

TRANSLATING THE CABINET OF CURIOSITIES IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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336 Reading the book of creatures, or book of nature, in the age of early modern empiricism involved new methods that brought a new and enriched understanding of translation. Even as it was enjoying a golden age of literary translation, seventeenth-century England experienced a perceptible shift in attention from texts to things, introducing a new domain of translation at the centre of which was the cabinet of curiosities, a site of translation in every major sense of the word. To *translate* might mean to bear or convey a thing from one place to another, to change the form or appearance of a thing, or to turn from one language to another (*OED* II.7, III.15a, I.1). All three senses of the term were at play in the acquisition and exchange of rare and curious objects, both natural and artificial, in these sixteenth- and seventeenth-century precursors of the modern museum. As in the textual domain, representing or translating the world of objects resulted in what Randall McLeod, writing as Random Clod/Cloud, calls “transmission” (246). McLeod’s portmanteau represents the idea that texts and, in this case, objects are transformed when they are transmitted. Collectors acquired objects from points around the globe and transmitted them via a pan-European network of exchange. Many of these objects were of interest precisely because they bore the marks of some sort of material transformation, such as, for example, a nautilus shell turned into an ornate vessel. The cabinet of curiosities itself was an attempt to render into a complex visual language a representation of a rapidly expanding and changing world of experience, deeply entwined with efforts to reform or devise new linguistic systems to mediate adequately this new world of objects.

The most obvious application of translation to the cabinet of curiosities in the first sense is provided by the *OED*, the transitive verb meaning “[t]o convey or move (a person or thing) from one place to another; to transfer or transport” (*OED* II.7a). By its very definition, a collection is a site for objects that have been removed from

one location to another, particularly and conspicuously so in the case of these collections. John Tradescant the Elder called his collection “The Ark,” evoking the idea of bringing into one container a representative and ideally, though not realistically, complete set of objects from all over the world. Objects in these cabinets came from the Americas to the west, the “indies” to the east, and Africa to the south, and from the more immediate environs of continental Europe and England itself. They were transported by travellers, merchants, sea captains, and other agents, and also by citizens of the collector’s own community. They were transferred not only in the initial act of collecting, but also (sometimes) afterward, between collectors and from donors to collectors. In all such cases, the removal was not just from one place to another, but from one state or condition to another. As the following discussion demonstrates, there are two senses in which these objects, in being transported, were also transformed.

The second definition of *translate* is “To turn from one language into another; ‘to change into another language retaining the sense’ (Johnson); to render; also, to express in other words, to paraphrase” (*OED* II.2). This usage is the most common today, and the baseline for any article published in a collection dedicated to translation studies. Language was an implicit factor in the collecting of curiosities insofar as these collections served a representative function with respect to the world of natural and anthropological objects. In the earliest days of these collections, their metaphoric association with language was fundamental to how the collections were understood. In calling his collection “The Ark,” Tradescant was signalling that it was to be understood as an epitome, a collection of signs pointing to the wide world of objects beyond its walls. English traveller and diarist Peter Mundy clearly recognized this function when he said of Tradescant’s collection, “I am almost perswaded a Man might in one daye behold [...] collected into one place more Curiosities then he should see if hee spent all his life in Travell” (2-3). This was an expression of the microcosm conceit, famous in the poetry and thought of John Donne and Thomas Browne, for whom the human body was a condensed representation of the larger world. For both Donne and Browne, the body—and for Tradescant, the collection—was a translation of the essence of the larger, wider world into more readily accessible and legible terms. The pioneering theorist of early modern collections, Krzysztof Pomian, thus speaks of these objects as *semiophores* (30). In being removed from their native environment and regarded as curiosities, the objects were taken out of circulation and put on display, thus being separated from their utility function and taking on a different significance as signs pointing beyond themselves and their erstwhile uses to some other level of meaning and significance. The bauble of King Henry VIII’s fool, seen by Swiss traveller Thomas Platter in Sir Walter Cope’s collection in 1599, was no longer used for whatever it is that baubles were used for. This object was collected and put on display for some reason other than its use value: seemingly for its association with a history-changing monarch of the now remote and romanticized past, as a connection to greatness by synecdoche perhaps, or possibly as a means of

reifying the achievement of the Tudor monarchy manifest in the present.

