

Mahan 2023 Interview

Tue, Oct 10, 2023 9:54PM 51:56

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

medieval, fables, animals, middle ages, dissertation, texts, fable, humans, write, work, lion, read, animal, travel, animal studies, deal, ways, english, great, students

SPEAKERS

Will Beattie, Ben Pykare, Dr. Emily Mahan



Will Beattie 00:05

I'm Will Beattie.



Ben Pykare 00:06

And I'm Ben Pykare.



Will Beattie 00:08

And we're two graduate students of the University of Notre Dame's Medieval Institute.



Ben Pykare 00:12

We're here to chat with students and scholars of the medieval world about what they do and how they came to do it.



Will Beattie 00:18

So who have we got today, Ben?



Ben Pykare 00:20

Today we're sitting down with Dr. Emily Mahan, recent graduate of the Medieval Institute here at Notre Dame and current postdoctoral student. We'll be chatting with her about her recent dissertation, "Reading Animals in Medieval Fable," as well as the life of a postdoc, and the the exciting world of critical animal studies.



Will Beattie 00:43

Well, then let's go and meet her in the Middle Ages.



Dr. Emily Mahan 00:47

Well, thanks for having me.



Will Beattie 00:48

Thank you very much for being with us today, Emily. How are you doing?



Dr. Emily Mahan 00:51

I'm doing great. Glad to be here.



Will Beattie 00:54

Good, good. Well, we always like to begin our episodes or our interviews with a question: imagine you're, you know, you're standing in the grocery store. It's a long line at the checkout. You get chatting to the person next to you, and they ask, "so what do you do?" How do you answer?



Dr. Emily Mahan 01:11

I might first start off by saying that I teach because that's something that people are familiar with. If they sort of press me, then I'll say that I teach literature. Then I'll get into Medieval Studies, and kind of narrowed down from there.



Will Beattie 01:24

Okay. And when you bring up Medieval Studies, do you get a whole range of responses?



Dr. Emily Mahan 01:29

Um, usually people are very interested, because so many people have exposure to "medievalism," meaning, you know, very, sort of, mediated popular culture representations of the Middle Ages. Whether those are supposed to be based on real history, or whether that's, sort of, translations of beliefs about the Middle Ages into some kind of fantasy contexts people are familiar with, with that often. So, um, the associations that people have, have to do with the Middle Ages as it appears in popular culture, I think.



Will Beattie 01:59

Right.



Dr. Emily Mahan 02:00

And the Middle Ages is, I think, seen as exotic in some ways. There's, like, kind of, a temporal equivalent to the kind of othering that some contemporary cultures are subject to.



Will Beattie 02:12

Interesting.



Dr. Emily Mahan 02:13

Yeah.



Ben Pykare 02:13

it is funny how, as medievalist when you hear someone say, like, "oh, that's medieval, or that's barbaric, or that's prehistoric," those, those kinds of temporal times when we overlay them on real people living in real places today...



Dr. Emily Mahan 02:29

Right.



Ben Pykare 02:29

It's... yeah, there's like a sting.



Dr. Emily Mahan 02:32

Absolutely, yeah. Yeah, yeah, it's, um, it's it that is a bit hard to sort of hear as a medievalist, of course, because you, your work involves dealing with reality. And it's like a very rich and interesting reality. And it's not a backwards reality. But um, I think the Middle Ages is sort of this stigmatized period, in a way, in the sense that there are all these strange negative misperceptions. And when you think about them critically, they are really strange. Or if you've studied the Middle Ages, you know, you know that they are very divorced from reality. But also the Middle Ages, is this like, romanticized period. So I think, simultaneously, you know, there's the stigmatization, and the romanticization in play with each other.



Will Beattie 03:20

Yeah, yeah, this sort of idyllic, simple past, in a way. I'm curious, then, if you get into those kinds of conversations, where it's clear that the person you're talking to has a very particular idea of the Middle Ages as in some way, simple, or, or even backward, right, this kind of "Dark Ages." Are there any characters or stories or events that you you tend to pull out as a way of demonstrating [that] well, actually, the medieval world was a lot more nuanced and complicated than people might think.



Dr. Emily Mahan 03:52

Right. I mean, I might literally say something to that effect, if I'm just in a very brief conversation with someone to just hopefully give the impression that, you know, whatever the sort of popular culture representations are, aren't necessarily very accurate. But um, I think where... where actually successfully debunking things to some degree comes into play as with with teaching about the Middle Ages. Because you have a more sustained opportunity to actually deal with the Middle Ages and present, you know, genuine material from that time.



Will Beattie 04:25

Right.



Dr. Emily Mahan 04:26

And also get people to sort of take a step back and unpack their own associations, their own baggage that they, kind of, bring to the study of this period.



Will Beattie 04:35

So to do that kind of work properly, then you feel like you need to dedicate time, right? You need to have the time that maybe a course provides as well, for you to really dig in.



Dr. Emily Mahan 04:44

I think so I think... I mean, which is not to say that there aren't, you know, good blog posts and think pieces that successfully address certain misperceptions. I think somebody could, you know, read something like that relatively quickly and be like, "Oh, I didn't know that. I didn't realize that," and have their view changed a little bit. But yeah, I think, um, to, really address fully the kinds of misperceptions that people have developed, you do need more time.



Ben Pykare 05:11

.....

Yeah. So, we have these medievalisms, you know, out in our popular culture, which, you know, kind of awkwardly hilariously, sometimes those are what draw people to Medieval Studies.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 05:23

Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

B Ben Pykare 05:24

Right. I'm curious what your path kind of into this world is. What, when was the first time, the first memory you have about anything medieval? And was it, was it positive? Was it negative? Was it you know, like, fantasy? Or kind of what was your "in" for that?

