

WE TRANSLATE HERE PRINCIPAL LANGUAGE-BASED ELEMENTS OF A *MON SEUL DÉSI*R WHICH MAY ALLOW A NON FRENCH-SPEAKING AUDIENCE TO BETTER UNDERSTAND PARTS OF THE WORK AND WHAT IS SAID.

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TAPESTRY

In the dim light we can distinguish some figures, but before we can see, our eyes must adjust to the dark.

The background is madder red. The space is so saturated that we can't recognize all the shapes at first glance. We detect some young girls and some animals.

The girls are thin, willowy, with narrow chests and stomachs that stick out a bit. They are in the style of the late 15th century: Botticelli's round chins and Memling's high foreheads. Initially, it seems possible that they are nude, but actually they are like animals. There is no nudity in nature. Animals are not naked - because they are naked. Precisely. The young girls are the same. In nature. They are calm. Their gestures are large, poised. They are at once focused and absent.

The beasts are completely pre-occupied with themselves. There are large ones and small ones. We notice the two most imposing ones immediately, woven in lighter tones: two animals bearing a coat of arms, and participating in the action: on the left, a lion; on the right, a unicorn. The lion has a strange face. On some of the panels, it is even totally rough. The unicorn is beige, with a long twisted horn.

So it begins like that: a red background, some young girls, a beige unicorn, and an off the mark lion.

When the eyes have adjusted, the wall hangings become perceptible. They are made up of six tapestries in faded colors, suspended vertically in a specific order, at first glance each one offering little variation from the last. Upon approaching, however, we can distinguish a silent scene on each piece, each time a discrete allegory of the five senses.

I understood the five senses later, because I didn't want to read the description. I preferred to remain seated on the large bench, looking without fully understanding. It was extremely cool due to the intensive air conditioning used to preserve the work. A perfect place to be in the middle of the summer.

Accordingly, it is during the summer of 1841, that the writer Prosper Mérimée, also inspector of Historic Monuments, visits the château de Boussac, seat of the subprefecture of Creuse. He mentions the presence of six Turkish inspired tapestries, imposed upon some 18th century woodwork. George Sand, a friend of Mérimée, also comes to the château. She sleeps in the room neighboring the tapestries and is strongly impressed by them. She describes them in one of her novels, *Jeanne*. At the time of Sand people say that the tapestries were owned by the unlucky Zizim, an oriental prince held captive in Bourgameuf tower, next to Boussac. He would have been carrying them at the time of his exile. Pure legend.

Today it is thought that the hangings were designed by the Master of the *Très Petites Heures d'Anne de Bretagne* – someone called Jean d'Ypres – around 1500; but its place of origin remains hypothetical: Arras, Lille, Brussels, Bruges, Paris or Tournai, perhaps even Roubaix, who knows. It was spun with great care by the weavers, a mix of wool threads colored with vegetable dyes and some silk threads, in beige or ecru.

Despite Mérimée's visit, the tapestries are rolled up and abandoned at Boussac's city hall for many years, amongst the humidity and the rats. A subprefect even cut some of them to make small rugs for his feet. That is why you must always beware of subprefects.

The tapestry arrives at the Cluny Museum in July of 1882, in a rather poor state.

On each of the wall hangings, the girls are positioned upon blue ovals, a profound and somber blue. Sort of islands suspended in the middle of the red. A garden closed upon itself, floating horizontally.

There are also banners, flags, shields, capes and crowns. In abundance. And always bearing the same emblem: gules on a bend azure containing three mounting silver crescents, Le Viste family crest, undoubtedly the commissioners of the tapestry. A family of the robe originally from Lyon, later given noble title, who once emigrated to Paris, needs to parade their ostentatious signs in order to be recognized.

The red background is rich in flora. First we notice some trees - always the same - with ripe fruit; orange tree, holly tree, oak and pine. And then, a myriad of flowers. Thousands of flowers. Some cultivated flowers but mainly wildflowers - flowers from the fields, woodland flowers: forty different species.

