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The First Queer Unicorn?: Reading Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* as Trans Narrative

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Abstract

Peter S. Beagle's decision to feminize the formerly masculine figure of the unicorn in his influential 1968 fantasy novel *The Last Unicorn* represents a key moment in the evolution of this now ubiquitous image, one embraced today as a symbol of pride by LGBTQ+ communities. The novel and its 1982 animated film adaptation have themselves remained popular among queer and especially trans audiences, who have often found the narrative resonant with their own experiences. This essay provides a preliminary overview of the queer history of the unicorn symbol and continues into a trans reading of the novel, arguing that these responses to Beagle's work by contemporary readers reflect dimensions of the narrative congruent with concerns about gender performance and misrecognition; gender dysphoria; and queer temporalities. The nature of the fantasy form itself, we maintain throughout, can also particularly enable reparative readings by queer and trans audiences.

Keywords: fantasy fiction; transgender studies; queer theory; unicorns

1. Introduction: Trans-ing Beagle's Unicorn

Transness, as both an identity and a signifier, necessitates some form of "transformation," a changing of something into another, most notably a changing from one gender identity to another. Magical transformations of a different kind structure the plot and define the themes of Peter S. Beagle's classic fantasy novel *The Last Unicorn*, which was published in 1968 and quickly marketed as a part of the "Ballantine Adult Fantasy" series, despite the later Rankin/Bass adaptation of the text as a children's animated film (with the screenplay by Beagle). In both versions, the story follows a unicorn, the hapless wizard Schmendrick, and the remarkably unremarkable woman Molly Grue as they seek to find and free the unicorns who have been trapped in the sea by the imposing King Haggard and his enigmatic Red Bull. The major transformation at the center of the text takes place when Schmendrick, in an effort to save the unicorn from the Red Bull, uses magic to turn her into a human, also stripping her of her immortality. The unicorn, now taking the form of a woman, immediately feels trapped by her newly mortal flesh, an intensely dysphoric experience of one's body contradicting one's perception of self; many trans people experience gender dysphoria, the psychological distress that can occur when one's biologically sexed body does not align with one's internal identity. A trans reading of Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, which need not be limited to an emphasis on this experience of dysphoria, also reveals the mechanisms by which gender is produced and performed, the trans body itself becoming an object of fantasy through which reader identification occurs.

As such, this essay situates Beagle's novel—and to a lesser extent its animated adaptation—within modern transgender and queer discourses, exploring how such non-

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normative expressions of identity can be imagined, experienced, and realized, and examining the role that fantasy literature might play in these processes. A given character or their author of course need not be queer or trans in order for a queer or trans reader to recognize some facet of their experience reflected in the narrative, or apply it to their own experience, or indeed otherwise to approach the text in a manner akin to the reparative mode originally described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a framework that Sam Tegtmeyer has productively applied to another classic fantasy novel from 1968, Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*.[1] In Tegtmeyer's phrasing, a newly queer approach to classic texts reminds us of "another way to read, another way to exist in the world" (Tegtmeyer 2025, p. 303). Reexamining, then, the dimensions of *The Last Unicorn* most resonant with dysphoria and nonnormative gender and sexuality will help better account for why and how so many queer readers in the 21st century can continue to locate their own experiences in this text composed by a straight cis man six decades ago.

2. Finding the Queer Unicorn, Finding the Unicorn Queer

As a foundational yet fluid icon of modern fantasy literature, the cultural figure of the unicorn itself represents a complex, contradictory image within both the genre and popular culture at large. Having galloped a great distance from its premodern origins, the unicorn has taken on many meanings over the centuries it has existed, including those presently enshrined within queer iconography. Sacha Coward writes on the unicorn's earned status as an LGBTQ+ icon in his book Queer as Folklore: "Today the unicorn is at the very heart of debates around queer acceptance and assimilation, both being subversive and commercial in their broad appeal. These horny horses have become a kind of accidental ambassador for queer people, as they are beloved and socially acceptable among many heterosexual, cisgender folk" (Coward 2024, p. 39). In 2025, the American public's perception of unicorns remains bound up with the colorful creatures depicted in the most recent iteration of Hasbro's *My Little Pony* tie-in series (2021) or *Unicorn Academy* (2023), both animated children's shows that center friendship with a female main cast. With their stereotypically graceful, feminine nature, the modern symbolism associated with unicorns makes the unconventionality of queerness more palatable and consumable to those outside of the community, especially on the level of marketability and commercialization. Queer writer Tracey Anne Duncan reflects further on this point: "On more cynical days, I attribute the link to the fact that we have always been fetishized outcasts that the cis-het capitalist overlords want to brand into profitability. To me, the ubiquity of pink fluffy unicorns feels like a commodified avatar for the "gay means happy" stereotype—that fatal insistence that queer folx be sparkling and content no matter how frequently society rejects us" (Duncan 2020). Such a statement highlights the complexities of the unicorn's relationship to queer identity. While the extravagance and hyper-femininity of the unicorn are often shared and celebrated by certain segments of the queer community, too often the queer unicorn becomes a vehicle for commercialization and mass consumption connected with the trend of "pink-washing" or "rainbow-washing" products to pander to the queer community.[2] Still, there persists a deep connection between conceptions of queerness and the figure of the unicorn, one that escapes binary categorizations and continues to evolve.

In the 2020s, queerness and the unicorn have become inextricable from one another, although historically speaking this is a very recent development. By the second decade of the 21st century, Amrou Al-Kadhi, a queer, non-binary drag queen, could naturally choose the unicorn as the governing image of their memoir, and indeed of their life and their self; the book bears the title *Life as a Unicorn: A Journey from Shame to Pride and Everything in Between*: "For me, the multiple meanings of unicorns encapsulate the very essence of being queer" (Al-Kadhi [2019] 2020, p. 8). A thorough history documenting the inception of the

now commonplace association between unicorns and queerness remains to be written, but it is clear that Beagle's novel appeared considerably in advance of this now ubiquitous connection, and arguably played an instrumental if indirect role in forging it. In his critical companion to the text, Timothy S. Miller speculates that "Beagle's decision to gender the unicorn female likely played a major role in the gradual feminization of the unicorn's image over the next two decades" (Miller 2024, p. 12).[3] We would add that, in taking a symbol of feral virility and unrestrained masculinity and instead cementing it in popular culture as an image of feminine beauty, Beagle crucially intermixed multiple gendered characteristics, enabling the "trans-ing" of the unicorn and its use as a signifier of gender fluidity.[4]