D Dr. Emily Mahan 05:40

Yeah, I'm trying to think of like, very early, like, you know, childhood impressions of the Middle Ages. And I think mine were probably similar to a lot of people where there are these, sort of, symbols that are representative of material culture at a certain point, and also of social structures, at a certain point, at least supposedly. So you have, you know, princesses in towers and knights on horseback and things like that. And I think my exposure to that sort of thing never particularly compelled me. I don't think I got into Medieval Studies being fascinated by medieval culture through these popular representations. Like, I've never read or watched "Game of Thrones," for example, I know people find that very immersive. I never found, I guess, like fantasy fiction about the medieval time, or that are sort of in the pseudo-medieval settings to be that compelling. I think, real medieval texts are so much weirder. And like more unexpected and more interesting than, than whatever fantasies people have come up with.

B Ben Pykare 06:45

So it was like through. So you came to this field, kind of through literary studies and...

D Dr. Emily Mahan 06:50

Yeah, actually, I think my first, sort of, serious interest in the medieval period started when I was an undergrad, and I saw that there was this Old English course being offered.

B Ben Pykare 06:58

Okay.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 06:59

And I don't actually remember what made me sign up for the course. But I was really fascinated

by, by the language and the literature. I've always really been fascinated by language, both in, kind of, intellectual linguistic ways, and in kind of intuitive, poetic ways as well, both those, sort of, aspects of language. And I think what really interested me about Old English is that it's kind of the same thing that interests me in general, about the Middle Ages, I think. It's that there's this mix of very foreign and novel things and very deeply familiar things.



Will Beattie 07:31

Right.



Dr. Emily Mahan 07:32

And so the foreign things can be like refreshing or can make you see things in a new light. And then the familiar can very deeply resonate with you. There are all these words that we still speak in our everyday lives that...



Ben Pykare 07:46

Yea



Dr. Emily Mahan 07:46

... that date back to that period, in that you can find in you know, ancient poetry, basically. But there are also all these aspects of the language that have changed to make it almost unrecognizable, at first glance. And I think with medieval studies, it can be hard sometimes to sort out which is the foreign and which is the familiar. Meaning, you know, which aspects should we anticipate are profoundly different than whatever we expect from our own period?



Will Beattie 08:16

Right.



Dr. Emily Mahan 08:17

And what needs to be understood on its own terms, versus what is comparable to things that we experienced today, or is a precursor to things that are happening today.



Ben Pykare 08:25

So did you study... was English your major in your undergrad?



Dr. Emily Mahan 08:30

D Dr. Emily Mahan 08:30
I was a linguistics major actually.

B Ben Pykare 08:32
Okay, cool.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 08:32
Because I loved language. I, I took both Old English and a "Beowulf" class where all we did was just work through "Beowulf," and just translate "Beowulf." That was really fun. And I took some other, sort of, medieval literature survey course, which was, which was interesting. I don't remember it very well, I don't think it made, like, a huge impression on me compared to the study of the language, and the study of things in their original form.

B Ben Pykare 08:59
Yeah, yeah. Yeah. So you're really coming at it from that linguistics perspective of charting the evolution...

D Dr. Emily Mahan 09:07
I think that was my inroad connections.


B Ben Pykare 09:09
... and finding some of those connections.


D Dr. Emily Mahan 09:10
Yeah. And someone omce called my dissertation work on philological.


B Ben Pykare 09:14
Oh, that's high praise in my book.


D Dr. Emily Mahan 09:17
I mean, coming from the person it came from, I think it was, and that it was. I was very focused on the nuances of particular words and phrases. The text I deal with are very short. So you do have to kind of unpack.


 Ben Pykare 09:29
Dig deep.

 Dr. Emily Mahan 09:30
Yeah, unpack very small things. Or at least that's what I ended up doing and how I tend to work.

 Will Beattie 09:36
Yes, a lot of deep close reading. Well, Old English studies, I feel, from my experience, when I had a similar experience with you as an undergrad of early exposure to Old English texts. And then there's this moment where you have to decide "okay, is that something I'm going to continue with? Or is it something I'm going to avoid like the plague?" And I really think that there was that moment where you just get exposed to Old English as an English Lit student where you just make that decision. And a lot of my friends and colleagues definitely did not go down the old English route and said, "this isn't for me." But I agree with you, there's something really intriguing about the language, that blending of the familiar and the alien. It's, it's almost like... it's kind of, this is a really bad way of explaining it. But it feels like when you're squinting at a text, and you can make out some of the words or if you're reading it without your glasses on, you can make out the letter forms and the shapes, but there's something that you're just missing. So, yeah, that's an interesting way of looking at the language that kind of resonates with me, I suppose.

 Dr. Emily Mahan 10:35
Yeah, I think I actually came to Medieval Studies a little, a little indirectly, in that I remember, I did an MFA in poetry. And I could take literature courses as electives. And in fact, you had to as part of the program, and I kept gravitating towards these medieval courses. Like, I took this great Chaucer course with Carla Taylor at the University of Michigan. And it was literally just me and her, like, no one else signed up for it. But, you know, thankfully, she was willing to just sit down a couple times a week and have a conversation with me about Chaucer, which of course meant I had to really be on the ball, because, you know, I couldn't, like, skim the reading for that day.

 Ben Pykare 11:14
You are the class.

