

8-7-2020

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PEREGRINATIONS

JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE
VOLUME VII, NUMBER 2 (AUTUMN 2020)

(Re)Visions of the Unicorn: The Case of Scève's *Délie* (1544)

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The unicorn is a ubiquitous figure redolent with symbolic meaning in the visual culture of the high and late Middle Ages. It is primarily a symbol of Christ in bestiaries and the *Physiologus* tradition, the hunt for the unicorn is an allegory of the Passion, but scenes of the unicorn near fountains or water sources suggest the late-medieval perception of the horn as a panacea. Beyond this, the one-horned creature represents courtly love as the poet-lover falls prey to the beautiful virgin. Because of this variety, unicorns also populate the genre of emblems¹ - an allegorical mode of representation derived from medieval bestiaries consisting of three parts: title,

The author would like to thank Editor Sarah Blick, Nicholas Ealy, and the anonymous peer reviewers for comments on earlier versions of this article. ORCID id 0000-0002-3136-9420

¹ Mara Wade defines the emblem, "The canonical emblem can be defined structurally, and often is, as a tripartite composition consisting of a brief motto in Latin or a European vernacular language (*inscriptio*), an enigmatic picture (*pictura*), and an epigram (*subscriptio*)" <http://emblematica.library.illinois.edu/help/what-emblem>. Utrecht University website reads, "Emblem books are collections of cryptic text and images" <https://bc.library.uu.nl/node/60>. On emblems see, William S. Heckscher, "Renaissance Emblems: Observations Suggested by Some Emblem-Books in the Princeton University Library," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 15, no. 2 (1954): 55-68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26402658>, www.jstor.org/stable/26402658; John Manning, *The Emblem* (London: Reaktion Books 2004); Karl A.E. Emenkel, *The Invention of the Emblem book and the Transmission of Knowledge ca. 1510-1610* (Leiden: Brill 2018). On French emblems see, Laurence Grove and Daniel S. Russell, *The French Emblem: Bibliography of Secondary Sources*. (Genève: Droz, 2000); Alison Adams, Stephen Rawles, and Alison Saunders. *A Bibliography of French Emblem Books* (Genève: Droz, 2002); Alison Adams, *Webs of Allusion: French Protestant Emblem Books of the Sixteenth Century* (Genève: Droz, 2003).

image, and motto. While scholars have shown the significance² of unicorns in a range of literary and visual arts,³ little scholarship has examined unicorn iconography in early emblem books of 1540s Europe nor has there been much formal analysis of emblem images combined with literary analysis of the accompanying text in emblem books.⁴

This article considers the shift of unicorn iconography from the allegory of Christ in medieval bestiaries to the symbol of poet-lover in Maurice Scève's early emblem book *Délie, objet de plus haulte vertu* (1544). The article title indicates a "vision" or sighting of the unicorn in antiquity, the revisions of written and visual

² On symbolic literature, see Robin Raybould, *An Introduction to the Symbolic Literature of the Renaissance* (Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2005).

³ Roger Caillois argues that from the late 12th/early 13th-century, during the Renaissance, up until to the late 18th-century, the unicorn was the most popular theme of sculpture and tapestries in the Christian world, "Le mythe de la licorne," *Diogenes* 119 (1982): 3. On the history of the unicorn, see Bruno Faidutti, *Images et connaissances de la licorne: fin du moyen âge – 19^e siècle* (Thèse de doctorat, L'Université de Paris XII, 1995); Michel Pastoureau et Elizabeth Delahaye, *Les secrets de la licorne* (RMN, 2013). On the Cloisters tapestries, see Margaret Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976). Jane Beal argues that the connection of Christ to the unicorn (in addition to the elephant) in the liturgy of 14th-century England was well known to Ranulf Higden and other monastics, "The Unicorn as a Symbol for Christ in the Middle Ages," In *Illuminating Jesus in the Middle Ages*, (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

⁴ There is a debate concerning the selection of woodcut images: until recently, no evidence existed to verify that Scève played a role in the choice of images. However, two prominent *Délie* scholars (Paul Ardouin and Gérard Defaux) confirm that Scève alone was responsible for the conception, composition, and placement of the emblems, see Paul Ardouin, "Au sujet du premier emblème de la *Délie* de Maurice Scève," in *Actes du colloque sur l'humanisme lyonnais au XVI^e siècle, mai 1972*, ed. Jean-René Derre (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1974), 388-389, and Maurice Scève, *Délie: Object De Plus Haulte Vertu*, 2 vols., edited by Gérard Defaux (Genève: Droz, 2004). Although interdisciplinary studies are beginning to emerge in the field of Renaissance emblem literature, art historical analyses of Scève's *Délie* remain rare. See Alison Adams and Laurence Grove, *Emblems and art history: nine essays* (Glasgow emblem studies, v. 1, Glasgow: Dept. of French, University of Glasgow, 1996); Dietmar Peil, "On the question of a Physiologus tradition in emblematic art and writing," *Animals in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Nona C. Flores (New York: Garland Pub, 1996), 103-130; Vladimír Juřen, "Scève et Raphaël," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 56, no. 1 (1994): 83-87; Jerry Nash, "The Notion and Meaning of Art in the *Délie*," *Romanic Review*, LXXI, (1980): 28-46; Jerry Nash, "Renaissance Values in Love and Art: The Emblematic Meaning of Scève's *Délie* 449," *Allegorica: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Literature* XVI (1995): 17-29.



Figure 1 De Animale Unicornium, *Physiologus Bernensis*, Cod. 318, fol. 16v, c. 830, Reims, France. Collection: Burgerbibliothek, Bern, Switzerland. Photo: public domain, <https://www.e-codices.ch/en/list/one/bbb/0318> <https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/bbb/0318/16v/0/Sequence-34>



Figure 2 Unicornis, *The Workshop Bestiary*, MS M. 81, fol. 12v, c. 1185, England. Collection: Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Photo: public domain Morgan Library: <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/workshop-bestuary/17>