For many collectors, though, the linguistic function of the collection of curiosities was much more literal. Collecting was part of the larger project of empirical investigation that Francis Bacon codified in his great instauration of knowledge. Bacon recommended the building of cabinets of curiosities in this turn to things themselves (*res ipsae*), articulated by the patient cataloguing and recording of natural phenomena and their properties as outlined in *New Organon* (“To the Reader,” sig. [2bv]). This tabulation of data looked beyond semantic unities to locate and aggregate the bits and bites of the material world, relying not on a body of knowledge conveyed in the words of received authorities, chiefly Aristotle, but on a reading of the object-world itself (24, xii-xiii; see Jardine and Silverthorne xii-xiii). Collectors were informed not only by the Baconian method, but also by a new valuing of pure referentiality. In this vein, Robert Plot praised Elias Ashmole’s collection for being comprised not of representational forms such as prints or models but of “the *real things* themselves” (277, sig. Mm3). In this empirical turn, each object, in its first consideration, was understood not by its place in the grand scheme of things and its relation to the whole, but rather as a unique and isolated thing defined by its particular combination of attributes. “The whole secret,” says Bacon, “is never to let the mind’s eye stray from things themselves, and to take in images exactly as they are” (24). For Bacon, the goal was to amass a collection of particulars derived from observation and arranged into “well-organized [...] tables of discovery of things relevant to the subject of the investigation” (80, 82).

Baconian empiricism influenced early modern thinking right down to the level of language. In the late seventeenth-century context of the Royal Society, this empirical turn from word to object went hand in hand with a reconsideration of the problem of representation through language and an attempt to make language more objective in an almost literal sense. Proponents such as Thomas Sprat (1667), John Wilkins (1668), and others sought a reformation of language, and in some cases creation of a new, literalistic signifying system that would correspond in a one-to-one relationship to the world of objects.¹ Their goal was a purely referential language that would communicate accurately and precisely the thing itself, a project that Jonathan Swift would push *ad absurdum* in the figure of the Laputians, who carry sacks of objects on their backs to communicate directly what they want to say. The accumulation of material things demanded new means of representing and managing a flood of information from this wide new world of reference and a new conceptual structure for making sense of new categories of being. With new objects came new challenges in communication, necessitating a kind of translation by paraphrase. According to Paula Findlen, the catalogue was an early modern invention arising from the need to manage this new interest in material objects. Unlike an inventory, which aims simply to list things, a catalogue both quantifies and interprets reality by “attaching analytical meaning to objects” (36). Catalogues of curiosities thus became a kind of lexicon for talking about this expanding world of reference and for generating new modes of

making meaning.

John Wilkins makes explicit the challenges of translating this world of objects into a different representational system. Commissioned by fellow members of the Royal Society, Wilkins's *An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language* (1668) arose from dissatisfaction with languages: their ambiguity, redundancy, and other deficiencies (13-14, sigs. [C4-C4v]).² This new, philosophical language could become a lingua franca to facilitate commerce, knowledge of the natural world, and better communication on contentious issues in religion leading toward better understanding. It would feature a "*Real universal Character*," that is, a system of signs "that should not signifie *words*, but *things* and *notions*" and that "should express their *natures*" (13, sig. [C4v], cf. 12, sig. [D3]). This system would therefore be drawn-up according to "the Natural Notion of things," and Wilkins's first step in this direction was to derive "Tables of *Substance*, or the species of *Natural Bodies*, reduced under their several Heads" and then "Tables of *Accidents*": in other words, a theoretical application of Bacon's method of tabulating the natural world. The next step in Wilkins's program was to "attempt the reduction of al [*sic*] other Words in the Dictionary to these Tables, and consequently to supply their defects" (sig. [2bv]). This tabulation of genus, species, and differentia would form the basis from which to derive names. Wilkins thus proposes a grammar derived from taxonomy that would enable a systematic representation of the world of objects and ideas. In his dedication to "William Lord Viscount Brouncker," president of the Royal Society, together with the rest of the governing council and members of the society, Wilkins ties this linguistic project to the Society's "repository" or collection of curiosities:

339

Particularly in those Tables that concern the species of *Natural bodies*; which, if they were (so far as they are yet known and discovered) distinctly reduced and described, This would very much promote and facilitate the knowledge of Nature, which is one great end of your Institution. And besides, the ranging of these things into such an order as the Society shall approve, would afford a very good method for your *Repository*, both for the *disposal* of what you have already, and the *supplying* of what you want, towards the compleating of that Collection. (sig. [a1v])

Wilkins imagines that his method toward a philosophical language could be an aid for structuring and arranging a microcosm of objects themselves. Pearce and Arnold note that Grew did indeed use Wilkins's taxonomy to inform the structure of his catalogue of the Society's repository, if not the arrangement of the collection itself (95). Implicitly, though, benefit would move in the other directions as well: an expanded world of things would provide a dataset for more tables, more taxonomy, and more applications of method toward this philosophical language. Wilkins goes on to remark that "[i]t is no easie undertaking to Enumerate all such matters as are to be provided for in such a design," and that the "business of *Defining*" is also very difficult, given all the "kinde of *Things*, *Notions*, and *Words*" that need to be accommodated (sigs [a1v]-[a2r]). Like the repository, this philosophical language was designed to be extensible and to grow in its capacity to represent the whole world of

things, and these two projects would (in Wilkins's mind) grow in tandem to enable translation of the natural world into a form tractable to human investigation and discourse.

