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## THE UNICORN: END OF A LEGEND

Medieval natural histories, being primarily moral in their interests, loved to interpret allegorically the habits of the beasts. Because he never existed the unicorn lent himself ideally to this purpose. The story of the virgin who alone can capture (incarnate) him, and the story of his miraculous power against evil are clearly stages leading toward the identification of the unicorn with Christ himself. Unfortunately, scientific skepticism intervened; not only the existence of the unicorn, but the magical efficacy of his horn, was called into question. Finally, the gentlemen of the Royal Society performed a decisive and historic experiment. Under laboratory conditions, they placed a poisonous spider in a circle of powdered unicorn's horn, and proved, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that no mysterious antipathy between the virtuous horn and the evil poison would cause the spider to shrivel up and die. Indeed, only one major problem remained, after their experiment: where did they get the unicorn's horn with which they performed it?

Our materials include some miscellaneous unicorn lore. Early items in the unicorn's story are amusing as they show the slender foundations on which the later myth was built. On the other hand, the foolish and naïve treatise of Alexander Ross illustrates how late the superstitions of the Middle Ages survived, and what dominion they retained over credulous minds. Finally, in the dry, businesslike pages of Sprat's *History of the Royal Society*, the legend, unlike the spider, quietly expires. For all its comic overtones, the experiment with unicorn's horn is one of many which had to be performed in all sober seriousness, in order to clear the way for modern scientific empiricism.

### 1

He says too that wild asses are taken in its marshes,<sup>1</sup> which have a horn in their foreheads with which they fight like bulls, and not badly; and that the Indians make drinking-cups from this horn, which have such virtue that the man who drinks from one will for one whole day neither fall ill, nor feel pain if wounded, nor be burned by passing through fire, nor even be affected by poisons which he could not swallow at any other time without harm. These cups are reserved for the king, and only the king may hunt these animals. Apollonius writes that he saw this beast and admired its appearance, and that when Damis asked him if he believed that story about the horn cups, he said: "I will believe it when I find that the king who rules this country never dies." \* \* \*

[Philostratus (3rd century A.D.): from *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* III.ii]

### 2

Unicornis the Unicorn, which is also called Rhinoceros by the Greeks, is of the following nature.

He is a very small animal like a kid, excessively swift, with one horn in the middle of his forehead, and no hunter can catch him. But he can be trapped by the following stratagem.

A virgin girl is led to where he lurks, and there she is sent off by herself into

1. The Hyphasis River.

the wood. He soon leaps into her lap when he sees her, and embraces her, and hence he gets caught.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is also a Unicorn spiritually, about whom it is said: "And he was beloved like the Son of the Unicorns." And in another psalm: "He hath raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his son David."

The fact that it has just one horn on its head means what he himself said: "I and the Father are One." Also, according to the Apostle: "The head of Christ is the Lord."

It says that he is very swift because neither Principalities, nor Powers, nor Thrones, nor Dominations could keep up with him, nor could Hell contain him, nor could the most subtle Devil prevail to catch or comprehend him; but, by the sole will of the Father, he came down into the virgin womb for our salvation.

It is described as a tiny animal on account of the lowliness of his incarnation, as he said himself: "Learn from me, because I am mild and lowly of heart."

It is like a kid or scapegoat because the Saviour himself was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, and from sin he condemned sin.

The Unicorn often fights with elephants, and conquers them by wounding them in the belly.

[From a 12th-century Latin bestiary, tr. T. H. White]

## 3

First, we understand by the word Licorn, a beast born in far distant lands, having a single horn in his forehead, which is taken as a miraculous influence against all poisons, and highly esteemed by Kings, Princes, and great Lords, and even by the vulgar \* \* \* Some say that if one dips it in water, and with this water draws a circle on a table, one may then put within it a scorpion or spider or toad, and that these beasts will die rather than pass outside the circle, indeed, that the toad will kill itself.

[Ambroise Paré: from *Discourse on the Licorn* (1582) I, XV]

## 4

Now let any Reader consider, and observe it as a Thing worthy of Note, that the true *Unicorns-horn*, sophisticated by no fallacy,<sup>2</sup> repels all Venom from it self, nor can it assume or draw to it self any thing of Venom, as is manifest by Experience. Let a living Spider be put in a Circle made of *Unicorns-horn*, and out of this Circle it cannot go, or passe over the *Unicorns-horn*, for it shuns whatsoever is adverse to Venom.