 Dr. Emily Mahan 11:15
Yeah, but I did that I took on Old Norse briefly. And I just kept being interested by, like, these much older poetic works. And that really seeped into my own work. And I think it was hard for a

lot of my, my, colleagues in the program to be interested in stuff that old basically. But I was repeatedly drawn to it.



Will Beattie 11:35

So in your own teaching now, how do you use medieval texts? Are they the focus of the courses you design? Or are they just one element, or sometimes you tend to shy away from or avoid using medieval texts at all?



Dr. Emily Mahan 11:50

I think that really depends on on the course. I've been teaching.... I've taught twice now at Notre Dame this medieval travels class, which was developed by Amy Mulligan. So I sort of inherited the class in a way. And it's a fantastic class with a great curriculum, but I didn't change much the curriculum from the way she developed it. But I still deeply enjoyed presenting these these, texts to the class. We read sagas, we read pilgrimage accounts and hagiographies, and "The Book of Marjorie Kempe."



Ben Pykare 12:22

Oh, great.



Dr. Emily Mahan 12:22

Yeah. We read a variety of texts that dealt with medieval travel in, in some form. And that was what, sort o, tied the class together: just the, the fact that that was a very big part of the medieval period is, you know, cultural exchange and travel. And I think people have this perception of the Middle Ages as, like, very provincial.



Ben Pykare 12:42

Yes.



Dr. Emily Mahan 12:43

Like people just sat in their little villages or in their castles. And that was it.



Ben Pykare 12:47

Yeah. And if it is, you know, less easy to travel, then like, when you do all the more reason to write about it.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 12:54
Exactly.

B Ben Pykare 12:54
Right? To record, like, "hey, this was a trip of a lifetime," you know.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 12:57
Yeah.

B Ben Pykare 12:58
Sharing those experiences with others.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 13:00
Or virtual travel experiences, which I think is what those texts offer us in a way. They offer vicarious travel experiences. That's what I think is compelling about them.

B Ben Pykare 13:11
Yeah, yeah. And now, right, we can put on our virtual headsets and pretend to drive through some, some city we've never been in looking around.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 13:20
But I do always try to, to connect things back to present day experiences, whether that's to say like, "maybe something similar is going on," or whether that's to say, you know, "this is actually very, very different than what was operative in in this, you know, in this text in this time period." For example, when we deal with, with pilgrimage texts, I like to bring up the fact that there are like Holy Land theme parks, like in the United States. That are aimed at giving people this sort of, you know, commercialized experience.

B Ben Pykare 13:54
How have I not heard of this.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 13:56
Yeah. no. it's... I think some of them may be defunct now. But it's this commercialized

Yeah, no, I don't think some of them may be different now but it's this commercialized experience of like, Jerusalem and, you know, surrounding areas and sort of biblical events in an American theme park.

B Ben Pykare 14:06

I've heard about the Ark thing where there's a big Ark, you can visit...

 Will Beattie 14:11

Oh sure.

B Ben Pykare 14:11


... like, I know, Ark. But I didn't know that there's just like, a Jerusalem theme park.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 14:17

Yeah, I think they have like stage shows, you know. They have like, rides for kids. And I think they have, like, a lot of things

B Ben Pykare 14:23


I really want to see with these rides are.

 Will Beattie 14:25

I really want to see these.

B Ben Pykare 14:27

Oh, yeah. Again, virtual travel that, you know, is still very much a thing, right?

 Will Beattie 14:32

Yea, I suppose it's not... in a way it's similar to travel vloggers on YouTube or even travel documentaries. Right?

D Dr. Emily Mahan 14:38

Absolutely.



Will Beattie 14:38

You're, you're telling this big audience about your travels, so they can live vicariously through that. Which... because of course reading it, in the medieval world, often, though, not always is, is more of a public performance. Right? So there's a similar kind of large audience who are listening to this tale and, and imagining themselves in this place, perhaps or however they they deal with it, you know... how they interact with it. But, but yea I suppose that is a potential point of similarity or comparison. Yeah, I want to go to these theme parks.



Ben Pykare 15:10

Backing up a bit, Emily, what was your, kind of, career trajectory like from undergrad to then grad school and then PhD? Was that... would you describe it as, kind of, a smooth path? Or was that a...



Dr. Emily Mahan 15:25

It was a meandering path....



Ben Pykare 15:26

A meandering path?



Dr. Emily Mahan 15:26

... I would say honestly. Um, so I, after... I'd always been interested in poetry and creative writing. And so it seemed kind of like the natural next steps to apply to MFA programs after I got out of undergrad. Yeah, so I did do that. And I, I wrote prolifically and have published almost none of it, sadly. I'm just very bad at putting my, my poetic works out there. And I did random things in the subsequent years, and then found my way back to Medieval Studies and decided, "you know, I really am interested in this." I kept... I think I had applied to some PhD programs with my MFA, which is, you know, technically a Master's degree, but it's an MFA. And I don't think they took that as seriously as a different type of Master's degree. And so I went and got a Master's degree at the University of York actually.



Will Beattie 16:19

Right, the MFA standing for what, exactly?



Dr. Emily Mahan 16:22

Master of Fine Arts.



Will Beattie 16:23

So that's more for a... what kind of postgraduate work is that?