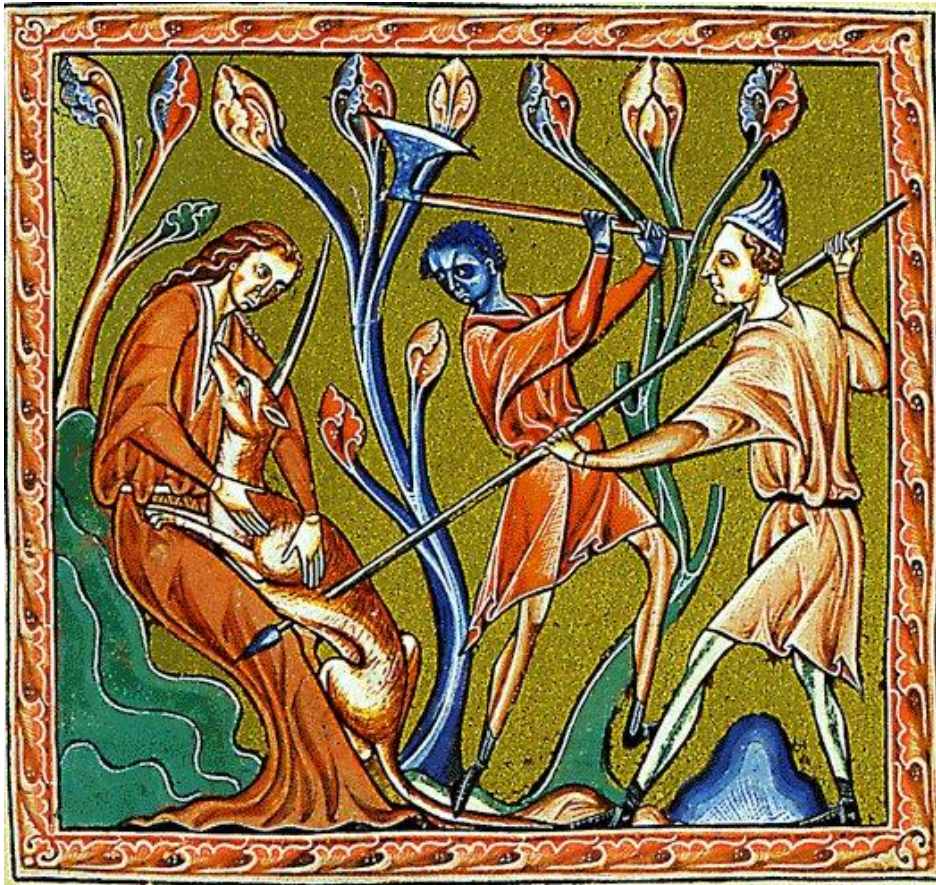


Figure 3, Unicornis, *The Ashmole Bestiary*, MS Ashmole 1511 fol.14v, c. 1220, England. Collection: Bodleian Library, Oxford. Photo: public domain

https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Licorne#/media/Fichier:The_Ashmole_Bestiary_-_Unicorn_hunt.jpg



Figure 4 Unicornu, MS Bodley 764 f.10v, c. 1225-1250, England.

Collection: Bodleian Library, Oxford. Photo: public domain

https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Licorne#/media/Fichier:82-Oxford_Bodley_764-Cervo.jpg



Figure 5 Unicornis, Bestiary and Lapidary ('the Rochester Bestiary'), Royal MS 12 F XIII f.10v (c. 1230) London, British Library. Photo: public domain: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-rochester-bestiary#>



Figure 6 Pierre de Beauvais, "la chasse à la licorne'Bestiaire," MS 3516 fol. 205v (1285) Artois, France, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. Photo: public domain <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Licorne#/media/Fichier:ChassalaXIII.jpg>



Figure 7 Richard de Fournival, *Bestiaire d'Amour*, "La chasse à la licorne" (1325-1350) Bibliothèque nationale de France Manuscrits Français 15213 fol 74v. Photo: public domain

depictions throughout history, and the unicorn's gaze in emblems. Following a brief discussion of unicorn imagery in the Middle Ages, I suggest that the well-known symbolic function of *Lady & the Unicorn* and the *Unicorn & the Fountain* in early 16th-century France, was altered by Maurice Scève who used these tropes in service of his own emblematic endeavor. By focusing on the emblems known as *The lady & the Unicorn*⁵ (emblem 1) (**Fig. 16**) and *The Unicorn who sees itself*⁶ (emblem 26)⁷ (**Fig. 17**), it

⁵ La femme & la Lycorne.

⁶ La Lycorne qui se voit.

⁷ The unicorn appears in *Délie* a third time in emblem 20 *Orpheus*. Nonetheless, the unicorn is not the main concern of the image-text, so I will not discuss it in the present study. See the *Orpheus* emblem online at the Glasgow University Emblem Website <https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/picturae.php?id=FSCa021>.

becomes evident that the title and image in emblems quote the medieval tradition visually, but the motto complicates the relation between text and image: the motto alters the symbolic significance of the image from the poet-lover caught by the snares of Love to the poet-lover who suffers and dies under the gaze of the monstrous Lady Délie. At the center of the book (the second unicorn emblem, 26) the medieval tradition of the unicorn purifying water with its horn is completely altered to an image of the animal terrified by its own reflection as he glimpses the monstrous other within.

History of the Unicorn in the West: Textual & Visual Tradition

The ubiquity of unicorns in contemporary popular culture has renewed interest in the antique and medieval origins of the one-horned creature.⁸ While legendary beasts in the West, such as mermaids and dragons emerge from Greek and Roman mythology, in contrast the unicorn originates in a discourse on knowledge about the observed world. The earliest Western⁹ account of the unicorn appears in *Indika* (398 BCE) in which Greek author Ctesias of Cnidus (5th century BCE) described a creature he saw in nature: an elusive quadruped with a single

⁸ Jenny Davis Barnett, "Explainer: from bloodthirsty beast to saccharine symbol - the history and origins of the unicorn," *The Conversation*, 29 August 2019, theconversation.com/explainer-from-bloodthirsty-beast-to-saccharine-symbol-the-history-and-origins-of-the-unicorn-120760.

⁹ On the origins of the unicorn in Caucasus hunting mythology, see David Hunt "The Association of the Lady and the Unicorn, and the Hunting Mythology of the Caucasus," *Folklore* (Research Article), 114 (2003):75–90. On the unicorn in the Persian tradition see Anna Contadini, *A World of Beasts a Thirteenth-century Illustrated Arabic Book on Animals (the Kitāb Na't Al-Ḥayawān) in the Ibn Bakhtīshū' Tradition* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012).

horn.¹⁰ Over the centuries, Roman authors embellished Greek accounts: Pliny (23-79) claimed it was impossible to catch a living unicorn,¹¹ while Aelian (c. 170-230) remarked that the unicorn grows gentle towards the chosen female during mating season.¹² Classical natural history influenced images of one-horned creatures in Jewish law and theology (*Talmud*, 2nd-century) and then, influenced by exegesis and the *Psalms*, unicorns migrated into Jewish art and literature. Subsequently, St Jerome's *Vulgate* (4th-century) translated this same biblical creature in the Old and New Testaments as the Latin *unicornis*.¹³

¹⁰ "(45) There are wild asses in India the size of horses and even bigger. They have a white body, crimson head, and deep blue eyes. They have a horn in the middle of their brow one and a half cubits in length," "The Indika," in *Ctesias on India: and fragments of his minor works*, Translated by Andrew Nichols (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011, 47–82), 56. Recent criticism identifies the same cognitive typology in Aristotle's *Parts of Animals* (350 BCE), Pietro Li Causi "Da Ctesia ad Aristotele: i primi passi dell'unicorno nel mondo della 'realtà,'" *ClassicoContemporaneo – Orizzonti* 5 (2019), available at: <https://www.classicocontemporaneo.eu/index.php/187-numero-5/orizzonti-5/438-l-asino-indiano-da-ctesia-ad-aristotele-i-primi-passi-dell-unicorno-nel-mondo-della-realta>. Based on the scholarship of Odell Shephard, *The Lore of the Unicorn* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930), it was previously thought that Ctesias was most likely describing the Indian Rhinoceros (the cloven-hooved ass with a single horn on its forehead). However, recent scholarship argues convincingly against this theory, see Chris Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns* (London: Granta, 2010).

¹¹ "They say it is impossible to capture this animal [unicorn] alive," Pliny, *Natural History, Volume III: Books 8-11*, Translated by H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library 353, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940): 57. DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.pliny_elder-natural_history.1938.

¹² "[B]ut at the mating season, when it [the unicorn] associates with the female, it becomes gentle and the two even graze side by side," Aelian, *On Animals, Volume III: Books 12-17*, translated by A. F. Scholfield (Loeb Classical Library 449, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959): 291. DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.aelian-characteristics_animals.1958.