[Basil Valentine: from *Triumphphant Chariot of Antimony*,  
1400, 1678]

## 5

The unicorn is a beast that has one horn in its brow, and this horn is good against poison and pestilential fevers. But one is to observe that there is very little of the true horn to be found. \* \* \* I will take this occasion to describe a true test by which one may know the genuine horn from the false. The test is this:

2. Adulterated by no inferior products.

place the horn in a vessel of any sort of material you like, and with it three or four live and large scorpions, keeping the vessel covered. If you find four hours later that the scorpions are dead, or almost lifeless, the alicorn is a good one, and there is not money enough in the world to pay for it. Otherwise, it is false.

[David de Pomis: from *Dittionario Novo Hebraico* (1587), tr. Odell Shepard]

## 6

As men, to try the precious unicorn's horn,  
Make of the powder a preservative circle,  
And in it put a spider. \* \* \*

[John Webster: from *The White Devil* II.i]

## 7

These Beasts are very swift, and their legs have no Articles. They keep for the most part in the deserts, and live solitary in the tops of the mountains. There was nothing more horrible than the voice or braying of it, for the voice is strained above measure. It fighteth both with the mouth and with the heels, with the mouth biting like a Lion, and with the heels kicking like a Horse. It is a beast of an untamable nature, and therefore the Lord himself in *Job* saith, that he cannot be tied with any halter, nor yet accustomed to any cratch or stable. He feareth not Iron nor any iron instrument (as *Isidorus* writeth) and that which is most strange of all other, it fighteth with his own kind, yea with even the females unto death, except when it burneth in lust for procreation; but unto stranger-Beasts, with whom he hath no affinity in nature, he is more sociable and familiar, delighting in their company when they come willing unto him, never rising against them, but proud of their dependence and retinue, keepeth with them all quarters of league & truce, but with his female, when once his flesh is tickled with lust, he groweth tame, gregall and loving, and so continueth till she is filled and great with young, and then returneth to his former hostility. He is an enemy to the Lions, wherefore as soon as ever a Lion seeth a Unicorn, he runneth to a tree for succor, that so when the Unicorn maketh force at him, he may not only avoid his horn, but also destroy him; for the Unicorn in the swiftness of his course runneth against the tree wherein his sharp horn sticketh fast, then when the Lion seeth the Unicorn fastened by the horn without all danger, he falleth upon him and killeth him. These things are reported by the king of *Aethiopia* in an Haebrew Epistle unto the Bishop of Rome.

[Edward Topsell: from *The History of Four-Footed Beasts*, 1607]

## 8

\* \* \* Lastly, Although we allow it an Antidotall efficacy, and such as the Ancients commended, yet are there some vertues ascribed thereto by Moderns not easily to be received; and it hath surely faln out in this, as other magnified<sup>3</sup> medicines, whose operations effectual in some diseases, are presently extended unto all. That some Antidotall quality it may have, we have no reason to deny; for since Elk's Hoofs and Horns are magnified for Epilepsies, since not only the

bone in the heart,<sup>4</sup> but the Horn of a Deer is Alexipharmaceutical,<sup>5</sup> and ingredient into the confection of Hyacinth, and the Electuary of Maximilian;<sup>6</sup> we cannot without prejudice except against the efficacy of this. But when we affirm it is not only Antidotall to proper venoms, and substances destructive by qualities we cannot express; but that it resisteth also Sublimate, Arserick and poysons which kill by second qualities, that is, by corrosion of parts; I doubt we exceed the properties of its nature, and the premises of experiment will not secure the adventure. \* \* \*

