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The *Gesta Romanorum*: Stories for all seasons, all levels

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Ait imperator: “Quid facis? Cur malum pro bono reddis?”

Ait serpens: “Quod natura dedit, nemo tollere potest.  
Et ideo secundum naturam facio.”

This is one of the punch lines for story 57, *De rege serpentem solvente*. It’s a perfect *exemplum* of the *Gesta* stories: there’s a moral (not religious!), a talking animal, royalty, and a confusion of internal vs. external logic. Snakes act according to their nature and they tell the king that, and anyway, how is a snake able to talk?

The *Gesta Romanorum*, or Deeds of the Romans, has no specific author; rather, it is collection of stories with morals added, part of the “the exemplum tradition identified with Franciscan and Benedictine preaching orders in England and southern Germany.”¹ The Latin manuscripts that we have date from the early 14th century. There were many versions, with up to 223 stories; not all versions use the same numbering system for the stories. The text was definitely popular during the medieval and Renaissance periods. Peter Alphonsus’ *Disciplina Clericallis* has several of these stories; he wrote around 1100 CE. For some sources of these stories, please

Despite the emphasis on preaching and morals, the stories can stand by themselves as just good folk tales. In fact, this is probably the genesis of the stories – entertaining folk tales that later had a whitewash of morality or religion added either to the story or to the moral. Certainly, animal fables, adulterous women, adventures, and magic are timeless story elements. The combination of sources - Old and New Testament (Elijah and the Rabbi, Esther, saints), Greek myth and legend (especially Ovid), history (Valerius Maximus, Pliny), Eastern tales (many things happen in Babylon) as well as local tales - makes these stories so much fun to read, and such an interesting window on the medieval world and mind.

This collection of tales from classical, oriental, and unknown sources, with a moralization in the form of an allegory attached to each, was evidently first compiled as a help for preachers, who used them to add force and interest to their sermons, perhaps even to arouse their hearers from drowsiness.²

Medieval logic in these stories is quite different from our modern logic; it is an internal logic, not an external one. For example: who would care if one turned over a fish in a dish (#200), and why would that be punished by death? Laws about adultery are equally bizarre: in #4, the law states that if a woman is raped, she can either have the man killed or she can marry him without a dowry. Yet the laws must be obeyed, even if the protagonist did a good deed: in #142, a soldier saves the kingdom by using the weapons of a dead hero, which were never supposed to be touched; even though he saves the kingdom, he is killed because he violated the law. John Weld, in his essay,³ notes these problems:

Inconsistencies are fairly common, however, in all versions of the Gesta. Aside from the characteristic inconsistencies of oral narrative in characterization or motivation, there are, more puzzling to the modern reader, inconsistencies in the allegory and discrepancies between the implications of the narrative and its allegorical meaning. The twelfth tale, of Focus the smith, exemplifies both kinds. Focus himself, who threatens the magic image if it reveals his trespass, is first equated with evil men who threaten preachers if they speak the truth, but when he is brought before the emperor and explains his actions, he is identified as every good

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² Bourne (1923, pp. 345-376).
³ Weld (1973, p. 5).
Christian. The emperor, furthermore, is clearly established as a fallible human being who is ignorant of hidden crimes in his kingdom and changes his mind after hearing Focus’s excuse, yet he is explained to be Christ, and Focus, though he has been brought to judgment for a failure to worship, has, in the allegory, been worshipping Father and Son as every good Christian should.

The modern reader must in any case accept these stories as a fact of medieval and Renaissance literary life, and once the outrage has passed, he may begin to anticipate the puzzles set by the narrative texts and to guess at their solution with some pleasure.

Riddles and word play are also very important. Thus, in story #66, *Alius dixit*: “Heri Alexander populo imperabat, hodie populus imperat illi,” (Yesterday Alexander was ruling the people, today the people rule him) there is an excellent use of polypoton, not to mention synchysis and chiasmus.

These stories are great to use with students who have finished the grammar and are ready to read authentic literature. Some Medieval words have different meanings from classical usage (*quod* often means “that” and can be omitted; *quidem* no longer means “a certain” but perhaps “a”. Some variants in spelling appear too: *cepit* for *coepit*, *a* for *ae*, etc.). Once you get the hang of it, you will find the stories entertaining and rewarding.

As a short example of a story, here is the complete story #57. The first version has notes, and the second is my translation of the story.

Cap. 57. De rege serpentem solvente.

Legitur de quodam imperatore, qui a casu per quandam silvam transiit, invenit serpentem a pastoribus captum et ad arborem alligatum. Qui pietate motus eum solvit et in sinu calfacere fecit. Cum esset calefactus, incepit mordere.

