

# FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

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Vol 7 Issue 2 - Queering Fantastika

<https://www.fantastikajournal.com/volume-7-issue-2>

ISSN: 2514-8915

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# MONSTROUS PURITY: VIRTUE, WOMANHOOD, AND THE FLUID NATURE OF THE UNICORN

Margaryta Golovchenko

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In the Western, Christian tradition, the unicorn has historically been viewed as the embodiment of sexual purity. Purity, in this case, is located within the patriarchal context and is most often discussed indirectly by pointing to the unicorn's relationship with human women. This relationship, rooted in the premise that attracting a creature as pure as a unicorn requires that the woman herself must be pure (read: chaste), has long been a marker for measuring a woman's worthiness in the eyes of heteronormative patriarchal society. Yet what about the unicorn itself? What happens when it is freed from this relational form of existence and given the ontological attention it deserves? How might we think of the unicorn's identity as an individual identity on-par with humans, rather than a being subservient to our fantasies? There is no single answer to these questions, primarily because from the moment of the unicorn's inception within culture, it has defied easy classification. Most recently, Chris Lavers traced the unicorn's complex history in *The Natural History of Unicorns* (2009). This history begins with the ancient Greek physician Ctesias and his unicorn chimera, which Ctesias created by combining the rhinoceros, the *kiang*, and the *chiru* (18-19). The unicorn's place in natural history is even more elusive. Cabinets of curiosities, which emerged in Europe and were intended to reflect the taste of their owners and curators, blurred the boundaries between art and zoology and played an important role in legitimising the unicorn's complex and seemingly impossible existence. In her article "On the Ironic Specimen of the Unicorn Horn in Enlightened Cabinets" (2019), historian E. C. Spary argues that, although we now know that these 'unicorn horns' tended to actually be narwhal tusks, the cabinet of curiosities was one of the first steps in trying to understand the unicorn at a time when to prove a creature's existence required finding proof in the visible and material world of nature (1036).

This article is a case study of the unicorn within the Western Christian tradition, yet it is not limited to a particular period, location, or even medium. Similarly, as the unicorn posed a taxonomic challenge for the field of natural history, it is not within the scope of this article to consider how it tangibly impacted the heteropatriarchal notion of lineage for a given species. Rather, using Aby Warburg's atemporal approach as a precedent, this article traces the unicorn's movement across visual and written media and the mortal and divine realms. It will argue that the unicorn's ontological ambiguity is, in fact, inherent to its identity. The ontological question of this article is therefore a moral and a philosophical one, rooted in understanding how the unicorn fit into, and eventually escaped,

the culturally constructed notion of heteronormativity that was imposed on an inherently queer creature. It is by performing this kind of broad, atemporal approach that the unicorn's ever-shifting position along the gender spectrum becomes clear, revealing that its existence is a challenge to the binary categories of gender (male/female), sexuality (virgin/whore), and existence (real/imaginary). For this reason, I use the term queer to refer not only to the relationships the unicorn has with women in the examples discussed in this article, but also to suggest that the unicorn does not have a fixed, or even binary, identity. By focusing on the unicorn's ability to blur the boundary between the saint-like and the monstrous, this article is an attempt to free the unicorn from its long-term linear relationship with human women and therefore from its existence as a 'pure' being that the woman is meant to measure up to but also, as I will discuss shortly, seduce. In doing so, the goal of this article is to locate the beginning of the unicorn's new life as a queer and androgynous being independent of human women and human-centric notions of purity, freed from the tangles of a binary form of existence.

### **Creature of the Gods: The Unicorn in the Heavenly Garden**

The unicorn's 'coming out' journey outside of a binary form of existence was shaped by its physical proximity and association to both the human and the divine. Before the unicorn could become a queer and asexual being, as I propose in this article, it first needed to overcome its role as a pure, even divine, creature. In Christian traditions, the unicorn was not only depicted in the company of the divine; it was also seen as one of the many forms of the divine, as in the popular Medieval trope, the Hunt of the Unicorn. Rather than a distinct story, the Hunt of the Unicorn is a combination of several elements that can still be found in contemporary culture, namely: the pursuit of the unicorn by a group of hunters and the presence of a young and beautiful female virgin who attracts the unicorn with her purity. Oftentimes, the unicorn finds respite from the chase by resting its head on the virgin's lap and falling asleep. It is later revealed that the female virgin was used as a lure by the hunters, who come upon the sleeping unicorn and kill it.

