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UNICORN STORIES IN TRACY CHEVALIER AND PHILIPPA GREGORY'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT. ***Unicorn Stories in Tracy Chevalier's and Philippa Gregory's Novels*.** Unicorns have been described as mythological creatures that only the chosen ones could encounter. In the novels *The Lady and the Unicorn* by Tracy Chevalier and *The Lady of the Rivers* by Philippa Gregory, one such mythical beast evinces certain features that reflect on some of the characters in the novels. The paper discusses the image and symbolism of the mythological beast and analyses the depiction of the animal in the two novels written by the respective British authors. The stories told of the unicorn in the two books are to be compared and completed by texts from various other sources, in an attempt to get a fair picture of the way in which the two novels explore the legend of the respective magical creature, and transform it into feminist narratives.

Keywords: *unicorn, mythological animal, maid, lady, Chevalier, Gregory*

REZUMAT. *Povești despre unicorni în romanele lui Tracy Chevalier și Philippa Gregory*. Unicornii au fost descriși drept ființe mitologice cu care doar cei aleși se pot întâlni. În romanele *Doamna și unicornul* de Tracy Chevalier și *Doamna apelor* de Philippa Gregory, o astfel de fiară mitică evidențiază anumite trăsături care se reflectă asupra unora dintre personajele din romane. Lucrarea discută despre imaginea și simbolismul fiarei mitologice, iar apoi analizează reprezentarea animalului în cele două romane scrise de autoarele britanice.

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Poveştile despre unicorn spuse în cele două cărţi urmează să fie comparate şi completate de texte din diverse alte surse, în încercarea de a obţine o imagine corectă a modului în care cele două romane explorează legenda creaturii magice şi o transformă în naraţiuni feministe.

Cuvinte-cheie: *unicorn, creatură mitologică, fecioară, doamnă, Chevalier, Gregory*

Unicorns, which constitute the topic of interest in this paper, have been described since ancient times as mythological creatures that only the chosen ones could encounter – an image that has been reinforced and enriched by medieval spirituality in accordance with its own religious agenda. The choice of such a mythological beast as one of the potent symbols that appear in the novels *The Lady and the Unicorn* (2003) by Tracy Chevalier and *The Lady of the Rivers* (2008) by Philippa Gregory is to be explored and analysed here, with a view to understanding why (and in what way), at the beginning of the third millennium, the image the unicorn can still prove a source of inspiration for novelists.

A comparative view of the way in which the two British authors appropriate the symbolic image of the unicorn is to be completed by a discussion of the sources of inspiration they used, ranging from medieval folklore and superstitions, historical facts (or gaps), and/or works of art resulting from the exquisite craftsmanship of the Middle Ages (probably Belgian) tapestry weavers (lissiers). The deployment of these resources, which share a certain transformation of the medieval unicorn stories into powerful 21st century novels of feminist inspiration, advocates, in the author's opinion, for the selection of the literary corpus to be analysed here. For that reason alone – their affinity in vision and agenda – Gregory's and Chevalier's novels have been preferred to the detriment of other – no less remarkable – books[2] that may also focus on the symbol of the unicorn as a magical being that can cure all wounds and is endowed with Christ-like powers.

The Lady and the Unicorn, published in 2003, is Tracy Chevalier's fourth novel, and her second about the world of art history,[3] whereas Philippa Gregory's *The Lady of the Rivers*, published in 2008, although preceded by thirteen other

[2] One such novel, which is not referenced here, is Iris Murdoch's *The Unicorn*, published in 1963. With its Gothic atmosphere and abundance of talks, thoughts and philosophical arguments on the big Murdochian themes – individual freedom, guilt, morality and love – that book deserves a researcher's special attention, to be materialized in a paper devoted entirely to *The Unicorn*.

[3] Her first novel, *The Virgin Blue* (1997), is set as two parallel stories: one of a 16th-century Huguenot woman and the other of her descendant from the 20th century, and tells us about the life in 16th-century rural France, with its superstitions and religious conflicts; her second novel, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), offers a fictional (hi)story of the famous Vermeer painting with the same name; her third, *Falling Angels* (2001) is set in London, immediately after Queen Victoria's death and depicts a clear image of the Victorian and Edwardian obsession with grief, mourning and death.

novels, is the latter author's first book of the 15-book series known as *The Plantagenet and Tudor Novels*. The respective series has the merit of propounding a novel feminist view of the historical events taking place in France and England between the years 1430-1568, with real or fictional adventures witnessed and recounted for the reader by women participants. In both novels proposed for analysis here, the symbolism of the unicorn is to be closely linked to the understanding of the medieval view of women's position in society, and will be instrumental to the reinterpretation of the respective view in the two authors' fiction.

