medieval observer it may have made perfect sense for *The Unicorn in Captivity* to be portrayed as a standalone tapestry and not a part of a series.

Unfortunately, there is no evidence that can conclusively tell us if *The Unicorn Tapestries* are indeed meant to be a single series, or if there are truly multiple. The three narratives are a small part of a much larger and more significant narrative of unicorn lore which is extremely complex. What is most unique about *The Unicorn Tapestries* is that they simultaneously tell all three narratives and the audience does not need to choose. The hunt can be read as a typical stag or boar hunt, as the Passion, the capture of the

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[141] Wardwell, "The Mystical Grapes," 21.

[142] Wardwell, "The Mystical Grapes," 21.

[143] Nickel, "About the Sequence," 10.

unicorn by a virgin, or as the unicorn as the lover. The virgin narrative can be read as the capture of the unicorn by a virgin (i.e. the hunt), the Christological reading of the Virgin Mary and Christ, or as the lover's maiden. Lastly, the Passion narrative incorporates the hunt as the suffering of Christ or as Christ the lover, and the virgin as the Virgin Mary. The unicorn was a complex disparate symbol that was associable to both the clergy and laity, however, there is most certainly a larger heraldic narrative at work.

Chapter III.

Chivalry, Knighthood, and Heraldry

While the narratives of the *Unicorn Tapestries* can be brought together, there are some themes I have come across that tend to be mentioned briefly that I believe are the most important aspects of these tapestries: chivalry, knighthood, and heraldry. These are all themes of medieval romances but are deeply woven into the tapestries as well. While researching these themes and the monarchy during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, I had come across interesting concepts of those three themes in daily life. However, to understand their impact on the tapestries, their function and impact on medieval aristocratic society must first be explored.

Firstly, the virtues of chivalry are what laid the foundation for knighthood; they were taken seriously and were heavily embedded in aristocratic society. Secondly, at the time the tapestries were made, medieval knighthood was in decline. Knights were replaced by men-at-arms; men who served by contractual agreement that had access to armor, horses, the ability to fight, and were not always knights.[144] According to Phyllis Jestice, "by the mid-fourteenth century, most men-at-arms were not knights."[145] Regardless of this decline, knighthood of the romances was still highly influential and can be seen in the hunting and virgin narratives of the tapestries where the unicorn represents the Lover—the knight or hunter—who is drawn to his maiden—the virgin. Thirdly, the unicorn had been used in heraldic imagery such as the Scottish royal coat of

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[144] Phyllis Jestice, *The Medieval Knight: The Noble Warriors of the Golden Age of Chivalry* (London: Amber Books, 2018), 191-192, 205.

[145] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 192.

arms on which it made its first appearance in the 12th century by William I, king of Scotland.[146] These themes are central ideals that were upheld by late medieval royalty and nobility and have a powerful visual impact on the *Unicorn Tapestries.*

Chivalry

The origins of chivalry can be traced back to 1066 when William, duke of Normandy, brought mounted warriors with him when he invaded England at the Battle of Hastings.[147] His mounted warriors established "the idea of knights fighting on horseback instead of riding to an engagement and dismounting before beginning battle."[148] The word, chivalry, derives from the French *chevalier,* which means mounted warrior and the Anglo-Saxons called these mounted warriors *cnihts*, meaning servant as they "appeared to serve their overlords in military and political matters."[149] Since the Battle of Hastings, the role of the knight grew in England in order to control the land and to garrison a new type of fortress, erected by William, called a castle.[150] Although chivalry originated in

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[146] Andrea Leitch, "You Can See Unicorns in This Magical Place," National Geographic, last modified January 8, 2018, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/destinations/europe/united-kingdom/scotland/unicorn-national-animal-trail/#close.

[147] Bradford A. Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), xii.

[148] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* xii.

[149] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* xii.

[150] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* xii.

England, the concept quickly migrated across Europe and was popular amongst the monarchy, nobility, and medieval romances.

