

IAN (reads): The dogs of India are conceived by tigers, for the Indians will take diverse females and fasten them to trees and woods where tigers abide. Whereunto the greedy, ravening tiger comes and instantly devours some one or two of them if his lusts do not restrain him, and then being so filled with meat (which thing tigers seldom meet withall), presently he burns in lust and so lymeth the living dogs who are apt to conceive by him. Which being performed he retires to some secret place and in the meantime the Indians take away the dogs of whom come these valorous dogs which retain the stomach and courage of their father but the shape and proportion of their mother, yet they do not keep any of the first or second litter for fear of their tiger and stomachs but make them away and reserve the third litter.

ALEXA: I'm Alexa Sand

IAN: and I'm Ian MacInnes

ALEXA: And this is Real Fantastic Beasts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance...

IAN: Because we believe that learning about animals in history and literature and art helps us understand our place among our fellow creatures today.

ALEXA: That is quite a lurid story! I mean, appetites of all sorts. Where does that come from, and can you tell me a little bit more about this biologically unlikely anecdote?

IAN: Well, it appears to come from a classical source and it's gotten recycled through the Middle Ages and into a Renaissance source, so this actually comes from Topsell's *Natural History of Four Footed Animals*. But he tends to repeat a lot of stories that he hears, like this one. I picked it because a lot of the sort of tiger lore that gets imported and recycled is very interested in tiger sexuality and tiger breeding and tiger cubs, so I thought this sort of captures all of it, and also this ridiculous idea that this is how you get valorous dogs is by breeding them with tigers.

ALEXA: It's so interesting because even today tigers are kind of associated with lust and with sexual desire, if you think about any rock song from the late nineteen-seventies or -eighties with tiger in the title. That's definitely about a sort of conflation of appetites; you know, "she's a man eater..."

IAN: Yeah, the appetite of the tiger seems to be a sort of a steady state thing, which I'm sure when we hear the now the medieval history of the tiger from you that's going to be a part of it

ALEXA: For sure. So, you know, in the European Middle Ages tigers were really more in the category of fantastic than real beasts. Which is to say, nobody in Europe was likely to have seen one; unlike lions and bears and ostriches and camels, animals that were kept in captivity, that were imported and given as royal gifts. When you look at inventories of medieval menageries, tigers never figure among the beasts. However, they did know of their existenc. One of the things that I think is really interesting is that when you and I think of a tiger, we watched Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom* when we were kids, and we know what a tiger looks like. It's a tawny animal, orange striped with black, and maybe has some white around the face and the belly. And sometimes tigers can be other colors like white with black stripes or even black tigers and there's this very rare kind of tiger called a golden tabby or strawberry tiger that's sort of like like gold with gold stripes. They are really pretty they're also extremely rare. They are all the same species actually but there are color variants.

IAN: And always striped.

ALEXA: Always striped. One thing you never see in the wild, is a blue tiger with spots and yet every time you see a medieval illustration of a tiger that's what it looks like. It's blue with spots. So, why did they think that? Where is that coming from? Even the literary sources, as you already pointed out that they had in the Middle Ages, classical sources where people had

actually travelled to the Indian sub-continent or central Asia, where there was actually a viable population of tigers at the time, and they had actually seen tigers, right? And so these eye witness reports would get sort of filtered back to Greek and Roman writers there's a one third century CE account by a guy named Gaius Julius Solinus, and in his collection of miraculous things he describes a tiger as tawny with black stripes, so those were the kinds of literary resources that were available in the Middle Ages. However, in the seventh century Isidore of Seville, who was a church father, a wise learned man, for reasons we don't exactly understand describes the tiger as a spotted creature. He kind of does this in passing so we don't know where he got that idea. My theory is that he could have seen a different kind of animal, a leopard maybe, because those actually were kept in a few medieval menageries around the Mediterranean.

IAN: And they have spots.

ALEXA: They have spots. I think he was a little maybe misled maybe he had seen or knew somebody who had seen a leopard and so you know it's an easy mistake to make if you've never seen either.

IAN: But why why is it that they were not they kept? So many animals were? Why are tigers not making it into the menageries of the west?

ALEXA: Well, there are probably a number of reasons for that. Not least that tigers are in fact very ferocious animals and very difficult to interact with in the wild on our terms. That is to say, anybody who is interested in tigers knows that they are not super interested in interacting with humans other than as just another species of prey animal, so I think that that might be part of it. It's very hard to catch a tiger and in fact almost everything that medieval writers have to say about tigers has to do with catching tigers and how hard it is.