The provocation in our title—the assertion that *The Last Unicorn* could somehow represent "the first queer unicorn"—we of course do not intend to advance as a literal historical claim, but rather through it we highlight the novel's position as precedent and catalyst for the subsequent affinities that arose between unicorns and queerness. Writing in 2020, Duncan, the author of the preliminary investigation "How Did Unicorns Get So Gay?", places the emergence of the unicorn as a universal gay icon in the very recent past: "Some time in the past ten years, unicorns became gay icons, second only to the rainbow flag in symbolizing queerness" (Duncan 2020). One can, however, locate a few suggestively queer unicorns predating even the adoption of the rainbow pride flag in 1978, but only a few. Filmmaker and broadcaster John Scagliotti—a producer of the documentary *Before Stonewall* (1984) and director of its follow-up *After Stonewall* (1999)—recalls joining a gay radio collective called "Unicorn News" prior to this date: "My partner, Andy Kopkind, and I met in 1971 and after hanging out in Europe for awhile we came back and joined a radio collective called Unicorn News, which was a gay collective basically. There was a straight woman in it, but she kind of identified with everything going on. Well, it was pretty gay. Our job (as far as the collective) was to make radio news stories that we would send to the newly emerging sort of progressive FM radio stations in and around Washington, D.C." (Johnson and Keith 2001, p. 121). References to Unicorn News in the early 70s are abundant, including the following description in the 1974 *People's Yellow Pages of America*, a countercultural directory: "Alternative radio news network being put together by gay male collective" (French 1974, p. 188). Likewise, in 1975 the Boston weekly newspaper *Gay Community News* advertises the "Framingham Unicorn Society" in the classified ads alongside other gay community groups across the Northeast, a listing falling under the publication's "Quick Gay Guide" (Quick Gay Guide 1975, p. 19). A few years later, gay poet bill bissett invokes the exhilarating liberatory power of the unicorn in his 1978 poem "th unicorn is loos": "th unicorn is loos n hees got ridrs" (Bissett 1978, no pag.). Serendipitously, Audre Lorde's own 1978 poem "The Black Unicorn" might be understood as representing another early queer adoption of the unicorn symbol, even if on the surface the emphasis in the poem appears to fall on race rather than sexuality.[5] Other unicorns surely lie hidden in various queer archives from this era, and into the 1980s the unicorn only grows in prominence as a sign under which queer people might meet, as we see evidenced in the proliferation of gay bars such as Milwaukee's "The Unicorn," which opened in 1984 (Schwamb 2023); as well as in the Chicago bathhouse "The Unicorn Club" (The Legacy Walk 2012); and a gay strip club with the same name that opened in Indianapolis in 1985 (Ryan 2025).[6] Most intriguingly for our purposes, in 1985 a new owner also renamed a gay bar in Green Bay "*The Last Unicorn*" (Bollier 2020): it seems that queer interpretations of unicorns and indeed *The Last Unicorn* itself have existed for quite some time.[7]

3. Gender Fantasy: From Queer to Trans Readings of Beagle's Unicorn

In this essay, we argue more specifically that Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* implicitly presents a transgender narrative, the unicorn's succession of transformations legible as

trans experience, including the frustration of being misgendered; a sense of nonnormative temporality; the horrors of dysphoria; false solace in repression and compulsory conformity; and, finally, the finding of community and acceptance. As we will discuss further below, queer readers who have grown up with this story, whether in writing or film—and those who may have only discovered it nearer to the present—regularly express deep empathy with the character of the unicorn and her struggles with identity. Video essayists such as the YouTuber Sam Komack—a group of commentators among whom the film adaptation understandably appears more popular—have produced queer and specifically trans interpretations of the story, Komack even framing it as a thoroughgoing "trans fable" (Komack 2025).[8] By rereading the novel alongside such perspectives from queer readers and viewers, and in conjunction with works of queer theory and fantasy theory, a broader linkage between fantasy literature and the queer experience can be rendered visible, illuminating avenues to further explore queer reader identification and queerness across the genre and related transformative responses to it.

Despite the relative dearth of scholarship at the intersection of trans studies and the academic study of genre fantasy, we contend that fantasy and queerness, particularly transness, remain inextricably linked: the realization of one's queer identity necessitates the practice of fantasizing, imagining a reality that differs from the present state of things.[9] Thus, a common theme within trans narratives involves envisioning a future self that radically differs from one's current physical form, or struggling to imagine such a future at all, as any future without transition would be undesirable. Foundational fantasy theorist Kathryn Hume emphasizes the fantasy genre's ability to act as a medium for projection: "Daydreams are private, and often anti-social, in the sense that the protagonist imagines himself or herself scaling the barriers erected by society, and gaining power that belongs to others. Traditional societies are founded upon the rightness of the status quo, so naturally such aggrandizement, by violence or marriage or cunning, is seen as sinful and threatening" (Hume [1984] 2014, p. 64). "Daydreams" such as those generated by trans individuals out of the instinctual desire to change form and therefore gain the privilege of their true gender identity provide the basis upon which fantasy is constructed. As such, fantasy fiction does not need to have an explicitly queer character in its narrative to be read as queer, and the groundbreaking work of scholars such as Taylor Driggers and Jes Battis have begun to put fantasy studies in closer dialogue with queer theory, though to a lesser extent with trans studies.[10]

On the relationship between queerness and fantasy literature, Anne Balay has further argued that fantasy invites its readers to participate in the act of imagining not just what is described in the text, but rather the unlimited possibilities of what might be, and that the apparent absence of queer characters should not in any way frustrate or limit queer readings: "Because of how fantasy fiction is constituted, including but not limited to its rules about sexuality, queer folk are never absent. Even if we don't appear, that absence makes queers almost *more* visible, since homosexuality is what makes straightness meaningful—even possible" (Balay 2012, p. 927, emphasis in original). Thus, the queer reader retains the ability to project their own queerness and lived experience onto an otherwise hetero/cisnormative text. Also invoking Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading, Balay highlights how an affinity between a child reader and a queer character in fantasy literature—either explicitly queer or in some way queer-coded—can trigger a self-reflective realization within the self, and more: "Fantasy books, I argue, do more than help questioning kids find themselves. Rather, in common with queer readings, they encourage 'the interpretive absorption of the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (yet?) have resolved into a sexual specificity of prescribed object choice. . . Such a child—if she reads at all—is reading for important news about himself' (Sedgwick 2–3)" (Balay 2012, p. 928).

When readers claim that "this book/movie made me gay," they usually mean something akin to this phenomenon, even if they have never read any Sedgwick; the online magazine *Reactor* in fact has a dedicated tag for such articles, "This Book Queered Me," one applied to August Clarke's piece published there on "Queer Visibility & Coding" in Beagle's novel, discussed later in this essay (Clarke 2020). *The Last Unicorn* commonly elicits this reaction from queer and particularly trans readers, its themes of transformation, mortality, and more in close alignment with feelings tied to transness and gender dysphoria.

For some readers of the novel and viewers of the film adaptation, especially those who encountered it in childhood, Beagle's unicorn may well have served as their "first queer unicorn," in a sense, and she remains queer for them in powerful ways irrespective of Beagle's intentions. Art historian Margaryta Golovchenko has taken the further step to argue that the unicorn of the Western imagination has always represented "an inherently queer creature" onto which was imposed "the culturally constructed notion of heteronormativity" (Golovchenko 2023, p. 85). We find it ultimately more useful in this context instead to think through the newer and culturally bound ways in which queer people have embraced—and indeed worked to claim and remake—the unicorn, Beagle's included, and as such remain just as interested in new readings and remakings of Beagle's original text by contemporary queer readers as in the text itself.[11] Our approach therefore aligns with the work of Jennifer Duggan, who has written extensively on queer approaches to Harry Potter and fan fiction, as well as a recent short piece on "Queer Readings and Rewritings of Children's Literature" that emphasizes fantasy texts in order to "explore and articulate the queer potentialities of certain children's texts—usually implicitly rather than explicitly queer texts—and seek to shed light on why they attract queer readings and rewritings" (Duggan 2025, p. 396). We will proceed to the why in Beagle's case, and begin with the evidence of such readings.