Over time, chivalry became known as the qualities of knighthood.[151] Bradford A. Broughton eloquently defines chivalry:

> At its loftiest, and assuredly in its underlying theory, chivalry depicted the perfect gentleman—gently born, gentle mannered, truthful, faithful, courteous to women, pure, brave, and fearless, unsparing of self, filled with deep religious feeling, bowing before God and womankind, but haughty in the presence of all others. To these were added the elements of maintaining a high sense of honor, disdain for danger and death, love of adventure, compassion for the weak and oppressed, generosity, self-sacrifice, and altruism.
>
> Often the term was used to connote a body of knights or horsemen equipped for battle, a body of cavalry…Additionally, in the technical feudal sense it meant tenure by knight service amplified into a tenure of service by which the tenant was bound to perform some noble or military office for the lord. In its broadest sense, however, it meant the entire knightly system of the medieval period with its peculiar religious, moral, and social codes and customs. At their best, the qualities of the chivalric knight were honor, piety, and love, and at their worst, ferocity, superstition, and lust. The virtues of chivalry were courage, faith, devotion, and its vices were murder, intolerance, and ferocity. [152]

The founding of chivalric orders in the fifteenth century was a common expression of kingship,[153] and many orders were modelled after fictional societies of knights, such as the Round Table from the Arthurian romances.[154] A knight was expected to have

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[151] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 108.

[152] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 108.

[153] Katie Stevenson, "The Unicorn, St. Andrew and the Thistle: Was There an Order of Chivalry in Late Medieval Scotland?" *Scottish Historical Review* 83 (2004): 3.

[154] D'A. J. D. Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown: The Monarchial Orders of Knighthood in Later Medieval Europe 1325-1520* (New York: Boydell Press, 2000), 43.

largesse, pity, to provide aid to the suffering, the poor, and the weak, to be courteous and, above all else, "he was expected to possess and exercise two virtues: prowess and loyalty".[155]

Prowess, or military prowess, was "the acquired skill at arms" and loyalty "relied on a loyal heart and implied fidelity to his pledge word or to an individual because of friendship or even some transient relationship."[156] Loyalty was a quality that flourished in medieval romances such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where, rather than breaking his promise and betraying his loyalty to King Arthur, he sought out the Green Knight to be beheaded.[157] However, these qualities were only practiced in times of peace and a knight was expected to utilize certain tactics to defeat his enemies with minimal losses by overcoming "the natural fear in his own men of death, mutilation, wounds, and pains to ensure they carry out the orders of their superiors… while trying to instill panic in his enemies if possible."[158] Battle is where chivalry played an important role as it "was designed essentially to ameliorate the horrors and brutality of war" and encouraged men "to view their enemies as fellow humans whose misfortunes in war were to be considered

[155] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 290.

[156] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 290.

[157] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 290.

[158] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 290-291.

with pity rather than with revenge."[159] It is evident that chivalric piety had a deep resonance and that pressure from chivalric orders encouraged knights to live up to this impossibly high chivalric standard, but these ideals that were written about in the romances were not followed in the real world as one would think.[160]

A knight who did not follow chivalric virtues by committing crimes such as "holding and practicing heretical religious beliefs, committing treason or *lèse majesté* against the king, or fleeing from battle or an encounter in which banners had been unfurled" risked being stripped of his knighthood, and he risked execution if he demonstrated an intent to harm the provost of an army, defyied the governor of the army, fled the battlefield whilst others stood their ground, revealed the secrets of his lord to the enemy, faked illness so that he would not have to join his lord in battle, spread rumors, or sought out a foe to challenge him to single combat.[161] In Arthurian romances, however, Sir Lancelot was the paragon of chivalry. According to the redemption tale of Sir Lancelot of the Lake, the Lady of the Lake had taught him the rules of proper behavior, but he had one great flaw—the object of his devotion, Queen Guinevere, the lady "for whom he performed his gallant deeds", was the wife of his lord, King Arthur.[162] This devotion ultimately ended with his betrayal in loyalty to King Arthur and adultery, thus

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[159] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 291.

[160] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 58; and Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 291.

[161] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 292.

[162] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 45.