As Lavers points out in *The Natural History of Unicorns*, the unicorn's inevitable capture by the hunters, as well as its physical form – small and meek, its horn read as a part of the cross, a prominent symbol of Jesus – lead to the creature being associated with Christ, thus imbuing it with the message of salvation and redemption (61). Lavers also draws attention to a reading of the Hunt of the Unicorn as a story about victory over the Devil (71), where evil is bested by virtue, which runs counter to a more conventional reading of the virgin as a cunning liar. More recently, Emma Maggie Solberg addressed a still more drastic interpretation of the trope in *Virgin Whore* (2018). Solberg argues that the Hunt of the Unicorn was seen by some as an allegory for how the vengeful God of the Old Testament, represented by the "wild and dangerous beast" of the unicorn, was baited and pacified by the Virgin Mary, who "lured him [God-as-unicorn] into the double-hinged trap of the Incarnation and Crucifixion" (87). These discrepancies foreshadow the increasingly contradictory existence of the unicorn, a creature that cannot be described as inherently either good or evil. Instead, the unicorn operates much like myth does for Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1972) – as "a system of communication [...] a message [that] allowed one to perceive that myth cannot possibly

be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form" (107). In other words, the unicorn exists beyond a one-to-one system of correlation since it can be read as either a hero or a villain depending on the context of the story.

The role of the virgin, the second vital figure in the trope of the Hunt of the Unicorn, is just as ambivalent as that of the unicorn. It is difficult to reconcile the idea that a woman deemed untainted would wield this virginal status in order to entice the unicorn to its death. The virgin's role as a seductress in the Hunt of the Unicorn suggests that obeying social norms, namely chastity, takes precedence for women as opposed to the more moral act of saving the unicorn. [The fifth tapestry in the Unicorn Tapestries at the Met Cloisters](#), which exists in the form of two incomplete fragments, captures this two-faced nature of the virgin. In her article "The Legend of the Unicorn: An Illumination of the Maternal Split" (1984), Ildiko Mohacsy identifies the woman as the evil-eyed double of the virgin maiden type, her narrowed eyes signalling a switch from innocence to betrayal (400). Associating the woman in the tapestry with the goodness ascribed to her proves difficult as her actions, facial expression, and body language suggest the opposite. Virtue takes many forms, of which sexually coded virtue is but one, as Donna Haraway reminds us in "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others" (2004). The persistent association of virtue with women's chastity "must always remain doubtful in patriarchal optical law" considering that "'virtue' used to mean manly spirit and valor too, and God even named an order of angels the Virtues" (106). Chastity, then, does not stray too far from Christian territory. Marion Woodman's *The Pregnant Virgin: A Process of Psychological Transformation* (1997) goes further in its attempt to disentangle virginity from female chastity and virtue, identifying the moment when the modern, patriarchal notion of the virgin diverged from the term's original meaning. Woodman refers to the words of British anthropologist and psychologist John Layard, who argues that "'virgin' does not mean chastity but the reverse, the pregnancy of nature, free and uncontrolled, corresponding on the human plane to unmarried love, in contrast to controlled nature corresponding to married love" (Layard quoted in Woodman 85).

These parallel and competing discourses about the Christian unicorn in the Hunt of the Unicorn narrative are helpful for thinking about the relationship in terms of the spectrums of gender and sexuality. In a reading where the female virgin is a symbol of innocence whose 'untainted' state attracts the unicorn, it is difficult not to see an element of desire within the unicorn's approach. If the unicorn is gendered male, which it often is, this desire takes on a heteronormative and sexual tone. Lavers reads the infamous ["The Unicorn in Captivity" tapestry](#) (1495-1505), in which a unicorn is depicted tethered to a tree in the middle of a circular enclosure, as a "hunter subdued by love and by the maiden — his earthly lover, his heart's desire — [t]he circular fence representing the male's divine view of the lover who has captured his heart and also the womb within which he hopes new life will be created" (91). Additionally, Mohacsy's psychoanalytic reading frames the unicorn's attraction to the maiden as an Oedipal longing for the mother and interprets the "virgin smell" that so entices the unicorn as either the smell of lactation or, more significantly, a reference to menstruation ("The Legend of the Unicorn," 396). The idea of courtly love, which emerged and was propagated in the Middle Ages, coincided with such heteronormative readings of the unicorn-maiden relationship as