Dr. Emily Mahan 16:29

So at the time, it was, they called it a terminal degree, basically. Um, you know, subsequently, there was an explosion of PhDs in Creative Writing. But at the time, the idea is you do coursework, you do academic work, that sort of, you know, gives you practice in analyzing literature and things like that. But you also... your thesis is creative rather than, you know, basically a long paper or something of that sort. Um, your, your work is, in the case of the prose people, like a novel or a collection of short stories. And in our cases, it's, you know, a, like a volume of poetry, basically. Yeah. And then I saw, but I couldn't get into PhD programs with that, or at least I didn't have any success. Maybe I could have. But um, I actually was torn between a PhD in Creative Writing, and this [Medieval Studies] PhD program. And one reason that I chose to go to Notre Dame and do Medieval Studies is I was so much more compelled by the prospect of studying the Middle Ages and medieval literature, as opposed to, [thinking] I need to be like, well versed in what's going on in the world of contemporary poetry in order to, sort of, stack up against all these other people.



Ben Pykare 17:40

Yeah



Dr. Emily Mahan 17:41

And one reason that the other program I was considering was, was interested in me actually, is because I was... I looked back to medieval literature, and most people, you know, weren't looking back past like, you know, the turn of the century, basically. And I just realized that I had so much more passion for delving into this intellectually. And I, despite the fact that I've written very little poetry in the last few years- I still do write some - but I've found myself so intellectually, and also creatively fulfilled by the work that I was doing as a graduate student here writing a dissertation on, you know, on fables, that I didn't really feel like I had squandered anything. I didn't really feel like I wasn't fulfilled. I felt very fulfilled with what I was doing.



Will Beattie 18:31

So there's a creative element, then, for you in writing a dissertation?



Dr. Emily Mahan 18:35

Oh, very much so, I think. I don't know that everyone views it that way, necessarily. I think some people view it in a very sort of pragmatic, maybe methodical way. But to me it is, you

some people view it in a very sort of pragmatic, maybe methodical way. But to me it is, you know, it's an act of creation, you're coming up with this ultimately long thing that's completely out of your own brain combined with, of course, like the research that you've done and things like that. And... but the way you, the way you structure that, and the way you present that is, is, of course, mediated by the sort of discipline's expectations and scholarly discourse expectations and things like that. But, um, but you do have some agency in that. And no one is, is writing exactly the dissertation that you're going to write. You're doing something unique, even if your intervention is small.

B

Ben Pykare 19:19

Yeah. So coming to the dissertation. How would you... if you had, you know, someone who hadn't read the abstract, they didn't know what your dissertation is about. How would you kind of present the topic you wrote on?

D

Dr. Emily Mahan 19:36

So my dissertation analyzes several medieval fable collections from a critical animal studies perspective. So I, I combined close readings of specific fables by seven medieval authors, including Robert Henryson, the anonymous author of the "elegaic Romulus," Alexander Neckam's "Novus Aesopus," and works like that. And I combined those close readings with discussion of real animal-human relationships in the period as well as contemporary post-humanist and, like, animal rights scholarship. And basically, I argue that although in a lot of ways fables... let me back up a little. Um, fables are neither radical nor conservative, in a way. You can find arguments that they are either of those things in different places. But ultimately they don't, sort of, tend to try to subvert a status quo. They deal with how characters survive in difficult circumstances. And sometimes it can't end up well for them. Sometimes the negotiations they can make are very limited. But basically I argue that by imagining these animal perspectives, these non-human perspectives and giving voice to them, that allows an opportunity for this sort of alternative discourse about what animals are and what they're like, and how they interact with human beings. Like, for example, when it comes to dogs in the Middle Ages, you will find text after text, you know, from Albert the Great to bestiaries, saying how loyal dogs are. Dogs love humans, dogs are dependent on humans, dogs will sacrifice themselves for humans. And you get a very different picture from dogs in the fables that I looked at, where you have this much more transactional relationship where they are just... they're aware of their own vulnerability, they're aware that they are dependent on humans for food and shelter, and that they can... those things can be withdrawn, and that they had better, sort of, live up to human expectations and do the jobs they were they were trained to do or else, you know, things might go badly for them. And so you get this very different picture of, of just animal-human relationships. And you get this sort of, I mean, I guess you could call it like, literally an "underdog" perspective.



Will Beattie 22:05

Right.



Ben Pykare 22:05

B Ben Pykare 22:05

Yeah. Yeah. So, um, you mentioned "critical animal studies." How would you describe that to a broader audience? What, what is critical animal studies, and then...

D Dr. Emily Mahan 22:18

So, um, "animal studies" more broadly, is, um, you know, the study... as it sounds like, it's the study of, of animals, particularly, you know, not only real animals, but animals in cultural representations and our relationships with other species. Critical animal studies is more, more explicitly political in terms of what it aims to do. Like, it does aim to have some sort of impact on real animals, and to sort of elucidate the ways that animals are, you know, exploited, maltreated, and the ways that not just our, you know, sort of economic structures and whatnot contribute to that, but the ways that our, our concepts and our ideas about animals are interlaced with what we really do to them. And, yeah, I'm not articulating this very well.

B Ben Pykare 23:09

No, no! That's really helpful.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 23:11

Yeah. And so it's more aligned with post-humanism. And, I mean, like... I guess, look at it this way: you could write about women in literature and not be coming at it from a feminist, like, standpoint in terms of the theoretical background, and those kind of, you know, political concerns that are, sort of, woven into it. And similarly you can write about animals but not want to unpack the ways that animals are oppressed, basically. The ways the animals are subjugated by humans, or the ethical implications of that.

B Ben Pykare 23:50

Yeah. So as you're coming to these medieval texts, it sounds like a lot of, you know, animal studies work is, you know, worried about the treatment of animals today.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 24:04

Right.

B Ben Pykare 24:04

How... how does your work kind of help that, or fit in with some of those goals within that field?