At this stage, the main point to be clarified for the paper to justify its approach is answering the question: what are the unicorn stories about? A neat encapsulation of the main themes and images related to the unicorn may begin with the portrayal of the mythical beast in Antiquity; in this respect, due to the work of the first-century Roman author, naturalist and natural philosopher Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, we learn that the unicorn was perceived as an exotic figure, to be found in distant lands, far from the civilized world. Pliny's categorization of animals had a great influence on the development of the medieval bestiary, especially on the seventh-century medieval etymologist Isidore of Seville's seminal work, *Etymologies*. Later, "during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, the image of the unicorn appears more frequently, particularly in bestiaries and in love poetry, […] but also in medieval heraldry and tapestries which illustrate attempts to capture the beast" (Łaszkiewicz 2014, 55). Christianity has its huge contribution to the preservation of the unicorn symbolism, with Christian tradition focusing on the animal's purity and strength, its power to heal with the help of its horn, but also with its weaknesses: "the untainted unicorn, exposed to harm because of a virgin, becomes a representation of Jesus Christ" (55). Both medieval legends and Isidore of Seville describe the same ruse by means of which the respective beast can be captured: "The unicorn is too strong to be caught by hunters, except by a trick: if a virgin girl is placed in front of a unicorn and she bares her breast to it, all of its fierceness will cease and it will lay its head on her bosom, and thus quieted is easily caught" (Isidore 2006, 252). The respective trick is referenced in both novels under discussion in this paper, as essential to the construction of the characters, and to the feminist transformation of the plot.

With the aim of pinpointing with more precision the reasons why Gregory and Chevalier have, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, chosen to approach a subject that was so popular in the Middle Ages, one must take into account the authors' own statements – given either in the notes at the end of their books or, in Chevalier's case, both there and on the Internet site devoted to the author's conversations with her readers. What one realizes on reading those statements is that the bits and pieces of historical evidence the authors

have found during their research for the respective books allow the two women writers to use the popular figures of some mythological creatures as the glue that can make their fiction come alive.

For Philippa Gregory, a writer that describes herself first and foremost as "an historian of women" (Gregory 2011, 426), the scarcity of biographical data she could find about her main character, Jacquetta of Luxembourg, prompted her to give free reign to her imagination: "The more I read about Jacquetta, the more she seemed to me to be the sort of character I particularly love: one who is overlooked or denied by the traditional histories, but who can be discovered by piecing together the evidence" (426). In doing so, Gregory cleverly speculates on the medieval rumours that circulated at that time at the English and French royal courts regarding Jacquetta's possible connections with supernatural forces, including mythical beasts such as the unicorn or the mermaid[4]. Those rumours might have originated from the legends regarding Jacquetta's ancestry, as a descendant of Melusina,[5] a water goddess, or simply in her alleged witch's skills. In defence of her character's innocence, Gregory explains that, in the absence of any other plausible explanations, many things that people now take for granted (such as using herbs for medicinal purposes) were considered clear signs that the woman growing/using those particular plants was a witch – an attitude that defined that respective age: "I think it very important that we as modern readers understand that religion, spiritualism and magic played a central part in the imaginative life of medieval people" (427).

Tracy Chevalier, on the other hand, confesses that she felt the lure of the unicorn approximately at the same time that she laid her eyes on the six tapestries know as *La Dame à la Licorne*[6] (the translation of which gives the title of Chevalier's novel, *The Lady and the Unicorn*), and explains that the appeal of the unicorn motif was only equalled by the mystery surrounding the interpretation or history of the respective tapestries: "I knew the tapestries from my teenage years when I was crazy about unicorns. […] Then many years later I read an article about

4 It may also be of particular interest to note here that marine biologists have propounded a theory according to which the water creature known as the narwhal might prove the animal with the closest resemblance to the mythical unicorn (for further reading, see Ford and Ford 1986).