Grew's preface to his catalogue of the Royal Society's collection, *Musaeum Regalis* (1681), further theorizes the process of translating the material world into a written representation of it. In his mind, this catalogue was a natural history. Natural histories of this period, such as those of collectors Ole Worm or Ulisse Aldrovandi, drew significantly from cabinets of curiosities and were a further step in the translation of the natural world. The first step in this sort of translation, Grew observes, is the imposition of some sort of order. The collections themselves, though at least partially scientific in their use and motivation, were not entirely scientific in their arranging of objects in display. There are any number of implicit principles of organization in these collections, and the catalogue is the place to make a scientific order explicit, as Grew explains:

340

As to [the question of order], I like not the reason which Aldrovandus gives for his beginning the History of Quadrupeds with the Horse; Quòd praecipuam nobis utilitatem praebeat. Being better placed according to the degrees of their Approximation, to Humane Shape, and one to another: and so other Things, according to their Nature. Much less should I choose, with Gesner, to go by the Alphabet. The very Scale of the Creatures, is a matter of high speculation. (sig. [E4])

Grew faults the illustrious Conrad Gesner for his indifference in the ordering of creatures in his *Historia Animalium* (1551-87) and therefore of sidestepping one of the most important intellectual questions posed by such collections: what exactly are the bases of the relationships between creatures? This matter of "high speculation" was the inherited model of natural order, which was now open to reconsideration, prompting new models for the order of things. In his *Quadrupedum omnium bisulcorum historia* (1621), the famous Roman Jesuit and collector Ulisse Aldrovandi gives primary place to the horse, owing to its supreme utility to man. Grew is no less anthropocentric in his proposed ordering principle, averring that creatures need to be classified and categorized according to their similarity to other creatures, and ultimately their degree of similarity to humankind.

Order implies categories and also vocabulary to articulate these categories. Another foundational consideration in translating the material world, then, is nomenclature. Pearce and Arnold note that Grew's "rational organization" of his catalogue was particularly influenced by Wilkins's idea of naming by means of a short definition that is indicative of the nature of the thing in some distinguishing way (95). Grew says he uses such names as are already established and available and supplies his own only in cases where they are lacking; he notes that many species lack names in English. He further points out, though, that many of the names he has found are deficient because they incorporate makers of identity that are not conveniently communicative, most commonly colour or place of origin (e.g. *Concha Persica*), rather than an object's shape, which is more pertinent in defining an object. Although he recognizes

that all naming is arbitrary to a degree, Grew insists that we should aim for names that are indicative:

[T]here is no Natural Reason, why [an object] should be called by one, rather than another [name]. So that the Names of Things should be always taken from something more observably declarative of their Form, or Nature. The doing of which, would much facilitate and Improve the Knowledge of them many ways. For so, *every Name were a short Definition*. Where as if Words are confus'd, little else can be distinctly learn'd. Yet I took it not to be my part, actually to reform this matter; unless I had been writing an Universal History of Nature. (sig. [E4]; emphasis added)

Following Wilkins's idea of a philosophical language apt for clear communication of the world of objects, Grew suggests that a name should be a short definition that reflects the nature of the thing. Grew then spends a great deal of energy emphasizing the importance of full description, because definition and naming rely on good description, as Wilkins notes:

It were likewise desirable to a perfect definition of each species, that the *immediate form* which gives the particular essence to every thing might be expressed; but this form being a thing which men do not know, it cannot be expected that it should be described. And therefore in the stead of it, there is reason why men should be content with such a description by *properties* and *circumstances*, as may be sufficient to determine the primary sense of the thing defined. (Wilkins 289, sig. Pp)

341

Grew first aims to “rectify the mistakes” of other authorities, but not to repeat the good work that others have done and instead simply points to such work. But where description is scant or wanting, he aims to supply an account of an object's shape, colour, and measurements, the last of which was a significant lacuna in the works of his predecessors. These will be full descriptions: “If any object against their length: perhaps they have not so well considered the necessity hereof, for the cleer and evident distinction of the several Kinds and Species, in so great a variety of Things known in the World” (“Preface,” sig. [A4]). Such thoroughness is important to the clear representation of the natural world. Echoing Wilkins's complaint against the deficiencies of current languages, Grew adds that it is desirable and useful to have “such an Inventory of Nature, wherein, as on the one hand, nothing should be Wanting; so nothing Repeated or Confounded, on the other. For which, there is no way without a cleer and full Description of Things” (“Preface,” sig. [A4v]). This inventory of nature was facilitated by the cabinet of curiosities.