Lancelot became unworthy to see, much less win, the Holy Grail.[163] Romances, such as Lancelot's, "focus on transgressions against the chivalric code" in order to "drive home the lesson that one should behave with proper chivalry."[164]

Medieval chivalry had reached its peak by the end of the fourteenth century due to "financial disorder of the [French] government, and baronial attempts to enforce old manorial services on the peasantry" which lead to the Peasant's Revolt in 1381; though unsuccessful, "the ancient holds exerted by serfdom over them were broken forever."[165] Despite having reached its peak, fiction and non-fiction literature on chivalry, such as Christine de Pizan's *The Book of Deeds of Arms and Chivalry* (1410) and vernacular romances, continued to reach a wide range of audiences during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[166] These works "complained that contemporary knights had lost vigour and become effete, but that charge had already been levied against knights by authors in the twelfth century" and "authors were more likely to celebrate the nobility of chivalric ideals" in works such as Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (1485).[167] These ideals were nearly impossible to live up to, and this will be further explored in my discussion of knighthood, orders of knighthood in late Medieval Europe, and knighthood in medieval romances.

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[163] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 46.

[164] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 46.

[165] Bradford A. Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: People, Places, and Events* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), xxii.

[166] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 210.

[167] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 212.

Knighthood

While there are no references to knights or knighthood in England prior to the Norman conquest, the origins of knighthood emerged in 1066 at the Battle of Hastings when William, duke of Normandy invaded England with mounted warriors.[168] While the defeated Anglo-Saxons called these mounted warriors *cniht*, meaning servant, the Latin word *miles* was often used to refer to an armed man or soldier.[169] The meaning did not changed in England until the 1100s to refer to a feudal knight.[170] By the late eleventh century, William had erected castles all over England and needed experienced soldiers to garrison them in order to control the population, thus creating "a small number of knights to be ready to serve for short periods as needed, and this need for knights expanded within 150 years."[171] This concept of a knight's service had changed during the reign of Richard I (1189-1199) when he needed a different form of organization for his lengthy campaigns and wars.[172] Although he was the king of England, Richard I was "influenced deeply by his mother's love for her homeland, and he remained basically a Frenchman all

[168] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 288.

[169] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 288.

[170] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 288.

[171] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 288.

[172] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 288.

his life…and spent most of his time in France, even after his elevation to the throne."[173] While not the king of France, his presence was no doubt influential to the changes a knight's service experienced.

In the early Middle Ages, the knight "was an important figure…but his role decreased in importance through time."[174] During the Norman expansion, there was a high demand for knights as there were numerous opportunities, however, the demand for knights diminished in the twelfth century, "and the endless source of fiefs to reward and breed knights dried up, as earlier generations became established in England and Wales and southern Scotland and Ireland, in Italy, and Sicily and Antioch."[175] The decline of knighthood was gradual, and the late fifteenth century saw the creation of national armies which brought an end to "the contract system of recruitment and paid the same wages to knights as to other men-at-arms," though heavy cavalrymen were still important even though their size declined.[176] While "the evolution of both knighthood and chivalry slowed down considerably after about 1250…the period between 1280 and 1525 witnessed a number of revolutionary developments in military technology and tactics which gradually deprived the knight of his position of absolute dominance on the field of

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[173] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: People, Places, and Events,* 559.

[174] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: People, Places, and Events,* xiii.

[175] R. A. Brown, "Status of the Norman Knight," *War and Government in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of J. O. Prestwich*, edited by John Gillingham and J. C. Holt (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Totowa, NJ: Boydell Press; Barnes & Noble, 1984), 31; and Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: People, Places, and Events,* xiii.

[176] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 214.

battle"[177] and cavalrymen had abandoned their heavy armor, which was "the most distinctive feature of the medieval knight" by the end of the sixteenth century.[178]

Orders of Knighthood in Late Medieval Europe

Now that the background of knighthood and chivalry throughout the Middle Ages has been established, it is time to investigate their importance during the time the *Unicorn Tapestries* were woven. First and foremost, one of the mysteries of the tapestries lies within the initials, AE, which can be found on all seven tapestries. These initials may hold a clue as for whom the tapestries were made for, but it is not conclusive. The initials have been suggested to represent the first and last letters of Anne of Brittany (1476-1514), who had been the queen of France twice— with marriages to Charles VIII and Louis XII[179]—but who had also been married to Maximilian I, King of the Romans and later Holy Roman Emperor, by proxy in December 1490.[180] While Anne of Brittany may or may not have been the person for whom the tapestries were made, it is not she who is relevant but rather the men to whom she had been married, their influence in Europe, and the orders of knighthood to which they belonged.

