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Stepping Down to Human: Remixing Identity in *The Last Unicorn*

With the release of *The Last Unicorn* in 1982, directors Jules Bass and Arthur Rankin Jr. offered what appears a typical anthropocentric fantasy. The film tells the story of a unicorn who discovers she is the last of her kind in the world and sets out on a quest to find the others. It features talking animals, anthropomorphic trees, and a human hero determined to save the day. The unicorn is even magically transformed into a human when her life is threatened. Everything points to a humanist view, but as a housecat advises the servant Molly Grue, appearances can be deceiving – particularly to “human beings, who seem to enjoy it.” A closer look at *The Last Unicorn* reveals inversions of expected roles and exposes a very posthumanist remix of identity in the film, particularly through the lens of the unicorn and Schmendrick the Magician. Both learn a great deal from the unicorn’s transformation into the Lady Amalthea. Such a notion may seem humanist at first, but the transformation bears an accompanying change in thinking that is central to posthumanism. This shift is not just about decentering *Homo sapiens* from our perspective of the universe, but engaging “the problem of anthropocentrism and speciesism and how practices of thinking...must change in light of their critique” (Wolfe xix). The series of complex changes from unicorn to human and back gives both new, unique perspectives that are radically different from before.

Many equate posthumanism with a technological transformation toward the transhuman, which would be at odds with the semi-feudal setting of *The Last Unicorn*. The truth is, “posthumanism encompasses not only techno scientific transhumanism ... but also older, romantic forms of incorporation into natural environments” (Taylor 5). Even before the advent of the posthuman as an idea, myth, and literature historically anticipated “narratives in which human figures are formally coupled with the nonhuman, transforming them into something beyond the human” (Clarke 3). Posthumanism draws heavily from deconstructionism, seeking to not only upset the traditional human/animal binary opposition, but to show there is no true privileged position because “we ourselves are human *animals*, part of the evolutionary history and behavioral and psychological repertoire of the human itself” (Wolfe xxv). Humans are one animal among many, although our anthropocentric view tends to make us see ourselves as somehow separate, and we forget that “the time of animals is an-other time, one parallel to our own. Occasionally these temporalities collide; history meets the time of the animal. In such moments, the wealth of openness and the time of the animal erupt” (Broglio 3). It is just such an eruption we find in the mingling of identities inherent in *The Last Unicorn*.

Of the fiction subgenres, fantasy is ideal for decentering humankind from the narrative. Even when animals are anthropomorphized in *The Last Unicorn*, they make full use of their voices to remind us there is nothing inherently special about this mostly hairless primate. Our place in the world is not as secure as we like to believe. As a speculative genre, fantasy deals with “what if” questions posed in alternate worlds that bear varying degrees of resemblance to our own. This “escape,” to borrow J.R.R. Tolkien’s term, does nothing to blunt the truth. Indeed, it helps us to see the subject at hand in harsher light because fantasy is based “upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it” (Tolkien 18). Fantasy creates a boundary where “constitutive-yet-alienating forces define our existence, converting ‘us’ into emergent, ephemeral events rather than static, pregiven things” (Taylor 167). If this particular genre is ideal in decentering

Homo sapiens, fantasy movies are able to take it a step further. When the written word held sway over the transfer of ideas, interacting with literature meant reading, which in turn “meant learning successfully how to hallucinate the aural and visual implications triggered by bare words on a page. Things have changed since other media began to hallucinate them for us” (Clarke 4). As with other films, *The Last Unicorn* “isn’t about ‘reality’; it’s about what ‘reality’ turns away from” (Wolfe 170). Fantasy works well in a variety of media, but as a visual medium, film handles it in a unique fashion that carefully places fantasy within the seemingly real world (190). Through film, “the existence of the world is miraculously affirmed via automatism, but the price we pay for the world’s recovery is that it no longer exists *for us*. It is radically ahuman, other. We can’t know or touch the world precisely because it manifests itself *unbidden*, without our help. Film is thus what the world looks like when we’re not there” (177). It is the age-old question of whether a falling tree without an observer makes a sound, taken to the nth degree. The question becomes one of whether a world can *exist* without a human observer. Film shows that it not only can, but that it can do so quite happily.