For an emblematic example of the many queer and trans readings of *The Last Unicorn* posted by fans on the Internet, we can begin with Anthony M. Bean's simple declaration: "I recall watching *The Last Unicorn* as a child, and feeling seen" (Bean 2022). Nonbinary writer Aya Maguire also references the narrative as critical to their self-understanding: "I am blessed to have, in the categorical tools of my subconscious mind, a particular story that helps me understand the world. That story is *The Last Unicorn*" (Maguire 2023).[12] Eve Tushnet likewise connects the film to an understanding of her sexuality: "I can see its themes running through my life like veins. The idea that beauty is a life-changing shock is one way of talking about how I came out as a lesbian" (Tushnet 2022). Similarly, WordPress user transgenxgirl titles a blog post "Why '*The Last Unicorn*' is an Allegory for My Transgender Life," and notes how the unicorn "experiences identity rejection by others": "Like many closeted or denied-existence transgender folks, Unicorn is trapped by various fake exteriors imposed on her by sometimes malevolent-sometimes benevolent outside forces" (Transgenxgirl 2017). Curtis Williams, too, elaborates on masking and performance in the story: "Masking one's self is something we all do for one reason or another, or for safety. However, members of the Queer community, particularly those who are Trans, can certainly relate to this feeling all too well" (Williams 2021). Finally, in one key sentence trans writer David Minerva Clover sums up the complex feelings expressed in many of these personal essays: "I know, logically, that Beagle didn't write it for queer kids on the internet, but the parallel is too real" (Clover 2020).[13] Queer and trans readers have claimed Beagle's story as their own, much as the contemporary queer community has claimed the symbol of the unicorn itself. In what follows, we will explore some of the most salient queer and trans resonances of the novel at greater length than these personal essays—many based chiefly on the film—are able to do, even as we acknowledge that the lived experiences of their authors and these accompanying expressions of self-understanding through the unicorn

remain some of the profoundest queer and trans readings of the narrative imaginable, and all the evidence that one could need in order to show that it rewards queer readings.

4. Recognizing Misrecognition in *The Last Unicorn*

If transformation proves the dominant motif of the novel, misrecognition continually accompanies it. The plot of the narrative in fact turns on a series of recognitions, misrecognitions, and transformations, the latter of which only further complicate the dynamics and problems of recognition. In the novel's first chapter, the unicorn decides to depart from her secret forest after overhearing human hunters declare that no other unicorns exist in the world. She will not be recognized herself as a unicorn until she meets the antagonistic witch Mommy Fortuna and the kindly wizard Schmendrick, two among the handful of characters able to see her immediately for what she is. After helping the unicorn escape from her captivity by the witch, Schmendrick becomes her first companion on her determined quest to free the other unicorns from their imprisonment by the imposing Red Bull of King Haggard. Later, with an apparent will of its own, Schmendrick's magic saves the unicorn from the aggression of the Red Bull by transforming her into a human woman no longer of any interest to it. In her new human form, the unicorn, now called the Lady Amalthea, continues the search as a guest at Haggard's castle, but gradually begins to lose sight of the quest and her sense of self until Schmendrick is able to transform her back into a unicorn, resulting in the triumphant freeing of her fellows. Throughout all of these adventures and the other episodes that constitute the wider narrative, a particularly relevant throughline emerges: the unicorn is rarely taken for what she is and feels, *knows*, herself to be.

Despite the consistency of the narration's use of she/her pronouns for the unicorn on either side of her magical transformation into a human, one scene in the novel unambiguously suggests a non-binary understanding of the unicorn's gender identity. Perhaps most unexpectedly of all, it is King Haggard, the primary antagonist of the text but also the unicorn connoisseur par excellence, who openly encourages readers—and his own son—to understand the unicorn as a being that defies binary gender, cautioning Prince Lír to "be slow to call that third male or female" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 155).[14] During a brief teichoscopy scene atop his castle's battlements, Haggard describes the approaching trio of Schmendrick, Molly Grue, and the unicorn as follows: "A man and a woman. The third one, in the cloak—I am not certain of the third"; "Do not be too sure of that one too soon" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 155). Lír demurs, and with a sudden vehemence: "'It is a woman,' he declared. 'I would doubt my own sex before hers'" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 155). For all of his professional heroics and eventually his ultimate sacrifice, Lír proves to be the character that most threatens to trap the unicorn as the Lady Amalthea, a more sinister threat than that represented by Haggard's desire to stable her as a unicorn in the sea with the other conquests of the Red Bull. The unicorn confides as much to Molly Grue: "[Lír] wants me, as much as the Red Bull did, and with no more understanding. But he frightens me even more than the Red Bull, because he has a kind heart" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 184). The unicorn most fears that she will cease in her struggles, and accept the identity thrust upon her, become content to be called "woman" rather than the unicorn she knows herself to be.

It is Lír who most wishes to keep the unicorn in the body that so disgusts and terrifies her, the body that denies her true self. It is Lír who wishes to make the unicorn the princess to his prince, the (heterosexual) woman to his man, two partners in a binary. When Haggard persists in disconnecting the unicorn from femininity, Lír tellingly not only doubles down on the assessment, but also insists on the absoluteness of a gender binary. Despite his father's continued insistence that neither "woman" nor "female" may suit the apparently feminine-bodied person below, Lír elaborates, "If I had grown up never dreaming that there were two separate secrets to the world, if I had taken every woman I met to be exactly

like myself, still I would know that this creature was different from anything I had ever seen before" (Beagle [1968] 2008, pp. 155–56). Lír recognizes in the unicorn difference from himself but nevertheless cannot think beyond the gender binary, even as the existence of the marvelous unicorn itself confirms the existence of more than merely two such secrets: "Or like the horns of a dilemma, Schmendrick thought. They never have just two" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 150). The unicorn cannot be the woman to Lír's man or the princess to his prince: that role can only by filled by the Lady Amalthea, a false self, and one that, as part of the novel's eucatastrophic happy ending, ceases to be entirely. While Lír feels this loss profoundly, the "death" of the Lady Amalthea represents a positive reassertion of the unicorn's identity beyond humanity and beyond the gender binary. Schmendrick, in the end, must restrain Lír—"Magician, she is mine!" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 275)—from the futile pursuit of a woman who does not exist: "be content, and be king" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 276). Beagle frames Lír's intended pursuit of the unicorn after her second transformation as one that would prove both self-destructive and corrosive to the realm that his leadership should heal, and Lír, to his credit, lets go.[15]