Given the Baconian underpinnings of the culture that supported these collections, the figurative extension of the definition of *translation* as “To interpret, explain; to expound the significance of (conduct, gestures, etc.); also, to express (one thing) in terms of another” (*OED* II.2), should have limited application in this context, but in practice, that was not always the case. While a scientific method such as Wilkins outlines ought to lead to a precise identification of things, the same desire for a name that is in some ways indicative of the thing often went astray, as when naming by means of analogy. A name formulated by similitude of form in an attempt to convey

the nature of the thing sometimes led to confusion rather than clarity. Collections routinely misrepresented specimens owing to their recourse to misleading analogies: the “sea mouse” or the “flying rhinoceros” in Thomas Platter’s diary account of Sir Walter Cope’s collection, names that were no doubt supplied, though probably not coined, by the collector (172-73); or the “tobaccopipe-fish” or “coney-fish” in the Royal Society’s repository (106, 111). Such naming by analogy was common in the period, a practice adopted by collectors and naturalists alike. Famous representations of the “Monk-fish” in works by such luminaries as Pierre Belon (1553), Conrad Gesner (1558), and Ambroise Paré (1573, sig. XXiii) illustrate just how misleading and contrary to Wilkins’s program of representation such naming could be (Figure 1).

342

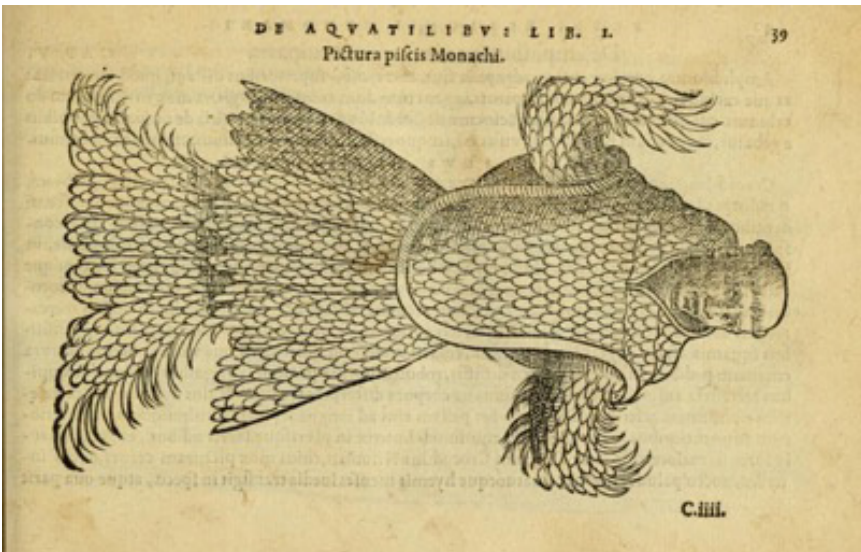


Figure 1. Belon, *De Aquatilibus*, 1553, 39; sig. Ciiii.

Ernst Mayr Library, University of Harvard. Biodiversity Heritage Library.

The *OED*'s fourth definition takes us very close to Randall McLeod's idea of "transmission": "To change in form, appearance, or substance; to transmute; to transform" (*OED* III.4). The *OED*'s reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* act III, scene i, line 113 as an illustrative instance of this usage is pertinent in a number of ways. When Quince says to Bottom, "Thou art translated," he means most obviously that Bottom's physical form has changed, but he has, in a sense, been physically transported as well, not just from one place to another (from the city to country), but from one sphere of being to another, from the world of man to the world of fairy. While he is transformed by Puck in an instant, he is further transformed in and by his new place; he becomes a new creature in his new environment. His nature is

changed. In the midst of his new context, he speaks a new language, and afterward, he seeks a new register to express his experience at the royal wedding. Rapt in wonder at his new world of experience, he struggles to find a way to express it.

Collected objects were subject to both physical and ontological change. In the translation from their original space to the space of the cabinet, objects often underwent a literal, physical translation. Plants were uprooted and pressed between pages; fish were plucked from the sea and, after they died, were dried by their collectors in an attempt at preservation. Transformation of varying degrees was in fact a cause of curiosity. Coral, a poplar specimen of the sea, became ossified after being pulled from its native environs and put on display, often changing colour in the process; in many cases, it was further transformed into an object of *beaux-arts* with the addition of skilled silversmithing. Nautilus shells commonly underwent similar transformations, becoming gilded ewers. In an autograph manuscript catalogue (dated 1676) of his humble but fascinating collection of curiosities, John Bargrave, a canon of the Canterbury Cathedral, describes collecting a chameleon acquired in Algiers in 1662 which, on its journey home, underwent a significant transformation: it died, so that what remains in his collection is reported as Item 43: “the skin, head, and legs of a chameleon, perfumed and stuffed” (129). He tells us later in this entry that it was the ship’s surgeon who was tasked with this transformation-as-preservation. But the chameleon also underwent another transformation, a change in nature as a semio-phore. Bargrave continues his account by noting, “The creature was given me alive in Africa.” What was once a creature living its life in its native habitat has a new and perpetual existence as a gift once given in an exotic land on or near the occasion of an historic cause. This was but one such gift acquired on this voyage to rescue English slaves from Algiers with £10,000 in backing from King Charles II, for which Bargrave, apparently, was chief negotiator (Bann 127-28). One of the freed captives, a London merchant named Timothy Couley, gave Bargrave a Cree necklace, belt, and set of anklets that the merchant had acquired in Canada, probably somewhere along Hudson Bay, as a gift of gratitude. Couley also gave Bargrave a few links of the chains that had bound him in captivity, which Bargrave intended to hang over his own grave *in memoriam*. In this narrative context, the dead chameleon acquires further association with death as a *memento mori*, further facilitated, but simultaneously complicated, by its immediate contextual association within Bargrave’s manuscript catalogue. The next item, item 44, is “the [mummified] finger of a Frenchman” that Bargrave acquired at a Franciscan monastery in Toulouse in which “all the dead men and women’s corps that are buried there turn not into putrefaction and corruption, and so into earth, as in all other places; but, on the contrary, the bodies that are buried there in the space of 2 years are found in the posture that they were laid into the grave, dried into a kind of momy” (130). A chameleon is no longer just a chameleon.