IAN: Which they never did!

ALEXA: Right. This again is coming from classical sources and we have these sources that tell us, starting with Pliny the Elder in the first century BC writing in his *Natural History*. and his story gets repeated in various ways, including by Ambrose of Milan (another church father writing in the fourth century). The story basically goes that certain emperors of Persia wanted to keep tigers in their menageries, so it's kind of associated with the exotic east right? And in order to catch these tigers what you had to do was find a female tiger who had a litter of young, and you had to sneak around wait for her to go out hunting pick up the baby tigers, put them in sack, put them on your horse – and you need a fast horse for this by the way!

IAN: You need a really good knapsack too I think...

ALEXA: Exactly! So the hunter is supposed to pick up the baby tigers put them in a sack and then ride away as fast as he can. But he needs to have an additional piece of equipment, and that is either a reflective glass ball or a mirror. The idea is that as he rides away the tigress will chase him of course because she is intensely protective of her cubs and so far this sounds semi plausible, right?

IAN: Right.

ALEXA: The next thing that happens is when the tiger starts to catch up with the kidnapper, she can be sort of slowed down if you throw this mirror or this reflective glass ball on the on the ground because she'll see her reflection in the mirror and think that it's her cubs. It won't work for very long because she'll figure it out, but the idea is that it will stop her enough that she won't be able to catch you... but you better have a fast boat waiting is what you're told to these accounts!

IAN: They can swim too, and they'll come after you!

ALEXA: Yeah! I mean one of the things that struck me about this story is that recently my teenager showed me TicToc video in which some cruel individual had placed a large mirror out in the woods where they knew a bear, a grizzly bear, was hanging out, and in the video the bear walks past the mirror a few times and then it sees reflection in the mirror and it goes bananas, not because it thinks that its cub is in the mirror but because it thinks it's another bear, and it attacks the mirror as if it were another bear. I mean there's so much to unpack there about animals and mirrors and recognition. But okay, so that's the story that you hear for most of the Middle Ages, and one of the most interesting spins on this is in text that was written in the thirteenth century by a guy named Richard de Fournival, called *The Bestiary of Love*. Richard gives us animal allegories about the experience of falling in love and trying to seduce the beloved, and all of the sort of stuff he goes through in his efforts to win her. It's really interesting because the tiger story he has goes, "When I first glimpsed my beloved, I was more taken in and incapacitated by the sight of her than a tigress is by the mirror," so, he compares himself to the tigress rather than to the hunter in this instance. I just think that's really interesting. It's sort of a critique how vision seduces us, so, it deals with all of that and it's not really about the tiger at all of course.

IAN: You know the mirror... it's interesting that it's a mirror or a glass ball because you run into these paintings where there are things on the wall that are mirrors but they are actually totally convex right?

ALEXA: Right.

IAN: So, mirrors were often almost spherical to begin with.

ALEXA: Yeah

IAN: So, it's less weird to me now to think of a glass ball.

ALEXA: A couple of years ago I was doing some research on these ivory mirror cases and everywhere I was reading that they had a metal reflective surface in them like polished gold or silver, but the question occurred to me like why don't any of those exist? Polished metal disks are not very destructible right you would have to intentionally melt them down or whatever. Okay, maybe most of them would get lost, melted down, whatever, but all of them? There's not a single one, and so I ended up talking to this archeologist in Switzerland who has basically all the evidence that we need to know that even in the Middle Ages mirrors were typically made of glass. So, that's one of those historical misconceptions that there were no glass mirrors and in fact the thing about the glass ball comes from Ambrose of Milan in the fourth century. We know the Romans made glass. They were really good at it!

IAN: Sure, Roman glass is beautiful.

ALEXA: Exactly. So this glass ball I'm imagining is not a light weight but a rather heavy, dense object. Anyway I mean I think it's interesting too because the association of the tiger with the east is the other piece of this, right? The idea that it belongs to this sort of exotic land of the Persians, and there clearly is a kind of fascination with the tiger in the Persian Islamic world, so I just want to leave you with one sort of bridge to the to the early modern period, which is that in the fifteenth century there was this Persian ruler who was actually descended from Genghis Khan and also from Tamerlane, and his name was Babur. Although his birth name was not Babur, or Persian for tiger, that became his name, and he's actually sort of considered the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India.