D Dr. Emily Mahan 24:12



Dr. Emily Mahan 24:12

That's a great question, because so much, so much attention is paid to the state of things now, which is, animal agriculture is highly industrialized. And, you know, it's sort of under this capitalist system. And in the medieval period things were quite different, of course, but um, basically, I think there is a romanticization of how humans were believed to have treated animals in the Middle Ages. People sometimes think, you know, because there is such brutality in modern animal husbandry with, you know, the sort of intensive feeding operations where tons of animals are just crammed together.



Ben Pykare 24:56

Yeah.



Dr. Emily Mahan 24:57

People think that because this hasn't intensified to such an intense degree that things must have been relatively good. And I'm not saying that, you know, the situation isn't much, much worse now. But I think the, the expectation that humans use animals was still very much operative in the Middle Ages. And the fact that there were these species differences and species hierarchies, and that those are treated as sort of inescapable. That was operative in the Middle Ages as well. And it does form, sort of, a precursor to subsequent attitudes, I think. And I think that what fables do is because they give animals a voice they are this, like, weird little countercultural thread, if you look at them that way, in what's otherwise like a very... a very, I guess, speciesist discourse. Like for example, there's the fable of "The Ass in the Lion Skin," where a donkey wears a lion skin. There are different versions. There are some interesting different versions. In one it's a collective decision by a bunch of donkeys who realize that humans are afraid of lions and don't want to be beaten and overlaid and whatnot. And so they put on lion skins in order to, sort of, escape this fate. But what happens with the donkey fables is that they're always, they're always put back in their place. But the fact that an animal is imagined wanting something different and better I think is... it opens, like, a little doorway or something into, you know, people have imagined what it would be like if something was different. And then maybe immediately shut that down, shut that thought down, shut that idea down, sort of reincorporated that discourse into, you know, expectations about how donkeys are supposed to be treated. But um, there's this brief, sort of, opportunity to, to look at things differently and to look at things from a nonhuman perspective.



Will Beattie 27:08

Is there something about using animal fables in itself, which allows, allowed medieval writers to do that, rather than for example, you know, a more general poetic form that doesn't involve almost anthropomorphized sort of animals, is it? What is it about the animals that allows them, allows people to explore these other ways of being?



Dr. Emily Mahan 27:30

Well, a very long standing idea, which comes from fable collections themselves in, sort of, the, the author's asides is that that fables were devised by slaves to tell truths without censure

the author's advice is that, that fables were devised by slaves to tell truths without censure, basically. That Phaedrus was the author of the first literary fable collection we have, which is in the first century, and he was a freedman. So he had been a slave who is freed. And he writes in his collection, you know, that people were using animals in order to tell stories and elucidate power dynamics and things like that, and basically criticize things without getting in trouble. And so there's been a long standing idea that this is a way of sort of smuggling truths through without, without getting... without those messages getting halted or sort of punished, I guess.

B Ben Pykare 28:31

Yeah.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 28:32

People often read animals in fables as, I mean clearly they are anthropomorphize. They're often ascribed voice and verbal discourse and, and other things. In critical animal studies with respect to fables, there's this very entrenched notion that animal fables aren't meaningfully about animals. Like Jacques Derrida, famously called fables "a moralizing subjection," a domestication. And basically, it's, it's about the animality of man and in man, for and in man. Whereas I think that to ignore them completely, as though they were not representations of animals is to kind of ignore something that's hiding in plain sight. In my research, I tried to demonstrate that when you do read them as animals, interesting things happen, and not... when you read them as animals and not just sort of proxies for humans.

B Ben Pykare 29:28

Yeah, there is that complex relationship to break down where you have humans writing to humans... .. using animals, right for these purposes, but they're relying on a shared cultural imagination, right? Where right, these animals have these proper roles or would have a certain voice. Yeah, very complicated. But also the same time, it's like fables are for children often or.... right? They're such a simple thing but when you start tearing into it can get rather complex.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 29:36

Exactly it can, yeah. Um, so I think the the question of the audience for fables is an interesting one because they were part of... in the medieval period, they were part of an early education in Latin. For students who were learning Latin. It would be a student's task not just to read fable, but to actually rewrite fables, to know the premise of a story and to be able to sort of collapse and expand that story and ventriloquise these animal characters, basically.

B Ben Pykare 30:32

Just like to aid them in learning Latin. That was kind of the concept.



Dr. Emily Mahan 30:35

Yes, and to aid them in sort of rhetoric and things like that as well.



Ben Pykare 30:38

Fascinating.



Dr. Emily Mahan 30:38

Yeah.



Will Beattie 30:40

Your dissertation obviously, is, is basically a literary one right? Right, I do really wish that my, my research on fables and animals in medieval literature had necessitated that I travel and look at manuscripts in person. I love working with manuscripts. I came to Notre Dame expecting I would write a manuscript studies dissertation, essentially.



Dr. Emily Mahan 30:44

I would say so.



Will Beattie 30:44

It's looking at other texts, literary and linguistic, of course, but it's looking at the text as your main source. I'm curious about the kinds of sources you're using and how you go about doing this research. Are you going to archives or libraries, having to look at manuscripts in person? Are you using digital manuscripts? Or maybe just you know, critical editions that have been printed that you can find in the university library?



Ben Pykare 31:28


I didn't know that.





Dr. Emily Mahan 31:28


And actually, yeah, no, I actually switched directions completely. And one reason I did that is actually because of the first... one of the first courses I took in my first semester at Notre Dame, where we read a work called "The Moral Fables" by Robert Henryson. And it's very weird for a fable collection. Just as this other work by Henryson called "The Testament of Cressyde" has


these, like, metafictional aspects. Henryson's fable collection is actually metafictional in places, which I can't think of any other works that do this. Like the narrator appears in the stories as a character at times and witnesses what happens and, like, comments on it.