¹³ The creature is also occasionally translated as *rhinoceros*. The Authorized Version of the King James Bible from 1611 mentions the 'unicorn,' Juliette Wood, "When unicorns walked the earth: A brief history of the unicorn and its fellows" in *Fantastic Creatures in Mythology and Folklore: From Medieval Times to the Present Day* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 15. On the *Vulgate*, see Edgar Swift and Angela M. Kinney. *The Vulgate Bible: Douay-Rheims translation*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010-2013). References to unicorns and horns in the Old and New Testament of the Bible are interpreted as prefiguration in the Middle Ages, Ron Baxter, *Bestiaries and Their Users in the Middle Ages* (Stroud; London: Sutton Pub., Courtauld Institute, 1998), 45. Medieval culture seeks out the announcement of the Revelation in Classical texts and interprets it with allegory, "Platon et Aristote ont parlé de la Trinité, Cicéron a deviné la Résurrection, les Sibylles sont des vierges pleines de l'esprit de Dieu, Virgile a annoncé l'enfant mystérieux qui devait changer la face du monde" [Plato and Aristotle spoke of the Trinity, Cicero guessed the Resurrection, the Sibyls are virgins full of the

The allegorical identification of Christ in the *Physiologus*,¹⁴ an explicitly Christian collection of animal lore, aids the integration of the unicorn into the Christian world view in the early Middle Ages.¹⁵ The *Physiologus* explains that this

spirit of God, Virgil announced the mysterious child who was to change the face of the world], André Masson, *L'Allégorie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1974), 43. The etymology of "unicorn" in English is "Latin *unicornis* one-horned, (Vulg.) unicorn, f. UNI- + *cornū* HORN," T. F. Hoad, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* s.v. "unicorn," (Oxford, 2003) <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780192830982.001.0001>.

¹⁴ Gohar Muradyan defines the *Physiologus* as "an early Christian writing, which appeared approximately in the second century A.D. [CE] in Greek, probably in Alexandria, and was widespread during the Middle Ages in various recensions...From Latin it was translated into western languages: Anglo-Saxon, Old High German, Flemish, French, Waldensian, Provençal, Spanish and Italian. It consists of miniature stories, forty-eight in all, about the nature (φύση) of real or mythical animals, plants and stones, with a religious interpretation of their peculiarities as an allegory of Christ, the devil, the Church or human beings" *Physiologus: The Greek and Armenian Versions with a Study of Translation Technique* (Leuven; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005), 1. The Latin *Physiologus* appears around the end of the 4th -century and during the Middle Ages it had a readership comparable to the Bible - evident from the numerous medieval manuscripts, versions, translations, and adaptations, Arnaud Zucker, *Physiologos: Le bestiaire des bestiaires* (Collection Atopia; Grenoble: Millon, 2004) 9.

¹⁵ The *Physiologus* reads, "In Deuteronomy Moses said while blessing Joseph, 'His beauty is that of the firstling bull, and his horns are the horns of the unicorn' [Deut. 33:17]. The monoceros, that is, the unicorn, has this nature: he is a small animal like the kid, is exceedingly shrewd, and has one horn in the middle of his head... Coming down from heaven, he came into the womb of the Virgin Mary. 'He was loved like the son of the unicorns' [cf. Ps. 22:21] as David said in the psalm," Michael J. Curley, *Physiologus* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 51. The illustrations that accompany textual references to the unicorn often show the allegorical rather than the literal representation. Debra Hassig argues, "beginning with the Early Christian exegetical interest in nature codified in the *Physiologus* treatise, on which the medieval bestiaries were based, Christian compilers began a process of rewriting and transforming pagan knowledge of the natural world in order to serve a new, didactic purpose," *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), xvi. The art of the Middle Ages is created by artists steeped in the traditions of Scriptural or Patristic Exegesis, a tiered system of delineation including the literal, allegorical, tropological (moral), and anagogical (eschatological) levels of interpretation. Robert Stuart Sturges writes, "exposition was thus divided into the literal and the more important spiritual levels; and the spiritual could be further subdivided into various kinds of symbolic meaning. The best-known system is the ancient fourfold one derived by St John Cassian [4th- 5th centuries] consisting of the literal (or historical) and three spiritual levels," *Medieval Interpretation: Models of Reading in Literary Narrative, 1100-1500* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 13. In chapter 8.14 of *Conlationes*, Cassian writes, "spiritalis autem scientiae genera sunt tria, tropologia, allegoria, anagoge, de quibus in Prouerbiis ita dicitur" [There are three means of knowledge of the spiritual, moral, allegorical, or anagogy, of whom we read in Proverbs it is said], John Cassian and Michael Petschenig, *Iohannis Cassiani Conlationes XXIII*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, Vol. 13 (Vindobonae: apvd C. Geroldi filivm, 1886), 404. See also, Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale 1* (Paris: Aubier, 1979).

animal only allows itself to be captured in the lap of a pure virgin.¹⁶ 7th-century pope, Gregory the Great, interpreted the unicorn's virgin capture as an allegory of the Incarnation with the Virgin Mary. The *Physiologus* was also the first Western text to combine the hunters and a virgin with the story of the unicorn.¹⁷ The earliest surviving illuminated copy, the 9th-century Bern *Physiologus*,¹⁸ depicts the unicorn as a blue-grey animal with a curved horn beside a human, presumably a virgin (**Fig. 1**). In contrast, the 11th-century illustration of Daniel 8:5, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* from Beatus of Liébana, shows a creature with long black fur and a large red horn engaged in combat with a ram.¹⁹ Both differ strongly from the later Middle Ages (as well as our current-day view of unicorns) as stately, white equestrian creatures.

Their visual change followed the change in their symbolism, though it took some time. Information about the unicorn from the *Physiologus* tradition and Isidore's vast Encyclopedia *Etymologies*²⁰ (7th century) appeared in Latin and vernacular French medieval bestiaries – collections of stories providing physical and allegorical descriptions of real or imaginary animals along with an allegorical

¹⁶ "The hunter cannot approach him [the unicorn] 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 palace of kings," Curley, 51.

¹⁷ Wood, 15-16. For a study on the representations of the unicorn with virgins and the Virgin Mary, see Jean-Pierre Jossua, *La Licorne, Histoire d'un couple* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1995).

¹⁸ Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 318, f. 16v – Physiologus Bernensis (<https://www.e-codices.ch/en/list/one/bbb/0318>) <https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/bbb/0318/16v/0/Sequence-34>.

¹⁹ This image is available on GALLICA <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b52505441p/f496.image>. Daniel 8:5 reads "And as I was considering, behold, and the goat came from the west on the face of the whole earth, and touched not the ground: and the goat had a notable horn between his eyes" (KJV).

²⁰ The *Etymologies* constitutes the basis of all scientific knowledge about animals at the beginning of the Middle Ages. In this work, Isidore elucidates the character of beasts through analysis of their names.

interpretation of the Christian moral significance each animal embodied in medieval culture. The ideological message was reinforced by the accompanying illustrations and so the medieval image of the unicorn was born. The *Workshop Bestiary* (c. 1185) depicts a blue creature with a curved horn lured into the lap of the virgin and killed by two hunters (**Fig. 2**), with similar scenes depicted in the 13th-century in the following: *Ashmole Bestiary* (**Fig. 3**), Bodley MS 764 (**Fig. 4**), the *Rochester Bestiary* (**Fig. 5**), and Pierre de Beauvais' *Bestiaire* (1285) (**Fig. 6**).