Daisies, marguerite, speedwell, marigold, wild hyacinths, forget-me-not, daffodil, columbine, white lily, pink lily, white campion, dames violet, white swallow-wort, spotted arum, tuberous comfrey, digitalis, doricum, bellflower, aristolochia clematis, pansies, blue periwinkle, white periwinkle, eastern hyacinth, milk-wort, Pulicaria, silene, moss-rose, mint, roses, strawberry, wallflowers, purple violet, yellow violet, white violet, field gladiolus, poorman's weatherglass, jasmine, red carnation, white carnation, blue carnation, etc.

Drowning in the flowers, lies an entire bestiary.

BESTIARY

After a moment, we notice the same beasts from one tapestry to the next, and we understand that they have the same precise roles in specific scenes. Because the beasts are not just beasts: they appear as figurations, representing other things corresponding to them in a superior plan, as symbols.

For example the fox is a sign of appalling deceit, because it walks only in a zig-zag pattern. The monkey uses its five senses only to plagiarize man in a truly distasteful manner. The parrot is a domesticated bird in fashion for rich women who are bored and who appreciate its feathers as much as his loquacity. The rabbit is an animal of total lust. It reproduces at an astounding speed, copulating everywhere and no matter where. During the 15th century, the word rabbit is not used, but "conin"- from the latin "cunnus" (vagina), that is to say "con" (cunt) in French. There are 35 rabbits in the tapestry. It is highly improbable that they were reproduced in such great numbers by pure coincidence, knowing the lewd character of the animal.

DRESS

In the midst of the animals, we finally recognize, from one tapestry to the next, the same young girl, facing us, larger than the others. She wears a different dress in every piece, but the dress in blue velour is particularly remarkable - even though the blue is faded.

On the dress, a surcoat of gold on red, with large scooping openings at the sleeves - a so-called "window to hell", because the hips are left visible; the fabric is precious, lined with ermine, decorated with pomegranate motifs, accented with orfres, pearls and precious stones, with things that hang here and there.

The collar is large: distinguished by its small flower-shaped pendants, resembling the ones we see on the headdress.

Furthermore the hairstyle is a bit strange: the hair is enclosed in a hairnet and the headdress that borders the face is sown with small applications of gold plating which fall on each side in two parts that meet at the top of the head by a high wick-like crest, a fantasy derived perhaps from the motifs of antiquity, but also a distinctive trait of the painter - once again the famous Jean d'Ypres, "Master of Anne de Bretagne", also called "Master of the Unicorn Hunt", or "Master of the Apocalypse Rose of the Sainte Chapelle".

THE UNICORN

Middle Age thought is analogical: it establishes a link between something that is apparent and something that is hidden. What is apparent, is that the girl is young. What is hidden, we don't know it right away.

In fact, all this rests upon the unicorn. Unicorns truly exist during the Middle Ages – Marco Polo saw one on the Island of Sumatra – and people relay contradictory and unsettling things about them: that they are composite animals, unusual, ferocious and sometimes formidable, quick in a race, they are capable of prodigious leaps and cannot be trapped easily. Mostly they say that their only horn possesses extraordinary virtues, like giving back fertility and sexual vigor to those who have lost it, or curing poison.

To attract them, a virgin is posted in a clearing. The unicorn crosses the forest, guided by the scent of the young girl. The hunters wait in ambush, and jump on the beast to capture it. It is a good way to know if a girl is a virgin. Because the unicorn is no joke, it gores the young girls who have lied. On the first tapestry - an allegory of touch - the unicorn does not gore the young girl. This is how we know she is a virgin.

Therefore everything would be fine if the rabbit didn't look so lewd.

THE LION

The lion and the unicorn make a fine pair in the tapestry, at first because they are two eloquent elements: the lion is certainly there to evoke the city of Lyon, where the Le Viste family originates. And the unicorn is there to represent "la vitesse" (speed): we pronounce "le vite" (the fast) for "Le Viste".

Two noble animals therefore perfectly fitting within the heraldic language: the lion as a sign of force and power, the unicorn as a symbol of speed, chastity and purity.