Lavers' and Mohacsy's. The unicorn, embodying male desire, is lured by the virgin, who serves as a stand-in for the temptation of female sexuality that is experienced by men. The consummation of this desire is more often symbolic rather than physical, exemplified by the capture of the elusive and, in a Christian reading, divine unicorn.

Since no physical intercourse between the unicorn and the virgin is depicted, the virgin becomes what Woodman calls, in *Addiction to Perfection: The Still Unravished Bride* (1982), the "still unravished bride" (111): capable of capturing the divine but, unlike the Virgin Mary, denied the possibility of reproduction through it. Like Lavers, Solberg reads the Unicorn Tapestries as a representation of the sacrament of marriage but draws attention to the fact that the allegorical ring of matrimony in "The Unicorn in Captivity" occurs separately from the actual act of taming: the "phallic fertility monster can only be subdued by coitus, represented by the encircling and suckling of the animal in the embrace of a naked virgin" (87). Even if copulation is allegorical rather than physical, the implication that coitus will nonetheless occur is palpable in the tapestry, casting doubt on the existing discourse of purity. The unicorn navigates between the acceptable spiritual form of copulation and the more literal and unacceptable forms, ranging from bestiality to sexual intercourse outside of marriage. It is worth noting that sodomy, which was defined as any sex that was not reproductive and included gay/lesbian sex, would have also fallen into this category. When it comes to the unicorn, there is no binary opposition of pure versus tainted, or chaste versus promiscuous, because, as the multiple contexts surrounding its existence demonstrate, the unicorn has always been instrumentalised for the narrative and moral – of piety and chastity – that most benefitted the teller of the tale, which historically tended to be a heteronormative one. As a result, moral fluidity was distinct from gender fluidity. The same flexibility was not extended to the latter since to exist in opposition to a woman meant to be, by default, coded male.

To read the unicorn in the Hunt of the Unicorn means to queer its relationship to the female virgin. This changes the gender of one of the characters, not the relationship between them, which is rooted in the unicorn's desire for the virgin and, as has been established, is often interpreted as sexual. Jess Dobkin takes on a different Christian story, Noah's Ark, which is often used to explain why the unicorn does not exist. Her piece *Everything I've Got* (2010) is a contemporary example that does more than simply change the unicorn's gender default from male to female. In the accompanying "Commentary: The Great Refusal and the Great Hope" (2011), Jill Dolan argues that Dobkin, drawing on the trope of the unicorn as a solitary creature, whether because it prefers to be alone or because it is the last of its kind, presents the creature as symbolic of a "queer resistance to [...] reproductive and other binaries [...] metamorphiz[ing] the radical lesbian refusal of heteronormativity" (194-195). Dobkin does not tell the reader about the nature of the unicorn's sexual relationships, particularly with the virgin maidens the unicorn summons, "none [of whom] are pure enough to answer the call" (190). Instead, the queerness of Dobkin's unicorn lies in her refusal to find a male mate and board the Ark, putting personal pleasure over reproduction. The death of Dobkin's unicorn is interpreted by one of the animals on the Ark as punishment for her frivolity, which is directly related to her sexuality. In a version of the Hunt of the Unicorn where the unicorn is gendered female, its death could similarly be interpreted – from a heteronormative perspective – as

punishment not only for giving into temptation but for also experiencing a 'deviant' form of desire.