Commercial production grew in response to increasing lay demand for such books.²¹ Bestiaries become accessible to a wider audience and began to incorporate new text and images to suit patrons' interests. In the 14th-century copy (**Fig. 7**) of Richard de Fournival's (1201-1260) *Bestiaire d'Amour*,²² a didactic treatise about animals in prose, put into verse by Fournival in the 13th-century and finished by an anonymous poet in the early 14th-century,²³ the unicorn becomes a courtly symbol. Taking refuge in the lap of the mirror-wielding lady, the sleeping unicorn represents the poet allowing himself to fall into the trap of Love.²⁴ Fournival alters the

²¹ Jessica Wong argues that in England, preaching was the medium that transformed the genre of the Latin bestiary from monastic use in the high middle ages to vernacular, lay use in the 14th-century, "Reading in the animal vernacular: the bestiary as lay genre in medieval England" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 2017). Little scholarship explores the increased popularity of bestiaries with the laity in France.

²² On the context of love bestiary's production in the 13th-century and Fournival's bestiary and response, see Jeanette Beer, *Beasts of Love: Richard de Fournival's Bestiaire d'amour and a Woman's 'Response'* (UP Toronto, 2003).

²³ Numerous versions of the prose text exist, of which BnF, Paris (Fr. 412, ca. 1285; Fr. 1444, 13th; Fr. 12469, 13th-14th; Fr. 12786, 13th-14th; Fr. 15213, 14th; Fr. 24406, 13th; Fr. 25566, 13th) are a few. BnF, Paris (Fr. 25545, 14th) is a copy of the manuscript in verse. BnF *Catalogue général*, <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb13506078t>.

²⁴The mirror is a symbol of pride and a clear reflection of chastity http://expositions.bnf.fr/bestiare/grand/n_07_bnf.htm

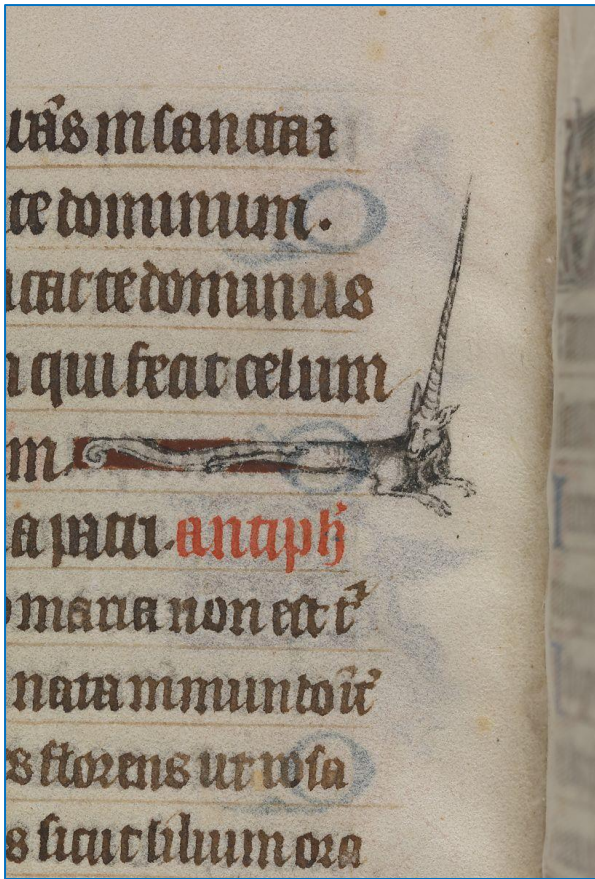


Figure 8 Jean Pucelle, The Hours of Jeanne D'Evreux, Queen of France, Folio 98v detail (1324-1328), Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Photo:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/470309?searchField=All&sortBy=Date&ft=unicorn&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=9>

significance of the unicorn from the *Physiologus* tradition of Christian bestiaries from an allegory of Christ to the love-sick poet.

Bestiary unicorn lore was reflected in a diverse array of visual arts from the 14th to the 16th centuries.²⁵ The illuminated Book of Hours (1324-1328) (**Fig. 8**) of Jeanne D'Evreux, Queen of France, shows a small animal with a long horn rising up straight from the creature's head, most likely signifying the unity of Christ and God.

²⁵ Wood enumerates Biblical unicorns, the unicorn and the lady, fighting and medical unicorns, and the curative power of a spiral horn, 11–48. On the unicorn horn in pharmaceutical history, see William Jackson, "The Use of Unicorn Horn in Medicine," *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 18 (Dec 2004) accessed 22 June 2020 available at <https://www.pharmaceutical-journal.com/news-and-analysis/features/the-use-of-unicorn-horn-in-medicine/20013625.article>.



Figure 9 Casket with Scenes of Romances, Walters 71264 (1330-1350), France, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore Maryland. Photo: public domain
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casket_with_Scenes_of_Romances_\(Walters_71264\)#/media/File:French_-_Casket_with_Scenes_of_Romances_-_Walters_71264_-_Left.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casket_with_Scenes_of_Romances_(Walters_71264)#/media/File:French_-_Casket_with_Scenes_of_Romances_-_Walters_71264_-_Left.jpg)

14th-century ivories²⁶ continue with the image of the unicorn as a symbol of courtly love. The short end of the “Casket with Scenes of Romances” (1330-1350) (**Fig. 9**)

²⁶ On Gothic Ivory see, Elisabeth Antoine et al., *Gothic Ivory Sculpture: Content and Context* (London: Courtauld Institute, 2017), available online <https://courtauld.ac.uk/research/courtauld-books-online/gothic-ivory-sculpture>.

illustrates *Tristan and Isolde* with the unicorn wounded while resting in the lap of the maiden. An illuminated manuscript of one of the first allegorical epics, *The Pilgrimage of Human Life* (1400), describes the character Pride as having a single horn like the unicorn.²⁷ Images from later in the 15th century show the unicorn as a white horse dipping its long spiral horn in water to purify any toxins.²⁸

Popular and relatively inexpensive media such as woodcut and etching and engravings, spread the changing image of the unicorn even further.²⁹ The first printed book in Hebrew (1491) included woodcut images of the unicorn (**Figs. 10a, 10b**) showing the inky outline of a cloven-hooved animal seated next to a ram. Albrecht Dürer's 1516 etching³⁰ (**Fig. 11**) depicts the unicorn as a monstrous beast with a curved horn, perhaps based on antique accounts.³¹ More expensive media promulgated the image of the unicorn as a symbol of refinement and innocence in