 Ben Pykare 32:07
Very wild.


 Dr. Emily Mahan 32:08
And yeah, and he in the middle he has this like dream vision where he meets Aesop and basically, like, convinces a disillusioned Aesop that fables are worth telling after all. And it's a tremendously funny text.


 Ben Pykare 32:21
He fixed the timeline!

 Dr. Emily Mahan 32:21
He did, he did. And it's also, like, tremendously bleak and violent and sometimes in close succession. Like, it's fascinating. And I found that work fascinating. And, um...

 Will Beattie 32:32
When was Henryson writing, sorry?

 Dr. Emily Mahan 32:33
This was around 1500 [AD] is when he is thought to have died.

 Will Beattie 32:37
Okay.

 Dr. Emily Mahan 32:37
So late medieval.

 Ben Pykare 32:38

Okay, so late medieval, yeah.

D

Dr. Emily Mahan 32:39

Yeah. So um... and I found this text so interesting that I realized it was what I wanted to pursue. Basically, when I was, when I was drafting my lists for my candidacy exams, I realized that in order to write this dissertation that would basically be about manuscript layout, and like porosity, and, you know, metrics and multilingualism, and things like that. The kinds of things I would have to know, I wasn't as interested in delving into as I thought I would be. But I was fascinated by fables. And at one point, I was like, "I wish I could just write about fables." And then I was like, "wait, why can't I?" Yeah, and so I, I told my advisor, Tim Mahan, I was like, "you know, I don't want to write this thing about like manuscript layout and multilingualism. Like, I'm sorry, I want to write about fables." And he's like, "do it."

B

Ben Pykare 32:43

That's great.



Will Beattie 32:51

That's a good advisor.

D

Dr. Emily Mahan 33:33

Yeah. And they're, you know, my other committee members were also fantastic. Like Martin Bloomer in the Classics Department knows quite a, quite a lot about fables as a specialist on, sort of, early education and things like that. I found that topic, the topic of fables, something that I was like, very organically, genuinely compelled by versus something that I would have had to have, sort of, kept justifying to myself, like, why am I interested in this? Why does this matter? And I could tell you, you know, why I'm interested in fables and why I think they matter. But, um, the interest sort of precedes that in a way, if that makes sense. Like the... I could give you rational explanations for, for the sort of draw to it that I already feel, but I don't have to talk myself into being excited by it.

B


Ben Pykare 34:24


Yeah, yeah.





Will Beattie 34:25


So this all came... a lot of this came out of your candidacy exams, which...


 Dr. Emily Mahan 34:29
Yes.


 Will Beattie 34:29
... for those who don't know, are these exams you have to take in your, usually your second or your third year of study in most North American PhD programs, which basically involves reading a huge amount of material in about four areas in order to demonstrate your, your supposed mastery, right... ... over these areas. And they can actually... it's a very stressful time, I think it's fair to say, for anyone doing a PhD.


 Dr. Emily Mahan 34:50
Right. Definitely.

 Will Beattie 34:57
But it can also be a great way for you to narrow down what it is you actually want to write about when you get to that dissertation stage. And in your case, it really helped to shape the rest of your, your academic time here.

 Dr. Emily Mahan 35:08
It did, I, you know, I thought to myself, "oh, I don't want to compose this reading list about, like, porosity and things like that." Not to, you know, be negative about that, that field of inquiry, but just I would have had to have talked myself into getting excited about it versus something that I had a more organic interest in.

 Ben Pykare 35:28
So then, from this dissertation, you've now completed it, congratulations.

 Dr. Emily Mahan 35:35
I have, yes.

 Ben Pykare 35:37
I saw that it was under embargo on on the website still, so it's not quite online accessible. But as, as you then moved into a postdoctoral fellowship, you've got to teach about animal fiction.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 35:52

Yes.

B Ben Pykare 35:53

How has that experience been?

D Dr. Emily Mahan 35:55

Um, that's been wonderful. Um, so that was a course that I kind of designed from the ground up. One thing that instigated this was that when I would tell people about my, my research, they would immediately have so many associations with other texts that represent animals and that are from animal perspectives, including works that considerably postdate the Middle Ages. Like, people, when reminded of talking animals, they're reminded of everything from like *Watership Down* to *Winnie the Pooh*. And the scholar Jan Ziolkowski has this great quote about how beast fables and other works that heavily featured animals, I think the quote is "beasts override genre." And I really think there's something to that, in that the connections people draw with... readers and writers draw with animals aren't easily contained by, like, any one literary tradition or even medium. For example, with Robert Henryson's "Moral Fables," you see how he reworks beast epic materials, so stories from a totally different genre, and makes fables out of them using, like, the same animals and the, like, the same species, and the same kind of events. But in developing the course, I wanted to do something that was, like, in my wheelhouse in terms of somebody who thinks a lot about animals and fiction, but out of my wheelhouse in that it was postmedieval. I would love to teach about fables and beast epic and things like that. I think that would be a blast. But, um, I wanted to also, you know, make it the kind of class that I'd be really drawn to as an undergraduate.

B Ben Pykare 37:24


Nice.


D Dr. Emily Mahan 37:26


So the earliest work we look at in the course is from the Victorian era. It's Anna Sewell's "Black Beauty." And the latest work we look at is, like, a 2018 Netflix adaptation of Jack London's "White Fang." So I wanted to centre the course around novels, so like prose fiction from nonhuman animal perspectives, as well as screen adaptations of those works. And I wanted a selection that, sort of, gave touch points over a span of time. So the, you know, the earliest work is "Black Beauty." We have Jack London's "White Fang" in, like, 1906. We have Felix Salten's "Bambi" in 1923. We have "Bambi" the film in the early 40s. We have "Watership Down" in the 70s and Barbara Gowdy's "The White Bone" in, I think 1989.