Already in the Medieval period the unicorn's body accommodated multiple readings, serving as a symbol for the divine (Jesus, Mary) and as a representation of mortal, male desire for female sexuality. The unicorn was anthropomorphised the moment it entered culture in the infamous Hunt of the Unicorn trope. In "On the *Dynamis* of Animals, or How *Animalium* Became *Anthropos*" (2006), Diane Apostolos-Cappadona notes that this process strips the *animalium* of its initial allure in the eyes of humans as "primal reverence" and replaces it with a desire for control and ownership, transforming the *animalium* into an Other (442). From an ontological standpoint, the unicorn's identity cannot be pinpointed easily because it has operated as a container for multiple, at times opposing, readings over the course of centuries. This flexibility has given the unicorn its cultural longevity, protecting it from the disintegration and disappearance that Barthes argues myths are doomed to (*Mythologies* 119). In fact, the unicorn's relationship with the female virgin is one of the few constants in the mythos of the unicorn, although its gender and the nature of that relationship is ripe for reimagining. In other words, the unicorn's beginnings as a flexible symbol suggests that to queer the unicorn is to continue the trend of allowing the unicorn to remain a semiotically and ontologically ambiguous being.

### **Becoming Female: The Unicorn as Woman**

The unicorn's relationship with humans, particularly human women, became even more complex once the unicorn descended from the divine to the mortal realm. The unicorn assumed a more corporeal form, sometimes human but not always. This mortal form is less fluid than the one it had in a Christian context. It does not hold multiple sexualities and readings as easily as it did when it served as an interlocutor for the divine. This occurs, in part, because the unicorn's bond with human women also becomes less ambiguous. The unicorn is shown to have more in common with the virgin than the Christian context initially suggested. As Woodman reminds us, the two share the same struggle of having chastity imposed onto them until each is "[c]ut off from the wisdom of the body [as] the [two] virgin[s] [are] frozen" (*Addiction to Perfection* 84). The possibility of a sexual relationship between the unicorn and the virgin is therefore diminished, if not fully erased, as the unicorn absorbed the physical and ontological aspects of the (cis) female body. As the boundaries between the two, as well as the boundaries between human and animal, began to blur, the unicorn was no longer simply gendered female but also, in some cases, became woman. I want to note that by using the word 'gendered' here, I am referring to the way that the unicorn's identity is still, ultimately, determined by the creators of the works that I discuss below. The unicorn in these fictional contexts does not declare its own gender, although such a premise would be a welcome addition to this article's argument and warrants further discussion.

Of the two cases – the female unicorn and the female-unicorn-turned-human-woman – the former is the less radical jump, as illustrated in Ridley Scott's 1985 fantasy film *Legend*. The film's central conflict follows the trope of the Hunt of the Unicorn: Lily, a princess who embodies innocence and beauty, touches one of the two unicorns that exist in the world, thereby sully-

the creature's purity with her mortal touch and sending it into a death-like slumber. At the same time, Scott adds a subtle complexity to the familiar narrative, as the two unicorns are revealed to be a male and a female. Lily touches the male unicorn, whereas it is the female who is pursued and ultimately captured by the servants of darkness. Although the quest to free the unicorn is motivated primarily by the need to prevent evil from winning, there is added urgency because the harmonious heterosexual partnership between the two unicorns has been disrupted, leaving the female unicorn to face the same potential end as Dobkin's unicorn. The question of reproduction is notably absent in historical discussions and portrayals of the unicorn, like the Hunt of the Unicorn, which suggest that the creature is fuelled by desire and passion rather than the need to procreate. More often, the unicorn is said to be alone to underscore its individual supremacy, much like the case with the Christian God. The select depictions of baby unicorns that do exist are more often found in media intended for children, such as in picture books, and their presence is taken for a fact that is rarely, if ever, explained. In such cases, the baby unicorn seems to appear out of nowhere, as if it were immaculately conceived and brought into the world, a topic that also warrant its own, separate discussion.