Prince Lír is not the only character to misrecognize the unicorn; in fact, every human in the world of the novel other than the principals can see her only as an ordinary horse, just as Lír can only understand her as a (cisheteronormative) woman. Misrecognition, as *The Last Unicorn* depicts it, variously evokes the misgendering of trans people in the present, as well as the consequences of that misgendering. Near the beginning of the unicorn's journey to find her missing kindred, she comes across a man working in his garden who attempts to capture and tame her, mistaking her for a white horse: "'You pretty little mare.' '*Mare*?' The unicorn trumpeted the word so shrilly that the man stopped pursuing her and clapped his hands to his ears. 'Mare?' she demanded. 'I, a horse? Is that what you take me for? Is that what you see?' 'Good horse,' the fat man panted" (Beagle [1968] 2008, pp. 9–10). Unlike Molly Grue and Schmendrick, who can understand the unicorn's speech, it is apparent that the man also has not heard her attempt to correct his misidentification: whether he has or hasn't, he can only repeat the mistake by calling her a "Good horse" once again. This initial instance of misrecognition sets a precedent for the entire novel, throughout which most of the human characters do not recognize the unicorn for what she truly is, labeling her a common (but beautiful) horse, having no conception that a unicorn could exist. Particularly resonant with the trans experience is the continued ignorance of those misrecognizing the unicorn, contrary to both visible evidence and verbal explanations such as the one that the man received, even if he could not understand it. Despite the unmistakable signifier of her unicorn identity—the horn—and her active rejection of his preconceived label, the man insists on understanding her as a horse, acknowledging neither. The man exclusively perceives the unicorn's horse-like features, and only these features end up defining her for him; they are also the least interesting things about her, the least core to her identity.

It is no wonder, then, that August Clarke, a transmasculine author of queer fantasy himself, should find in *The Last Unicorn* multiple examples of "Queer Visibility and Coding," among them an emphasis on "the stakes of misrecognition," counterbalanced with the value of recognition: "To me, before I could even conceptualize my own gender perils, I understood this story as being about how the stakes of misrecognition—how it's variously annoying, frightening, debasing, excruciating—and that I could legibly exist and be my own pseudo-mythic weird thing if I could find others like me, who surely existed in the great wide world beyond one's own little forest patch" (Clarke 2020). Clarke notes that the group of characters that correctly recognize the unicorn consists of either other unicorns or humans that become her close companions. Similarly to how queer folk navigate the world, the unicorn creates her own safe space and finds community with those that respect her identity. After all, Emily Truman has commented on the uptake of the unicorn by LGBTQ+

communities as a "metaphor to represent 'otherness' and as a symbol of pride around sexual orientation and gender identity," and one fundamentally connected to a sense of a community formed of unique individuals: "In this context, the importance of being one's true self is embedded in broader notions of community and allyship" (Truman 2022, p. 122). Beagle's unicorn tends toward the solitary, but in fact cannot survive or succeed alone, and craves the recognition she requires to thrive.

As far as the other stakes of misrecognition are concerned, the same episode with the man described above makes clear that such misrecognition is not harmless, but rather borders on an act of violence. Beagle's language in the scene carries undertones of sexual assault; the man goes rigid at the sight of her—"Oh, you're beautiful"—and loosens his belt to approach, even if at first, "When he tugged off his belt, made a loop in it, and moved clumsily toward her, the unicorn was more pleased than frightened," knowing herself in no real danger of being captured (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 9). Frustrated and overtaxed by physical exertion as the unicorn proves too nimble to catch, the man begins to gasp breathlessly: "'Ah, steady, steady, easy now.' The man's sweating face was striped with dirt, and he could hardly get his breath. 'Pretty,' he gasped. 'You pretty little mare'" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 9). This impotent hunt of the unicorn fails to culminate in the penetrative finale common to medieval bestiary images of the unicorn—in which the male hunter takes the unicorn unaware, its head reposing in the lap of a virgin girl—yet it represents an aggressive misrecognition nonetheless. The man's assumptions that the unicorn is something she is not, and that therefore she is common property available to anyone who desires her and can claim her by violence, that finally she is, or should be, his own, differs little from Lír's more rarefied desire for the (false) body of Lady Amalthea. Possessed of greater power to overcome her will than this ineffectual aggressor, other characters will prove more frightening: Haggard with his Red Bull; his heir apparent Lír; and even the friendly Schmendrick, not hesitating to exercise his own form of control over the unicorn's body, transforming her without her consent. Each of these men threatens to trap the unicorn in cages of very different but no less confining forms.

The character of Mommy Fortuna, an antagonist like King Haggard, represents one final but crucial exception to the pattern of misrecognition in the novel, but she uses her ability to recognize the unicorn for malicious ends. Recognition, we see, has its own perils. We should first note in connection with this point that, while Haggard recognizes the Lady Amalthea as something other than a woman, he does not proceed to encourage respect for her identity, but will later confront her threateningly on a parapet, wielding his knowledge like a weapon: "The Bull missed you because you were shaped like a woman, but I always knew" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 222). Haggard has correctly "clocked" the unicorn, identifying an essence that her shape belies, but draws on this understanding in ways that threaten to harm and dominate her, as in this tense and frightening scene. In a trans reading of the novel, Mommy Fortuna's actions and attitude likewise evoke a transphobic desire to make a spectacle out of and fetishize that which is deemed "unnatural." While exhibiting the unicorn in her Midnight Carnival, Mommy Fortuna must use a spell to enhance the unicorn's appearance so that the audience might recognize—or believe themselves to recognize—her true nature. The unicorn feels violated rather than validated by this act, and, although the audience sees her as a unicorn, this recognition relies on an illusion, a false physical signal in the form of a second illusionary horn. In practice, this carnival display reduces her again to a mare with the superficial trappings of a unicorn, all intended for the benefit of an audience's simplistic ocular consumption of her.

With shock and confusion, the unicorn explains to Schmendrick that the need for the spell disturbs her deeply because of what it reveals about how people otherwise perceive her: "'There has never been a spell on me before,' the unicorn said. She shivered long

and deep. 'There has never been a world in which I was not known'" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 40). This feeling embodies the trans sense of obligation to perform gender, as if for an audience's approval, the stability of the identity itself relying on how much effort is put into it. Bruno Monfort, speaking to "The Political Economy of Sexual Identity," recently writes of how "the production of gender is exposed as a particular kind of labor: a repetitive and obligatory performance of the body that produces the sexed self and that appears independently of the acts that produce it, it is naturalized" (Monfort 2024, p. 270). Monfort goes on to underscore the cisnormative demands governing the act of performing gender in this way, which then justifies the assumption of gender based on outward appearance, and reckons the real costs of this dynamic: "The laborious activity of producing and performing the sexed body becomes central to the production of normative and disciplined subjects" (Monfort 2024, p. 270). Mommy Fortuna's illusion reveals to the unicorn that no one would ever truly know her without such an unwilling and uncomfortable performance, a profoundly difficult "lesson" that weighs on her just as heavily as the literal iron of her cage presses down on and confines her. It is no wonder that trans readers might find in this imagery reflections of pressure to conform in their gender performances and of dysphoria.

5. "I Will Die Here!": The Trans Body and Dysphoric Horror

Images of confinement repeat with variation upon variation across Beagle's novel. At one point when Schmendrick attempts to free the unicorn from her cage at the Midnight Carnival, his well-intentioned magic gone awry threatens the unicorn with a more intense form of confinement still. The bars of the cage start to shrink, and her livable space inside dwindles to nothing: "The bars were drawing in, pitiless as the tide or the morning, and they would shear through her until they surrounded her heart, which they would keep a prisoner forever" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 47). Later we learn how Haggard's Red Bull keeps the unicorns penned in the sea, where they remain always near to the shore, but never permitted to reach dry land. In *The Last Unicorn*, the cage may be a literal one with iron bars, or as vast as the ocean, or as small as one's own body: just one's own body, perhaps the worst of these to find oneself trapped inside.