IAN: Which is sort of where they thought the tigers were from. The place that you hear tigers are normally from, and I'm pretty sure that this comes from the Middle Ages, is Hyrcania, right? So, in the Renaissance they're always talking about Hyrcanian tigers. Hyrcania is an area in

Persia right underneath the Caspian sea and as far as I can see there have never been any tigers there. So there was never such a thing as a Hyrcanian tiger.

ALEXA: No, there was an animal known as a Caspian tiger, and in fact those animals were still present in that region in the eighteenth century and there's evidence that they didn't go extinct entirely until the nineteen-thirties. So, that's a little-known fact about tigers. I mean if you think about it there are Siberian tigers, right? And a long distance between Siberia and the Indian sub-continent and so animals typically have a kind of range and in fact all of those animals are essentially the same species their sub species.

IAN: Yeah, though I think the Caspian tiger might have been different right because it's extinct?

ALEXA: They don't know very much about those animals. That population is extinct I guess is a better way to say it.

IAN: And we should call it the Hyrcanian tiger?

ALEXA: Yes, the Hyrcanian tiger was a sub population maybe or a sub species. Now, there are manuscript illuminations from Persia in that period that depict them as looking like stripy lions to me rather than tigers, but who knows maybe the Hyrcanian tiger had a particularly impressive ruff or something.

IAN: Yeah.

ALEXA: Tell me about early modern tigers and what happens to the medieval blue spotty animals in Renaissance?

IAN: Well, I have a list of the stuff that sort of seems like the fantastic lore that's still around and I wanted to see whether maybe some of these are also medieval, like the idea that tigers cover their footsteps with their tails (that's how they sneak away so that you don't see their tracks), or that tigers hate the sound of bells...

ALEXA: H .

IAN: And then there's this one idea that they're all female, right? There's no such thing as a male tiger: they make more tigers by being impregnated by the wind because tigers are supposed to be super-fast.

ALEXA: Wait, wait, wait! Getting back to your original story though...

IAN: Yes?

ALEXA: Male tigers...

IAN: I know!

ALEXA: Dogs...

IAN: Female dogs.

ALEXA: Are they being impregnated by female tigers?

IAN: People say there's only female tigers... however...

IAN: There's also this idea that they're innately modest, and again this contradicts the sex with random dogs, but that they only have sex in secret, right? That you'll never see them having sex because they're so innately modest. Oh and that tigers taste like beef apparently.

ALEXA: That's a variation on "it tastes just like chicken," I guess?

IAN: I mean, they're always held up as icons of cruelty or ravenousness or shocking violence and it's worth noticing that like the classical tradition Dionysus, who's the god of madness and crazy violence is often depicted as riding a tiger, although again classical tigers were actually closer to the real tigers than the Middle Ages.

I mean, there are a whole bunch of things getting tied together here: you've got the cruelty of the tiger, which at least in the early modern period cruelty has often gendered female. There's the negative stereotype that women are somehow more cruel than men, so the tiger would somehow be inherently more female to begin with. Thus this idea that maybe the tigers are all female. And then the all these stories about mommy tigers, the tiger as a maternal animal except for that story about impregnating the dogs that we started with.

ALEXA: It is interesting too, that they're both a figure for maternal love and a figure for bloodthirsty bestiality.

IAN: Right. A very interesting combination, so figuring out when the fantastic tiger turns into the real tiger I have to go past my own Renaissance period into the very late early modern period to get there. There are sort of two things we can use as an index. We can use the stripes, because medieval tigers are spotted and modern tigers are striped. Something happens: when do the stripes occur? When do they appear? So, stripes are one thing to look for, and then the other is you can use the spelling of tiger as well.

ALEXA: Interesting!

IAN: Because you can spell it with an "i" or you can spell it with a "y" and both spellings go way back, so like there's a tiger with an "i" way back and there's a tiger with a "y" right up to the late early modern period, but by and large the closer you get to the modern tiger, the more you spell it with an "i" as opposed to the "y" so that the "tyger" is antique and becomes this like old way of talking about the tiger. The tiger with an "i" took over right around seventeen fifty five, so that's when the lines cross when the "ti" tiger takes off. Coincidentally there's two other things that happened at that period. One is that the British, basically the first major moment where they take over India occurs in the Battle of Plassey in 1757. That's where they get Bengal, which is where most of the tigers are after all. Suddenly, you know, the British are noticing modern tigers.

