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Platonic Forms and Unicorns: Plato's Philosophy in Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*

by

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Introduction

The story is, at first glance, a classic fairy tale: a unicorn living alone in a lilac wood overhears two hunters debating the existence of unicorns. They decide that, if they ever existed at all, unicorns must have vanished decades or even centuries ago. The last unicorn decides to go on a quest to discover the fate of her people, and to facilitate their return if she can. Since its publication in 1968, Peter Beagle's fantasy novel *The Last Unicorn* has won both popular and critical acclaim (Zahorski 38-39). Critics who have written about the book tend to focus on Beagle's subversive treatment of the fantasy genre in general, as well as the way his text explores and complicates the relationships between reality, illusion, mortality, immortality, and time. Several of these same critics have noted that Beagle's treatment of these themes seems to echo Platonic philosophy—more specifically Plato's theory of forms, which states that the highest and "truest" reality is the world of forms, or ideas. But none of these writers have given this particular feature of the text a sustained, rigorous analysis. However, a closer reading suggests that this philosophy is a central concern of the *The Last Unicorn*. Beagle frequently and deliberately intertextualizes Plato's work, addressing the same themes and even mimicking some of Plato's rhetorical strategies. But Beagle does not whole-heartedly support Plato's ideas. *The Last Unicorn* is frequently called an allegory about "the magic in being human" (Olderman 223). And it is a lack of respect for human longing, human experience, and human magic that Beagle opposes in Plato. Over the course of the novel Beagle invokes Plato's theory, then gradually subverts it, until he arrives at a vision of reality that recognizes transient, imperfect, human experiences and

knowledge as equal in importance to the timeless, transcendent knowledge that Plato values above all else.

Plato's Philosophy in *The Last Unicorn*

Among those who have found parallels to classical philosophy in *The Last Unicorn* is Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, who provides a rich and compelling argument that the novel intertextualizes Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. According to Olsen, Beagle deliberately mimics the structure and themes of Boethius in order to subvert his philosophy. While Boethius claims that “the love of transitory things--riches, honor, and even family members--puts one in the power of Fortune [...] in Beagle it is the love of the immutable which betrays people and makes them prisoners of Fortune” (Olsen 141). The “immutable”, of course, is represented by the unicorn--the pure, perfect, and immortal protagonist of the story. However, Beagle seems less concerned by whether transcendent experiences or transient human joys are more valuable or advantageous. Instead, *The Last Unicorn* explores which experiences are more “real” or “true”. This emphasis on mortality, immortality, reality, illusion, and knowledge can certainly be seen as a parallel to Boethius, but it can also be read as the result of Platonic influence. As Olsen points out, Beagle demonstrates a clear awareness of classical materials—*The Last Unicorn* is littered with references to Greek and Roman mythology. The unicorn encounters the harpy Celaeno, a witch who names herself after the goddess Fortuna, and a deluded spider that believes itself to be Arachne of Lydia. At one point, the unicorn even adopts the name “Amalthea” as an alias—the name of the goat-nymph who nursed Zeus, and whose broken horn became the cornucopia. Plato's *Republic*, along with his

other dialogues, constitute some of the most important philosophical works in the Western canon. Taken with Beagle's evident knowledge of classical materials, it would not be overly-ambitious to suggest that not only is Beagle aware of Plato's work, but that the parallels found in *The Last Unicorn* are deliberate. Olsen is correct when she claims that Beagle's novel subverts the philosophical traditions it references, but in this case he is not opposing Boethius—he is opposing Plato, and more specifically Plato's theory of forms.