Both Charles VIII and Louis XII were affiliated with the Order of St. Michael the Archangel (1469-1790), which had been intended to be the French equivalent of the

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[177] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 10.

[178] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 216.

[179] Rorimer, "The Unicorn Tapestries Were Made for Anne of Brittany," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series* 1, no. 1 (1942): 7.

[180] Pierre Terjanian, *The Last Knight: The Art, Armor, and Ambition of Maximilian I* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019), 44.

Order of the Golden Fleece (Burgundy and the Netherlands, 1430/1-present), though it was no match for the influence that the Order of the Garter (England, 1344/9) and the Order of the Golden Fleece held over Europe .[181] It does not appear that the creation of this Order was geared toward a true fraternity of knights, considering France had been, not only the richest kingdom in Christendom, but also the "source of the chivalrous literature and much of the chivalrous culture that had inspired the creation of monarchial orders in other kingdoms."[182] Yet the actual development of a knightly order was not as important to the monarchy in France and was not taken as seriously as other orders in Europe. While the Order of St. Michael drew upon certain aspects of the Order of the Golden fleece, it lack the luster to make it a true knightly order.

Maximilian I had been affiliated with both the Order of the Garter and the Order of the Golden Fleece, both of which were extraordinarily successful, in addition to the Austrian Order of St. George. In 1478, he became sovereign of the Burgundian Order of the Golden Fleece, in 1489 he was elected to the Order of the Garter, and in 1493 he became the chief protector and advocate of the Austrian Order of St. George.[183] Maximilian I leveraged "the values of fellowship promoted by exclusive chivalric institutions… to enhance his image as a virtuous knight and mobilize political support."[184] The Order of the Garter and the Order of the Golden Fleece were massive

[181] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 356, 427-447.

[182] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 427, 447.

[183] Terjanian, *The Last Knight,* 188; and Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 153.

[184] Terjanian, *The Last Knight,* 188.

advocates of chivalry and of knighthood, with the Order of the Garter having been founded upon the "strictest sense of those terms."[185]

The Order of the Garter, founded by King Edward III upon his return from France in 1343, was "modelled directly and explicitly upon the Round Table society of King Arthur," in addition to other romances such as *Franc Palais* and *Perceforest*.[186] The Order of the Golden Fleece incorporated many of the aspects of the Order of the Garter and, in the beginning of the fifteenth century, Europe experienced a chivalric revival, instigated by certain princes.[187] This revival is important because by 1390, "the idea of maintaining an elaborate neo-Arthurian order, composed largely or exclusively of knights and genuinely dedicated to the promotion of chivalry, had fallen completely out of favour in most of the royal and princely courts of Europe."[188] This was due to a number of factors, but ultimately the decline between 1350 and 1390 was due to the "absolute number of knights in most regions and in the importance of heavy cavalry in general within princely armies."[189] Despite the decline of knighthood, chivalry had been heavily embedded in aristocratic culture and could not be so easily vanquished.[190] The enthusiasm in Europe for chivalry suggests that a "chivalric Renaissance begun by the

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[185] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 129.

[186] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: People, Places, and Events,* 276; and Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 107.

[187] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 356.

[188] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 356.

[189] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 356.

[190] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 357.

Dukes of Burgundy in the first decades of the fifteenth century continued well into the sixteenth century."[191] While knighthood may have been in decline, medieval romances and retellings of Arthurian legends continued to thrive.

Knighthood in Medieval Romances

The evolution of the worldly knight is very aristocratic and elite, but not necessarily romantic as the portrayal of the knight in medieval romances set unrealistic standards and unrealized ideals for the perfect gentleman. Knighthood and chivalry of the romances played a significant role in the creation of knightly orders of chivalry and kingship. The combination of worldly and literary knighthood and chivalry are both woven into the *Unicorn Tapestries* and complement the narratives.