5 Melusina is a fairy who, at the age of 15, punishes her father for having abandoned her mother and the three daughters they had together, and suffers the consequences. "On telling their mother what they had done, she, to punish them for the unnatural action, condemned Melusina to become every Saturday a serpent, from the waist downwards, till she should meet a man who would many her under the condition of never seeing her on a Saturday, and should keep his promise" (Keightley 2012, 481). Melusina meets her knight, they fall in love and get married, and, for many years, Raymond (or Raimondin) keeps his promise until a fatal Saturday when he spies on her and makes her leave him, taking her daughters with her. Melusina only comes back to foretell his death, and the deaths of her children, and to cry for them, as well as for her own misfortune.

6 The tapestries are now on display at the MUSÉE DE CLUNY - Musée national du Moyen Âge in Paris.

them that talked about their mysterious history and how no one knows who made them, exactly whom they were made for, or how to interpret them. Those mysteries appealed, and I thought I would try to answer those questions" (Chevalier, "Questions and Answers").

The preference for incomplete (hi)stories, which allow for a writer's imagination to fill in the gaps, is a trait that Chevalier has in common with Gregory – and the medieval period, with its religious turmoil and monastic bestiaries, has proven a rich soil in which the two authors could plant the seeds for their fiction. As Chevalier states, fiction and history do not always go hand in hand, and the less one knows for sure, the more one can invent – to the benefit of one's fiction: "By and large I stick with the truth, but I often choose subjects where we don't know much, where there are gaps to be filled in with reasonable conjecture" (Chevalier, "Questions and Answers").

As one can notice, the obvious thing that strikes the reader's eye is that the two novels share a tendency to delve into the personal lives of certain historical or artistic individuals from the 15th century, with the intention to (re)discover the type(s) of power mechanisms that enabled women to accomplish (at least) some of their goals in the Middle Ages. In the "Author's notes" at the end of *The Lady of the Rivers*, Gregory plainly states that, when she writes, she is on a mission to help reconstruct the past through the voices of some special women: "I have spent my life as an historian of women, their place in society and their struggle for power" (Gregory 2011, 426). On the other hand, although Chevalier does not openly confess a feminist quest for any hidden truths regarding medieval women, she does, in a subtle way, with irony and creativity, betray her postmodern feminist preference while spinning her intricate thread about the (hi)story of the design and creation of the famous *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestry.

The challenge that both Gregory and Chevalier accepted when they embarked on their journeys into the past lives of Jacquetta of Luxembourg (the former author's main character) and Geneviève de Nanterre (one of the latter's main female characters), respectively, was that of putting together the pieces of the historical puzzles they found, and then build, with the help of powerful mythological symbols such as the unicorn (and the mermaid, in the former's case), their own fictional pieces that would compensate for the missing ones. In her study *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, when discussing the relationship between history and fiction, Linda Hutcheon remarks upon the provisional character of any discovery about the past. The theorist attributes the respective inability to 'know for sure' to intertextuality, or the chain of interdependence between texts: "What postmodern novels teach is that, in both cases [history and fiction] they actually refer at the first level to other texts: we know the past (which really did exist) only through its textualized remains" (Hutcheon 1988, 119).

The "textualized remains" of the past that Hutcheon writes about are, in the case of the two novels here, very similar with regard to the manner in which they depict the medieval world and mentalities, with the image of the unicorn as one of the representative mythological beasts, which were referenced, during the Middle Ages, both in religious texts[7] and in popular legends. That similarity is mainly due to the fact that the respective plots[8] are both set in the 15th century and, up to a point, share the same vision of the relationship between humans and animals in the medieval time. As Garcia, Walker and Chico observe in their study devoted to the perception of animals in the Middle Ages, humans used animal analogies in order to find out truths about themselves: "The Middle Ages inherited from Antiquity the taste for animal fables, whose legacy was preserved in monastic libraries and became increasingly popular in the last centuries of the medieval period. Mirroring human values and behaviour, animal fable narratives enabled to discern truths about human existence through the animal 'other'" (Garcia, Walker, and Chico 2013, 20).

Nevertheless, before reaching that stage, as Joyce Salisbury's work *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* demonstrates, during the millennium between the fourth and the fourteenth century, there was an important shift in the medieval thinkers' perception of the relationship between humans and beasts, which, in Salisbury's view, "shows that by the late Middle Ages (after the twelfth century) the paradigm of separation of species was breaking down" (Salisbury 2010, 2). The behaviour of the characters in the two novels discussed here is relevant for the way in which the symbol of the unicorn was used in the 15th century, with Chevalier's male character Nicolas des Innocents imagining himself to be as unique and irresistible as the unicorn in the stories he tells the girls he tries to bed, or with Gregory's female character Jacquetta de Luxembourg in the role of the virgin, demonstrating her magical powers in spite of herself.