If the unicorn is gendered female, how does it perform femininity? One approach to answering this question would be to turn to Judith Butler's seminal article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988), in which Butler defines gender as "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" which, with time, solidifies and becomes something we think of as a type, a behaviour, a form (519, original emphasis). In the case of the unicorn, its characteristic trait – its attraction to human female virgins – is a form of behaviour that is not limited to a specific gender. Unlike the human woman, whose femininity is judged based on her appearance and behaviour, particularly her virginity, the unicorn does not have an extrinsic layer around it that would enable this kind of performance. Only through assigning meaning to the unicorn's behaviour do the creature's actions acquire masculine or feminine connotations. After all, as discussed above, just because the unicorn in the Hunt of the Unicorn has been interpreted to be male does not mean that the unicorn's sex is male, merely that a reading of the unicorn as male is the reading that was favoured historically. Butler's theory of repetition can help us understand the long-standing reading in Western culture of the unicorn as male, conflating gender and sex until it is difficult to disentangle the two. The next step for the unicorn, which it has not quite achieved yet on a cultural level, would be to move past this binary approach altogether.

Rebecca Horn's wearable sculpture *Unicorn/Einhorn* (1970-72) is an example of the attempt through performance. The sculpture also manifests what Giovanni Aloï describes in *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene* (2018) as our inability to understand an object beyond the most immediate surface level, since "even when we cut into an apple or an animal body, our action is only capable of multiplying surfaces: the essence of the object relentlessly withdraws" (163). In Horn's case, the 'cutting into' is less a physical action than it is a question of embodiment. *Unicorn* – or a wearable "alicorn," to use the term popularised by American professor, poet, and politician Odell Shepard in his 1930 book *The Lore of the Unicorn*, referring to the unicorn's horn – is one of several prosthetics that Horn put on, after which she

wandered through a field for most of the day. It is debatable what occurs in this performance. Does Horn become a unicorn or is the unicorn brought to life and 'given form' through the prosthetics, using Horn's body as an instrument? More importantly, if the unicorn is 'brought to life' by Horn, is it a female unicorn given that Horn herself identifies as female? Rather than attempting to answer these open-ended questions, it is important to recognise that this is yet another instance where the unicorn resists conforming to a single identity, which would require exists in a static, fixed form. By wearing *Unicorn*, Horn seeks the unicorn in its Platonic form, abstract and nonphysical. Gone is the familiar image of the white horse with a flowing mane and a glimmering, single horn projecting from its forehead. If Horn's unicorn does have an identity, then it is, quite literally, performative, assumed and shed at will and shaped by the actions and presentation of the human wearer. In this way, it has been divested of the layers of gender and sexuality that have smothered the unicorn for so long.

The question of performing is much clearer when the unicorn becomes a woman, as in Peter S. Beagle's 1968 fantasy novel, *The Last Unicorn*. Like Scott, Beagle specifies that Unicorn is female. The primary difference between *The Last Unicorn* and *Legend* is the fact that, until she is transformed into a woman and given a 'human' name, Amalthea, Unicorn is referred to by her species type. By capitalising the word so that it becomes her 'name,' Beagle distinguishes Unicorn from all the other hypothetical unicorns that existed in the past and, as Unicorn believes, are still out there somewhere. Significantly, Beagle makes it clear that Unicorn is female, for even nameless other characters refer to her using female pronouns. The fact that Unicorn is the last of her kind is also one of her defining features and, when applied to the female body, whether human or animal, this detail adds an additional level of urgency and responsibility, as a vessel that contains the future. Although it is curiosity and concern that fuels Unicorn's journey, rather than any kind of biological urgency, the reproductive implications of the narrative cannot be overlooked. The fact that Unicorn is non-human simply makes this implication more complex. Instead of looking for a mate to engage in reproductive sex with, Beagle's Unicorn becomes a mother figure by finding the unicorns. She therefore still achieves the goal of reproduction, being the sustainment of the population of one's kind to ensure its continuity into the future. Whereas the Immaculate Conception still involved the physical birth of Jesus, Unicorn's form of motherhood omits this physical aspect. In *The Last Unicorn*, therefore, the archetypes of the unicorn and the virgin are conflated in Unicorn, who maintains the curiosity of the former and the innocence and purity of the latter. If Unicorn can be read as a mother figure, then it is in the way she expresses concern for the well-being of her 'children,' who in this case are kin on a species level.

