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Harris, Nigel; Stace, Christopher

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Gesta Romanorum: Introduction

Gesta Romanorum ('Deeds of the Romans') is the title conventionally given to a diverse corpus of Latin stories (or exempla),[1] many based on Classical sources, which are accompanied by edifying interpretations designed for use by preachers. The *Gesta* were extensively read and enormously influential in the later Middle Ages, and indeed well into the early modern period. They were transmitted in a very large number of manuscripts (at least 300 of which are still extant), as well as in approximately forty printed editions dating from between 1472 and 1558, and were also translated into numerous European vernaculars: we know of four German redactions, as well as versions in English, French, Czech, Polish and Russian.[2] Moreover traces of the *Gesta*'s influence can be found in the works of such celebrated authors as Boccaccio, Chaucer, Gower, Shakespeare, Hans Sachs, Lessing, Hofmannsthal and Thomas Mann.[3]

No one knows for certain when, where or by whom the *Gesta* were first compiled. The earliest surviving dated manuscript is Innsbruck, Universitätsbibliothek, cod. lat. 310 (generally referred to as 'J'), which was written in 1342; but there are numerous indications that this manuscript does not transmit the earliest version of the collection, and a scholarly consensus has developed that it originated around 1300.

Relatively recently, Brigitte Weiske argued plausibly that traces of the *Gesta*'s influence can be found in the *Solsequium* of Hugo von Trimberg, in which case at least parts of our compilation must have been available in some form by 1284; yet in the same volume Nigel F. Palmer demonstrated that certain other stories were discernibly influenced by sections of the *Moralitates* of Robert Holcot, which is generally dated to the 1330s.[4] Such evidence is only superficially contradictory, however: rather, it serves to reinforce the reasonable assumption that, for all its elements of consistency, a collection as diverse and complex as the *Gesta* is likely to have developed gradually over a period of decades either side of 1300, rather than being attributable exclusively or in its entirety to a particular author at a particular time.

As to the *Gesta*'s place of origin, the only two credible candidates are England and the German-speaking lands – for whatever reason, there are few manuscripts or other signs of widespread reception in the Romance area. A disproportionate number of the surviving manuscripts come from South Germany or Austria, though the importance of this fact should not be overestimated given the huge overall increase in manuscript production that occurred in precisely those areas in the later Middle Ages. Of perhaps greater consequence for attempts to establish the *Gesta*'s

origins are the traces of German or English that appear in several manuscripts. The *Gesta*'s editor Hermann Oesterley was right to urge caution in drawing conclusions from these about the origins of the work as a whole, rather than of individual copies of it; nevertheless S. J. H. Herrtage's and Brigitte Weiske's profitable analysis of Middle English terms used and simultaneously glossed in early versions of stories such as our no. 166 has suggested that these may well have been composed by a native English speaker writing for a Continental audience.[5]

As suggested above, it is impossible to ascribe the *Gesta Romanorum* to any particular named author or authors. That said, there is some evidence to suggest that its first compiler might well have been a Franciscan. This is arguably implied by the colophon of its oldest manuscript, J, which speaks of the 'gesta imperatorum moralizata a quodam fratre de ordine minorum' (fol. 138^{r}). This ambiguous designation of a 'certain brother of the order of the Minorites' might perhaps refer only to J's scribe, but it is far from impossible that the originator of the *Gesta* tradition is meant. The work's overriding concern with providing materials for preaching is, after all, firmly in line with established Franciscan interests, as indeed is the overall thrust of its theological message, which, as Weiske (*Gesta*, vol. 1, pp. 172-94) has demonstrated, is

compatible with Franciscan emphases, particularly of the early scholastic period before the advent of Duns Scotus. Moreover the *Gesta* texts themselves occasionally make positive references to the importance of preachers (see nos 85, 96, 131, 175), and no. 163 singles out the Franciscans and Dominicans in particular as being 'bound to be welcomed' by 'prelates of the Church'. One way and another, then, there is ample circumstancial evidence to suggest that the *Gesta*, along with several comparable collections such as the *Exempelwerk der englischen Bettelmönche*, were at least decisively influenced by the priorities and pedagogical techniques of mendicant friars.