Taking a closer look at the way in which the motif of the unicorn is employed in the narratives of the two contemporary British authors, one may discern some conceptual differences in the artistic imagery, as well as in the structural scaffolding of the novels. On the one hand, Gregory uses the medieval stories about the unicorn for a very precise purpose, that of underlying the idea of her main character's virginal purity as a prerequisite for the success of her scrying activity – the reason why Jacquetta's first husband proposes to her in

[7] The unicorn is said to be endowed with proverbial strength and is used in the Bible as a standard against which human power is measured.

[8] Gregory's novel *The Lady of the Rivers* begins with the imprisonment of Jeanne D'Arc in France, in the Castle of Beaurevoir, near Arras, in 1430, while Chevalier's first part of *The Lady and the Unicorn* is placed in Paris, dated during Lent-Eastertide, in 1490. That 60-year period of the 15th century is to be remembered in Europe both for endless wars for land, political instability and religious upheavals, and for the flourishing of arts, crafts and ideas.

the first place. On the other hand, Chevalier goes beyond the lore of the unicorn and, while still having her characters debate the fable of the unicorn, she reinterprets it in a feminist re-evaluation of the image of the medieval women that were involved in the various stages of the creation of the six tapestries that make up *The Lady and the Unicorn* masterpiece.

In both Gregory's and Chevalier's novels, the image of the unicorn is instrumental to the depiction of the characters, functioning as a moral mirror in which they could see themselves as they truly are, not as they imagine themselves to be. For the purpose of drawing a clearer conclusion as regards the twenty-first century feminist intervention in the Middle Ages plot, the paper suggests a comparative analysis of the characters and situations in which the unicorn symbol appears in the two novels.

As argued earlier in the paper, the lack of enough historical evidence about either Jacquetta of Luxembourg or the origins/ designers /sponsors /manufacturers of *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries left enough room for the two novelists to put their imagination to work. Thus, most characters in both novels have their stories revolving around the unicorn image, if not deeply rooted in the unicorn legend. The main male characters in both narratives are depicted as the hunters who would go to great lengths in order to ensnare the mythical beast with the help of the legendary virgin as an unsuspecting bait.

In *The Lady of the Rivers*, Jacquetta's first husband, John, Duke of Bedford, is obsessed with alchemy and finding the Stone, which (he believes) will help him end the war between France and England. Far from desiring Jacquetta for her beauty and fertility, the Duke of Bedford intends very much to keep Jacquetta a virgin with "the pure touch" (Gregory 2011, 56) – a power which he strongly believes she has, because of her ancestry as a descendant from Melusina. What adds to his hopes for the manifestation of his spouse's supernatural powers is, ironically, her own statement, given under pressure: "I know that I defended myself, and I know that it is true: I am a virgin so pure that I could capture a unicorn" (40). The Duke of Bedford is cast from the very beginning of the novel in the role of the hunter, who is interested both in the virgin who could capture a unicorn, and in his metaphorical unicorn taking the shape of the alchemist's Stone. However, the Duke disappoints as a hunter, as he is firstly misled into thinking that, because Joan of Arc was often called "the Maid,"[9] *she* was that special virgin that could help him with the discovery of the Stone. He also disappoints as a husband, since he never touches his wife, but keeps her as his precious tool, a new wife he had married for the sake of his project, and whose (lack of) sexual life he could control. That was a position that the majority of medieval women held, irrespective of their status – it is the conclusion of a

[9] La Pucelle, in French.

research conducted by Kim Phillips, who writes in her study on *Medieval Maidens* that: "Young laywomen were taught to live in subordinate relationship to men, and therefore sexuality was defined phallocentrically […] One recurrent theme in this chapter [Sexualities] has been that of exterior control: control and construction of maidens' sexuality by families, communities, employers and by the Church" (Phillips 2003, 168).