Establishing a concise and accurate definition of the theory of forms is inherently problematic. Plato developed his theory over the course of a lifetime, and while different aspects of it are explored in many of his written works, it is never fully explained in any of them. In the context of its appearance in *The Last Unicorn*, the following definition is helpful:

According to the Platonic theory of forms, the everyday world, the world we apprehend through our senses, is a mere shadow world, mutable and concerned only with appearances, whereas the “real” world, that of ideas or true forms, is immutable, mind oriented, and concerned with reality. In terms of Platonic dualism, then, the only things that are “real” are the pure forms which remain unchanged. (Zahorski 50)

The relationship between reality and illusion is one of the central themes of the novel, and Beagle's treatment of this theme deliberately echoes this Platonic philosophy. A wonderful example occurs when Schmendrick, a friendly but profoundly inept magician and one of the unicorn's companions, is captured by a gang of woodland bandits and their

leader Captain Cully. Cully and his crew, however, are a far cry from the romanticized ideal of the heroic outlaw. As one of the bandits complains,

We don't steal from the rich and give to the poor [...] we steal from the poor because they can't fight back—most of them—and the rich take from us because they could wipe us out in a day. We don't rob the fat, greedy Mayor on the highway; we pay him tribute every month to leave us alone. We never carry off proud bishops and keep them prisoner in the wood, feasting and entertaining them, because Molly hasn't any good dishes, and besides, we just wouldn't be very stimulating company for a bishop. When we go to the fair in disguise, we never win at the archery or at singlestick. We do get some nice compliments on our disguises, but no more than that. (Beagle 84)

In an attempt to distract the bandits and escape, Schmendrick succeeds in his first act of “real” magic, summoning the shades of Robin Hood and his Merry Men. Despite Cully’s vehement protestations that “Robin Hood is a myth”, the bandits abandon camp to pursue the shining phantoms through the forest. Only Molly Grue, Cully’s common-law wife, takes the time to reply: “Nay, Cully, you have it backward [...] There’s no such person as you, or me, or any of us. Robin and Marian are real, and we are the legend!” (Beagle 88-89). The paradox here is that Cully is technically correct. The images that Schmendrick creates are not ghosts, nor are they flesh and blood—they are only an impossibly idealistic illusion. Yet Beagle insists on treating this incident differently from Schmendrick’s usual bumbling attempts at sorcery. Even the unicorn recognizes it as “true magic” (Beagle 96). This reversal, the treatment of the magical illusion as “reality” and of reality as “illusion”, makes sense when viewed as a Platonic

allegory. Robin Hood may be a myth, but the very idea of him, of what heroic outlaws should be, outshines the shabby reality that Cully has come to accept. Because it breathes life into the dream that still lives within the hearts of Cully's men, Schmendrick's magic is real, and drives them "wild with loss" (Beagle 89).

However, Beagle's most explicit reference to Plato's theory is manifest in the novel's protagonist. The nameless unicorn is perfect, pure, eternal and unchanging. She is also practically impossible to perceive--most humans only see her as a beautiful white mare. "She is a rarer creature than you dare to dream. She is a myth, a memory," Schmendrick tells a man who marvels at the remarkable "horse". "If you remembered, if you hungered..." (Beagle 66-67). Only those who truly seek wisdom, souls like Schmendrick and Molly Grue, are able to see the unicorn as she is: "a true form symbolizing purity, truth, beauty, and the Highest Good" (Zahorski 50), "a manifestation of the Ideal visiting the world of shadows" (Matheson 418). Not only is the unicorn a living expression of form, but she also seems to experience reality in a completely different way than any of the novel's mortal creatures. "I know how to live here, I know how everything smells, and tastes, and is" the unicorn says, as she reflects on her forest (Beagle 6). Once again Beagle hints at the difference between the world of sensation and reality. But more importantly he suggests that the unicorn is able to discern between the two. This suggestion is made more explicit during the unicorn's first encounter with a farmer, yet another human who sees her as a white mare despite the fact that a unicorn "[does] not look anything like a horned horse" (Beagle 1). The implications of this encounter are not lost on the unicorn:

I suppose I could understand it if men had simply forgotten about unicorns [...]
 But not to see them at all, to look at them and see something else—what do they
 look like to one another, then? What do trees look like to them, or houses, or real
 horses, or their own children? (Beagle 11)

The characters frequently “express a Platonic pessimism about the possibility of
 knowledge in the phenomenal world” (Norford 95). Schmendrick agrees, claiming that
 “there is much misjudgment in the world.” But he still recognizes that the unicorn seems
 to be an exception: “Still, I have read, or heard it sung, that unicorns when time was
 young, could tell the difference 'twixt the two—the false shining and the true, the lips'
 laugh and the heart's rue” (Beagle 40).