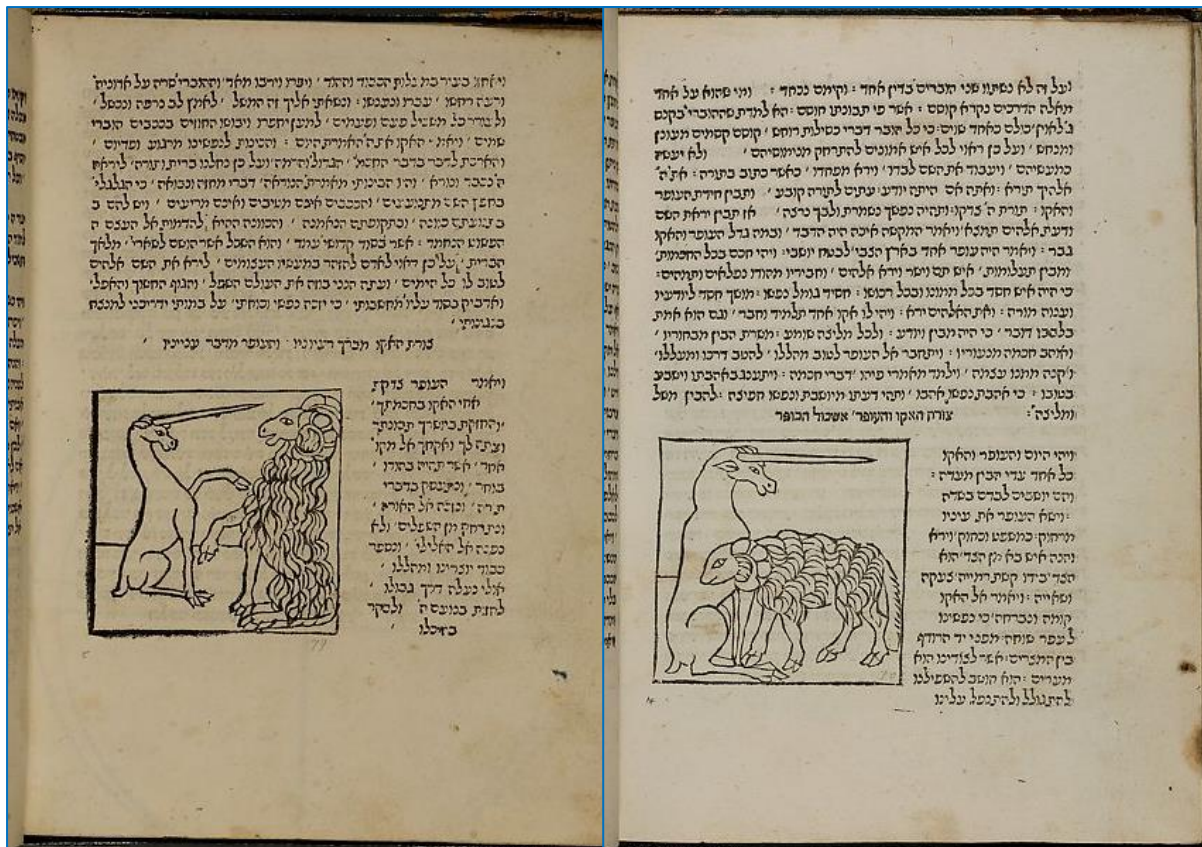
²⁷ "Pride is inflated and has one horn like a unicorn. She carries a horn, a staff and a pair of bellows and wears a white mantle and spurs. Her servant (Flattery) holds a mirror (Accordance) in which she looks at her own face," Fol. 66r, Bodleian Library MS Douce 300. Guillaume de Deguilleville, *c.* 1400 *Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*, fol. 065v-066r. Manuscript, University of Oxford. Image available online: <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/inquire/p/9966b3bb-56d8-4e0a-a184-5d278c27a069>.

²⁸ Bibliothèque nationale de France, Manuscrits, Français 22971 fol. 15v shows a unicorn purifying a river of poisons http://expositions.bnf.fr/bestiaire/grand/k_02_bnf.htm. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Manuscrits, Français 138 fol. 117 shows a unicorn dipping its horn in a fountain http://expositions.bnf.fr/bestiaire/grand/n_11.htm.

²⁹ The unicorn did not become popular in heraldry until the 15th -century, Stephen Friar, *A New Dictionary of Heraldry* (London: Alphabooks/A & C Black, 1987), 353-354.

³⁰ On Dürer's *Abduction on a unicorn* (1516) see Jessie Poesch, "Sources for Two Dürer Enigmas," *The Art Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (March 1964): 78-86; Christof Metzger, "The Abduction on a Unicorn," *The Renaissance of Etching* edited by Catherine Jenkins et al (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2019): 52.

³¹ Engraver Jean Duvet's (1485-1562, known as "The Unicorn Master") unicorn creatures closely resemble a horse with curled tail.



Figures 10a & 10b Isaac ben Solomon abi Sahula, *Meshal ha-Kadmoni* [Fable of the Ancients] (1491), Brescia, Italy, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: public domain <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/479689>



Figure 11 Albrecht Dürer, *Abduction of Proserpine* (1516), Rijksmuseum, the Netherlands. Photo: public domain <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.33180>

paintings such as Raphael's³² 1505 *Lady with the Unicorn* (**Fig. 12**) and the famed Unicorn Tapestries from around the turn of the 16th century, picture unicorns as symbols of courtly love and, along with the *jardin clos*, represent the chastity of the Virgin Mary and Christ³³ (**Figs. 13, 14, 15**).

With so many examples, for medieval society, unicorns existed.³⁴ The authoritative ancient texts on natural science (as well as those of the Christian Church) propagated the unicorn's existence in medieval imagination. That no one had ever seen a living unicorn reflected the animal's rarity; it was not until the 17th century that people began to doubt its existence.³⁵ The unicorn existed for medieval

³² On Raphael's *Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn* (1505/6) see, Esther Bell, Linda Wolk-Simon, Mary Shay-Millea, and Anna Coliva, *Sublime Beauty Raphael's Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Cincinnati Art Museum, 2015).

³³ Michel Cazenave, *Encyclopédie des symboles* (Paris: Livre de poche, Librairie générale française, 1996), 357-358.

³⁴ The first five editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, s.v. "licorne" (1694, 1718, 1740, 1762, and 1798) indicate that the *licorne* [unicorn] is a wild animal in Ethiopia that resembles a small horse with one horn in the middle of its forehead ("Sorte d'animal sauvage qui naist dans la haute Ethiopie, & qui selon ce qu'on rapporte a une corne au milieu du front, & du reste est assez semblable à un petit cheval"). It isn't until the sixth edition of the dictionary in 1835 that the existence of the *licorne* is questioned and even then, it is not debunked unequivocally, "Suivant l'opinion la plus généralement admise aujourd'hui, la licorne est un animal fabuleux" [According to popular opinion, the unicorn is a mythical creature]. The eighth edition of 1935 definitively describes the *licorne* as a mythical beast: "Quadrupède fabuleux, portant une corne au milieu du front et dont il est souvent question dans les *Bestiaires* et les légendes du moyen âge" [Four-legged mythical creature with one horn on its forehead which is frequently mentioned in the *Bestiaries* and legends of the Middle Ages] accessed 18 December 2019, <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A1L0107>. All English translations from the French are the author's own unless otherwise indicated. Edmond Huguet's *Dictionnaire de la langue française du seizième siècle* (7 vols) was not published until the 20th-century (1925-1967). Hence, Huguet's definition of *licorne* as "animal fabuleux" [mythical animal] is an anachronism and has no significance for cultural belief in the 16th-century. Tome 5, 12, accessed 18 December 2019, <http://arrow.latrobe.edu.au/store/3/4/3/8/2/public/B13535262T5.pdf>. The French term *licorne* has a complex etymology. The initial L on *licorne* is from the Italian definite article. From Latin *unicorno* to Italian *l'unicorno* > *liocorno* to French *licorne*. *Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales* s.v. "licorne," accessed 18 December 2019, <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/licorne>.

³⁵ Boria Sax, *Imaginary Animals: The Monstrous, The Wondrous, and The Human* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 7.

Figure 12
Raphael, Young
woman with
unicorn (1506)
Galleria
Borghese, Rome.
Photo: public
domain



persons - lay and educated alike. So, it is to these last moments of belief in the unicorn, the late Middle Ages in Western Europe, that I would like to direct my inquiry.