In Chevalier's novel, the male character that is cast in the hunter's role is primarily a comic figure, an artist reminding the reader of Falstaff or Casanova. This respective character, ironically named Nicolas des Innocents, has the habit of using the story of the unicorn as an amorous prelude, adding his original touch to the story and identifying parts of himself as similar in shape and function to the unicorn's magic horn: "I know which animal I want to be,' […] 'A unicorn. […] His horn has a special power, you see. […] 'If your well there was poisoned, beauty, or sullied such as Jeanne has just done, a unicorn could come along and dip his horn into it and it would become pure again" (Chevalier 2004, 24). In fact, Chevalier's novel surprises its readers with the idea of creating this image of the designer of the unicorn tapestry fancying himself like a unicorn that can only be tamed by beautiful virgins, whom he gets pregnant and then abandons without shame or regret. Ironically, though, Nicolas, who is always boasting on dipping his horn in beautiful maiden's wells, is in the end punished for his sins, and forced to marry Béatrice, the ugliest lady's maid – an act of seduction he has never wished for. Here, Béatrice is depicted as the lucky female hunter who gets the prized unicorn, but who will not be satisfied with the arrangement, after all – in the Epilogue of the novel, Chevalier tells her readers that Nicolas des Innocents "had three more children, none of them with Béatrice" (366). Somehow, once caught and forced to sign a binding marriage contract, the unicorn eludes his hunter and loses the power of his horn, only to get it back again when he is free.

What is more surprising, is that, more often than once, in Chevalier's narrative, the seduction of the maiden has the opposite effect to the one intended by the male seducer; to be more precise, in *The Lady and the Unicorn*, the respective effect is that of liberating the virgin from the restraints of an unwanted marriage or from undue pressure. That type of liberation is experienced by the blind daughter of the Belgian lissier, Alienor, who welcomes the unicorn's horn both as a gesture of rebellion against her cruel fate[10] and as a means to experience the act of making love to someone of her own choice. In this, Chevalier cleverly demonstrates her feminist agenda, on balance, offering the formerly virgin

[10] She was promised in marriage to a brutish, malodorous dyer with whom her family did business.

character an escape plan: a knight in shining armour appears in the shape of a cartoonist who had been in love with the blind girl for ages, but knew he had no chances with her until the moment she declared she was in the family way.

In both novels under discussion here, one can notice the feminist mark in the manner in which the virgin from the unicorn stories manages to cleverly free herself from society's bonds the moment she loses her maidenhead. Like Chevalier's Alienor, who becomes a woman in her own right the moment she decides to let herself seduced by Nicolas, Gregory's Jacquetta of Luxembourg is transformed into an independent woman only after losing her virginity to her late husband's squire, Richard Woodville. Her strong, independent will is to be evinced by her decision to use an herbal potion in order to get pregnant with her first child, and, in that way, make sure she would marry the man she loves. Jacquetta's likeness to the virgin in the unicorn's legend is plainly described in the scene of the former's encounter with the unicorn, witnessed by an entranced Richard Woodville. Not a hunter himself, Richard "had a sense that he should not try to catch the unicorn" (Gregory 2011, 84), and that awareness or common-sense comes from the stories he has seen depicted in the artistic productions of the time: "Only one being in this world can catch a unicorn, and he had seen the capture in half a dozen tapestries and in a dozen woodcuts in story books, since his youngest boyhood" (84). Intertextuality is again used for the purpose of evincing the twenty-first century feminist reinterpretation of the unicorn story, with the legendary virgin becoming the hunter of the man she loves, whereas he is transformed into the unicorn that she ensnares with her charm. Feminist research has advocated for a similar turn of tables movement with regard to women's power. In an interesting study devoted to *The Great Cosmic Mother*, Sjöö and Mor remark on the powerful image of the virgin in ancient cultures, as well as on the original meaning of the concept, before its Christian distortion for religious purposes:

> Ancient moon priestesses were called virgins. "Virgin" meant not married, not belonging to a man—a woman who was "one-in-herself." The very word derives from a Latin root meaning strength, force, skill; and was later applied to men: virile. Ishtar, Diana, Astarte, Isis were all called virgin, which did not refer to sexual chastity, but sexual independence. […] The Hebrews used the word, and in the original Aramaic, it meant "maiden" or "young woman," with no connotations of sexual chastity. But later Christian translators […] distorted the meaning into sexually pure, chaste, never touched. (Sjöö and Mor 1987, 99)

That interpretation of the concept of "woman" as being considered worthy of the virginal[11] status only when she reaches an independent position seems to be shared by the two novelists, and, as we have seen, closely related to the legend

[11] Elizabeth I was referred to as "The Virgin Queen" in spite of her many affairs

of the unicorn. Moreover, in Chevalier's narrative, the motif of the seduction of the unicorn is explained by Nicolas des Innocents, the designer of the tapestries, as having the meaning of restoring women's power in all its manifestations. Commissioned first and foremost as a means to remind viewers about Jean Le Viste's status and valour,[12] the unicorn tapestries are, in their designer's concept, visual reflections on women, virgins and ladies alike, and their power, as he plans them according to his vision and after his heart's desire, enriching the original version of the unicorn legend: "They will not only be about a seduction in a forest, but about something else as well, not just a virgin but a woman who would be a virgin again, so that the tapestries are about the whole of a woman's life, its beginning and its end. All of her choices, all in one, wound together" (Chevalier 2004, 34).