The Cave and the Carnival

To explore this tension between the worlds of reality and illusion, Beagle relies
 heavily on visual metaphors. This strategy recalls Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave,
 which he uses to illustrate the nature of the forms. In his *Republic*, Plato asks the reader
 to imagine a group of people living underground in a cave. Since childhood they have
 been trapped there, restrained in such a way that they are only able to look ahead at the
 wall of the cave. Behind them, in the opening of the cave, is a path along which people
 carry “all kinds of artifacts—statues of people and other animals, made out of stone,
 wood, and every material” (Plato 187). Behind this path burns a fire, bright enough that
 shadows of these artifacts are projected onto the far wall of the cave. Unable to turn
 around, the cave-dwellers only ever see these shadows, and are convinced that they
 constitute reality. If ever one of these prisoners were to break free and escape the cave,

the fire and sunlight would dazzle their eyes for some time. Knowledge of “reality” belongs to those courageous enough to escape the cave and risk blindness in pursuit of the truth. The parallels to Plato’s Allegory in *The Last Unicorn* become more obvious when the unicorn is captured by Mommy Fortuna, a fraudulent old witch who puts mythical beasts and monsters on display in her traveling “Midnight Carnival”. At first the unicorn is puzzled at what makes the crowd gasp and stare—she can see nothing but common animals in the cages, no magical beasts. She is befriended by Schmendrick, who despite being employed by Fortuna quickly bonds with the unicorn. He repeatedly and earnestly encourages the unicorn to “look at [her] fellow legends [...] look again” (Beagle 24).

Then, as though her eyes were getting used to darkness, the unicorn began to perceive a second figure in each cage. They loomed hugely over the captives of the Midnight Carnival, and yet they were joined to them: stormy dreams sprung from a grain of truth [...] The shadow-dragon opened his mouth and hissed harmless fire to make the gapers gasp and cringe, while Hell's snake-furred watchdog howled triple dooms and devastations down on his betrayers, and the satyr limped leering to the bars and beckoned young girls to impossible delights, right there in public. As for the crocodile, the ape, and the sad dog, they faded steadily before the marvelous phantoms until they were only shadows themselves, even to the unicorn's undeceived eyes. (Beagle 25)

Unlike Schmendrick’s conjuring of Robin Hood and his Merry Men, Mommy Fortuna’s magic is not real—it is only a hoax, a meager illusion with just enough reality behind it to seem true. The guileless villagers “who gawk at Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival,

confusing the true and the false, substance and shadow, resemble the prisoners in Plato's cave" (Norford 96). Only the unicorn is able to perceive the truth. Ironically, even she must be crowned with an illusory horn in order for the crowd to recognize her.

However, even as Beagle consistently invokes Platonic philosophy, he also subtly begins to subvert it. While the unicorn is perfect, pure, and eternal, she is also cold and aloof. In fact, the only creature that evokes the slightest empathy from her is the harpy Celaeno, another prisoner in Mommy Fortuna's menagerie. Unlike the rest of Fortuna's "home-made horrors", the harpy is just as real and immortal as the unicorn. At first it seems that Beagle is establishing the two mythical beasts as opposites. He translates the name Celaeno as "The Dark One", and the harpy is indeed dark where the unicorn is bright, hideous where the unicorn is lovely. While the unicorn bears the power to heal and protect, the harpy revels in destruction and bloodshed. Yet the two creatures are also eerily similar. The unicorn is first described as "the color of snow falling on a moonlit night" (Beagle 1). To Schmendrick she also resembles the moon: "cold and white and very old, lighting his way to safety or madness" (Beagle 53-54). In fact, the moon becomes a consistent symbol for the eternal purity that characterizes the unicorn. In Beagle's novel, to be associated with the moon "is to have intimations of immortality, to transcend mortal existence—or more accurately, to transfigure mortal existence" (Norford 97). The caged unicorn observes that the harpy

had the shaggy round ears of a bear; but down her scaly shoulders, mingling with the bright knives of her plumage, there fell hair the color of moonlight, thick and youthful around the hating human face. She glittered, but to look at her was to feel the light going out of the sky. (Beagle 30)