Since therefore there be many Unicorns;<sup>7</sup> since that wheretofore appropriate a Horn is so variously described, that it seemeth often never to have been seen by two persons, or not to have been an animal; Since though they agreed in the description of the animal yet is not the Horn we extol the same with that of the Ancients. Since what Horns soever they be that pass among us, they are in the Horns of one, but several animals: Since many in common use and high esteem are no Horns at all: Since if there were true Horns yet might their vertues be questioned: Since though we allowed some vertues, yet were not others to be received; with what seemed a man may rely on this remedy, the mistress of fools<sup>8</sup> hath already instructed some, and to wisdom (which is never too wise to learn it is not too late to consider.) \* \* \*

[Sir Thomas Browne: from *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646) III]

## 9

\* \* \* If the Ancients adscribed no vertue to this horn, why was it of such account among them? Why did the *Indian* Princes died out of them, and make Cups and Rings of them, which either they wore on their fingers, or applied to their breasts, but that they know there was in them an antidotal vertue against poison, as *Andrella Baccius* (*l. de Unicorn.*) sheweth, and the Doctor<sup>9</sup> denyeth not can Antidotall efficacy, and such as the Ancients commended in the Horn) and yet two lines before, he denies that the Ancients adscribed any vertue to it. But sure it is apparent, that not only there is an occult quality in it against poison, as in the *Elks* Hoof against the falling sicknesse,<sup>1</sup> but also by manifest qualities it works; for *Baccius* proves it to be of an excessive drying quality, and therefore good against worms and putrefaction. And that *Riccus* the Physitian did use sometimes the weight of a scruple, sometimes of ten gram thereof in burning fevers with good successe. That it can read Arsenick, the same *Baccius* proves, by the experiment which the cardinal of *Trent* made upon two Pigeons, (*l. de Unic.*) to which he caused some Arsenick to be given: shortly after he gave som scrapings of his Unicorns horn to one of them, which after some symptoms recovered and lived, the other died two hours after it had catch the Arsenick: The same Horn cured divers pestilential Fevers, and such as were poisoned. Hence then it appears, that this Horn was both commended by the Ancients, namely by *Aelian*, *Philostrates*, and divers others, as also by modern Physitians, as *Ficinus*, *Brasavolus*, *Matthiolus*, *Mandella*, and many more. It is true that some might not find the vertue of it, either because it was not the true

4. The roots of the arterial vein and chief artery of the deer, which harden with age and were sometimes likened to a bone.

5. "Expulsive of poisons" [Browne's note].

6. Ancient medical compounds.

7. Browne's many unicorns include rhinoceri, oryces, narwhals, and even "four kinds of nasi-

cornous Beetles."

8. Experience is the mistress of fools.

9. I.e., Thomas Browne.

1. The value of elk's hoof against the lepsy was an article of Ross's faith and even Browne conceded it.

Horn, or the true dosis was not exhibited,<sup>2</sup> or due time was not observed, or else the malignancy of the disease would not yield. For *Interdum docta plus valet arte malum*.<sup>3</sup> But from hence to deny the Horn or its vertue, were all one as to deny Rhubarb, Agarick, Sena, or other Simples,<sup>4</sup> because they do not always produce the wished effect, or work upon all bodies at all times alike. The means to discriminate the true Unicorns horn from the false, are two, to wit; if it cause the liquor in which it is put, to bubble; and secondly, if it sweat when the poison is near it, as *Baccius* tells us.\* \* \*

[Alexander Ross: from *Arcana Microcosmi* (1652)]

10

\* \* \* Experiments<sup>5</sup> of destroying *Mites* by several Fumes: of the equivocal *Generation of Insects*: of feeding a *Carp* in the Air: of making Insects with Cheese, and Sack: of killing Water-Newts, Toads, and Sloworms with several Salts: of killing Frogs by touching their skin, with Vinegar, Pitch, or Mercury: of a Spiders not being Incharnted by a Circle of *Unicorns-horn*, or *Irish Earth*,<sup>6</sup> laid round about it.\* \* \*

[Thomas Sprat: from *The History of the Royal Society*, 1667]

2. It was given in wrong amounts.

3. "Sometimes a sickness is stronger than learned art."

4. Herbs.

5. In this extract, Sprat is describing experiments conducted by the Royal Society.

6. The absence of reptiles from Ireland gave rise to superstitions about the magic properties of Irish earth, as early as Giraldu Cambrensis (ca. 1146–ca. 1220); but this is another story and another set of experiments.