Thus, our second key term, “transformission,” is implied in the first: these same objects, as they were being translated from one space to another, were also significantly transformed. Given that scholars such as Matthew Kirschenbaum and Alan

Galey have applied the term to communication technology, and McLeod himself has used it to critique scholarly editorial practices, perhaps it is apt to consider the cabinet of curiosities as an act of editing the material world, which is itself a special kind of translation (Galey 56; Kirschenbaum 215-17). Perhaps we could even say that the cabinet of curiosities is an edition of sorts, a representation of a primary source: the entire material world. In such an editing space, knowledge is not simply received and conveyed, but produced. The primary object is read, interpreted, and transmitted into a new signifying system. In the process, the object is often literally transformed, but it also always undergoes a change as a signifying sign. Even the first act of collecting is itself a kind of editing: a selection, re-presentation, and reframing of an original, primary source, curated in such a manner as to enable and enrich, and skew, the reading of that source. At this point we must admit that our examination of the transformission of collected objects that follows is not, strictly speaking, a reading of the thing itself, the actual cabinet of curiosities: most of these objects, in fact, do not survive, although in the case of the Tradescant and Bargrave collections, many do. Rather, we must necessarily deal with a second level of transformission in the verbal, inscribed representation of these translated objects in historical documents.

344

In its literal transmission, its transportation from Africa to England, Bargrave's chameleon also underwent another kind of transformation, not just from life to death, but in its very nature as a creature of the world, as understood by its beholders. On the journey home, Bargrave had ample opportunity to observe that this creature subsisted "not by the air, as the report goeth, but by flies, chiefly" (Robertson 129). In *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), Thomas Browne had already exposed as false the common belief that a chameleon "liveth only upon ayre, and is sustained by no other aliment" (242, 856), building on the work of many others who had done the same; and in 1661 the Royal Society was presented with a live chameleon for its collection, receiving a report a few weeks later that contained a detailed anatomical description.³ The truth of the chameleon had been demonstrated and well documented, but Bargrave had to prove this for himself through his own observation. He was taught by his hosts how to feed it, and in doing so he observed and recorded in detail the mechanics of its ingestion; and as they sailed further to sea, and the flies disappeared, he learned definitively that indeed, the chameleon cannot live on air alone. This was no longer the same creature of received tradition. It had shifted space in the medieval bestiary. Bargrave records, in an empirical mode, a number of other observations about the nature of his specimen and concludes by confirming one other characteristic that, conversely, had been held in doubt: that the chameleon does indeed change its colours in response to external stimuli. But it is *not* true, Bargrave adds, that this transformative ability is owing to "a pellucid body, like cristal" that simply transmits the colour of its context (129). The chameleon was no longer the fabulous creature that it once was.

In the remainder of this article, I want to consider the translation and transformission of a rather peculiar object in collections of curiosities, the Unicorn horn:

specifically, how it was born away from its original context and conveyed to a place of display, how it changed in physical form and meaning, and how it was translated into language and interpreted. When Martin Frobisher's men in 1577 discovered a narwhal, with horn intact, on the west coast of Baffin Island, they sought to understand it by placing it in the only meaning-making framework they knew:

On this West shoare we found a dead fishe floating, whiche had in his nose a horne streight & torquet, of lengthe two yardes lacking two ynches, being broken in the top, where we might perceiue it hollowe, into which some of our Saylers putting Spiders, they presently dyed. I sawe not the tryall hereof, but it was reported vnto me of a trueth: by the vertue whereof, we supposed it to be the sea Unicorne. (Settle 1577, sig. [Bviii])