The association of the harpy with the moon shows that she is “real” in the same way that the unicorn is real. In the animated film adaptation (script also by Peter Beagle), the harpy even tells the unicorn “we are sisters, you and I”. When Schmendrick finally betrays Fortuna and releases the unicorn, she in turn liberates the harpy, despite knowing that the monster will slaughter her captors. When the two immortals finally meet free and face-to-face, their confrontation is violent, but also tinged with mutual recognition:

The unicorn heard herself cry out, not in terror but in wonder, 'Oh, you are like me!' [...] [The harpy] burned overhead, and the unicorn saw herself reflected on the harpy's bronze breast and felt the monster shining from her own body. So they circled one another like a double star, and under the shrunken sky there was nothing real but the two of them. (Beagle 52-53)

Beagle’s unicorn represents the forms, but the association of the same concept with a creature as vicious and destructive as the harpy causes readers to question its value. While Schmendrick and the unicorn manage to escape the harpy's wrath, Mommy Fortuna is brutally killed. Despite the fact that she effectively allowed the harpy to murder Mommy Fortuna, the unicorn expresses no regret over her actions. Afterwards, she tells Schmendrick “I can never regret [...] I can sorrow, but it's not the same thing” (Beagle 55). In contrast to the kinship that she feels with the harpy, the unicorn's attitude toward mortal creatures ranges from patronizing affection to outright exasperation. This attitude becomes most apparent during a brief conversation with an incomprehensible butterfly. “This flighty, spacy butterfly, who evidently was once a bookworm, quotes indiscriminately snatches of poetry, songs, slogans, and commercials, confusing past and present, the sublime and the ridiculous” (Norford 94). At first his appearance serves to

dramatize the difference between a flawed, mortal perspective of reality and the unicorn's perfect, immortal perspective. The unicorn notes that, as a general rule, butterflies “mean well, but they can’t keep things straight. And why should they? They die so soon” (Beagle 13). Yet glimpses of truth are hidden in his nonsensical tirade. The butterfly is the first creature to recognize the unicorn, and even possesses knowledge that the unicorn does not, demonstrating that a mortal perspective is not as devoid of truth as she believes. With extraordinary effort, he manages to communicate a lucid and original thought. He tells her that the other unicorns “passed down all the roads long ago, and the Red Bull ran close behind them and covered their footprints [...] he shall push the [unicorns], all of them, to the ends of the earth” (Beagle 15). This encounter also exposes the limitations in the unicorn’s own perspective. While she may believe that she and she alone possesses access to reality and truth, she is nevertheless dependent on mortal creatures to guide her. During her captivity in Fortuna’s carnival, Fortuna reveals that the Bull is associated with a certain King Haggard. Schmendrick liberates the unicorn, and Molly Grue leads the way to Haggard’s kingdom.

The Philosopher King

While the demonic Red Bull emerges as one of the novel’s most vivid antagonists, it is difficult to describe its nature or purpose, because Beagle deliberately makes the relationship between the Bull and King Haggard ambiguous and interdependent. Even Schmendrick, the voice of reason and wisdom despite his failings as a magician, is unsure of its true nature:

I have heard too many tales and each argues with another. The Bull is real, the Bull is a ghost, the Bull is Haggard himself when the sun goes down. The Bull was in the land before Haggard, or it came with him, or it came to him. It protects him from raids and revolutions, and saves him the expense of arming his men. It keeps him a prisoner in his own castle. It is the devil, to whom Haggard has sold his soul. It is the thing he sold his soul to possess. The Bull belongs to Haggard. Haggard belongs to the Bull (Beagle 57-58).

In order to understand the Red Bull, King Haggard must be explored first. It is in the character of King Haggard that Beagle's rejection of Platonic philosophy finally becomes apparent. Before the unicorn, Schmendrick, and Molly ever even meet Haggard, his presence is palpable. As they draw nearer to his castle the land changes from a lush wilderness into a barren wasteland. Schmendrick explains that the kingdom was once prosperous, beautiful, and fertile, but that it "withered" upon Haggard's ascension to power. Despite this, his power over his land is absolute—while his subjects live in starvation and poverty, they are too afraid of the Red Bull to rebel.