The unicorn's pivotal transformation into a (mortal) human exemplifies the feeling of being trapped in a body not one's own, manifesting in the dysphoric horror that the transformed being experiences; the narration now refers to the unicorn as the "the white girl" until Schmendrick arbitrarily concocts the name "the Lady Amalthea" for her. Immediately upon her transformation, Beagle describes the horror of the newly made "girl" at her body in striking terms: "The girl began to touch her face timidly, recoiling from the feel of her own features. Her curled fingers brushed the mark on her forehead, and she closed her eyes and gave a thin, stabbing howl of loss and weariness and utter despair. 'What have you done to me?' she cried. 'I will die here!' She tore at the smooth body, and blood followed her fingers. 'I will die here! I will die!'" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 147). "Here" is not a place; "here" is a body that is simply intolerable. The girl reacts with pure dread and abhorrence at her new mortal form, as pleasing as others may find it—"In the first place, it's quite an attractive shape," Schmendrick says unhelpfully, or damagingly (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 148)—even going so far as to tear at her own flesh in a desperate attempt to escape it. Based on a previous conversation, Schmendrick should have already known how the unicorn would feel upon being turned into a human shape: she had earlier compared unicorns changed into human bodies to being "exiled, trapped in burning houses" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 59). And so the newly minted girl continues to resist this unlivable existence, demanding to know how the wizard could commit such a deed: "'Why did you not let the Bull kill me?' The white girl moaned. 'Why did you not leave me to the harpy? That would have been kinder than closing me in this cage'" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 148). The

unicorn feels stifled and trapped in this shape, even though and because it is the body that she inhabits, the body that has been given to her, unasked for.

For a recent depiction of the trans experience by a trans director that handles themes of identity, dysphoria, and temporality similarly to *The Last Unicorn*, we could turn to Jane Schoenbrun's 2024 horror film *I Saw the TV Glow* (Schoenbrun 2024), especially as Schoenbrun chooses to revive the premature burial trope from classic Gothic fiction as a recurrent point of reference. The film follows the characters of Owen and Maddy, who come to believe that their true selves originate in a fictional world, now trapped and slowly dying in the reality they find themselves in, a metaphor for their respective queer identities that yearn to be expressed. The unicorn's constant discomfort in the body that she feels deteriorating and dying—"I can feel it rotting all around me"—resembles the gradual suffocation that Owen experiences in *I Saw the TV Glow* as he feels his other, truer self dying within him, buried alive in another world (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 150).[16] Schoenbrun has glossed this dimension of *I Saw the TV Glow* in a way just as applicable to this key scene from *The Last Unicorn*: "'TV Glow is about something I think a lot of trans people understand,' Schoenbrun said later. 'The tension between the space that you exist within, which feels like home, and the simultaneous terror and liberation of understanding that that space might not be able to hold you in your true form'" (Seidlitz 2024). Later, in Haggard's domain with the added seductions of Prince Lír and the "normal" life that he promises, the fear that the unicorn will die in this form, yet happy and content to do so, consumes her and indeed almost reaches fulfillment as her destiny.

In order to gain entrance to Haggard's castle, the nameless white girl must take on the new identity of the Lady Amalthea, another disguise imposed on her from without, hastily improvised by Schmendrick once again. Her languorous sojourn in the castle leads her into a kind of somnambulant, amnesiac existence, all the while Lír attempts to woo her, to persuade her to accept her new identity as a human woman. A long passage from this almost timeless interlude proves especially evocative of dysphoria, and dysphoria reaching the point of dissociation from the false self that others wrongly recognize her as: "Now I am two—myself, and this other that you call 'my lady.' For she is here as truly as I am now, though once she was only a veil over me. She walks in the castle, she sleeps, she dresses herself, she takes her meals, and she thinks her own thoughts" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 186). These lines affirm the existence—the material and social reality—of this new human woman, "my lady," who walks the castle while simultaneously distancing the unicorn's true sense of selfhood from that same "her." Yes, "she" is the correct pronoun, but it is a depersonalized third-person pronoun that has replaced the unicorn's "I," the unicorn's "myself." Further, the specific term of address here, "my lady," underscores the way in which this new identity relies on the possession of the unicorn by others, now a lady that belongs to someone else, to their first-person (possessive) pronoun, always "my lady," never "one's own lady," one's own anything.

While at first viscerally resistant to this playacting as the Lady Amalthea and to the idea of living a human life, after residing in King Haggard's castle for some time, the Lady Amalthea comes to express love for the Prince Lír, suggesting her eventual assimilation and tentative acceptance of her new role and physical form. Evidence of her past life as an immortal unicorn gradually fades, only to be half-remembered in scraps such as the verses she sings for the king: "*I am a king's daughter,/And I grow old within/The prison of my person,/The shackles of my skin./And I would run away/And beg from door to door—*" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 215, emphasis in original). Here the unicorn has remembered some of the lyrics sung to her earlier in the novel by a young noblewoman (Beagle [1968] 2008, pp. 102–3); tellingly, she has remembered the lines about the prison of her person and the shackles of her skin, relevant as they are to her present experience, but she has forgotten

that she was the addressee of the song, not the human speaker, the king's daughter. The unicorn cannot recall where she learned the song, and finds its meaning inscrutable after her unicorn self has become so submerged in the Lady Amalthea: "I am no prisoner. I am the Lady Amalthea, beloved of Lír, who has come into my dreams so that I may not doubt myself even while I sleep. Where could I have learned a song of sorrow? I am the Lady Amalthea, and I know only the songs that Prince Lír has taught me" (Beagle [1968] 2008, pp. 215–16). She has become reduced to only that which Lír has filled her mind with: "He told her everything he knew, and what he thought about all of it, and happily invented a life and opinions for her, which she helped him do by listening. Nor was she deceiving him, for she truly remembered nothing before the castle and him. She began and ended with Prince Lír—except for the dreams, and they soon faded, as he had said they would" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 214). This is the cost of the bargain into which she has entered in becoming her performance: the iron bars of a carnival cage have not literally shrunk to trap her heart, as such, but she herself has shrunk to occupy a much smaller space.

Such a complete and total repression of her true nature illustrates the Lady Amalthea's willingness to trade her identity for a life of comfort and security without fear of being hunted or captured, or perhaps simply without being confronted with the difficult truth that her physical appearance and the social roles connected with it do not correspond to her true nature. Most trans folk must undergo this negotiation between living a life that is true to oneself but that may place them in active danger, or living a lie in order to maintain their safety. The Lady Amalthea goes on to reinforce this sentiment, dramatically contravening her reactions upon first turning human with a negative reaction to the possibility of being changed back into a unicorn: "It is good that everything dies. I want to die when you die. Do not let him enchant me, do not let him make me immortal. I am no unicorn, no magical creature. I am human, and I love you" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 249). The centering of a heteronormative relationship within the Lady Amalthea's process of assimilation highlights her learned ability to perform the role of human woman appropriately in relation to a man within the context of Beagle's constructed feudal society. The Lady Amalthea ultimately must sacrifice this feeling of comfort and safety in order to transform back into a unicorn and save her fellow unicorns from their own ensnarement, although the novel suggests that she will continue to carry the burden of these experiences despite her immortality and true form having been restored. This bittersweet ending for the unicorn illustrates that, although remnants of a repressive past may haunt the queer imagination, there exists a future in which one can be accepted and recognized by those around them. As Sedgwick writes in relation to the reparative reader, "Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates" (Sedgwick 2003, p. 146). Fantasy's traditional movement towards restoration and healing, the renewal of the land, here signs queer hope.