Everything is muddled when the parrot enters the scene. Heraldic science overlapping courtly love: the bird which eats from the hand of a lady is effectively the image of the lover, in the literature of the time – a submissive lover, servile, who suffers everything for his lady, "contented by her most tenuous and least substantial favours." Then how can we believe in the virginity of the young girl when the bird appears, since in courtly love, even if it indefinitely suspends the sexual encounter, one still loves an already married woman?

And what about the chaste instinct of the unicorn? Unless the horn has other virtues than those already described.

Or the couple Lion-Unicorn is straight out of Lewis Carroll:

"What's this?" said (the lion), blinking lazily at Alice and speaking in a deep hollow tone that sounded like the tolling of a great bell.

"Ah, what is it, now?" the Unicorn cried eagerly. "You'll never guess! I couldn't."

The Lion looked at Alice wearily. "Are you animal - vegetable - or mineral? he said, yawning at every other word.

"It's a fabulous monster!" the Unicorn cried out, before Alice could reply.

"Then hand round the plum-cake, Monster," the Lion said, lying down and putting his chin on his paws.

Because it is like that in Lewis Carroll: there are lions and unicorns that eat cakes and young virgins that are fabulous monsters.

SMELL

Lewis Carroll must have seen the tapestry. He perhaps sat in the same spot as me, or close to it; was there a bench in front of the wall hanging in 1882? I don't know. Anyhow, there was no air conditioning, but the same suspended garden, a paradise of virgin girls, of flowers and animals. Only fabulous monsters in truth, drowning in a long intertwinement of roses.

The monsters are only things in the end, things that exist or don't. Anyway, the desire lies in the thought. It is Heidegger who said that. It's not bad. And if it's true, why is our thinking baffled by virginity? Who cares? Or virginity is all in the mind. And the mind can very well be in the ass, the cunt or anywhere.

It is empty space between things that preserves their "purity". The things are not of this world, each one of them is a world. Between them, inter-worlds, barriers impenetrable to all.

The fact that the things – the virgins, the beasts, the asses, the cunts, the fabulous monsters and whatever else – are not in the world is so foreign to our experience, so unexpected, that this surprise we distance from ourselves as archaic and magic. Archaic and magic like the end of the film *Apocalypse Now*.

It is funny, terrible, and stupid at the same time. The monkey doesn't plagiarize men any more than the men plagiarize themselves. And the monkey doesn't care about virginity, he smells. The lion and the unicorn eat the cake, the monkey smells, and the young girl is only a virgin when seen from the front.

HEARING

At least once, we should flip the image, to see the reverse of the virgin. To see the reverse of the Christian world. For medieval culture, the reverse is the devil, one depicts what one believes, not what one sees: the truth doesn't relate to the physical but the metaphysical. For example: physically, a virgin cannot become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, but metaphysically, she can. We just need to move a bit to the side of meta for the miracle to happen. For example, we could look at a meta-virgin from behind, surrounded by meta-animals in a silent scene that only music can pierce. And wait for the miracle. Only, what we understand after a moment is that the tapestry doesn't have a back: the back is readable exactly like the front. The miracle can therefore come right-side up as well as inside-out.

Suffice to say that we must remain alert.

SIGHT

The problem is that I can't go to the Cluny Museum every day; but I preciously preserve the postcards in my bag.

I bought my favorite animals - the fox, from the hearing tapestry, with his paw in the air. And one of the thirty-five rabbits, from the allegory of sight, which looks at the spectator straight in the eye, in all its lewdness.

By the way, there is something funny in this panel: the young girl holds a mirror in her hand; yet, medieval painters often represented the sinner in her bedroom, with a mirror in hand. Like in the *Tapestry of the Apocalypse*.

Here, the girl doesn't look at herself: she is sitting, a small furry dog to her left, and she holds the mirror to the unicorn. As if to say that unicorns are whores. Or that whores are unicorns.

I like it: the unicorns, the furry dogs, the whores and the fabulous monsters. Not to mention the thirty-five lewd rabbits. Not really metaphysical but an excellent political agenda.