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Talking Animals: Medieval Latin Beast Poetry, 750-1150

Author

Ziolkowski, Jan M

Date

1993. University of Pennsylvania Press. Philadelphia

Category

Secondary.

Call No: PA8065.A54 Z55 1993 (Fable Collection, Reinert-Alumni Memorial Library) .

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Remark:

I had the pleasure of hearing Jan Ziolkowski as keynote speaker at a meeting of The Beast Fable Society. This book underscores the strong impression I received then of an inquisitive mind, readiness to learn, and comprehensive study of a given subject. This book, in my impression, deals more with story content -- specifically talking animals -- and so does not focus specifically on fables. In fact, its purpose seems to be to track what happens when writers move beyond the well-known fable form. The book thus tracks their creative engagement of new and more expansive genres presenting talking animals. One of the few general rules Ziolkowski can establish is that these writers avoid having their new creations look like the old fables. Thus expressed morals are suppressed as we move into bestiary, beast epic, dialogue and other larger genres. Fable, it seems, was the carrier of a great deal of content through the middle ages and remains that. Latin writers, in particular, could count on their readers knowing a substantial body of fable literature. But fables, like other popular

oral genres, were also much in people's mouths in the vernacular. Thirty-two helpful appendices here give translations of stories Ziolkowski refers to along the way. The earliest pages of this book raise the most engaging questions for me. Ziolkowski rightly distinguishes that the moral identifies a fable (18), but I fear he presumes that the moral must be stated. Secondly, I wonder if Perry would agree concerning the importance of animals in fable (19). Of course, Ziolkowski does not need to bother with non-animal-fables -- including the so-called Sybaritic human fables -- but I wonder whether one understands this genre correctly when one believes with John of Garland and Isidore that animals are paramount in fable (19). Particularly helpful to me is the subsequent section on the history of fables in the Middle Ages (19-32). Ziolkowski there brings together and makes sense of a great deal of information I have seen otherwise only in scattered and partial contexts.

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