Also significant is the fact that the role of the unicorn as the one who is sexually drawn to the human virgin is performed by a male character, prince Lir. Beagle continues the Medieval view of the unicorn-virgin relationship as a heterosexual one but reverses the sex-species correlation. However, as Weronika Laszkiewicz observes in "Peter S. Beagle's Transformations of the Mythic Unicorn" (2014), "Lir's yearning for the Lady is perhaps the purest one in the book" because he is ultimately "satisfied by Amalthea's existence alone and does not care about her physical shape" (58). In other words, Lir-as-unicorn demonstrates pansexual feelings towards Amalthea-as-virgin. In doing so, he disrupts the Hunt of the Unicorn trope, in part because a single physical touch would prevent Amalthea from returning to her unicorn form and achieving her goal of finding the other unicorns. The initial sexual desire that Lir experiences for Amalthea turns into something more,



suggesting that Amalthea – and by extension, Unicorn as a character and as a being – inspires higher and purer feelings that transcend lust. To be female and to become a human woman is not a punishment in Beagle’s novel, nor is it an eternal chrysalis that has been imposed on Unicorn the way it is on the virgin in the Hunt of the Unicorn. In fact, Beagle presents mortality and a single corporeal form as something to be feared due to the limitations that result from it. *The Last Unicorn* gives the unicorn the opportunity to try out a greater number of corporeal forms, to slip in and out of them like skins. Beagle’s novel also diminishes the distance between unicorn and human, demonstrating that the two are not mutually exclusive categories and that unicorns and female virgins have more than sexual purity in common.

Beagle nonetheless calls back to the unicorn’s historical gendering as male by having the magician Schmendrick recall a tale told by the great wizard Nikos about a male unicorn who was ambushed by three hunters when it was resting its head in the lap of a female virgin. Unlike in Medieval tales, this unicorn transformed into a young man who brandished a sword and killed the hunters, after which he married the virgin. The unicorn then lived the rest of his life as a mortal and died an old man, albeit without bearing any children. Beagle upholds the idea that unicorns do not bear children, but he allows the unicorn to obtain the object of its desire – the female virgin – without that being treated as a reprehensible action punishable by death. What makes Nikos’ story significant is that it reiterates that Beagle is not limited to thinking of the unicorn as aligned with only one gender, although the female gender predominates.<sup>1</sup> Through the characters of Unicorn and Amalthea, *The Last Unicorn* queers the reader’s understanding of the unicorn in relation to sexual desire and non-sexual reproduction, in the sense that heterosexual reproduction is no longer assumed, nor possible. The novel undermines the idea that the unicorn is unfit for any sort of kinship relations, demonstrating that a sense of community does not have to be rooted in a parent-child dichotomy to be valid.

### **Queering the Unicorn: The New ‘Monster’**

Turning now to examining the unicorn itself, we first need to consider a more basic level of identification: how do we talk about the unicorn? What pronouns do we use? Up until now, I have deliberately referred to the unicorn as a ‘creature’ or, when speaking of the unicorn directly, used the pronoun ‘it.’ ‘It’ is neutral and makes it possible to distinguish between humans and non-humans in a way the pronoun ‘they’ does not. However, ‘it’ has the unshakeable connotation of objectification, suggesting the unicorn is lesser than a non-human being. This paradox is addressed at the beginning of Timothy Morton’s book *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People* (2017). Morton focuses on this very question of recognising other entities and finding ways of empathetic coexistence: There is no pronoun entirely suitable to describe ecological beings. [...] If I call them “he” or “she,” then I’m gendering them according to heteronormative concepts that are untenable on evolutionary terms. If I call them “it,” I don’t think they are people like me and I’m being blatantly anthropocentric. (3-4)

Due to the unicorn's mythical nature, it is also difficult to call 'it' an 'animal,' even though Mary Midgley's definition of the term in *Myths We Live By* (2003) – "the word 'animal' stands for the inhuman, the anti-human. It represents the forces that we fear in our own nature, forces that we are unwilling to regard as a true part of it" (136) – is an important reminder that 'animal' has often been used in a way that is synonymous to 'monster,' especially in the Western colonial context. There is an unbridgeable gulf between the unicorn and other animals that stems from the fact that the unicorn is a hybrid, an amalgamation of a several different animals. It is this stitching together that gives the unicorn a touch of the monstrous, eternally separating 'it' from the animals with which we are familiar.