The account is brief and to the point. Frobisher's men had one point of reference for making sense of the thing they saw before them, the unicorn horn of lore, so they applied a simple test to see whether it was indeed the same. In the decades to follow, many horns were traded as simply unicorn horns. In the early days of collecting, with its transmission from the seashore where it originally landed into collections and apothecary shops, the narwhal tusk became dissociated from the sea and gained a new association with the land unicorn. But recontextualized with other objects of single-hornedness, the object *in itself* could be examined empirically in a mode that transformed the object into evidence. It became something different than its medieval predecessor. To the medieval mind, the unicorn horn was not so much an object of curiosity provoking questions about the nature of the world out there, but rather was, literally, treasure, an object of considerable worth because of its rarity; so rare, in fact, that the animal that sourced it had never been seen. The value of this extremely rare object was heightened by its putative medicinal properties, particularly against poisons, leading to a further stage of transformission: a misguided practice of fashioning horn into cups to turn water into antidote, or grinding it into a powder as an additive to drink.⁴

The young Swiss medical student Thomas Platter, travelling in England with his half-brother Felix in 1599, records seeing a few remains of the unicorn, among other notable curiosities. Interestingly, in Walter Cope's collection, Platter saw not a horn, but a "unicorn's tail," but there were horns in the offing elsewhere. At Hampton Court, after viewing the gardens and courtyards, a person he describes as the governor of the palace and a member of the nobility showed him and his brother the royal apartments and "cabinets." In the Queen's library, the brothers were shown a number of old books and manuscripts and several curiosities of the type that would become common in English collections of curiosities: Henry VIII's hunting-cap and his silver gilt post horn, with several silk leashes for his hunting hounds, along with many more bugles, horns, and pipes for the hunt.⁵ Here he also saw "the circular [i.e. spiral] horn of a unicorn, seven of my spans in length, [that] had been filed down to heal the sick, resembl[ing] ivory, although the black veins where it had been turned were still visible. It was hollow inside so that a nerve could run through it" (204-05).

The description, with its reference to an absent nerve, is anatomical in orientation.

The filing of the horn is an allusion both to its medicinal properties of lore and to its continuing pharmaceutical interest to physicians. The confusing reference to it having been “turned,” hinting at human agency, speaks to a curious man’s interest in the interplay of art and nature, such as we see in the ornamentally augmented nautilus shells. At Windsor Castle, Platter saw more curiosities, such as a whole bird of paradise in a chest, and as he reports,

in a lower drawer of said chest lay also a natural unicorn’s horn weighing twenty pounds, and one span taller than I. I could almost compass its circumference with one thumb and forefinger. In the region which seems to have been embedded two spans into the head, it was hollow and contained a nerve. The exterior was very straight and pointed and wonderfully turned. They told us that Henry VIII had received this unicorn from Arabia and had valued it highly. (215)

346 Again, Platter’s representation is anatomical and empirical, and again it contains a suggestion of artifice in nature. He also affirms that this was the unicorn of received tradition, or at least that was what he had been told. The association, again, with Henry VIII and its exotic origin add to its semiophoric appeal. Platter aims at denotation but cannot resist the meaning-making urge.

This same horn was probably one of the “two great unicorns” seen by German traveller Georg Christoph Stirn when he visited Windsor Castle in 1638: “one very smooth and one, nearly four ells long, of a spiral form” (qtd. in Hager 443). Stirn is less empirical in his reading, but he also picks up on an association with Henry VIII when he records his visit to the Tower of London, where he saw “a fine horn of a unicorn of fair length” along with many artefacts related to royalty, particularly Henry VIII: his “old weapons [...], some suits of armour as used for ballets, and one very strange one which a fool is said to have worn” (Hager 449). Four years earlier, English traveller Peter Mundy had also seen a horn at the Tower of London, though it is not clear whether it was one of the horns Stirn had seen,⁶ and he supplied measurements:

Nott long after I went to the Tower of London, where I saw a Unicorns horne, about 1½ yards in length and 2 or 2½ Inches diameter att the bigger end, goeing Taperwise and wreathed, although somewhat smoothe (I think by often handlinge). It was white, resemblinge the substance of an Eliphants Tooth, estimated att 18 or 20000 pounds Sterlinge. This, as all the rest are, conceived to bee rather the horne of some fish then of a beast, because such a beast now a dayes is not to bee found, although discoveries att present are in farr greater perfection then they were then. (3-4)

This last statement is equivocal, evincing both skepticism (in the shifting opinion of the time) and possibility, both born out of conflicting experience where, up to that moment, material evidence had been lacking. However, we get a sense that this is changing: new discoveries are increasing, and continuing accumulation of objects for observation forestalls definitive judgement.

New empirical readings of this translated object were further informed, and complicated, by their new context in collections together with other spatially and notionally adjacent items. The same Georg Stirn saw in the Tradescant collection

“two cups of ‘rinoceode’” and “a cup of an East Indian alcedo [a bird] which is a kind of unicorn” (450). Tradescant the Younger, in his own catalogue of 1656, lists three cups (or maybe one) and in a rather different configuration, presenting them in that typically Renaissance, and in this case, confusing, manner of association using ram’s-horn brackets:

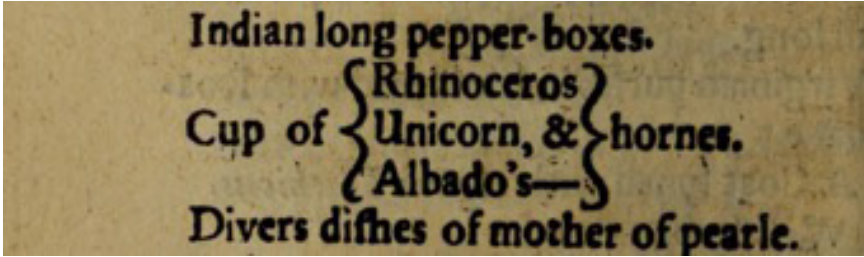


Figure 2. *Musaeum Tradescantianum*, p. 86, sig. [E2v].
Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto Library.