Posthumanism relativizes “the human by coupling it to some other order of being” (Clarke 2-3). In the case of *The Last Unicorn*, the human and unicorn are intertwined due to the fact that, in the case of the unicorn, one stems from the other – and both learn that neither holds the privileged position. The unicorn’s self-convinced superiority is evident early on when she hears from two hunters that she is the last of her kind: “What do men know? Because they have seen no unicorns for a while does not mean we have all vanished. We do not vanish. There has never been a time without unicorns. We live forever. We are as old as the sky, old as the moon.” And yet that nagging doubt refuses to go away. She goes on a quest to search for the missing unicorns, meeting the hapless Schmendrick and Molly Grue along the way. Her journey brings her face to face with the Red Bull that has captured all the other unicorns at the behest of King Haggard. In an effort to save her, Schmendrick magically transforms her into a human – a “humble creature” the Bull has no interest in pursuing. The ruse works, but the metamorphosis is not well received and gives rise to a sense of horror commonly associated with posthumanism, a “polymorphic unfixity, articulating a logic of identity as decentred, ontologically confusing and in a state of transition” (Campbell and Saren 162). Molly expresses the horror of the situation first: “You’ve trapped her in a human body. She’ll go mad!”

The unicorn is no less upset. “I wish you had let the Red Bull take me. I wish you had left me to the harpy! I can feel this body dying all around me!” she says. “I’m afraid of this human body. More than I was of the Red Bull.”

This sudden onset of “mortality is especially terrifying when seen through the eyes of the unicorn herself; the human characters have had to live with the knowledge of their own deaths all their lives, but for the unicorn, it is fresh and horrific” (Reiter 107). As Lady Almathea, the unicorn has to learn how to use her new body and behave as a human in society, learning that “being/doing a body, and especially being/doing it ‘right,’ transcends both the concrete, material level of physical ability, and the sociocultural level where the rules and conventions of ‘appropriate’ bodily behaviour are instilled” (Hoogland 215). Learning these rules is particularly difficult for the unicorn. In her sudden transformation to human, Lady Amalthea becomes something like a newborn thrust unwillingly into the world. A developing person does not acquire its sense of individuality simply through perception. The “body ego” also depends on others for care and basic necessities as it develops, which means that “these early modes of self-realization cannot be simply described in terms of mere copying or imitation. It rather involves a process of incorporation, of quite literal identification with the Other body” (217). As a result, the ego has a seemingly unlimited capacity to reshape its body image. But this plasticity works both ways, allowing the body to shape the mind, as well. Indeed, the longer she is in a human body, the less Lady Amalthea remembers being a unicorn, and she slowly becomes a true human. Her original nature fights this “becoming,” a process that involves “the establishment of relations among a psychical subject, other subjects, and various objects” that results in a structure “not determined in advance by the nature of its composite substances, but generated by the mode of their organization” (221). This “becoming” is governed by an internal set of rules amalgamated from laws of nature, society, culture and even symbolization (222). *The Last Unicorn* takes this quite literally with an insistence on the power of

the narrative, or as Prince Lir puts it, “things must happen when it is time for them to happen. A quest may not simply be abandoned. ... The happy ending cannot come in the middle of the story.”

This sort of metanarrative expresses “the open,” which humans are traditionally seen as having access to through our ability to formulate and address the question of being. Animals, on the other hand, “captivated by their environments...are unable to get outside their worlds and have a look around” (Broglia 1). Even in such anthropocentric circles, it has been speculated that animals may have their own “open” that humans could not understand, which “provides a way for thinking of the assemblage animal–human–machine without deciding in advance in favor of the human” (2). Such a division, even when promoted to simply let animals be, strengthens the human/animal binary and keeps them as Other, outside our understanding. Posthumanism seeks to avoid this by decentralizing humans and removing the species “from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information and cognition” (Wolfe xii). In doing so, posthumanism avoids humanism’s “anthropological dogma” and the notion that humanity can only be achieved by somehow leaving animality behind (xiv-xvi). The boundary between animal and human is crossed both ways in *The Last Unicorn*, putting humans and other animals on a much more level field – a field which the unicorn herself has seen both sides of. As Schmendrick says: “Of all unicorns, she is the only one who knows what regret is. And love.” There is no doubt the unicorn has been changed by her experience. In her final conversation with Schmendrick, she says: “I’m a little afraid to go home. I have been mortal, and some part of me is mortal yet. I’m no longer like the others, for no unicorn was ever born who could ever regret. But now, I do. I regret.”

“I am sorry,” the wizard replies. “I have done you evil, and I cannot undo it.”

“No. Unicorns are in the world again. No sorrow will live in me as long as that joy, save one. And I thank you for that part, too.”

Schmendrick’s role in this story results in his own remixed identity. In fact, his very presence upsets general fantasy conventions. This is not the wise, powerful Gandalf defeating the enemies no one else can. Nor is he a font of knowledge like Dumbledore offering hints and helps as to what needs to happen next. Schmendrick is a bumbling, incompetent hedge mage who offers more laughs and complications than real aid. Not that he does not learn a great deal along the way. From the beginning, Schmendrick acknowledges the unicorn’s own identity and importance when he promises to help her escape Mommy Fortuna’s carnival: “If not you, no one.” At the same time, however, he also sees her as a means to serve his own privileged ends, calling the unicorn “my last chance” to become “a great wizard” rather than what most see as simply “a clumsy fraud, a trickster.” After she is free and continues her quest, Schmendrick asks her to “take me with you, for lucks, for laughs, for the unknown.” Not for any real help; just as amusement. But he must still see her as the key to his own desires even as he acknowledges that she “could never have granted my true wish.”