There are two ways to be a monster: on the level of connotation and on an ontological level. Monsters by connotation are monstrous on a physical level, feared and Othered because of the drastic changes that occurred to their body. These changes can be significant deformities or simply exaggerated features. Ontological monsters, on the other hand, are those that terrify the imagination because they pose a threat to social stability on an ideological level. These monsters are dangerous because they suggest a physical mode of being other than the status quo, which is, among other things, heteronormative and ableist. This does not mean, however, that monsters are 'uncertain.' According to Dana Oswald in "Monstrous Gender: Geographies of Ambiguity" (2012), monsters still "exist in a very clear space, one that does not choose a side, but rather one that points to the futility and inadequacy of such divisions" (362). More importantly, ontological monsters also exhibit, albeit not always, what Oswald calls "monstrous gender" (346), existing beyond the boundaries of the socially acceptable in a way that "constructs human gender as stable" (347). In other words, monsters reinforce the constructed nature of the human gender binary. They exist in opposition to it, showcasing a myriad of other possible genders. By tracing the unicorn's movement across the binary genders and beyond them, the first two sections of this article have also sought to make this idea of unstable gender apparent. Considering that gender does not mean the same thing when applied to a human, an animal, and a mythical creature, then the unicorn's constructed and fluid nature becomes even more prominent.

Even if we do not think of the unicorn as a monster according to contemporary Western culture's definition of a monster – that is, a monster by connotation – then the unicorn's ability to blur the boundaries of gender and being make 'it' ontologically monstrous. Before declaring this a defeat for the unicorn, let us keep in mind Patricia MacCormack's observation from "Posthuman Teratology" (2012): "Monsters are only ever defined contingent with their time and place; they are never unto themselves. It could be argued that monstrosity is only a failure of or a catalyst to affirm the human" (293). Classical monsters like Dracula or Frankenstein exist based on this logic, as 'unnatural' to the human 'natural,' allowing us to define our humanity by contrasting ourselves to their perceived inhumanity. By comparison, the unicorn, as a symbol of purity and chastity, requires us to treat 'it' as the example to aspire to, to look inward and absorb 'its' virtues into ourselves. The unicorn's desire to live, less in a biological sense of survival and more in terms of 'its' ability to remain present in Western culture, is comparable to the persistence of myth. For Barthes, "[w]hen meaning is too full for myth to be able to invade it, myth goes around it, and carries it away boldly" (132). In a

similar way, the unicorn has been navigating 'its' way around ideas of heteronormativity and female chastity, sexual and immaculate reproduction, biological and chosen kinship systems. 'It' has gone from being a symbol to coming into 'itself,' transitioning across various corporeal and metaphorical forms. This movement between two genders destabilises the gender binary and suggests that the unicorn is more than any single gender identity, given the creature's natural propensity to slip in and out of them. In other words, the unicorn can be thought of as ontologically trans. By becoming increasingly aligned with a greater sense of individuality, most notably in Beagle's novel, the unicorn demonstrates that 'it' is no ordinary monster, or at least not the kind of monster described by MacCormack, which exists in Horror narratives as a warning to the human characters. In fact, the unicorn redefines the very word 'monster,' which is shown to be negative only for those who insist on reinforcing the gender binary. Today, the unicorn's Otherness therefore becomes positive and desirable in a starkly different way. To recall, in a historical and patriarchal context, the unicorn was physically desired for 'its' body and perceived magical properties. 'It' was also seen as a favourable model for women to emulate. In a contemporary context, the unicorn's Otherness becomes an entry point for rethinking binary gender identity and the idea of a fixed self that is established at birth.