This is a particularly rich moment of bibliographic transformation. Is this one cup (as in “a cup”) or more, possibly three cups, with “cup” indicating a category of object, in the way “plate” was used at this time? And then, are these three kinds of horn, with a comma missing after rhinoceros, but implied by the list-form? Elsewhere, Tradescant’s catalogue lists parts of a rhinoceros with no reference at all to a “unicorn.” It may, therefore, be that there is one cup of three substances, a possibility that Tradescant’s ambiguous braces allow; or there might be three cups, as Stirn indicates, but of three substances, as Tradescant also seems to allow; or possibly three cups of two substances, by Stirn’s count. Although Tradescant distinguishes the rhinoceros from the unicorn, Stirn seems to want to avoid the discrete category of unicorn proper, while simultaneously using the term as a point of similitude for identifying the alcedo, by which he apparently means Tradescant’s Albado. Tradescant, though, seems happy to let ambiguity reign here, whereas earlier in his catalogue he distinctly and precisely lists a “unicornu marinum” when referring to the whale (9, sig. [B5]).

In the mid-seventeenth century, this sort of association through similitude and juxtaposition led to further dissociation and distinction and a clearer understanding of the object previously received as the unicorn horn. That singular unicorn becomes but one of many possible unicorns. These distinctions were enabled, in part, by a fuller transmission of the horn, plus added context, as in Ole Worm’s museum. Thomas Hearne’s manuscript “An Exact and particular Account of the rarities in the Anatomy School” at Oxford lists “Horns *which grow out of the snout* of a fish call’d the Unicorn fish” (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawl C865a, f. 11). But even as late as 1708, the date of Hearne’s inventory, the juxtaposition of objects creates complications. This sea unicorn is listed right after “A Mermaid’s Hand,” reasserting a connection to a fabulous past. The list later mentions an unspecified “Unicorn’s horn,” with no such qualification. A seemingly scientific distinction between the animal of lore and

the animal of empirical observation is lost in a complicated set of associations, a confused grammar in an ambiguous translation.

348

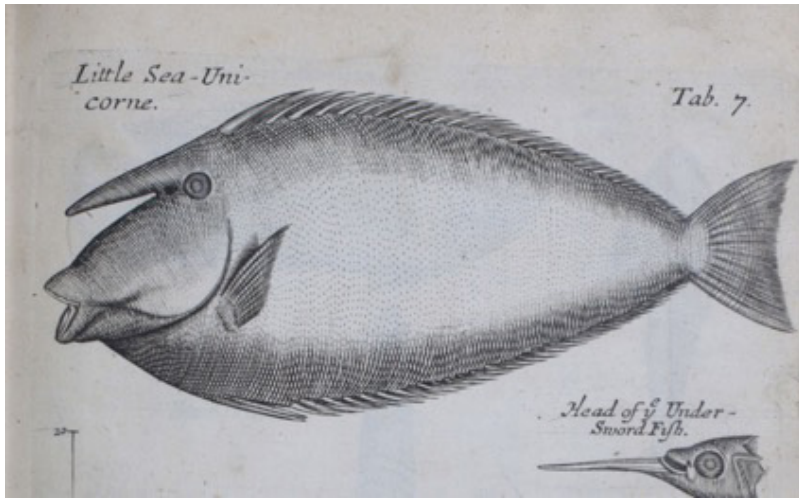


Figure 3. *Little Sea-Unicorne*, Grew, tab. 7.
University of Saskatchewan Special Collections.