Chevalier's character that is supposed to have ordered the *Dame à la Licorne* tapestries[13] is Jean Le Viste's wife, Geneviève de Nanterre. The latter has longed for years on end to embrace the simplicity of a nun's life, a pleasure which she has been repeatedly denied. For Geneviève de Nanterre, the coveted life of a nun would also mean her independence – something that her husband would not agree with. Dissatisfied with the fact that he and his wife only have daughters, and no son and heir, Jean Le Viste blames Geneviève de Nanterre for it and would not release her from her marriage bonds; instead, he keeps her in a position that will allow him to preserve his status, finances and authority intact. As research on the financial status of women in the Middle Ages shows,

> A noble lady could inherit a fief, but it then passed to her husband. Rarely was she herself considered either a lord or a vassal, and almost never was she allowed to run her estates as an unmarried woman. Virtually the only visible single women in this social class were those who became nuns, even though wives showed themselves perfectly capable of overseeing their husbands' properties. Widows, however, were often allowed a great deal of latitude in ruling their own lands. (Amt 1993, 107)

In both novels, women characters are depicted as expressing their own desires, although they did not, at the time, have their authority recognized. As Sandy Bardsley states, "Most women exercised some degree of power in the Middle Ages, but few exercised authority" (Bardsley, 2007, 193). Nonetheless, both Gregory and Chevalier make reference to the words inscribed across the top of the tent in

[12] Beatrice, the plainest of the lady's maids remarks smartly that "Visté means speed. The unicorn is visté, n'est-ce pas? No animal runs faster. So when we see a unicorn we think of Viste" (Chevalier 2004, 36), thus making the connection between the sponsor's name and the figure of the unicorn.

[13] For more on the actual sponsor of the tapestries, see Decu Teodorescu's "La tenture de la Dame à la licorne: nouvelle lecture des armoiries" (2010).

one of the six tapestries, "À Mon Seul Désir". That is one of the deliberately obscure, highly crafted and elegant mottos of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, precursor to the feminist movement mottos, which, in the fifteenth century, often alluded to courtly love, and was, for that reason, adopted by the nobility during the age of chivalry. With its various interpretations, ranging from "to my only/sole desire", "according to my desire alone", to "by my will alone", or "love desires only beauty of soul", the motto suggests strong feelings, such as passion, will or desire, while also implying that those feelings and will – signs of power, if not of authority – belong to the woman one courts. Although the motto is largely discussed in Chevalier's book, and not at all in Gregory's novel, we may also find a common trait in the fact that, in the latter narrative, John of Lancaster, 1st Duke of Bedford, had almost the same motto, "À Vous Entier", French for "(Devoted) to you entirely" – which is comparably similar to that on the famous tapestry.

Conclusions

The present study has focused on two of the many literary works that have shown an increased interest in unicorns in the twenty-first century and explained its methodology and selection of the literary corpus. A comparative view of the way in which Philippa Gregory and Tracy Chevalier have adopted and adapted the symbolic image of the unicorn in *The Lady of the Rivers* and *The Lady and the Unicorn*, respectively, has been completed by an analysis of the novelists' sources of inspiration. In this respect, the paper has explained the reasons why medieval characters and legends, in combination with historical facts (or gaps), have been revisited and found their place in the novels of the two British authors. The way in which the medieval characters in the legend of the unicorn – the mythical beast, the virgin and the hunter – are reworked for the third millennium readers reflects on the two novelists' skills and feminist agenda.

There is still much to be discussed about the literature devoted to unicorns, and many medieval sources to be disputed and/or challenged, but the main conclusion of the study is this: in both novels analysed here, the story and the image of the unicorn is perceived in close relation to that of the power of women, be they virgins, wives, nuns or mothers. The unicorn, with all its stories, makes everyone believe that the feminine draws its power from the magical side of the world, which, just for convenience, has been turned into reality. Throughout their two novels, both Gregory and Chevalier do their best to use intertextuality for a double purpose: to reveal the (hi)stories of their characters while creating their own fictional interpretations of them.

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