Whatever their precise origin, the *Gesta* changed and developed enormously even in the course of their Latin manuscript tradition. In many ways, indeed, they could serve as an ideal example of the variability and 'openness' intrinsic to many medieval texts. Oesterley was perhaps using some poetic licence when he spoke of having to deal with 'almost as many texts as manuscripts',[6] but the frustration implicit in such a comment is understandable. Differences between *Gesta* texts abound, and go far beyond variations in individual words of phrasing; few manuscripts, indeed, preserve exactly the same corpus of exempla, and scribes and later printers clearly felt at liberty to add or subtract items at

will. This means that no editor could responsibly seek to reconstruct an 'original' version of the *Gesta*, and can seek to do no more than to produce a reliable version of a text or texts that were actually read in the Middle Ages. Oesterley's own text, on which Christopher Stace has based his translations in this volume, is based on two very early *Gesta* prints, those published by Nicolaus Ketelaer and Gerhardus de Leempt in Utrecht in 1472, and by Ulrich Zell in Cologne around 1473. The shorter Utrecht print contains the first 150 stories of Oesterley's volume, and he supplemented these by a further 31 from Zell's edition. Following Oesterley, scholars have tended to refer to this corpus of 181 items as the 'Vulgate' text – to which, in his edition, Oesterley proceeded to add some 82 others which stem from a rather arbitrary variety of manuscripts and prints. For reasons of space and coherence, only the first 181 stories are translated here. Oesterley's edition recommends itself as the basis for a new translation of the *Gesta* not least because the only more recent edition, that published by Wilhelm Dick in 1890, is fatally flawed.[7] It has the arguable advantage of being based principally on manuscript J, which contains some 220 stories, but, for reasons that now seem untenable, omits all of the work's allegorical interpretations – which, as much more recent scholarship has

shown, are fundamentally important parts of the *Gesta* tradition, and of many other medieval exempla collections as well.[8]

Indeed one could readily argue that the binary structure of story and spiritual interpretation, which is common to the vast majority of items in every version of the *Gesta*, represents the tradition's most powerful unifying force. The method used to convey the spiritual meanings behind the stories is in essence an allegorical one, and as such ultimately owes much to techniques used throughout the Middle Ages in the context of biblical interpretation. From the time of the Church Fathers onwards, scholars perceived in the Bible both a literal sense, a *sensus literalis*, and a spiritual sense, a *sensus spiritualis*; and the convention developed of dividing this spiritual sense into three levels, or layers. These consisted of the allegorical, concerned with the history of salvation, the tropological, which focuses on moral instruction for this life, and finally the anagogical, which relates to the end times and, as such, to heaven. Gradually these techniques designed to unearth the hidden, deep meanings of Scripture came to be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to a wide range of non-biblical texts, and they underlie such exempla collections as the *Disciplina clericalis* of Petrus Alphonsi, the *De luco scacchorum* of Jacobus de Cessolis, the *Moralitates* of Robert Holcot and, last but by no means least, the *Gesta*

themselves[9] – at times to initially puzzling effect, as when we are told, for example, that figures such as Alexander the Great (no. 96), the tyrant Dionysius (no. 53) or a quarrelsome nobleman (no. 35) all, allegorically, represent God; or that a serpent can signify the Devil (nos 37, 174, 176), yet also mankind (no. 99), a prelate or confessor (nos 105, 119), and indeed Christ (no. 141).

The compiler of the *Gesta* seeks, then, to disclose to his readers the 'true' meaning of the stories he tells, and lays particular, though not exclusive emphasis on their allegorical significance: that is to say, he focuses on the Devil and on human sinfulness, but also on the means available for their defeat, notably the salvific work of Christ and the sacraments of the Church (particularly penance). As one might expect from an author of his era, he often employs for this purpose the related method of point-by-point allegoresis: in our first story, for example, the king 'is' (or 'means' or 'represents') God the Father, his daughter the rational soul, the five soldiers the five senses, the burning lamp 'the will that is subject to God in all things', and so on. One of the *Gesta*'s most fascinating characteristics, however, is that this thorough if potentially tedious procedure is used frequently, but not altogether consistently. Some stories (such as no. 59, on Jovinian, or no. 110, on St Eustace) leave

many parts of the story altogether uninterpreted and permit the narrative 'half' of the exemplum to take on an extensive life of its own; in others (e.g. nos 17, 97), this process is reversed, and a notably slight story is followed by a much more detailed moralization; and in at least a few others the basic structural division between narrative and interpretation is removed and the latter is either omitted entirely or subsumed within the story itself (see nos 36, 51).