Eventually, Beagle reveals that the curse that plagues Haggard's kingdom and the disappearance of the unicorns share the same origin. At Haggard's command, the Red Bull has hunted all the world's unicorns and driven them into the sea below his castle. As the unicorns are immortal, they do not die, but remain trapped beneath the waves, cowed into submission by the Red Bull's power. However, Haggard's decision to rob the world of unicorns is not rooted in any malicious intent. He is characterized as a pitiable figure, a jaded old man who has lost all taste for worldly pleasures and trivial joys. "They are nothing to me," he claims. "I have known them all, and they have not made me happy. I

will keep nothing near me that does not make me happy” (Beagle 163). He keeps no court or company, other than four men-at-arms and his adopted son, Lír. The grandest room in his castle, the throne room, sports a chair but “no other furnishings, no rug, no draperies, no tapestries” (Beagle 160). The food he eats is tasteless and unsatisfying. “He says that no meal is good enough to justify all the money and effort wasted in preparing it. ‘It is an illusion,’ says he, ‘and an expense. Live as I do, undeceived’” (Beagle 189-190). He expresses nothing but apathy, even towards his own son. The only thing that moves Haggard, that has ever moved him, is the sight of unicorns. Standing on his balcony, overlooking the sea that has become the unicorns’ prison, Haggard is almost unrecognizable:

His face was changed beyond believing, delight coloring the somber skin, rounding over the cheekbones, and loosening the bowstring mouth [...] “I like to watch them. They fill me with joy [...] I always knew that nothing was worth the investment of my heart, because nothing lasts [...] so I was always old. Yet each time I see my unicorns [...] I am truly young, in spite of myself. (Beagle 220-222)

If we continue to see the unicorns as a symbol for the forms, then Haggard becomes something far more complex than a fairy-tale villain. In his *Republic*, Plato defines a true philosopher as a “lover of wisdom”—one who seeks out the true forms rather than contenting himself with knowledge based on the superficial, sensory world. “Do you think,” he asks, “that there’s any difference between the blind and those who are really deprived of the knowledge of each thing that is” (Plato 158)? Like the common citizens of Plato’s Kallipolis, the peasants who see the unicorn as a white mare are “blind” to the truth. But Haggard, like Schmendrick and Molly, has the same “hunger” and longing that

allows them to see unicorns for what they are—“philosophic natures always love the sort of learning that makes clear to them some feature of the being that always is and does not wander around between coming to be and decaying” (Plato 158). Haggard also fits Plato’s definition of a philosopher in other ways, choosing to “abandon those pleasures that come through the body [...] moderate and not at all a money-lover” (Plato 159). Haggard is Plato’s philosopher king, taken to the logical extreme—a man utterly incapable of finding joy or meaning in anything except the forms: “they love all such learning and are not willing to give up any part of it, whether large or small, more valuable or less so” (Plato 159).

To keep both the unicorns and his kingdom docile, Haggard relies on the Red Bull. Strangely enough, while the mere mention of the Bull is enough to inspire terror in Haggard’s subjects, it never actually performs any acts of violence. What keeps the unicorns trapped and his subjects compliant is actually fear of the Bull—“since it never fights, and only conquers, the Bull operates and succeeds only through the agency of fear.” It is “the power that usurps man’s control over his own life [...] and leads [him] to the brink of annihilation” (Olderman 227). The Bull is a living expression of the oppressive power that Haggard wields over his subjects. And while its true nature remains a mystery even to the end of the novel, it also seems to be some aspect of Haggard. Beagle’s first physical description of Haggard tells us that his eyes are “the same color as the horns of the Red Bull” (Beagle 161). The Red Bull, however, is also literally blind.