Ait imperator: “Quid facis? Cur malum pro bono reddis?”

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4 serpentem: serpens, serpentis, m, *snake.*
5 a casu = casu.
6 alligatam: alligo, are, *bind.*
7 solvit: solvo, solvere, *free, loosen, pay.*
8 sinu: sinus, us, *lap.*
9 calfacere: calfacio, ere, become warm [calidus + facere].
10 mordere: mordeo, ere, *bite.*
Ait serpens: “Quod natura dedit, nemo tollere potest. Et ideo secundum\textsuperscript{11} naturam facio.”

Qui ait: “Bonum tibi feci, et illud mihi male solvis.”

Illis sic contendentibus vocatus est quidam philosophus, ut esset iudex, et ei totum processum\textsuperscript{12} narravit.

Ait philosophus: “De hac causa per auditum ignoro\textsuperscript{13} iudicare, sed volo, ut serpens ligetur\textsuperscript{14} ut prius, et tunc iudicium dabo.” Et sic factum est.

Tunc ait philosophus: “Serpens si potest evadere, discedat! Et tu, imperator, noli amplius laborare, ut serpentem solvas, quia semper facit quod natura dedit!”

ABOUT THE KING FREEING THE SERPENT

It is written about a [certain] emperor, who by chance crossed through a [certain] forest, [who] found a snake caught by shepherds and bound to a tree. Who, moved by piety, freed him and made him warm in his lap. When he had been made warm, he began to bite.

Said the emperor: “What are you doing? Why do you return evil for good?”

Said the snake: “What nature has given, no one is able to lift/remove. And thus I do according to nature.”

Who [emperor] said: “I did good for you, and you pay me badly.” [lit: you pay that badly to me].

As they are thus arguing, a [certain] philosopher was called, to be the judge, and he told the whole story to him.

Said the philosopher: “I do not know how to judge concerning this case as it is heard, but I want the snake bound as before, and then I will give judgment.” And thus it was done.

Then the philosopher said: “If the snake is able to escape, let him depart! And you, emperor, don’t work further to free the snake, because he always does what nature has given!”

This story is such a pleasure because it has so much to say about the Medieval

\textsuperscript{11} secundum: according to.
\textsuperscript{12} processum: processus, us, story.
\textsuperscript{13} ignoro: ignoro, are, not know.
\textsuperscript{14} ligetur: ligo, are, bind.
world. First, it is a classic story, sometimes told with a snake carrying a mouse, or a fox carrying a scorpion, etc. This story also appears in Aesop’s Fables 83, Babrius 143 and many other versions.\textsuperscript{15} This story appears in Peter Alphonsus’ \textit{Disciplina Clericalis} as story 5.\textsuperscript{16} The very fact that so many Medieval versions abound testifies to its universality.

Philosophically we can see this as nature vs. nurture: is it our nature which rules our actions, or can we be taught or trained not to follow our nature by a different upbringing? This is very important, since the Medieval Church taught that you should deny those desires of this world and put your sights on the next; thus, you can be trained not to follow your nature. Snakes, being animals and devoid of reason, do according to their nature; humans can reason and learn from their mistakes.

Finally, the use of language in this story shows elegance and medieval usage. There is a good example of polyptoton: \textit{solvere} in lines 2, 6, and 12. The use of \textit{ait}, instead of \textit{inquit} with direct quotes, is also post classical. The forms of \textit{quidam} have lost their classical meaning and now simply mean “a.” In line 3, \textit{caleficere fecit} uses \textit{facio} in two ways: he made him become warm. That is also a more vernacular use, since the infinitive with \textit{facio} is not common in classical Latin.\textsuperscript{17}

In summary, these stories are quite useful, both as transtional readings and as a brief introduction to the Medieval world.


\textsuperscript{16} See Works Cited for source. http://www.academia.edu/8166204/Peter_Alphonsus_Folktales_and_Wisdom_Literature.

\textsuperscript{17} “A good example of these is to be found in the French causative periphrasis “faire + infinitive” (\textit{je fais construire une maison}), which has its origins in late Latin “facere + infinitive.” This Late Latin causative periphrasis is simply reproducing a structure (with a verbal noun, ancestor of the infinitive, plus \textit{facio}) which already existed in pre-literary Latin and is illustrated by the Latin causative verbs in …\textit{e-facio}, like \textit{cale-facio} “to warm something,” \textit{tepe-facio} “to make lukewarm,” etc. See Fruyt (2005, p. 131).
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