The Emblem & the Unicorn

By the 16th century, the unicorn acquired multiple layers of signification in writing and images. The system of interpretation and the traditional sense of word-

Figure 13 Tapisseries de la Dame à la licorne, 'la vue,' (c.1500) Musée de Cluny. Photo : public domain

<https://www.musee-moyenage.fr/collection/oeuvre/la-dame-a-la-licorne.html>

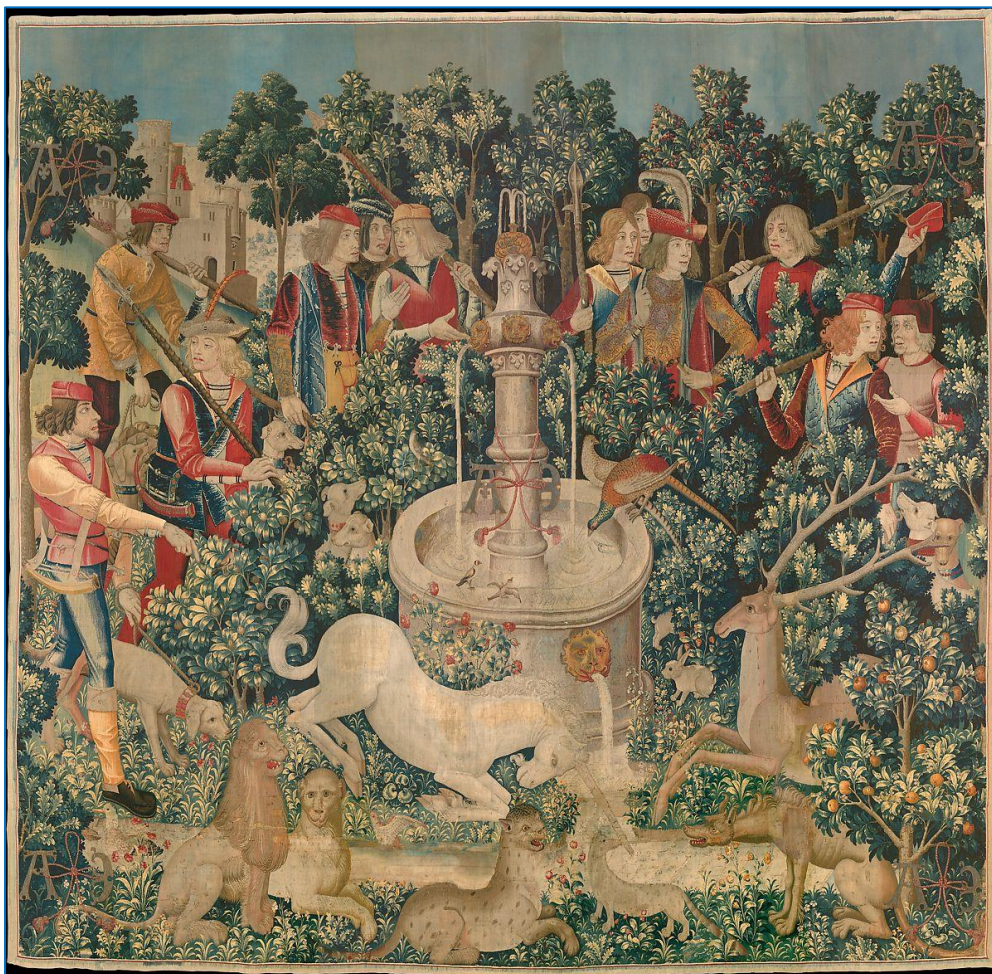


Figure 14 The Unicorn Tapestries, 'The Unicorn is Found' (1495-1505) Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: public domain <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/467638?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=the+unicorn+tapestries&offset=0∓rpp=20&pos=5>



Figure 15 The Unicorn Tapestries, 'The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle' (1495-1505) Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: public domain:
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/467641?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=the+unicorn+tapestries&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=2>

image representation found in medieval bestiaries and manuscripts informed the depiction of the unicorn in the tradition of emblematic literature, which was enormously popular throughout Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Derived from bestiaries that explained the importance of animals and proverbs, emblems were allegorical representations of moral, religious, or political values that had to be

decoded by the viewer. Emblem books -- collections of emblems and accompanying text (often morals or poems) -- were widely disseminated (several thousand were produced) in Europe following the invention of the printing press, exerting enormous influence on visual and literary arts.³⁶ Emblem books also took inspiration directly from Greek and Roman sources and so included images of animals, real and imaginary.³⁷

One of the earliest emblem books, Maurice Scève's 1544 work *Délie* includes 50 woodcut emblems dispersed among 449 *dizains* (ten-line poems) written from the subjective viewpoint of the poet-lover and addressed to the Lady.³⁸ Rather than embellishments, the emblems in *Délie* form an integral part of the text. In the first edition from 1544, the woodcut images occupy the exact dimensions as the *dizains* and follow a strict succession which suggests that the images are to be "read" just as the lines of text. In Scève's work, the unicorn appears in both the primary and central images, with the position of the unicorn at the beginning and center of *Délie* highlighting the creature's significance and informing the reader's interpretation in terms of the sacrifice for vision and self-reflection.³⁹

The first emblem in *Délie*, entitled *The Lady & the Unicorn* (**Fig. 16**), pictures the unicorn, wounded with an arrow, resting in the lap of a female, recalling the hunt

³⁶ Glasgow University Emblem Website <https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/#what> . Raybould indicates no fewer than 6,500 emblem books were produced in a span of about 200 years, 250-252.

³⁷ Martyn Lyons, *Books: A Living History* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), 92-93.

³⁸ On Scève's *Délie* see, Defaux.

³⁹ On sacrifice, vision, and the self in medieval French culture, see Nicholas Ealy, *Narcissism and Selfhood in Medieval French Literature: Wounds of Desire* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).



Figure 16 Maurice Scève, La Dame à la lycorne, "Pour le veoir je pers la vie," *Délie, object de plus haulte vertu* (1544) Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF). RES-YE-1746 p. 7. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

for the unicorn allegory or the Incarnation of Christ popular in the Middle Ages. The relation between the title (*inscriptio*) *The Lady & the Unicorn* and the image (*pictura*) seems to confirm this interpretation of emblem 1. The unicorn is an equine creature (with a straight, spiraling horn) resting in the lap of a female wearing a long tunic in a nature setting. Emblems, however, always contain a third term that complicates the seemingly straightforward relationship between the title and image: the motto (*subscriptio*). Emblem viewers expect to find an allegorical encoding in the relation between the textual motto, the title, and the picture - so, viewers work to decode the

allegory. The motto for emblem 1 reads “for the view/vision I lose life.”⁴⁰ Hence, with the motto, Scève alters the relationship between title and image, and consequently the signification of the unicorn symbol. The motto suggests that the image pertains to the loss of life as a result of vision. The textual motto and the pictorial elements in the emblem work collectively to redirect the emphasis in Scève’s representation: the unicorn is the tortured poet-lover stricken by the glance of the Lady, although this is not evident visually. Without the presence of the knight, the arrow may be seen as a trait from Délie’s “harrowing gaze”⁴¹ (*dizain* 1): “the archer from her eyes”⁴² (*dizain* 6). The motto of the emblem problematizes the signifying relation between the title and image. The arrow is Délie’s gaze - not that of Amour or Cupid. Scève alters the sexual encounter between the Lady and unicorn to suggest that the poet-lover’s desire for the Beloved leads to death, not because the hunters come and capture him, but because he loses his life for vision, as the motto confirms: “for the view/vision I lose life.” This allegorical aspect of the tripartite emblem structure is not initially visible. It is only once the interlocking structure of title, image, and motto of the emblem is puzzled out that the allegory becomes understood.