For the modern reader at least, such obvious discrepancies of scale are not the only features that sometimes make the relationship between the two parts of a *Gesta* exemplum appear disconcertingly loose or, indeed, inappropriate. On occasion the tone of a narrative seems to jar somewhat with that of its accompanying interpretation, as when a jokily misogynistic anecdote such as no. 33, 'On Boastfulness',[10] gives rise to a decidedly serious moralization about Christ's passion in which the three wives hanged on a tree are compared to the unholy trinity of sins from I John 2:15-16. Such jarring is perhaps an inevitable concomitant of the *Gesta* compiler's programmatic decision to impose Christian moral and theological lessons on Classical material – as we see, for example, when the story of Androcles and the lion (no. 104) or Seneca's cogitations about the lesser of two evils (no. 134) are used to teach lessons which bespeak a

very different cultural and ideological awareness from that which will have informed their original authors and audiences. In instances such as these, one strongly suspects that, far from being in any way inessential or dispensable (as Dick, for one, plainly believed), the *Gesta*'s spiritual interpretations were regarded by contemporaries as ultimately more important than the stories that precede them – an impression which is reinforced by the numerous examples one could cite of motifs which appear to have been engrafted on to stories not for narrative reasons, but specifically in order to invite a particular moralization. In our no. 67, for example, the inclusion of the two paths (one hazardous and one light), each of which is guarded by a steward and three knights, is clearly called for primarily by the desired interpretation of the story as an allegory of God's judgment. Similarly, in no. 49, one is surely justified in surmising that Duchess Rosimila is specified as having two daughters and four sons simply because these have later to be interpreted as 'wicked pleasure and evil desire' and as the four cardinal virtues respectively.

For all this, however, it is plain from comparably numerous instances of vivid, lively storytelling – apparent perhaps especially in longer tales such as those about Pope Gregory (81) or Apollonius of Tyre (153) – that the *Gesta*'s compiler(s) regarded the narratives as of interest for

their own sake, rather than solely as vehicles for the conveying of sermonizing messages; and in general one can only admire the work's essentially pragmatic approach to its own allegorical content and method – one which facilitated a coherent presentation of its central didactic message, yet did not lose sight of the essentially literary nature of its basic material. This is no doubt one of the reasons for the *Gesta*'s remarkable popularity in the later Middle Ages: as Philippa Bright's recent survey of the circulation of Latin *Gesta* manuscripts written in England has implied, the collection, in its various forms, was used not only by preachers, but also by readers with more devotional, historical or literary interests.[11]

The sources of the *Gesta*'s stories are many and wide-ranging. Most versions of the *Gesta* ascribe roughly a quarter of their exempla to particular sources, though these attributions are by no means always reliable; and the matter is rendered still more complicated by the fact that much of the work's Classical material has for certain been transmitted indirectly, via more or less faithful medieval intermediaries. That said, Ella Bourne was able to establish that, of the 181 stories translated here from Oesterley's main corpus, some 75 are 'clearly classical *[sic]* in origin', whilst twenty others 'contain elements the classical nature of which in most cases is quite plain'.[12] Moreover, of these 95 items, roughly a third

can be traced back to 'definite classical authors' and 'with a few exceptions deviate but slightly from the classical versions and contain few mediaeval additions' (Bourne, p. 376). The Classical work used most frequently by the *Gesta* was, according to Bourne (pp. 349–51), the *Controversiae* of Seneca, material from which is found in our stories 2–7, 14, 73, 90, 100, 112, 116 and 134. The next most frequently quarried Classical text is the *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* of Valerius Maximus: stories 50, 52–3 and 149 are correctly attributed to Valerius, and 'several others are manifestly taken from him'.[13] Other important sources include Pliny the Elder (nos 37, 92, 139, 175–6 and 181 are based on his *Natural History)*, Frontinus (nos 38, 88 and 152), Seneca the Philosopher (32 and 140), Justinus (21 and 169) and Macrobius (87 and 126), whilst several stories 'have become so widely used in classical literature that they have, as it were, become standardized, with little or no variation to indicate individual authors'.[14] This is no doubt true also of the stories involving Alexander the Great (36, 61, 96, 139 – though some of these contain seemingly inauthentic medieval elements). One way and another, it is clear that the subject matter of the *Gesta*'s narrative owes much to Classical literature and its medieval reception. Nevertheless by no means all of the *Gesta*'s narratives have Classical origins: there are Christian legends (such as nos 15, 18, 81, 110), anecdotes