6. Queer Temporality, Reproductive Time, and Queer Community

While much of the novel's resonance with trans and broader queer experience turns on (mis)recognition, dysphoria, and belonging, Beagle's interests in rethinking linear time via the fantastical premise of immortality—and the unicorn's concomitant challenges to reproductive time—enable one final set of comparisons between the narrative and various conceptions of queer temporality. On the most basic level, the unicorn's experience of life and the passage of time differs radically from human experience, as she lacks any concept of age or death as an immortal being. From the beginning, a feeling of timelessness or agelessness permeates the unicorn's consciousness and the story as a whole: "[S]he had no idea of months and years and centuries, or even of seasons" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 2).

At first the unicorn has no awareness of temporality that would allow her to comprehend the statement made by the hunter intruding on her timeless forest space that "Unicorns are long gone" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 3); more sinisterly for a trans reading of the novel, the man even calls their existence into question: "If, indeed, they ever were" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 3). Up until she is transformed into a mortal woman, the unicorn resides outside of time, an eternal spectator on the sidelines of time itself: "Generation after generation, wolves and rabbits alike, they hunted and loved and had children and died, and as the unicorn did none of these things, she never grew tired of watching them" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 2). Queer narratives often explore alternatives to linear temporality, whether those alternative understandings of time carry with them more positive or more negative implications. To draw another comparison with *I Saw the TV Glow*, Terra Mae Gasque posits that the comparable "agelessness" of the character Owen "is a dark reflection of the feelings commonly held by chronically traumatized individuals": "In queer theory, the idea of 'queer temporality' describes the phenomena of queer people residing outside and thus challenging a society's markers of maturation and progress [. . .]. To those within the normative lens of society, queer individuals are viewed as maturing out of sync with the society's markers" (Gasque 2025, p. 139). Owen hardly seems to age throughout the narrative as the film moves at an inconsistent and erratic pace, skipping past major life events and winding back on itself; also, while at one point Owen claims to have achieved the heteronormative goal of reproducing, we never see this family, and it very clearly has not made him happy. The unicorn, too, refuses reproductive time, and occupies a very different place in relation to human time in general.

In the context of Beagle's ruminations on mortality and temporality, Miller draws attention to the following passage in which the unicorn contemplates her continued existence in a far future incomprehensible to her traveling companions, whose familiar *stars* will not even survive to see it: "Often then, between the rush of one breath and the reach of another, it came to her that Schmendrick and Molly were long dead, and King Haggard as well, and the Red Bull met and mastered—so long ago that the grandchildren of the stars that had seen it all happen were withering now, turning to coal—and that she was still the only unicorn left in the world" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 107).[17] Miller explicates the extreme prolepsis here primarily as reflecting the potential for loneliness and alienation inhering in the unicorn's inhuman temporality: "Here the unicorn imagines the distant future and her own continued existence there, almost as if she is taking the perspective of a mortal viewing eternity with vertiginous fear, imagining the stars burning out. What most frightens her about this future is her utter loneliness there, a suffering in solitude, and certainly Beagle does not encourage desire for eternal life when that life would be filled with anguish and despair" (Miller 2024, p. 33). But we would like to reread this same passage in light of queer temporality and in light of our wider queer reading of the novel, with potentially more liberatory implications.[18] It is abundantly clear that a future as a human woman marrying Lír would be all the more terrible a fate for the unicorn, and she would remain cut off in the same way from her unicorn community, alienated from her past and indeed her self. When the unicorn begins to surrender and enter cisheteronormative time as the beloved lady of Prince Lír, we see her reduced to nothing more than an appendage: "She began and ended with Prince Lír" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 214). To remain a human woman would be to sacrifice both her past, a livable present, and her infinite future; many readings of the novel emphasize the latter of these to the exclusion of the first, focusing on the nature of mortality compared with immortality, certainly a major thematic obsession of Beagle.[19] Ultimately, the unicorn embraces her own "deviant" temporality, and achieves the freeing of her kindred and escapes all of the forms of imprisonment that threaten her own freedom and future.

From a queer perspective, in other words, *The Last Unicorn* allows its unicorn to evade, queerly, the demands of reproductive time, a formulation of Jack Halberstam's that Loretta Stec usefully glosses as "that which is associated with marriage, children, stability and respectability, and provides a heteronormative shape to a life" (Stec 2020, p. 184); as Halberstam writes, "Reproductive time and family time are, above all, heteronormative time/space constructs" (Halberstam 2005, p. 10). The novel's introductory passages describe heterosexual coupling between unicorns as infrequent, in that "They mate very rarely" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 2). This reference to mating taking place at all does seem to presuppose a familiar biological mechanism for unicorn reproduction, but throughout the novel the titular unicorn never once ponders pregnancy, progeny, or a male mate: her attention remains entirely fixed on freeing her fellow unicorns, framed as an undifferentiated community of adults.[20] Breaking from the dominant narratives of reproductive futurity that Lee Edelman has famously identified, the quest in *The Last Unicorn* does not involve saving some last infant unicorn, a symbol of a future guaranteed by a heterosexual reproductive order, but instead rescuing the collective of all adult unicorns, the ones alive now, here, in the present.[21] Repeating this decentering or really denial of any image of the child, and in an obvious instance of foreshadowing, Schmendrick tells the unicorn a story about his teacher Nikos, who once saved the life of a unicorn by turning it "into a handsome young man" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 58); although the man marries the maiden in whose lap he had lain his unicorn head, "There were no children" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 59). Neither will (or should) the eventual intensity of feeling between Lír and the Lady Amalthea result in children, and Golovchenko, in a brief discussion of *The Last Unicorn* within her wider art historical study of the unicorn image, incisively connects the novel's challenges to normative reproductive expectations with a different understanding of community in alignment with contemporary queer culture: "*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" (Golovchenko 2023, p. 91).

While throughout this essay we have emphasized a trans reading of the unicorn's experiences, we have also hoped to demonstrate that the text—and its readers—permit a variety of overlapping and possibly divergent queer interpretations of the narrative, including for example an argument that might build on this refusal of heterosexuality's reproductive time to develop a fully asexual account of the unicorn. For one, queer poet Esther Spurrill-Jones has written of "the asexual selflessness of Amalthea and Lír's doomed love" as she judges it in the adaptation, and argued that "unicorns as depicted in this movie are asexual and aromantic" (Spurrill-Jones 2024). Such an asexual reading of the story complements rather than contradicts a trans or other queer reading, and the conclusion of Spurrill-Jones's reflection speaks to the many different kinds of queer readers and viewers who felt and feel affinity with Beagle's unicorn: "[F]or me, *The Last Unicorn* reflected my latent queerness. Invisible and lonely, disguised as something I was not, I yearned to transform into a powerful and beautiful magical creature. [. . .] I am asexual. I am queer. I am alive. And I am not alone" (Spurrill-Jones 2024). The unicorn promises her readers a space outside of and opposed to cisheteronormative structures of domination, united in a community of difference.