“No. I cannot turn you into something you are not. I cannot turn you into a true magician,” the unicorn replies.

“That’s all right, don’t worry about it.”

Schmendrick shows flashes of true power in moments of extremis, such as when he is captive in Captain Cully’s band. Letting the “magic do as you will,” he calls up phantom figures of Robin Hood and his Merry Men – of whom Captain Cully’s crew is but a pale shadow. The outlaws tie him to a tree in response. His magic animates the plant, which promptly declares her love for him and threatens to smother him if not for the unicorn’s intervention. These moments serve as setup for his greatest triumph: The unicorn’s transformation into “Lady Amalthea.” Unlike Mommy Fortuna, who can only create illusions, Schmendrick accomplishes a true metamorphosis. Where Molly and the unicorn express horror at the change, Schmendrick is elated at his fulfilled wish: “What do you mean, what have I done? Only saved her from the Red Bull by magic, that’s all I’ve done! By magic! By my own true magic! Doubtless you are wondering how I plan to return her to her proper shape. Wonder not. The power will come to me whenever I need it. And one day, one day it will come to me when I call! You were right!” Even as his jubilation fades and the enormity of the moment dawns upon him, the magician remains confident he can change her back when the time is right. Here, at the height of Schmendrick’s life as a



wizard, we see a subversion of a humanist expectation for the story. This is not the moment where he assumes control of his powers and becomes a driving force in the story. Quite the opposite, in fact. Despite his triumph, Schmendrick is no less the bumbling fool that he was earlier. It is a role that works well in service of the dour King Haggard because it lets Schmendrick be a distraction while the others search for the Red Bull. As the film progresses, there are hints that his powers have grown – dematerialization, animation of his clothing, making balls juggle themselves – but nothing that indicates he will ever be at the level of Mommy Fortuna or his fellow, but more impressive, wizards, all of whom can perform their feats of magic at will. Schmendrick can do small tricks, but the “big” magic is sporadic and seemingly accidental. That is not seen until the end, after Schmendrick changes the unicorn back and the Red Bull and King Haggard are defeated. The unicorn declares, “You are a true wizard now, as you always wished. Does it make you happy?”

“Well, men don't always know when they're happy, but I-I think so,” he replies.

Schmendrick's awareness has also grown, and his identity is as changed as the unicorn's. Rather than becoming a more complicated figure, however, he has become a simpler one. He started as an arrogant yet self-proclaimed inferior magician willing to use even a unicorn as a means to his own ends. The completed quest finds Schmendrick more powerful and more confident, but also humbler. Although he has always had some knowledge of what the unicorn was, she is no longer a tool for him to use and discard. Instead, she is an entity in her own right, one that will continue to exist long after “men are fairy tales in books written by rabbits.” He also sees her as a truly unique individual as the only unicorn to know regret or love, and acknowledges his role in making that happen: “I am sorry. I have done you evil and I cannot undo it.”

It is interesting that despite everything he has accomplished, Schmendrick sees his role in the unicorn's story as “evil.” In fact, harm and hindrance are almost the only things any human characters in this film have to offer the unicorn. They try to help but provide little of any real substance. In this sense, *The Last Unicorn* remixes the very identity of the fantasy genre. Many forms of speculative fiction fall back on the “humans are special” trope. *Babylon 5* and *Star Trek* use it as a central theme. Even when works such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Stand* have many nonhuman characters, they remain solidly anthropocentric in their insistence that the world belongs to humans, and they are only ones who can solve its problems. For the unicorn/Lady Amalthea, however, it falls to other creatures to provide information and assistance when it is most needed. The unicorn learns from humans that she is the last, but her adventure gets its direction from a butterfly that communicates through a variety of human poetry and verse, including a radio show theme, traditional songs, children's games, A.E. Houseman, Shakespeare, the Brothers Grimm, Broadway musicals, W.B. Yeats, John Donne, the Bible and even matchbook instructions. The unicorn says that all such insects “know are songs and poetry and anything else they hear.” The butterfly spouts more than two dozen fragments, treating each piece equally without regard of whether it is classic literature or doggerel. In fact, none of these gems of human literature offer anything useful to the unicorn. The most important thing the butterfly says comes from some in-universe source:

No, no, listen. Don't listen to me, listen. You can find the others if you are brave. They passed down all the roads long ago, and the Red Bull ran close behind them and covered their footsteps. Hold tight. ... Hold tight. Hold tight, hold tight. His firstling bull has majesty, and his horns are the horns of a wild ox. With them, he shall push the unicorns, all of them, to the ends of the earth. Listen, listen, listen quickly!