If Haggard and the Bull are so intimately associated, then the Bull’s blindness complicates the claim that Haggard is a parody of Plato’s philosopher-king. After all, as a

philosopher, Haggard should be associated with sight and enlightenment. He has an awareness of the world of forms, which according to Plato's theory is the only perspective worth having, and the only one that gives absolute truth. But Beagle also frames Haggard's very nature as being antithetical to truth: "it was impossible to speak the truth to King Haggard. Something in his winter presence blighted all words, tangled meanings, and bent honest intentions into shapes as tormented as the towers of his castle" (Beagle 129-130). However, it is important to note that Haggard's philosophical nature does not ennoble him. While he is intelligent, perceptive, and appreciates beauty, he is also cold, callous, and selfish. His dissatisfaction changes him from a monarch into a parasite, depriving his subjects of access to the unicorns so that he and he alone may possess them. He may have access to the world of forms, but he has lost sight of something else. He is blind in exactly the way that the unicorn is blind. Perfect and pure as she is, she is unable to feel empathy or regret, or love, as she demonstrates when she releases the harpy without a thought for the consequences for her human captors. The insinuation is that, contrary to Plato's theory, there must be another version (or vision) of truth besides the world of forms—a reality which neither the Haggard nor the unicorn has yet discovered.

Entering the Cave

The unicorn is given the opportunity to experience this new reality in the final portion of the novel. As she and her companions approach Haggard's castle, her presence awakens the Red Bull, who hunts her and attempts to drive her into the sea. The unicorn, however, is powerless against him. In a desperate attempt to save her from being driven

into the sea like her brethren, Schmendrick performs his second act of true magic, inadvertently transforming the unicorn into a young human woman. While the transformation is successful in concealing her from the Bull, it is nevertheless a traumatizing experience for the unicorn: “This body is dying. I can feel it rotting all around me [...] How can anything that is going to die be real? How can it be truly beautiful” (Beagle 150)? Schmendrick, ever the voice of wisdom, tells her that “whatever can die is beautiful—more beautiful than a unicorn, who lives forever, and is the most beautiful creature in the world” (Beagle 150). He reveals that he is also afflicted with a curse: his master decided that the depth of Schmendrick’s ineptitude was so profound that it could only conceal vast magical talent, and so cursed Schmendrick with immortality until he could achieve mastery over his magic. The wisdom that he repeatedly demonstrates stems from his experience of both realities; the immortal Platonic world, and the flawed human world that the unicorn must now enter. The unicorn’s experience is an inversion of the philosopher’s journey from the cave—she must descend into the shadow world to discover something true or real, rather than escape it.

The unicorn, now calling herself Amalthea, is able to enter Haggard’s castle without incident, although her ethereal beauty and grace arouse both Haggard’s curiosity and that of his son. Once again Beagle mimics Plato’s strategy of using visual metaphors to explore the unicorn’s relationship to reality. Upon meeting Haggard, he attempts to deduce her identity by gazing into her eyes. What he sees is disturbingly familiar to him. Her eyes are “dark as the deep sea, and illuminated [...] by strange glimmering creatures that never rise to the surface. The unicorn could have been transformed into a lizard, [...] or a shark, a snail, a goose, and somehow still her eyes would have given the change

away” (Beagle 146). “Where am I?” Haggard cries. “Why can I not see myself in your eyes” (Beagle 170)? Throughout the novel’s final section Beagle continues this motif, frequently using words like “dark”, “unknowable”, and “indescribable” to describe Amalthea’s eyes. She may be physically human, but her inhuman gaze reveals that she is still a unicorn at heart, and that she retains her transcendent perspective. She is too pure, too immortal to reflect the great greed and age that characterize Haggard. To discover the strength to defeat the Red Bull and free the other unicorns, she must complete the transformation.

As the weeks become months and Amalthea’s companions come no closer to discovering the whereabouts of the unicorns, her magical nature begins to fade. She becomes more human, even beginning an innocent romance with Lír. A talking cat who lives in the castle kitchens describes the danger of this situation to Molly Grue: “They are within sight of your lady’s eyes, but almost out of reach of her memory. They are coming closer, and they are going away” (Beagle 197-198). Amalthea’s evolving human personality may endow her with the longing necessary to seek the unicorns, but it also pulls her further away from the world of forms, and deeper into the world of shadows. When Haggard finally deduces her identity and confronts her, her eyes have changed. He sees that they “were lovely still, but in a way that had a name, as a human woman is beautiful. Their depth could be sounded and learned, and their degree of darkness was quite describable” (Beagle 186). In fact, she can no longer even see her own kind. When Haggard urges her to look at the sea, to look for her people, Amalthea becomes confused, telling him that she sees “nothing at all in the water”. Haggard quickly dismisses her, saying that “her eyes are stupid [...] as any eyes that never saw unicorns, never saw

anything but themselves in a glass” (Beagle 223). Amalthea’s immortality has faded. She no longer has access to the world of forms, but has become enmeshed in a wholly human vision of reality. In the film adaptation the moment is even more explicit—we see the reflection of Haggard’s withered face looming in Amalthea’s terrified eyes. Somehow, mortality and imperfection have taken root within her.