Romances, especially the Arthurian romances of Chrétien, gained popularity in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries and were known throughout Western Christendom through translations and adaptations.[192] More importantly, the ideas the romances developed and promoted about knighthood and knightliness "quickly assumed a central place in the ideology of the emerging knightly class, and their heroes came to be regarded as historical personages and treated as models by knights of all ranks" with Arthurian romances as "the most popular form of literature in the knightly class."[193] Additionally, as D'A. J. D. Boulton emphasizes, "it is almost impossible to overestimate the influence of these works on the chivalrous culture of the later medieval court, and it is

[191] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 448.

[192] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 5.

[193] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 5.

not at all surprising that they provided the most important models for the knightly orders."[194]

An important aspect of the romances is their emphasis on knightly piety.[195] A great example of this is when the mother of Percival, a knight in the Arthurian romances, instructs him to stop at every church and pray.[196] However, chivalric piety was significantly greater than prayer.[197] By the mid eleventh century, a specific chivalric piety was developing that "was based on an active, martial life, with no qualms about the pursuit of military glory."[198] According to Phyllis Jestice, however, "a common theme in troubadour poetry is that worldly love can lead a knight to the love of God"[199]; this plays an important role in the theme of the lover, divine or human, which is also one way to interpret allegorically the hunting narrative in the *Unicorn Tapestries.*

The allegory of Christ as a lover-knight was common in medieval preaching books and manuals of instruction.[200] This allegory resides in the reoccurring story of the knight who die for his lady in order to win her love—a theme that contained "abundant

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[194] Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown,* 5.

[195] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 49.

[196] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 49.

[197] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 49.

[198] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 49.

[199] Jestice, *The Medieval Knight*, 49.

[200] Rosemary Woolf, "The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight in Medieval English Literature," *Review of English Studies* 13, no. 49 (1962): 1.

potentialities of theological allegory."[201] This popular theme—the representation of Christ's suffering to win man's love—was the epitome of medieval piety.[202] The notion of Christ the lover fusing with the secular, knightly lover is not as unlikely as it may appear to be. In fact, as Rosemary Woolf argues:

> From the end of the twelfth century onwards there developed a perfect parallelism between the theological stress upon Christ's display of love on the Cross and the conception of chivalric conduct in the Arthurian romances, wherein a knight by brave endurance and heroic encounters would save the lady whom he loved from treacherous capture, thereby hoping to gain her favour, or might joust brilliantly in front of her, hoping by his prowess to win her love. This common theme of the romances had arisen from two causes: religious morality imposed upon feudal custom emphasized the duty of a knight to protect the helpless, such as women and the fatherless, whilst romantic love fusing with chivalric courtesy exalted battle on behalf of a lady as a means of gaining her love. It is likely that the ancient and well-known image of the Crucifixion as a battle, which was relevant only to the theory of 'the devil's rights', would have disappeared in the Middle Ages had not the literary conventions of medieval chivalry enabled the idea of the warrior Christ to fuse with the idea of Christ the lover or bridegroom of the individual soul, thus making a single theme.[203]

The notion of Christ as the lover or bridegroom can be seen in representations of the unicorn as the lover or bridegroom in the *Casket with Scenes from Romances* (Figure 2), *Bowl with The Virgin and the Unicorn and arms of Matthias Corvinus and Beatrice of Aragon* (Figure 3), *Portrait medal of Cecilia Gonzaga* (Figure 4), and *Portrait of a Woman, possibly Ginevra d'Antonio Lupari* Gozzadini (Figure 5). While the hunting

[201] Woolf, "The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight in Medieval English Literature," 1.

[202] Woolf, "The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight in Medieval English Literature," 1.