7. Conclusions: Reader Responses and Reparative Readings

Spurrill-Jones wrote her essay in response to the prompt "(How) Have LGBTQ Film & Literature Shaped You?" posed by Prism & Pen, a collective of LGBTQ+ writers on

Medium, acknowledging the wide embrace of Beagle's work as an example of queer fiction, queer not because of the author's identity but rather the communities of readers who have acknowledged it their own. Queer and trans readers have frequently responded to *The Last Unicorn* by expressing some form of gratitude to the narrative, either for making their identity feel seen or helping them better understand and navigate the complexities of that identity. Strikingly, Clarke reflects on how traditional queer coming-out stories—even those by queer authors—did not resonate with their own experience to the same extent as did Beagle's novel, which they write taught them "more about being queer than any condescendingly saccharine coming out story ever did": "These modes of being seemed impossible rarities, strange and esoteric, outside of my nasty little reach. What I felt I might be seemed too weird to exist, frankly. Might explain something about how alienating those above-mentioned coming-out narratives felt to teenage me; whatever those characters were announcing unto the universe/social media/their parents, it was not what I happened to be. After all, lesbianism is usually defined by the lazy layperson as being a woman who loves exclusively women, and I had a gnawing suspicion that I wasn't one of those" (Clarke 2020). Duncan's similar comments on the film reinforce the idea that the fantasy genre's invitation to imagine allows for revelations about oneself to occur via projection: "My dad brought me a copy of *The Last Unicorn*, an early bit of animated magic about a unicorn who thinks she is the last of her kind. [. . .] The point is that the unicorn is magic and she has been told her whole life that she is the only one. 'Me too, me too,' I thought as a child, 'I am the only one of my kind,' even though I didn't feel like a sparkle-eyed waif and I didn't know what 'my kind' were. I just knew that my existence was somehow different than the muggles around me" (Duncan 2020). The title of Spurrill-Jones's essay, "How '*The Last Unicorn*' Reflected My Invisible Queerness," underlines the value of Beagle's text and other fantasy novels for queer readers, in reflecting, in rendering visible, in recognition.

Yes, Beagle's re-gendering of a formerly masculinized symbol in 1968 may well have helped accelerate the now-ubiquitous identification of the unicorn with queerness and even transness, but perhaps the novel's greatest contribution as queer literature lies elsewhere, in the panoply of "amateur" affective readings of his novel and screenplay that we have only begun to document here. We apply the term "amateur" in the opposite of a derogatory fashion to this field of YouTube video essays and personal narratives and film reviews, following Carolyn Dinshaw's celebration of the amateur in her book on queer temporality and medievalism; reparative reading requires only reader response, not formal academic training, and Dinshaw provocatively suggests that "amateurism's operation outside, or beside, the culture of professionalism provides an opening of potentials otherwise foreclosed" (Dinshaw 2012, p. 24).[22] Quite simply, *The Last Unicorn* rewards trans readings because trans readers have found it to do so, and in this essay we have hoped to provide not only documentation of these engagements but some more extended clarification on the how and the why of such queer identifications. One final line from the story of the unicorn, this from Beagle's screenplay for the film adaptation, can also speak to the importance of queer and trans readers being able to locate themselves in a narrative that may not have been written by them or for them and may predate contemporary understandings of queerness and transness: "There has never been a time without unicorns" (Rankin and Bass [1982] 2007). One merely has to look for them.

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Notes

1 See (Sedgwick 2003) and (Tegtmeyer 2025), the latter of which essay builds to a compelling conclusion about genre fantasy itself, and its margins: "Escape in fantasy is a reparative impulse that shows no matter how consuming the shadow of tradition can seem there always exists a place on its edge to recover and become whole again. I believe that this is a connection that Le Guin's fantasy and the field of queer theory share: the desire to take what has been tossed away, neglected, or overlooked and give them a place to thrive" (Tegtmeyer 2025, p. 316).

2 While some commentators use the terms "pinkwashing" and "rainbow-washing" interchangeably on the model of pseudo-environmentalist corporate "greenwashing," others inflect the term "pinkwashing" with a narrower political sense, namely as "the practice of covering over or distracting from a nation's policies of discrimination of some populations through a noisy touting of its gay rights for a limited few" (Puar 2013, p. 33). See also (Wargo and Coleman 2024), and Coward, who does not use either term but comments on unicorns as "highly commodified, safe and ofttimes neutered symbols" in conjunction with "the commercialisation of Pride itself" (Coward 2024, p. 39). Finally, while Miller does not discuss pinkwashing per se, he traces how, in a fashion comparable to the unicorn's potential to facilitate pinkwashing, a "rhetoric of uniqueness seeks to persuade consumers" to purchase unicorn-themed products of all kinds (Miller 2023, p. 53), such that the mass-market unicorn has become "an icon of the unique that any number of corporations leverage and exploit as a collectively maintained brand identity" (Miller 2023, p. 64).

3 Miller writes further that "Beagle's novel has [. . .] done much to solidify the now ubiquitous popular culture image of the unicorn and its nature," and suggests that "the transformation of what was, pre-1968, typically a symbol of untamable masculine virility into Beagle's femininized version of the unicorn enabled the proliferation of such unicorns in, for example, the My Little Pony franchise and Lisa Frank's rainbow designs" (Miller 2024, pp. 12–13).

4 Emily Truman and others characterize the unicorn "often coded as female or gender fluid" in modernity, rather differently from its uniform medieval maleness (Truman 2022, p. 122). The unicorn is always male in the premodern bestiaries, a doubly phallic stallion tamable only by the ultimate power of a king (as in the coats of arms of Scotland and the United Kingdom), or of the subduing maiden in whose lap he will rest his horned head; see the relevant subheading on the subject in Miller's critical companion (Miller 2024, pp. 51–63). Also see Alicia K. Anderson's forthcoming edited collection *The Unicorn Evolves* (Anderson 2026), which contains several essays that explore the queer dimensions of the contemporary unicorn. Most relevant to our project here are Brian Johnson's "The First Unicorn: A Memoir of Protogay Boyhood," which describes the role of unicorns in the author's personal imaginary during a "protogay" boyhood when queerness could be experienced but not recognized, and Mina Sewell Mancuso's "*A Brief History of the Unicorn* on Screen: The Making of a Modern Fairy Tale." This latter explicates the author's own 2019 short film, which centers a transgender character as expert on unicorn lore, and briefly notes some of the queer resonances of the animated *Last Unicorn* itself as a part of a larger survey of the unicorn on film.

5 There is no reason why one cannot approach Lorde's poem as a call for Black as well as queer liberation, and sexuality is not absent from it: "It is not on her lap where the horn rests/but deep in her moonpit/growing" (Lorde 1978, p. 3).

6 A few years later, English playwright Rod Dungate's 1992 short drama *Playing by the Rules* references a gay bar with this name; various characters explain that they are banned from particular bars, prompting another to ask, "Anyone banned from 'The Unicorn'?" (Dungate 1994, p. 38). In San Diego in the early 80s, a gay-owned business called "White Unicorn Gifts" also regularly contributed floats to local pride parades (Kaminski 2022).