Without the butterfly's information about the Red Bull, the unicorn would have had nowhere to start her journey. The quest to rescue the others would have failed before it even began if not for an inconsequential, babbling insect that got her going.

Another seemingly insignificant creature propels the quest forward when it stalls near the end at King Haggard's castle. Schmendrick, Molly and “Lady Almathea” learn the king has captured the unicorns and trapped them in the sea with the help of the Red Bull. They also know the Bull's lair is somewhere in or around this castle. For all their human ingenuity and determination, they cannot find its location without some help from a mere pet. It is a cat who tells Molly: “When the wine drinks itself,

when the skull speaks, when the clock strikes the right time, only then will you find the tunnel that leads to the Red Bull's lair." Molly finds this information less than satisfying and demands to know why the creature refuses to give a straight answer. To which the cat replies, "Because I be what I be. I would tell you what you want to know if I could, mum, but I be a cat, and no cat anywhere ever gave anyone a straight answer." Unsatisfactory though the riddle may be, it is enough to point them in the right direction and restart the quest and ultimately lead to the confrontation that frees all the unicorns.

Not only do human contributions to the quest pale to those of the nonhuman, the people found in this story get in the way more often than help. When the unicorn is captured by Mommy Fortuna, Schmendrick the Magician promises to help her escape. His first spell only creates an illusion of freedom. The second, designed to make the bars of her cage "as brittle as old cheese, which I crumble and scatter," burns his hands. His third spell sets the cage to shrinking, which he is just barely able to halt before it crushes the unicorn. The wizard has to resort to using stolen keys in the end. Still, Schmendrick serves some purpose, however feeble. To truly see just how useless the human characters are, turn to the unicorn herself after she is changed into Lady Amalthea. On this matter, posthumanists "would argue that all mental thought, all consciousness and spirit, can be attributed to the operation of micro-material processes distributed in the autopoietic (self-creating) body" (Campbell and Saren 164-165). Amalthea's body is literally created from magic, and the processes involved in that new body change the way she thinks and acts. The longer she spends in a human body, the less of a unicorn she is. After spending some time in King Haggard's castle, she asks Molly, "Who am I? Why am I here? What is it that I am seeking in this strange place, day after day? I-I knew a moment ago, but I-I have forgotten." Her confusion grows, and she has to remind herself that she "must face the Bull again and discover what he has done with them, before I forget myself forever." As her humanity takes over, she starts to actively resist what had once been her own personal quest, begging Prince Lir, with whom she has started to fall in love: "Drown out my dreams. Keep me from remembering – whatever wants me to remember it." Once they find the Red Bull and it is time to turn the Lady Amalthea back into a unicorn, she tries to remain human because "the Red Bull has no care for human beings. We may walk out past him and get away. ... Everything dies. I want to die when you die. I'm no unicorn, no magical creature! I'm human, and I love you. Don't let him! Lir, I will not love you when I am a unicorn." Rather than interfere, the "hero" Lir does the bravest thing he can think of: nothing. He knows "the happy ending cannot come in the middle of the story" and steps aside to let events unfold. In fact, he is apparently killed by the Bull, which sparks the unicorn's attack that drives the creature into the sea, and rescues all the other unicorns, and saves the hero, restoring him to life. The quest completed, she is able to return home, even though she is no longer the same creature that left on the quest.

Metamorphosis narratives such as *The Last Unicorn* "place the human into improper locations, then try – successfully or not – to renaturalize that impropriety" (Clarke 2). For the unicorn, being human *is* the improper location. It is one she has learned from, but can never truly renaturalize. She goes home, but also realizes she will never be like the others again. Having been human, she has learned what regret and love are. She has gone through one of those "uncanny syntheses that retain transgressing stigmata and tend to refuse renaturalization" (2). The unicorn no longer insists that her kind is somehow superior by mere dint of birth, but neither does she say that humans are particularly special – a message frequently driven home in speculative fiction. Rather, she seems to have learned the ultimate posthuman lesson: All creatures exist in their own right and have their own special place that is neither more nor less than any other. Schmendrick comes to much the same realization, but from a different direction. He started as someone who would use even a unicorn to further his own ends, and ends up realizing just how special the creature is – and, by extension, other creatures, as well. These lessons subvert the supposed humanistic tendencies of this fantasy story and reveal a very posthuman tale driven by a remix of form, which itself necessarily creates an accompanying remix of identity.

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