In light of this challenge of classifying the unicorn and placing it along the spectrum of monstrosity, Morton's "strange stranger," a translation of Derrida's *arrivant*, is a fitting candidate to replace extant terms used to speak of the unicorn, terms that are based either on the binaries of gender (she/her and he/him) or the terminology of myths and fairytales (the 'neutral' fantastical creature or the evil monster). The term "strange strangers," which Morton puts forth in their article "Queer Ecology" (2010), encapsulates the "uncanny, familiar and strange" nature that the unicorn represents, "its" "familiarity [...] strange, [its] strangeness familiar" (277). We are familiar with the animals that make up the unicorn, perhaps less so with where they originated from or how they came together because of curiosity and misconception. Yet is the way that these parts come together to create a new whole, resulting in a creature that is of this world but also slightly removed from it, that makes the unicorn a magical presence that destabilises the perceived order and rationality of the world it inhabits.

The uncertainty in identifying and labelling the unicorn suggests 'it' is not only a living entity but also a living form of resistance to existing systems of representation and identification. The unicorn embodies what J. Jack Halberstam defines as "wildness" in their recent book *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020): "a chaotic force of nature, the outside of categorization, unrestrained forms of embodiment, the refusal to submit to social regulations, loss of control, [and] the unpredictable" that "disorders desire and desires disorder" (3, 7). Like wildness, which Halberstam argues exists to add tension and represent all the things left behind in the creation process of our human-centric world order, the unicorn's presence in art and literature is a type of disturbance. Narratives like the Hunt of the Unicorn and even *The Last Unicorn*, which still assigns Unicorn a fixed gender even when the species divide is crossed, use gender to try and make sense of the unicorn, to tame 'its' wild nature and bring 'it' into the orderly world some might refer to as 'reality.' Yet each time we think we have found a place for the unicorn where 'it' belongs, 'it' finds a way to disrupt the peace in 'its' newfound garden and escape. In doing so, the unicorn,

as well Halberstam, remind is that “wildness is not the territorial equivalent of freedom” since “wildness has its own regulatory regimes, its own concept of order, and its own hierarchies and modes of domination” (131). To let the unicorn be wild means that ‘it’ must be allowed to maintain a genderqueer existence, transitioning between and beyond gender at will.

The fact that the unicorn has functioned as both a character and an allegory, as an animal-like mythical creature who also occasionally transforms into a human, suggests that ‘it’ operates under what Aloi calls “speculative taxidermy,” which is “concerned with a more specific approach and with a much narrower range of works of art in which visible animal skin (or its representation) is critically adopted as a defining indexical relationship between animal presence and the medium of representation itself” (23). We can never get to the centre of what the unicorn is, how it should be identified and referred to, because from its inception the element of multivalence was built into it. The unicorn never belonged to the maiden, to the realm of the feminine, even though the unicorn has always been closely aligned with femininity. This is not because the unicorn is ‘above’ the feminine, but rather because we have only recently begun to understand that the female, whether human or unicorn, biological or allegorical, is only one of the possible doors the unicorn may choose to walk through on its journey of self-discovery.

## Conclusion

With its propensity for denying readers and viewers the ease of a quick and definitive interpretation, the unicorn’s existence has taken on a distinctly trans nature. Challenging our understanding of purity when it comes to sexual intercourse and heteronormative marriage conventions, the unicorn necessitates a re-examination of the interconnection between womanhood and motherhood, with the frequent emphasis on procreative capabilities, within Western patriarchal society, as well as on the role that gender identity and plays in shaping how human and non-human existence is then valued and judged. As the examples considered in this article demonstrate, while remnants of the trope of the unicorn and the virgin can still often be found within more contemporary media, like *Legend* and *The Last Unicorn*, this relationship no longer defines the unicorn. Although the unicorn has long served as an interlocutor, representing figures from the Christian religion as well as more abstract concepts or social values, its ever-evolving presence within culture – such as its relatively recent association with the rainbow, one of the symbols of the LGBTQIA+ community – is a reminder that is a biologically and ontologically fluid creature that no longer exists in opposition. Now, it is the unicorn who demands our full attention.

## NOTES

1. Unlike in the Hunt of the Unicorn trope, where the unicorn’s gender had a direct impact on the story, it is easy to look past gender in *The Last Unicorn* and read Unicorn more holistically, as a symbol rather than a specific character. One such reading, which further emphasises the underlying queerness of Beagle’s novel, is Hannah Abigail Clarke’s “Queer Visibility & Coding in *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle.”

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## BIONOTE

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