7 It would appear that, in the earlier 70s, it was primarily gay men rallying under the symbol of the unicorn, and often in connection with the leather subculture (as with the Milwaukee Unicorn), likely a function of the unicorn's association with virility: in 1970, Al Brightman opened a Cleveland gay bar called the Leather Stallion Saloon, and then founded a "Unicorn Motorcycle Club" the following year 1971 (The Unicorn Horn 2017). In the 80s, after Beagle's novel and its adaptation had popularized the feminized unicorn, the bar "*The Last Unicorn*" mainly served a lesbian clientele (Trix's All Star Joint/Trixie's 2025). The unicorn pride button archived by the Smithsonian declaring "My Unicorn Is Lesbian" also dates from the 1980s, and shows a drift in appearance away from the imagery of the hypermasculine stallion with its phallic horn in the Milwaukee Unicorn's marketing materials (Gifford 2015).

8 For evidence of prior conversations on the subject within the queer community, Komack points to a thread on a subreddit for fans of *The Last Unicorn* (https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLastUnicorn/comments/oxl9ly/a_trans_story/, accessed on 7 January 2026), as well as the second most popular review on the reviews site Letterboxd (https://letterboxd.com/fuchsiadyke/film/the-last-unicorn/, accessed on 7 January 2026), which floats trans and queer interpretations; these sites constitute only two of the

many online fora on which users swap such perspectives. Komack's own reading emphasizes themes in the film that he finds "deeply relevant to the transgender experience," including isolation versus community; perception versus reality; and acceptance versus rejection (Komack 2025).

[9] In testament to how fantasy studies has often lagged behind science fiction studies in its uptake of various theoretical paradigms, Douglas Vakoch and Sabine Sharp's massive *Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature* includes dedicated chapters on "Science Fiction as Trans Literature" and the related "Artificial Intelligence Narratives as Trans Literature" and "Climate Fiction as Trans Literature," but absent is a chapter that would cover "Fantasy as Trans Literature" (Vakoch and Sharp 2024).

[10] See especially the fourth chapter of Driggers's monograph *Queering Faith in Fantasy Literature*, 137–184 (Driggers 2022), which engages the most closely with trans studies, and see also Battis's discussion of *The Last Unicorn* in their monograph *Thinking Queerly*, 135–142 (Battis 2021). Battis takes a queer interest in Beagle's novel mainly for how it "dramatizes radical failure," invoking Jack Halberstam's 2011 book *The Queer Art of Failure* (Battis 2021, p. 136).

[11] Golovchenko's intriguing argument relies on the idea that "the unicorn's ontological ambiguity is, in fact, inherent to its identity" (Golovchenko 2023, p. 84), even to the point that "the unicorn can be thought of as ontologically trans" (Golovchenko 2023, p. 93).

[12] Bean further reflects, "I often feel like a unicorn—and the last—as I sit with clinical knowledge as a clinician, but as a Queer person, whose childhood is marked by a journey that was both magical in my difference from others and traumatic, in battling the unwavering hardship of being mocked, shunned, and reminded that I was different" (Bean 2022).

[13] Clover glosses the narrative as "a story about loneliness, and it's a story about pretending, and how faking it can easily take on a life of its own" (Clover 2020). We can find copious examples of additional "queer kids on the internet" continuing to interpret the film version in similar ways in assorted memes and commentaries shared via Tumblr post (https://www.tumblr.com/big-ender/799962059071684608/me-in-my-early-30s-the-way-i-cope-with-this or https://www.tumblr.com/thru-the-void/799946920250490880/thinking-about-the-last-unicorn-transgenderism, both from November 2025 and accessed 7 January 2026), as well as on other social media platforms such as X and Bluesky (https://bsky.app/profile/nicoism.bsky.social/post/3lgobpjlavk2x, accessed 7 January 2026). Moreover, while our reading focuses on the unicorn herself, on such platforms queer and/or trans readings exist of virtually every individual character in the story.

[14] Miller comments briefly on this line in connection with Beagle's decision to make his unicorn female: "The novel finally suggests that this feminized unicorn does not merely reverse the conventional stallion image, but may in some sense exist beyond gender or at least beyond binary gender" (Miller 2024, pp. 61–62).

[15] Also to his credit and in spite of the binary thinking and heteronormative future that he represents, Lír repeats a profession of love even after learning that the Lady Amalthea is actually a unicorn temporarily occupying another shape, and insists that he would love her across any transition: "I love whom I love" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 248).

[16] The character from the fantastical world and the TV show with whom Owen becomes identified is a woman named "Isabel," although Owen seems consistently to repress a desire to transition (whether "back" to her, or to another new identity).

[17] Schmendrick himself demonstrates an awareness of such unicorn time, and in his own more seriocomic fashion echoes this flashforward to an inconceivable future, so non-anthropocentric it is literally post-human, gesturing to the unicorn's perdurance in a time "when men are fairy tales in books written by rabbits" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 286).

[18] Miller's critical companion only briefly mentions the imbrication of the unicorn and queer culture, as does his article "The Unicorn Trade"; the conclusion to the latter explains that he has entirely refrained from investigating "the association with celebrations of queer identity and culture, primarily via that intermediary of the rainbow" (Miller 2023, p. 65), and he refers cursorily to Clarke's essay in the former as attesting "to the novel's success in continuing to find new audiences in the twenty-first century, and audiences who may read it in new ways [Beagle] could not have imagined" (Miller 2024, p. 116).

[19] See, among other discussions of immortality in the novel, the second chapter of Miller's *Critical Companion* (Miller 2024, pp. 17–46), as well as Geoffrey Reiter's article addressing "The Dialectic of Mortality and Immortality in Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*" (Reiter 2009).

[20] While the novel does mention male unicorns, in that instance Beagle intriguingly renders their distinguishing secondary sex characteristic delicate, feminized. A vivid passage calls attention to the "the fragile beards of the males" when relating the expectant churning of the sea-bound unicorns, poised to breach their thalassic prison: "And in the whiteness, of the whiteness, flowering in the tattered water, their bodies arching with the streaked marble hollows of the waves, their manes and tails and the fragile beards of the males burning in the sunlight" (Beagle [1968] 2008, p. 267).

[21] Edelman announces his project as an examination of "the pervasive invocation of the Child as the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value and propose against it the impossible project of queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such" (Edelman 2004, pp. 3–4): "This paradoxical formulation suggests a refusal—the appropriately perverse refusal that characterizes queer theory—of every substantialization of identity, which is always oppositionally defined, and, by extension, of history as linear narrative (the poor man's teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—*as itself*—through time" (Edelman 2004, p. 4, emphasis in original).

[22] Dinshaw builds a direct connection between the amateur and the queer, particularly in the context of temporality: "I shall dilate on the idea throughout *How Soon Is Now?* that amateurs—these fans and lovers laboring in the off-hours—take their own sweet time, and operating outside of regimes of detachment governed by uniform, measured temporality, these uses of time are queer. In this sense, the act of taking one's own sweet time asserts a queer force. *Queer*, *amateur*: these are mutually reinforcing terms" (Dinshaw 2012, p. 5, emphasis in original).

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