As Wilkins insists, a clear grammar requires a clear distinction and articulation of terms and categories. In his catalogue of the Royal Society's repository in 1681, Nehemiah Grew lists a number of unicorns, or *monocori*: "the little SEA-UNICORNE. or Monoceros minor," which Grew describes in detail and presents in an engraved illustration (105, sig. [O4v]), see Figure 3); and an item identified as "The horn of the unicorn bird, in Brasile called Anhima" known today as the Horned Screamer (65, sig. K). It is "Horned on his Forehead (with some likeness) as the Unicorne is pictur'd." He describes the horn, noting that since it is too blunt and small to be of much help as defence, it must have some other use. Therefore, his mind resorts to its former association with the traditional unicorn: "Being taken in any convenient Liquor, saith Piso, [...] it is often successful in Malignant Fevers, and against Poyson, by provoking sweat" (66, sig. [Kv]). These are precisely the same effects associated with the land unicorn, and also with the sea-unicorn Grew describes later in the catalogue. Following Worm, Grew explicitly identifies the horn of the sea unicorn in the Royal Society collection as that of the narwhal and describes the horn briefly but quite precisely. He quibbles with Worm on one point of description—his calling it a "tooth" rather than a "horn"—giving his reasons why it should be understood as the latter, and Worm's reasons for preferring the former (83, sig. M2). He also faults Olaus Magnus's crude depiction in his *De Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (1555) as "fictitious" (743, sig. RRRii). Most of Grew's attention, however, is dedicated to the horn's medicinal properties. He describes two experiments concerning its curative effect



Figure 4. Olaus Magnus, *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* 1555, p. 743, sig. RRRii. Nasjonalbiblioteket, Norway. Project Runeberg.

that Worm cited—expressing some doubt regarding the design and execution of these experiments, but not doubting their intent—and he refers to a number of authorities to give supporting rationale, using language similar to that associated with the horn of the unicorn bird: “Whatever it may perform against poisons it has been very successfully used by Physitians in Malignant Fevers (according to Bartholine) by causing very great Sweats stimulated by the horn” (84, sig. [M2v]). Although both horns were identified as distinct from the land unicorn, the properties attributed to them are very much the same.

In concluding this consideration of the “transmissions” of the unicorn horn in the cabinet of curiosities, we seem to have come full circle, but in the process, with its many instances and transmissions, the unicorn horn has indeed transformed. An entry in the journal book of the Royal Society, dated 24 July 1661, describes a meeting of this illustrious group of learned men in the early days of the society, at which “A Circle was made with powder of Vnicornes horne, & a Spyder sett in the middle of it: but immediately it ran out, severall times repeated the Spyder once made some stay vppon the powder” (Royal Society MS JBO/1, f. 26).⁷ Taken in isolation, this event is misleading. This group of men knew very well that the “unicorn” was a genus, not a species, and they knew very well the lore of the namesake beast. But they also did not, and as a founding principle, *could not*, rest on authority. With the proliferation of unicorns and other unanticipated materials from a rapidly widening world represented in so many collections of curiosities, they had to know; they had to put it to trial. Almost a hundred years after Frobisher tested the horn of the unicorn fish on the shores of Baffin Island, after many cultural encounters with the collected object, the narwhal horn signified differently. The horn had been examined, considered, paraphrased, and translated into a new empirical signifying system.

NOTES

1. In his *History of the Royal-Society* (1667), Thomas Sprat notes, among other elements of achievement in the Royal Society's founding principles and values, a close attention to reform of discourse as being necessary to the empirical turn of their philosophical approach, resisting "redundance of *speech*" and the "superfluity of talking" (111, sig. [O4]). Therefore, the Society sought "to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many *things*, almost in an equal number of *words*. They have exacted [...] a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can: and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that of Wits, or Scholars" (113, sig. P). Sprat himself would go so far as to have ornamental and figurative language banished from civil society (see also Grindle). See Kusakaw on the influence of Wilkins's *Essay Towards a Real Character* on John Ray and Francis Willughby.
2. Unlike Sprat, though, Wilkins reserves some use of metaphors that tend toward the universal, rather than the particular. On the desideratum of a universal philosophical language in seventeenth-century England, see Fleming; Knowlson; Slaughter; and Stillman.
- 350 3. Robbins (857-58) cites a report of a gift of a live chameleon ("presented to the society from Mr. Clayton by Dr. Henshaw" 9 October 1661) and a report containing a description of a chameleon (presumably the same one) by Jonathan Goddard presented to the Society on 30 October 1661, printed in *Philosophical Transactions*, vol. 12 (1677-78), 930-31.
4. On the contesting of the true vs. the false unicorn in the context of early modern pharmacy, see Duffin.
5. Although this was not a proper collection of curiosities, as exemplified by Cope's cabinet, the objects Platter remarks upon here express the interests of the observer of curiosities: a portrait of the Inuit man, woman, and child captured by Frobisher and transported back to England; and "the whole evangelical scripture, very artfully cut or carved on numerous square plaques of mother of pearl, a very exquisite work" (201).
6. If it were one of the horns later seen by Stirn, it would have to be the spiraled one estimated to be 1.5 yards, which would be somewhat shorter than Stirn's estimation of "nearly four ells" (an ell being about 18 inches).
7. This meeting is also reported in Birch, but dated 24 July (I.35, sig. F2). For a study of unicorn horns in collections of curiosities from a different perspective, see Myriam Marrache-Gouraud's essay "Du nouveau sur la licorne: Le rôle des cabinets de curiosités dans l'avancée des savoirs." I wish to thank Prof. Myriam Marrache-Gouraud for her helpful comments and corrections on an earlier draft of this essay.

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352

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