[203] Woolf, "The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight in Medieval English Literature," 2-3.

narrative in the *Unicorn Tapestries*—especially *The Hunters Enter the Woods* (Figure 10) and *The Unicorn in Captivity* (Figure 16)—can be interpreted as a stag or boar hunt, the unicorn, in this narrative, can be interpreted as the Lover, while the maiden is his Beloved, and the hunter is Love.[204] In fact, the *Casket with Scenes from Romances* depicts scenes from medieval tales, such as Alexander the Great and the legends of King Arthur, that "all attest to the power of love" and "the depiction of the unicorn on one end is indebted to a thirteenth-century French tale, the *Bestiaire d'amour*."[205] The unicorn passage in the *Bestiaire d'amour* attests to this theme as a symbol of courtly love, rather than celestial love:

> I have been drawn to you by your sweet odour alone, as the unicorn falls asleep under the influence of a maiden's fragrance. For this is the nature of the unicorn, that no other beast is so hard to capture, and he has one horn on his nose which no armour can withstand, so that no one dares to go forth against him except a virgin girl. And as soon as he is made aware of her presence by the scent of her, he kneels humbly before her and humiliates himself as though to signify that he would serve her. Therefore wise huntsmen who know his nature set a virgin in his way; he falls asleep in her lap; and while he sleeps the hunters, who would not dare to approach him when awake, come up and kill him. Even so has Love dealt cruelly with me; for I have been the proudest man alive with regard to love, and I have thought never to see the woman whom I should care to possess....But Love, the skillful huntsman, has set in my path a maiden in the odour of whose sweetness I have fallen asleep, and I die the death to which I was doomed.[206]

The scene in the *Casket with Scenes from the Romances*, next to a scene of Tristan and Isolde, shows the Beloved (a maiden holding a mirror), has attracted the Lover (the

[204] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 24.

[205] "Casket with Scenes from Romances."

[206] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 54-55.

unicorn) who lays in her lap, when Love, disguised as a skillful hunter, pierces the unicorn with a long spear.[207] The depiction of the unicorn as the Lover undoubtedly makes sense as the unicorn in *The Unicorn in Captivity* (Figure 16) does not appear to suffer the wounds from the previous tapestries; instead its wounds are like Cupid's darts which cause no physical harm.[208] This scene also has a Christological reading, where the pomegranate is "a symbol of resurrection and life everlasting…[and] the impending incarnation of Christ."[209] After having suffered wounds, as Christ had, the unicorn in *The Unicorn in Captivity* is Christ resurrected.

Heraldry

The unicorn was one of the oldest, and most popular, of heraldic monsters.[210] Heraldry was a system of personal symbolism for recognition that was essential to knights who owed a feudal service to their lord.[211] Knights needed "symbols by which they could be recognized and seals by which the authenticity of documents could be established."[212] These symbols were hereditary, primarily displayed on the shield, and,

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[207] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 24.

[208] Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 36.

[209] Patricia Langley, "Why a Pomegranate?" *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 321, no. 7269 (2000): 1154.

[210] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms*, 463.

[211] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms*, 241.

[212] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms*, 241.

"Because arms and the right to bear them was conferred by the crown, the king had to exercise some control."[213]

There were various elements in which the surface of the shield could be decorated, and one of these elements, called charges, could include "animals, real and imaginary, natural objects, inanimate objects, divine and human beings."[214] Odell Shepard, in *The Lore of the Unicorn,* describes in great detail the heraldic unicorn. It acquired its physical attributes from the *Physiologus* tradition, rather than Bestiaries.[215] Its identification with Christ, association with the virgin, water-conning, and magical horn converge, making the unicorn the epitome of purity.[216] It was fierce, proud, dangerous to his foes, gentle, and had the dignity of solitude.[217] Shepard further expresses that "most significant of all, he was a protector and champion of other beasts against the wiles of their enemies."[218]

One of the most iconic coat of arms that displays the unicorn, today, is on the British Royal Coat of Arms, where the unicorn of Scotland stands opposite the lion[219] as a result

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[213] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 242.

[214] Broughton, *Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Concepts and Terms,* 243.

[215] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 73.

[216] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 73.

[217] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 73.

[218] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn,* 73.