Regardless, the Red Bull finally becomes aware of her presence, and Amalthea, Schmendrick, Molly, and Lír descend into the bowels of the castle to meet him. The heroes find themselves faced with an ethical dilemma: return the unicorn to her natural form and effectively kill the human personality of Amalthea, or allow her to live as a mortal woman; to live, love, and die without ever freeing the unicorns. While Amalthea begs to remain human and stay with Lír, he insists that she go through with the transformation. Schmendrick performs his third act of true magic and returns the unicorn to her proper shape, transforming himself in the process: “he felt his immortality fall away from him like armor, or like a shroud” (Beagle 259). However, the unicorn comes no closer to victory against the Bull until Lír throws himself in its path and is trampled to death. Seeing Lír’s broken body, she gives not the “challenging bell with which she first met the Bull” but “an ugly, squawking wail of sorrow and loss and rage, such as no immortal creature ever gave” (Beagle 180). In contrast to previous descriptions of the unicorn, which focus on her unnatural grace, beauty, and indifference, Beagle deliberately frames this moment as awkward and intensely emotional. While the unicorn herself admits that she is capable of sorrow, “loss” and “rage” are completely new emotions to attribute to her. Even the sounds of the words he chooses are different. Beagle frequently uses poetic devices such as alliteration when referencing the unicorn,

the language he uses to describe her reflecting her effortless and ethereal nature: “she still moved like a shadow on the sea” (Beagle 1). However, the clashing consonants of the phrase “ugly, squawking wail” are anything but effortless—they are disruptive and clumsy, and undermine Beagle’s previous characterization. Despite her transformation, some part of her remains human. The grief-stricken unicorn finally faces the Bull and drives him into the sea, freeing her people and vanquishing Haggard. Beagle is explicit: it her experience of an imperfect, human reality, a reality in which people can “love, and fear, and forbid things to be what they are, and overact,” that gives her the strength and courage to defeat the Bull (Beagle 250).

Conclusion

The unicorn revives Lír, who takes over rulership of the kingdom. The effects of Lír’s choice not to keep Amalthea for himself—in essence, not to repeat the mistake of his father—are immediately felt. Although the unicorns are hardly more visible than they were before their liberation, their presence is obvious, as the once-barren kingdom blossoms in the wake of their passage. Yet the ending is not the happy one readers would normally expect from a fairy tale. Lír and the unicorn are permanently divided, and while the unicorn has recovered her true form, she has also been fundamentally changed by the experience. She tells Schmendrick,

I will go back to my forest too, but I do not know if I can live contentedly there, or anywhere. I have been mortal, and some part of me is mortal yet. I am full of tears and hunger and the fear of death, though I cannot weep, and I want nothing,

and I cannot die. I am not like the others now, for no unicorn was ever born who could regret. But I do. I regret. (Beagle 289)

While there is something tragic about the idea of an eternal creature filled with human longing, there is something wonderful about it as well:

This transformation is not simply a restoration of her immortality. And it is overly simplistic to insist that she is incomplete without mortality, that the two are necessary opposites. Rather, she has become something new, something greater, by reconciling within herself these two opposing forces [...] It is this last glorified incarnation—this synthesis of immortality with mortality's pain and loss and its transient joy—that the unicorn finally embodies at the novel's end. (Reiter 115)

The unicorn, having experienced two realities, is now able to understand both of them. She has recovered her vision of the pure, objective truth that rests in Plato's world of forms, but she has also developed the capacity for compassion, empathy, and love. And that, Beagle might tell us, is a wisdom that is entirely human.

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