B Ben Pykare 38:14

So there's also elements of literary history and film studies, kind of film history.

 D Dr. Emily Mahan 38:20
Yes.


 B Ben Pykare 38:21
Kind of interwoven...


 D Dr. Emily Mahan 38:22
Yes.

 B Ben Pykare 38:22
... with these animal-centric tales...

 D Dr. Emily Mahan 38:26
Right.

 B Ben Pykare 38:26
... right, that capture people in different ways.

 D Dr. Emily Mahan 38:28
Yeah. And um, one of the students' assignments was to present on another animal fiction work which might not necessarily fit into the category of the core works on the syllabus of, like, relatively, ostensibly realistic novels about nonhuman animals. And the purpose of that was to... precisely to kind of highlight those genre differences when it comes to animal characters and to examine what it is that novels about animals from animal perspectives are doing that, that the other works are not. So how do we meaningfully discuss both the things that are core to the curriculum, while also acknowledging how beasts escaped genre, as Jan Ziolkowski would say. Did students bring forth any surprising facts from that project? I wouldn't say surprising, exactly. But there were some works that I hadn't heard of that were very, very interesting. And students ended up writing papers about those works actually like, um, Wes Anderson's "Isle of Dogs," for example.

 Will Beattie 39:26
Oh yeah

Oh, yeah.

B

Ben Pykare 39:27

Yeah, I saw that film, yeah.

D

Dr. Emily Mahan 39:28

Yeah. So, um, and people were clearly really into this assignment in that they could talk about some of their favorite books and films that featured animals, but that weren't, sort of, within the purview of like, a realistic prose fiction work. So there was a... I think most people did do um, did do a movie or like a TV show rather than, rather than a work of written fiction.

B

Ben Pykare 39:53

Or other novels.

D

Dr. Emily Mahan 39:54

But um, I mean, we had we, we analyzed several films in the course so that was, you know, that was in, in keeping with that, that aspect of the course.



Will Beattie 40:06

So when you have a... it's great because when you have a theme like this, there are so many ways that students can bring in their own favorite literature or film or whatever the text is and, and really make the course their own I suppose. So it's nice, these kinds of courses, where you start with these big themes, are a nice opportunity for the instructor and the students to learn from each other.

D

Dr. Emily Mahan 40:28

Oh, I think so. And that's what I enjoy about teaching is that I feel like I'm discovering this material, like, alongside my students. Like, I don't... I do provide, like historical context and like, factual information that will help them contextualize what we read. So there is, like, a little lecture component, but I'm really interested in. like, how are they responding to these texts? And what do they see in these texts? And what, what kinds of, you know, what, what kind of knowledge and what kind of ideas do they bring to bear on those texts? Because those are often, you know, something I never would have come up with myself.

B

Ben Pykare 41:04

Yeah. Briefly, I want to ask... kind of for our audience. You're now in a postdoctoral fellowship.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 41:12

Yes.

B Ben Pykare 41:13

You so you've completed your doctoral studies, you are Dr. Mahan, and kind of what is a "postdoc" as it's often shortened to? And how has your postdoc experience been over the past year?

D Dr. Emily Mahan 41:27

I think postdocs can take somewhat different formats, depending on the stipulations of, of the fellowship, and how long they're for. My, my postdoc was considered a "teaching and research" postdoc, so sort of through the "5+1 Program" at Notre Dame. So that involves teaching one course per semester and also working on my own research projects, which in my case is developing my dissertation into a book. I'm writing an additional chapter and revising the rest of it basically. So I taught medieval travels last term, and I'm teaching this animal fictions course, this term, while I'm, you know, trying to find time to work on my book as well.

B Ben Pykare 42:02

Yeah. How has that process looked? We've heard from some other scholars who were able to, kind of, massage their dissertation into a, into a book publication. How, kind of, has that process gone? When do you think about the history of animal stories, medieval animal stories, there's a potential, right, for a broad audience of people who would love to be introduced to these fables, some of which your dissertation brought into, you know, Modern English for the very first time, right?

D Dr. Emily Mahan 42:33

Actually yes, yeah. A lot was otherwise untranslated into English.

B Ben Pykare 42:36

Yeah. So, so tell us about that project, if you could.

D Dr. Emily Mahan 42:39

Absolutely. Yeah. As mentioned, my, my dissertation involves close readings of these texts. And in my case, you know, also translations of the texts that weren't in English. Most of them, most of those sources were not English sources. The only one was actually William Caxton's "Aesop."

The others are in Latin, largely, or old French. There's a fabled collection ascribed to Marie de France, probably not the same person who wrote the *lais*. There is, um... and Robert Henryson is considered Middle Scots, which, you know, is quite intelligible with Middle English I find. But um, you know, many classify that as, like, not English. For, you know... because there are, there's a lot of politics involved in that. So I, you know, I did do my own translations because I think it's, for me, what's critical is being able to have the most unmediated access possible to these texts. So I did extra coursework in languages, in Latin and in Old French so that I could feel confident that I could work with these texts directly without relying on somebody else's interpretation, somebody else's translation. And in terms of developing that project into a book, I determined that there was more I wanted to write about basically, um, that hadn't fit under the sort of categories that my, my chapters dealt with. And I do think that this subsequent chapter is going to reframe everything actually. Because most of the fables I dealt with, I'm looking at them through the lens of human-animal relationships. And in most cases, this is humans, basically, killing or exploiting animals. But in the chapter I'm working on now this deals with powerful predators, such as big cats, basically, like lions and panthers and things like that. And the playing field is kind of leveled and very interesting things happen when the assumption is not one of human physical superiority or human, you know, superiority through violence. So I think there's, instead of about... instead of it being about just humans sort of exploiting animals or something, it's about what happens when, when there is the power to exploit or to kill, and who holds that power and who refrains from using that power. Because interestingly, in a lot of cases it's the animals who refrain from harming humans. And they're much more restrained than the humans in the fables are.