[219] Daniel F. McCall, "The Prevalence of Lions: Kings, Deities and Feline Symbolism in Africa and Elsewhere," *Paideuma: Mitteilungen Zur Kulturkunde* 19/20 (1973/1974): 143.

of from the Union of the Crown in 1603.[220] In 1426, the unicorn was first connected to Scottish royal business "when James I appointed a Unicorn Pursuivant and the crown used a unicorn signet for official matters between 1457 and 1462 and in extremis in 1482."[221] Similarly to *The Unicorn in Captivity* (Figure 16), the unicorn in these royal arms was depicted as wearing a crown-shaped collar, suggesting that the unicorn had been "tamed and bent to serve the Scottish crown."[222] The message that this conveyed was important in chivalric orders, such as the Order of St. Andrew (named the Order of the Unicorn by scholars), as livery collars "bound the recipient, like the unicorn, to the crown."[223]

The unicorn thus became the ultimate symbol of chivalry, knighthood, heraldry, and Christ; it embodied all the ideals of medieval romances, of the suffering of Christ and the salvation of the knight. The image of the unicorn, adopted as a heraldic device, is emblematic "for he possessed the qualities of an ideal medieval knight. He could fight fiercely and courageously against his foes, and win; he could show compassion toward his fellow creatures; and he could submit completely to his lady as was required by the laws of courtly love."[224]

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[220] "Coat of Arms," The Royal Family, accessed August 18, 2020 https://www.royal.uk/coats-arms.

[221] Stevenson, "The Unicorn, St. Andrew and the Thistle," 12.

[222] Stevenson, "The Unicorn, St. Andrew and the Thistle," 12.

[223] Stevenson, "The Unicorn, St. Andrew and the Thistle," 13.

[224] Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 60.

Chivalry, knighthood, and heraldry have a strong presence in *The Unicorn Tapestries*, and their revival in France and the Netherlands in the late Middle Ages entails reading the knight as a Christ figure and Christ as a knight. The Normans were responsible for bringing these ideals to England which then spread throughout Europe. Orders of knighthood demanded Christ-like piety in addition to martial values, inspired by knights of the romances, and while these ideals were unrealistic, they were embodied by the unicorn. Charles VIII, Louis XII, and Maximilian I were involved in knightly orders, and Maximilian I used knightly ideals to further his own influence in Europe. With Anne of Brittany central to these three rulers through marriage, her position places her in a pivotal role as the possible person for whom *The Unicorn Tapestries* were made.

Conclusion

While the mystery of the *Unicorn Tapestries* may never be solved, one thing that is conclusive is that its importance throughout the Middle Ages is not something so easily understood by modern-day observers. These tapestries are remarkably complex, with many underlying narratives and themes easily overlooked at first glance. Whether the seven tapestries are a part of the same series or not, their story can be told in more ways than one.

Many figures from classical history and medieval mythology that appeared in tapestries "provided resonant role models for medieval and Renaissance patrons. The production of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century is characterized by a predilection for subjects representing feats of arms drawn from contemporary chivalric romances and histories."[225] Armorial and chivalric tapestries were produced in large quantities and ready for sale at the cheaper end of the spectrum and "in qualities that ranged from simple patterns to artistic designs with complex symbolic and allegorical components," but they could also be commissioned.[226] While tapestries with the hunting narrative were typically displayed in private or intimate settings, those with "elaborate figurative and narrative sets" were displayed in public rooms of great palaces and households, and the patron who commissioned them "paraded role models and concepts with which he or she wished to be allied."[227] The unicorn, therefore, must have been an

[225] Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 25.

[226] Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 24.

[227] Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 24.

important image for the person who commissioned the tapestries. While it cannot be shown conclusively that they were made for Anne of Brittany, she did have an interest in unicorns,[228] and was a central figure of her husbands during the decline of medieval knighthood and chivalry. If they had been made for her, then the unicorn would have been the perfect mythological beast to utilize.