The poet-lover as wounded unicorn pleads with the viewer to recognize that the Lady deceives him. Like the virgin in the medieval legend, Délie lures him with

⁴⁰ ‘Pour le veoir ie pers la vie.’

⁴¹ Poignant veue.

⁴² Que de ses yeux l’archier.

her odor: “sweet smell: But the taste too bitter / disturb the peace of my sweet thought”⁴³ (*dizain* 10). The poet-lover admits in the preceding *dizain* (5) that he attempts to escape when his Lady approaches with Love’s bow.⁴⁴ When she sees him and draws near, she asks if he eludes her bow or its strength. In response he states, “I do not flee, say I, the bow, nor the arrow: / but the eye that makes in my heart so great a wound”⁴⁵ (*dizain* 5). The poet-lover flees the eye of the Lady because she possesses a harrowing gaze (*dizain* 1). In the image of the first emblem, the arrow is the physical mark left by Délie’s harrowing gaze and the vision/view in the motto is Délie’s glance, for which the poet-lover dies.⁴⁶ From the Lover-Beloved (unicorn-Lady) couple of the first image there is a shift to singular, solipsistic reflection and frightened self-awareness shown in the unicorn’s second image.⁴⁷

⁴³ Suave odeur: Mais le goust trop amer / trouble la paix de ma douce pensée. Pleasant odors are associated with virtuous people, immortality, and even divine presence in the Middle Ages. As early as the 4th century, Christian practices were profuse with pleasant and sweet smells. Perfume, incense, and scented oils were used to create a Christian religious experience heavily dependent on olfaction, Jonathan Reinartz, *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 25-26.

⁴⁴ Arc d’Amour.

⁴⁵ Je ne fuys point, dy je, l’arc, ne la flesche: / mais l’oeil qui fait a mon coeur si grand’ playe.

⁴⁶ On the medieval gaze, see Robert S. Nelson, *Visuality before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages: Ocular Desires* (Palgrave Macmillan 2002); Simon Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love* (Oxford 2006), 28-35; Michael J. Huxtable, “The medieval gaze at grips with a medieval world” *Progress in Colour Studies* 1 (2006): 199-217; Paolo Santangelo, “The Lover’s Eye: Image and Love in Medieval-Renaissance Europe and Late Imperial China” *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 5, no. 3 (2018): 173-195 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40636-018-0117-6>. On psychoanalytic theories of the gaze and medieval visuality, see Robert S. Sturges, “Visual Pleasure and *La Vita Nuova*: Lacan, Mulvey and Dante” *The Senses and Society* 5 no. 1 (2010): 93-105. Sturges argues that Lacan’s theory is better adapted to medieval texts than Mulvey, whose theory does not account for both pleasure in looking and dissolution.

⁴⁷ Defaux, tome II, 23.

The *Lady & the Unicorn* emblem has been interpreted as an Annunciation based on the association of the Lady and unicorn with the Virgin Mary and Christ.⁴⁸ Yet, when considered with the connotation of the unicorn's erotic attraction to the Lady,⁴⁹ this vision is sexualized. If emblem 1 is an Annunciation in Scève's work, I argue it is an announcement to the reader that serves as a warning: seeing is a dangerous act and, throughout the cycle of 449 *dizains*, *Délie* visually deceives the poet-lover. Scève's image of the Lady and wounded unicorn depicts a scene in which vision leads to death because sexualized vision leads to deception and death. If Scève's complex structures resist systematic analysis, it is because the image-text presents itself as a demonstration of that which it warns against – *Délie* is a work of and about deception. Scève orients his entire work in terms of vision, deception, and the fear of seeing, by beginning his work with an emblem depicting a unicorn wounded by the gaze of the Beloved.

Scève presents a paradigm of the fear and terror (*l'épouvantail*)⁵⁰ associated with the unicorn and sight again in the central emblem 26, *The unicorn who sees itself* (**Fig. 17**). Unlike the first image of the unicorn, in this emblem the lady is absent; the poet is alone. Emblem 26 depicts a unicorn gazing at its own reflection in a pool of water. Customarily, this image symbolizes the familiar legend of the magical powers

⁴⁸ Paul Ardouin, "Au sujet du premier emblème de la *Délie* de Maurice Scève," in *Actes du colloque sur l'humanisme lyonnais au XVI^e siècle, mai 1972*, ed. Jean-René Derre (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1974), 388-389.

⁴⁹ Madeline H. Caveniss discusses the overt erotic visual puns of the unicorn horn in the virgin's lap and the hunter's spear piercing the flesh of the creature, "Patron or Matron? A Capetian Bride and a Vade Mecum for Her Marriage Bed" *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993): 333-362, 344.

⁵⁰ Huguet observes that the verb *espouanter* means *terrifier* [to terrify].

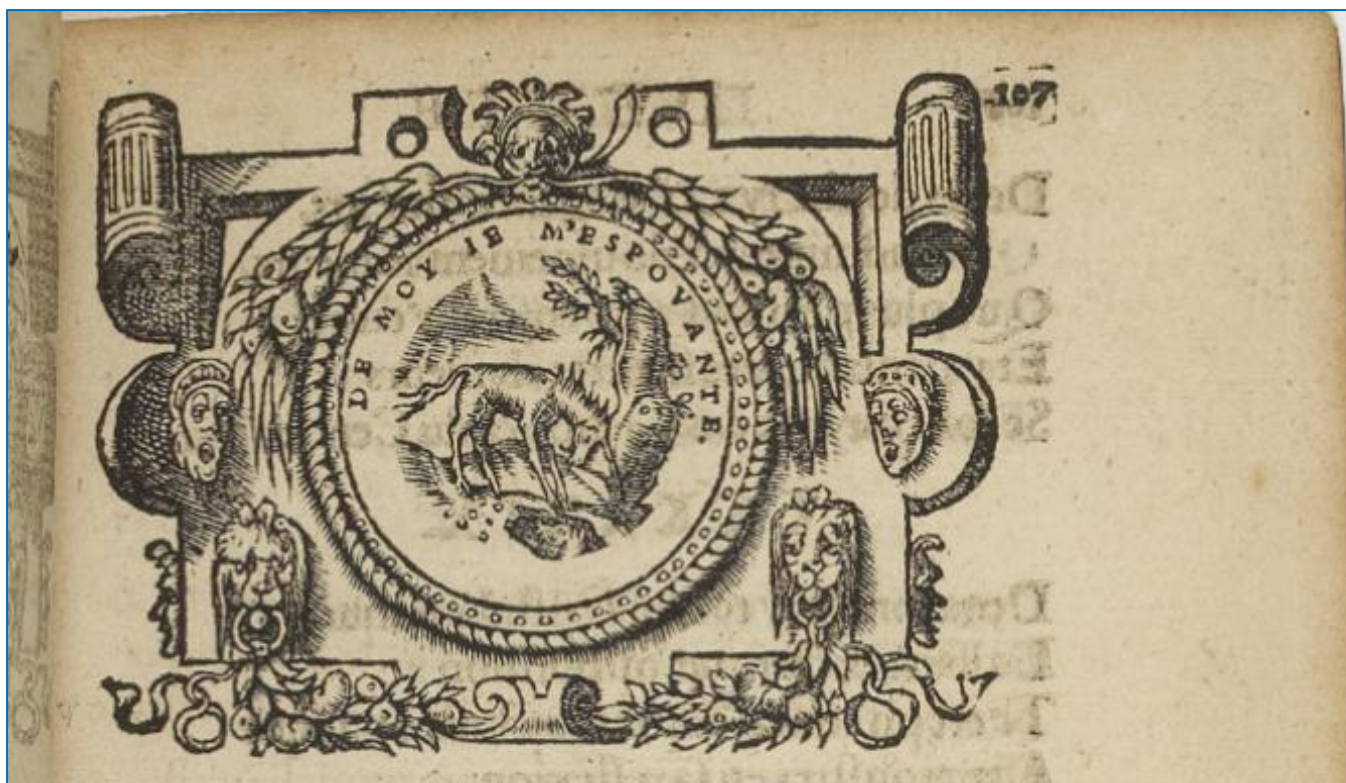


Figure 17 Maurice Scève, La lycorne qui se voit, "De moy je m'espovante," *Délie*, *object de plus haulte vertu* (1544) Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF). RES-YE-1746 p. 107. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France