B

Ben Pykare 42:43

Really interesting. Yeah. And again, I can, I can see, I can see the book on the shelf. It's...



Will Beattie 44:55

I feel like you're tantalizing us. I want to press you for an example, if you can think of one, of one of these situations where they've leveled the playing field, and we see the animals in the position of predator.

D

Dr. Emily Mahan 45:28

Yes. Well, there's the the classic fable of the, it's sometimes called "The Man and the Lion," which could be about anything, I suppose. But this is the fable where the Wife of Bath [in the "Canterbury Tales"] refers to it saying, "who painted the lion?" So basically, in the earliest version of the fable, which is by Avianus, you have a line and a man, verbally contesting over who is superior. And the man points to a work of art in which a man is subduing a lion, and he says, "see, we're superior." And the lion says, "how can you take that as as evidence? You know, if a lion were to have sculpted that, you would see a man being crushed in the lions jaws," basically. Marie quote-unquote "de France," the author of the Old French fable collection, does something really interesting with that, where instead of just this one sort of verbal exchange which is commenting on the unreliability of art, and, sort of, implying this weird, like, lion mythography almost, where like, if they were to imagine, if they were to create in the way that humans do, you would see sort of the inverse of what humans tend to portray. But in

any case, you have a man and a lion who are companions, and they travel together. And it's as though the man is being instructed by the lion the whole way through. The, the man at first sort of views himself as superior and then the lion brings him to, you know, an image of art. And the man points out that the lion is being subdued in this piece of art. And the lion points out, "well, who painted that? Who, who created that?" And the man acknowledges it was humans. Then they go to sort of a coliseum-type situation where a man has been attacked and completely destroyed by, by a lion. And there's, sort of, that little lesson for the man that you know, the reality of physical might and of physical deeds is, is probably going to be in the lions favor. Then you have what to me is the most interesting episode, where they encounter another lion. And the lion says to them, or says to the other lion, rather, "you know, you should really kill that guy, because humans catch us and kill us all the time." And the lion basically says, "I'm not going to do that. Get out of here. Let's go on together." And so the man and the lion go on together. And then at the end, the lion asks him, basically, you know, "now what do you think?" And he's like, "I think very differently than I did before." There's this possibility offered of, like, companionship without strife. There are all these sort of models offered of animal-human relationships, animal-human violence. But also this weird sense that, you know, something different is possible and the moral, kind of, doesn't address this. The moral sort of encapsulates it back again into this thing about art and about the false potential of, of art and how you should believe things that really happen. But the actual narrative kind of escapes those boundaries a little bit in terms of, in terms of what it portrays.

B

Ben Pykare 48:43

Very cool. So you have all these interests you have all this training and skills. Going forward as, as a scholar what, what continues to hold your interest? Is it animal stories? Is it animal studies? Fables in general? English literature in general? Or medieval literature's in general? What, what going forward are you going to, you know, bounce around across your different interests?

D


Dr. Emily Mahan 49:09

Yeah. So um, after finishing the fable book I would like to work on beast epics, actually. When I originally was formulating my dissertation proposal and presenting that to my committee, I actually envisioned a dissertation that dealt with both fable and beast epic. And their advice was basically that's too disparate." You should focus on fable and I think you really have something there." And I think they were completely right. I think it was much more, you know, cohesive, cohesive work to only focus on fable and not be focusing on these very different genres. Beast epics are these long poems. One famous one is the "Roman de Renart." So Reynard the fox and Isengrim, the wolf who he constantly tricks and sort of betrays, in the court of this lion king. And there's "Ysengrimus," which is maybe sort of a precursor to the "Roman de Renart" in some ways. There's the "Speculum stultorum," which is about a donkey who, who escapes his abusive master and tries to go to the university. He has various adventures, the university thing doesn't pan out very well for him. They're tremendously entertaining texts, but they're very different than fables because, um, they have, you know, much longer character arcs, they have a lot of, sort of, episodic things happening to the characters as opposed to these very discrete little narratives where, you know, somebody dies at the end and that's it. People, you know, there is often a lot of violence in the the beast epics as well. But instead of kind of being an object lesson, it's it's more like, often more satirical. The

violence is often much more grotesque, really, and I think is often played for humor. So I think I'm, although both of my, in both cases, my interests have to do with interspecies violence, very different things are going on in these different genres. And I'd like to explore that with with beast epic next. That would be my next project.

 B Ben Pykare 51:07

Fantastic. Well, we look forward to it. Unfortunately, that's all the time we have for today. Thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Mahan.

 Will Beattie 51:17

And thank you all for listening, and we will see you next time in the Middle Ages. "Meeting in the Middle Ages" is sponsored by the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame, with a generous grant from the Medieval Academy of America. If you have any questions for medievalist send them to us at "meetinginthema@gmail.com." You can follow us on Twitter at "meetingintheMA" and Instagram at "meetinginthemiddleages." For more information on some of the topics raised in this episode, head on over to the episode description. Thanks for listening