Though the three narratives—the hunt, the virgin, and the Passion—appear to be completely separate, the commissioners and artists of the tapestries managed to bring these series together, creating a new narrative that has no name, a narrative that is all three yet one, unless one should call it the unicorn narrative. It is no different from accepting the Holy Trinity as one, and the audience of the tapestries need not decide on a series or narrative, but we may never know for how long the tapestries were portrayed as a single series. The problem with the three separate narratives is that the tapestries themselves may be of different sets, with some that could have come from a hunting set, some could have come from a virgin-capture set, and another from a Passion set. This creates a challenge when attempting to decipher the sequence in which they were hanged. The *Unicorn Tapestries* don't *just* represent a hunt, they don't *just* tell the tale of virgin-capture, and they don't *just* tell the story of the Passion of Christ. Those narratives can be told without the unicorn, and the virgin-capture narrative can even be merged with that of the hunt.

Through examination of other works of art depicting the unicorn throughout the Middle Ages, such as the *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries, it is evident that people were familiar with these narratives and the unicorn as a symbol within them. The question

[228] Rorimer, "The Unicorn Tapestries Were Made for Anne of Brittany," 12.

therein lies: why the unicorn? The unicorn has a deep, rich history spanning thousands of years, and its biblical counterpart enabled medieval Christians to accept the unicorn as a symbol of Christ. However, its biblical implications are not enough to answer the question: why was the unicorn, in this particular time and place (Paris and Netherlands), of such great importance?

The unicorn had gone through an extensive evolution since it was first mentioned by Ctesias. The *Physiologus* and medieval bestiaries further integrated the unicorn into medieval society, and eventually placing it in its permanent home on the shield of knights' and the coat of arms of kings. History had made its mark in England in 1066, changing the course of all of Europe, leading to the creation of a new form of courtly life: chivalry and knighthood. Chivalric values were written about extensively in medieval romances, and orders of knighthood had made many an appearance.

The ancient descriptions of the unicorn, however, melded perfectly with these new chivalric virtues and knighthood. The unicorn, as seen during the Middle Ages, was the ideal medieval knight. As Odell Shepard describes:

> Here was a perfect emblem of the ideal that European chivalry held before itself in its great periods—the ideal according to which exceptional power and privilege were balanced and justified by exceptional responsibility. The lion, for all the heroic courage falsely attributed to him, the panther with his sweet breath, the bear with his mighty strength, had no such chivalric significance as the unicorn, which might almost seem to have been imagined precisely to serve as an emblem of the "verray parfit gentil knight.[229]

The unicorn was Christ and the Lover, it represented Christ's love and suffering, and, in turn, the knight's as well. During the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the

[229] Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn*, 74.

sixteenth century, chivalry, knighthood, and heraldry were in a period of decline and revival, and it reflects upon the transition of the Middle Ages into the early modern world and which values were most important during the early stages of that transition. The *Unicorn Tapestries* were a revival of past virtues, romances, and Christ, and the unicorn does not need hunters, plants, or a virgin for its story to be known by medieval people. Orders of knighthood, such as the Order of the Golden Fleece, which had been established in Burgundy and the Netherlands, most likely had an influence on the making of tapestries woven in the Netherlands, as the *Unicorn Tapestries* had been. These orders, and no doubt the tapestries, could not have come to fruition without William conquering England. A movement that began in England, chivalry and knighthood had migrated across Europe and played a pivotal role in monarchy and society.

The unicorn, by the late Middle Ages, had become a complex creature that was so integrated within medieval society that their magical horns were sought after by kings. This mythological beast was very real to medieval people, and the *Unicorn Tapestries* strongly portray this belief. Conceived by religion, mythology, and sexuality, the unicorn had become the epitome of chivalry, knighthood, heraldry and Christ, and within the *Unicorn Tapestries* it had become a visual medieval romance. These tapestries tell the tale of Christ the lover-knight, it embodied all chivalric and knightly virtues, and the narratives of the tapestries cannot be merged so effortlessly without the unicorn. As God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as one, so is the unicorn in the matter of the narratives and themes that surround it. If there were to be a single symbol to represent the transformation from medieval to early modern society, it would be that of the unicorn. There is no doubt that the unicorn always had this resonance in heraldry and its image,

well known, was a powerful one. Though its meaning has been lost to modern audiences, the *Unicorn Tapestries* show the might, the prowess, and the romance of the unicorn at the end of the Middle Ages.

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