The other is 1758 which is where we get the first modern scientific description by Linnaeus, the father of taxonomy. He has a description of the tiger. The stripes are interesting as well, so they really appear first in Linnaeus. He's writing in Latin and he uses a word which does mean stripes, I guess, but though the actual word stripe for tiger doesn't really appear until the nineteenth century. What you first get is that tigers have spots, and then they have streaks or bars of color, but you're not going to find striped tigers until into the eighteen hundreds it becomes so conventional that I think if I asked you like what's the first word that comes into your head when I say tiger, you'll say stripes.

ALEXA: Yeah, exactly!

IAN: Well, that's not a thing right until pretty late even though they're clearly recognizing the Bengal tiger with the bars and the streaks. At the time, there is a lot of confusion: the word tiger gets employed to describe a bunch of critters, including things that we think are leopards and panthers even though they also had the words for "panther," and "leopard." So you get writers saying well there's leopards and panthers and then there's spotted tigers and you can you know they're different for these reasons or you know this tiger is spotted but it's not like the other tigers... so there's a lot of kind of confusion about what they even think a tiger really is and when they finally decide that the Bengal tiger is the tiger, they don't even say now that's the tiger and there's nothing else. They start by calling it the royal tiger; the one with stripes is

the royal tiger, which becomes the Bengal tiger, or the tiger royal. At first it's a special kind of tiger that has stripes, and then they realize there is no other kind of tiger. This is *the* tiger.

This all happens really late and it happens pretty quickly. One way to figure out when it's going to enter popular culture is by figuring out in England for instance when they were kept at the Tower of London. The Tower of London has this famous menagerie; they had lions at the Tower of London for ages, so like people knew what lions look like, what bears look like, certainly in Shakespeare's London you could see a lion, and you could see bears all the time, but you couldn't see a tiger. So, but at a certain point the menagerie at the Tower of London gets tiger. When does that actually happen? I don't have an actual date, but I have a period in which it has to happen. In 1741, there's a visitor to the Tower of London who is using the term tigers and then he says that the two old tigers, who are named Will and Phyllis...

ALEXA: Aww!

IAN: Are marked with round spots like the leopard, whereas those found in the East Indies are streaked all down their sides instead of having spots. Seventeen-forty-one and he's recognizing that there is this tiger with stripes, but he's also saying the tigers in the Tower of London have spots which means leopards or maybe jaguars or something like that. And then in 1744, there's an actual tiger in the tower. One described as having stripes.

ALEXA: You're not going to like this. Me being a French scholar and you being in the English world, but I'm pretty sure at Louis XIV had a tiger in his menagerie at Versailles, because there's a very famous story about the Persian ambassador was impressed when they staged for him fight between a tiger and an elephant. Now, unfortunately, that description doesn't include whether the tiger had stripes or not...

IAN: So in response, I'm sure it had spots!

ALEXA: But the story goes at least, that Colbert, his minister, as part of his portfolio of things that he was responsible for was getting these super exotic animals and collecting them for the court. It was a famous entertainment in 17th century France.

IAN: It's hard to know because they'll use tiger all over the place when they're clearly not talking about the striped tiger, and you know if it's super famous I mean tiger stripes are pretty distinctive. I mean you see it, you don't say like oh it just looks like a leopard right

ALEXA: Right, but this was the Persian ambassador. I mean I was assuming that he had seen a tiger, right, because the Persian emperors kept tigers, actual tigers.

IAN: Well yes, that's true but again you know like which tiger are we talking about because tiger was a catch-all term for large cats that weren't lions. It could be anything until you actually hear them saying, "No, no, it doesn't have spots, it has stripes."

ALEXA: Okay, right...

IAN: So, the description of Linnaeus of the tiger which is the first "scientific description" of the tiger itself conjures up some of this past stuff because he says, "okay so a tiger had a long, tall, body marked all over with stripes as big as a lion," so far so good, and then he says, "it is the most beautiful and fastest animal and it eats humans, especially Indians, and then the male tigers kill their own children," so imbedded in that is this idea that it is the most beautiful and fastest animal which is something from the early modern tiger lore, and then this idea that it is somehow particularly ferocious and dangerous to humans. That's also something that really kind of hearkens back to the past, and you get this repeated as well, so the idea that the tiger is most beautiful but also most cruel and horrifying, that's something that you see like over and over again.