of the unicorn's horn – that the unicorn dips its horn in a fountain or stream to cleanse the water for other animals to drink. In the emblem book *Emblemata* (1564) by Joannes Sambucus an emblem entitled "What is useful is valuable" includes a woodcut image of a unicorn standing near a chest of treasures to indicate the esteemed value of the creature's horn to purify poison.⁵¹ Yet a closer look at Scève's image shows that the legend is altered: the unicorn is not using its horn. Instead, the image portrays the unicorn viewing its own reflection in a pool of water. Contrary to

⁵¹ See the emblem 'Preciosum quod utile' from Joannes Sambucus at the Glasgow Emblem Project site <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=FSAb118>. On Sambucus see, Arnoud Visser, *Joannes Sambucus and the learned image: the use of the emblem in late-Renaissance humanism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

the popular legend of the unicorn, the motto “of myself I am terrified”⁵² implies that the unicorn becomes frightened upon seeing its own reflection. Scève modifies the legend of the unicorn in his emblem to suggest the monstrous transformation and self-reflection experienced by the poet-lover.

Scève’s emblem of the unicorn seeing its reflection seems peculiar and unconventional to 16th-century society. One possible source for the theme in emblem 26 is the Italian poem “Driadeo” (1489), in which author Luca Pulci details the passion felt by the shepherd Severe for the Dryad Lora (a wood nymph):

when he [Severe] is on the point of succeeding in gaining her love, Diana the Goddess of Chastity, enraged at his enterprise and audacity (the Dryad of course being one of her handmaidens) transforms him into a unicorn... [he is] stupefied and horrified on realizing [his] physical state.⁵³

Diana transforms Severe into a unicorn to protect the virginity of her handmaid Lora. Scève may have formed emblem 26 on the basis of Pulci’s tale of Severe and Diana.⁵⁴ Pulci’s poetry suggests that erotic desire is punished via metamorphosis.⁵⁵

The power of the unicorn rests in its ability to purify with a touch. In general, it suffices to simply touch tainted water or food with a fragment of the magic horn set at the end of a silver sleeve.⁵⁶ Yet the image in emblem 26, the title (*The unicorn who sees itself*), and the motto (*of myself I am terrified*) sever any link to the traditional

⁵² De moy ie m’espouante.

⁵³ Dorothy Coleman, *An Illustrated Love “Canzoniere”: The Délie of Maurice Scève*, Textes et Études--Domaine Français, 2 (Genève; Paris: Editions Slatkine, 1981), 51.

⁵⁴ Defaux, tome II, 271.

⁵⁵ On Lacanian desire in *Délie* see, Nancy Frelick, *Délie as Other: Toward a Poetics of Desire in Scève’s Délie* (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1994).

⁵⁶ Caillois, 10.

legend and the value of the unicorn's horn. Instead of purifying the water, the unicorn sees its own image and becomes terrified. The concave curvature and stance of its legs and knees in position to the pool suggest that the unicorn is drawing away in fear from the water and the reflected image. The hair of the unicorn's mane stands erect - an indication that the animal is frightened or feels threatened.

Scève's altered legend removes the power of touch from the unicorn and redirects the emphasis of the emblem towards self-perception, monstrosity, and terror. Monsters challenge human understanding, both fascinating and terrifying us.⁵⁷ Scève imports the medieval concept of monstrosity defined as "unacceptability"⁵⁸ into his emblems. The power of touch belongs to the Beloved as she is portrayed as his basilisk in the initial *huitain* (eight-line poem): "my basilisk with its harrowing gaze."⁵⁹ As the basilisk, the Lady is a hybrid, monstrous creature with the ability to kill with a glance. Délie's "touch" is thus the look that touches: a haptic gaze. Like the transformed Lover in Pulci's "Driadeo," the unicorn's reflection is monstrous and unacceptable because it is other. The poet-lover glimpses his monstrous alterity through the gaze of the other: the transformed self, depicted as the unicorn.

⁵⁷ John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 3.

⁵⁸ Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 254.

⁵⁹ Mon basilisque avec sa poignant' veue.

Conclusion

The unicorn has a long and fascinating history beginning as early as the 4th-century BCE. The topical qualities of the unicorn are informed through knowledge from Antiquity, lore of the Bible, and allegorical interpretations from the Middle Ages.⁶⁰ This article has presented a brief intellectual history of the unicorn symbol from the ancient Greeks to 16th-century western Europe. I have highlighted the iconography of the unicorn, the significance of medieval bestiaries, and literary and visual influences on Scève's representation of the unicorn's medieval legacy. In *Délie*, the poet-lover likens his suffering to the unicorn lured and deceived by the calculating female, once signifying the Virgin Mary in the later Middle Ages. For Scève, the unicorn scenes represent sexualized vision and erotic desire punished by death from the glance of the Beloved.⁶¹ In my reading of emblem 1, I situated the lover and Beloved in the work in terms of their visual relation. With the second image of the unicorn Scève reveals that the poet-lover suffers so acutely that no refuge remains for him to direct his glance, employing the unicorn to construct a theory of love based on the gaze. This enquiry into Scève's appropriation of the

⁶⁰ Julia Weitbrecht, "'Thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns': The Biblical Unicorn in Late Medieval Religious Interpretation," *Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literatures*, 5 (December 2018): 63, riviste.unimi.it/interfaces/article/view/9631/pdf.

⁶¹ Images of sexuality in the Middle Ages are often connotative rather than explicit and can thus be interpreted in various ways such as the virgin seducing the unicorn. The virgin-unicorn trope represents the underlying sexual connotation of the virgin-capture story from Pliny and Aelian and recalls earlier depictions of the unicorn's suggestive phallic horn laying in the lap of the virgin. Sarah Salih reminds us that medieval female sexuality understands women as both addressee or consumer and sexualized object, and that the representation of sexuality medieval imagery is often contradictory, "The Trouble with 'Female Sexuality,'" *Different Visions: A Journal of New Perspectives on Medieval Art* 5 (August 2014): 1-22. See also Freeman and Caviness.

unicorn from the Middle Ages shows that vision and the gaze are the dominant, organizing structures at work within *Délie* to provide a much-needed entry point to Scève's work. Just as "love bestiaries" alter the significance of the unicorn from the *Physiologus* tradition of Christian bestiaries from an allegory of Christ to an explicit symbolic representation of the love-sick poet, Scève's unicorns encode an allegory of the poet who dies repeatedly under the gaze of the monstrous Lady in emblematic form. 🐉