from medieval historiography (nos 38, 49, 162, 180), accounts of everyday life (nos 30, 82, 113, 133), humorous tales (nos 122-3, 125, 157) and not a few fables or accounts of natural historical *proprietates* whose genesis cannot always be dependably traced (nos 23, 68, 79, 83, 104, 175–6).[15] Certainly, to see our collection's use of Classical materials as in some way heralding or prefiguring the priorities of Humanism would be misguided – not least given that it evinces little or no interest in Classical culture in its own right, but rather shows a pervasive determination to use antiquity to promote an orthodox, medieval Christian world view. We should not be surprised to see Erasmus of Rotterdam, in his *Praise of Folly*, mock those preachers who 'bring in some popular story drawn, I judge, from the *Speculum historiale* or the *Gesta Romanorum* and interpret it'.[16]

What precisely, then, do these interpretations of the *Gesta*'s tales seek to teach their readers and hearers? In essence they present the human being, and his or her soul, in the context of a cosmic conflict between God and the Devil. People are born with the potential to do good, and to become children of God; yet they have an equal propensity towards evil, and as such to be children of the Devil. They therefore have free will; but they have been crucially assisted in any attempt to defeat sin and choose the path of salvation by the grace of God, by the redeeming death and

resurrection of Christ, and by the sacraments of the Church. In particular the *Gesta* tends to present the sacrament of penance, and especially its elements of contrition, confession and priestly absolution, as essential to human salvation. In ecclesiological terms, then, our collection is entirely orthodox, so much so that one can see it as constituting an 'attempt to assert the primacy of the Church's authority in moral and religious matters' (Bright, p. 416).

On the other hand, the individual reader or hearer of the *Gesta* is frequently urged to contribute to, or work out, his or her own salvation by approaching the the sacramental process with willingness and determination, and by practising good works (see for example nos 7, 17, 20). The receipt of divine grace and forgiveness via the sacrament of penance, then, brings with it moral implications, responsibilities and challenges: those who have been made or re-made children of God should live in the light of this fact and seek to follow, to imitate Christ in their everyday lives. This emphasis on the *vita apostolica,* along with features such as criticism of avarice or worldly wealth (nos 31, 164) and the relatively frequent use of such biblical passages as Matthew 25.34-41 (see nos 9, 14, 21) and I John 2.15-16 (see nos 107, 128, 132), are rightly seen by

Weiske (*Gesta,* p. 193) as 'at least not arguing against' the notion that the *Gesta* may have originated in Franciscan circles.

All in all, this religious 'programme' of the *Gesta*'s moralizations undeniably sits, not least in the eyes of a modern reader, in an at times uneasy tension with the decidedly secular morality that underlies many of the stories to which it is applied. The latter tend to focus our attention less on matters concerning God and the soul, and more on a wide variety of social and relational concerns: problems to do with inheritance (e.g. nos 45, 87, 89–91), relationships between the sexes (nos 5–6, 120, 122), social barriers and the possibility of overcoming them (nos 17, 34), just or unjust judges (nos 105, 127, 140), and so on.[17] Indeed, despite being frequently set in the highest echelons of Classical, especially Roman society,[18] the stories typically thematize common and timeless human preoccupations, with which readers and hearers of diverse social backgrounds were presumably able to identify.

If the dominant literary mode of the *Gesta*'s spiritual interpretations is allegoresis, then that of their narrative parts is dialogue – as befits subject matter that often foregrounds complex inter-personal relationships. Whilst there exists in nearly all of the stories a clear narrative voice, the narrator in question often records a number of

conversations, speeches, questions and answers. Rainer Nickel perceives in this the influence of Seneca's *Controversiae*, which either dramatize controversial legal debates or record advice given to people in difficult situations.[19] Be that as it may, the 'culture of conversation' that Nickel (p. 265) observes in the stories of the *Gesta* add much to the work's liveliness and literary appeal. Good examples of this include the judicious mixture of direct and indirect speech in no. 62, the quickfire exchanges of stories like no. 117 and, not least, the incongruous but often entertaining words uttered by a variety of animals (see nos 110, 141, 167, 174).

Furthermore the concept of dialogue in its broadest and most inclusive sense is perhaps a fruitful one for attempts to comprehend and assess the *Gesta* tradition as a whole. Within the bipartite framework of individual exempla, the narrative and interpretative parts, responding to and shaping each other as they do, can be seen as engaging in a form of dialogue which is creative as well as problematic; and the same is true also of the distinct but related theological and moral (allegorical and tropological) sections into which several interpretations are in practice divided. Nor do individual exempla ever exist in a vacuum; rather, they are in an essentially dialogic relationship both with their sources and with the other exempla of the specific corpus in which they are transmitted.