Oliver Goldsmith in the eighteenth century, so like he's clearly talking about modern tiger, he's talking about it in ways that call up this kind of medieval tiger lore. He says, "tigers partake of all the noxious qualities of the lion without sharing any of his good ones. To pride, courage, and strength, the lion joins greatness, clemency, and generosity, but the tiger is fierce without provocation and cruel without necessity." And then later he goes on about how beautiful the tiger is, and then he says, "unhappily this animal's disposition is as mischievous as its form is admirable, as if Providence was willing to show the small value of beauty by bestowing upon the most noxious of quadrupeds." That double "it's fast and beautiful, but it's also just a terrible animal." Do you know Blake's poem "The Tyger"?

ALEXA: Yes, yes! "Tyger, tyger burning bright!"

IAN: Which by the way he spells with a "y."

ALEXA: I remember that!

IAN: He's clearly marking that kind of antique nature to the tiger, but that poem lays into this idea that the tiger is both sort of beautiful and terrible, which for you know a lot of eighteenth-century writers was just a problem. That idea that "Providence is showing the small value of beauty," by giving beauty to this horrible animal. Blake, of course, is saying, no, it's that the beauty of the tiger and its ferocity are two necessary poles that go together. He's basically challenging like all the tiger lore that ever was and including the real tiger – his tiger at the bottom of the page has stripes. It's kind of muddy, depending on which reproduction you're looking at, and it's unclear as to how stripy it really was, but it's not spotted.

ALEXA: Obviously there's a connection between colonialism and the first scientific description of the tiger and this grappling with the idea of the tiger as both beautiful and incredibly deadly and fierce, and I feel like that is still with us. Of course, when we talk about tigers, they're what are called charismatic mega fauna, these large, fascinating and also terrifying beasts like sharks or lions or that sort of thing, and so they again provide a really good tool for thinking about how beauty and terror are related.

That seems a long way from the medieval conception of the tiger as this kind of figure for, or do I mean literally, as a tiger mother, this ferociously devoted parent, and also a creature that is far enough from human nature not to recognize what a mirror image is. That can be fooled by that mere image as a monkey never would be, at least in the medieval account. So now in some ways though, that gendering of the tiger's ferocity is also about how to understand the incomprehensible other. And so, it then ties into the idea that Orientalism in general associates the feminine with the east and with the exotic, and I think you start to see a bigger cultural picture emerging for the tiger. And then of course you know we can't do an episode on the tiger without thinking about the *Tiger King* the recent Netflix phenomenon...

IAN: I have not watched it, and I sort of refused to.

ALEXA: I have to admit I haven't either, but I don't think you have to have watched it to understand that it's all about sex and violence and the allure of the exotic, and also the uncomfortable, distasteful feelings that are aroused by the association of humans and these beasts in a way that seems too intimate and inappropriate, so there's a lot of transgression there.

IAN: Fascination, revulsion... With colonialism, you mentioned that the east is feminized in a way, but then that in the colonial world Asia was often associated with things like cruelty and violence as well, but also beauty. Like, "they understand beauty but they're cruel like well." So, the tiger stands in for a European view of the east.

ALEXA: As opposed to a European court where, as entertainment, you put an elephant and a feline together and make them fight, that's not cruel at all!

IAN: I mean that's practically modern. The thing about the tiger is in order to get to the actual tiger you have to understand it's absent in all sorts of ways for so long, and yet present in its fantastic form, and then when they become present as the real tiger, they're often treated as sort of the most fantastic of real beasts. Which is still true today, I think. Of the real animals which are the most fantastic, well, people see tigers as just fantastic.

ALEXA: And tigers are real animals for now, but they're desperately endangered as their natural environments are being lost, and as poaching is really taking a toll on the on the surviving animals, so I think we need to keep in mind that some of the real animals of the twenty-first-century may be only fantastical by the end of the century.

IAN: In the end, you may be right.

ALEXA: I think we'd be telling a very different story if we approached this from an east Asian perspective in this period, or a southeast Asian perspective where the tiger is such an important animal in terms of royal symbolism, and the sort of figuration of the power of the Emperor of China, for example. I think that it might be a really interesting to bring back a guest speaker for at some point.

IAN: Right, and view this from the other side.

ALEXA: But first, we have to deal with the tiger's cousin, the manticore.

IAN: Which you know is the man tiger get it? Man-tiger... manticore.

ALEXA: I know! And a scarier or more disturbing hybrid I cannot imagine. So, next up...

IAN: Next time: the manticore!