And the innumerable different versions of the *Gesta* as a whole inevitably exist in intertextual dialogue with those versions they have copied, translated, excerpted, extended, amended and indeed influenced. As we have seen, the *Gesta* seek in many ways to convey a basically monologic religious message – that is, the spiritual interpretations are intended to 'reduce the multiple voices and consciousnesses within a single text to a single version of truth imposed by the author'.[20] Nevertheless the modern reader will surely be disposed to hear this voice as only one of many that confront him or her when reading the translations that follow. It is a loud and insistent one, for certain; but it is in the end no more than one of the rich multiplicity of voices which, together, make reading the *Gesta Romanorum* a sometimes baffling but highly rewarding experience.

The *Gesta Romanorum* in English

As we have seen, the *Gesta* may well have originated in England, and hence it is not surprising that they seem to have been well known here in the Middle Ages and the early modern centuries. Within the Latin manuscript tradition, it is reasonable to designate, as English-speaking scholars have tended to, a particular group of *Gesta* manuscripts as constituting a discrete 'Anglo-Latin' tradition – which, whilst itself

decidedly variable, differs from 'Germano-Latin' versions in the wording, ordering and, above all, quantity of its exempla (*Gesta* texts originating in England are almost invariably shorter, never exceeding 103 items).[21]

There can be no doubt that the fifteenth-century Middle English translation of the *Gesta* (assigned by its editor Herrtage to the reign of Henry VI, i.e. 1422-61) was based on one or other of these insular Latin manuscripts – though the three vernacular codices used by Herrtage in his edition include only 70, 46 and 32 stories respectively.[22] These figures in themselves imply something about the extreme variability of the *Gesta*'s textual history, as does the statistic that only eight of these exempla (nos 8, 20, 27, 57, 60, 85-6 and 119) are shared by all three English vernacular manuscripts and by Oesterley's Latin corpus. Moreover even those stories which are transmitted in both Latin and Middle English provide a revealing case study of the extent of the changes that *Gesta* exempla frequently underwent in the course of their transmission. Some differences are modest: in the English texts that correspond to our no. 74, for example (cf. Herrtage, pp. 438-9), the king's golden apple is a golden ball, and an additional moralization is provided for the king's son, who becomes a peripatetic 'precheor and dyscrete confessoure' (p. 439). The English texts of Oesterley no. 99, however, record a significantly different account and

interpretation of the enmity between the serpent and the toad. Instead of the knight being poisoned by the toad during the former's intervention on behalf of the serpent, he is followed home by the toad and poisoned by it whilst sleeping. The serpent appears and proceeds to fight and kill the toad while the latter is still in the knight's bedroom, and is given a bowl of milk for its pains. Whereas in our Latin version of no. 99 the knight is thereupon interpreted as Christ, the toad as the Devil and the serpent as man, the allegoresis of the English version proceeds along quite different lines: the toad remains type-cast as the Devil, but the serpent represents Christ and the knight 'every good christian man that lovith God with perfite herte' (Herrtage, p. 6), whose donation of milk to the serpent exemplifies the 'shewing of goode werkis' (p. 7). Finally, Herrtage's no. 47 (pp. 167-70) is a highly idiosyncratic exemplum which clearly has its origins in a combination of, or contamination between, our corpus's nos 45 and 89. One day, in anger, a king's Spanish wife tells him that she has borne three sons, of whom only one is legitimate – which one, however, she declines to reveal. On his deathbed, the king bequeaths a ring to this (still unidentified) legitimate son, leaving them with an inheritance problem similar to that described in Oesterley 45. The sons seek advice from the King of Jerusalem, who has the father's body disinterred and

asks all the sons to shoot an arrow at it. The youngest refuses to do so – an action which the following allegory interprets as a refusal to 'see God smitten by sin' (p. 170). The remainder of the interpretation shows an obvious affinity to Oesterley no. 89 and other versions of the 'ring parable' in presenting the three sons as the Jews and Saracens, 'fals Christen men' (p. 169) and the children of God respectively. All in all, an exemplum such as this is undeniably rather an extreme example of the essentially unstable nature of medieval textuality in general and of the *Gesta*'s transmission in particular; but it nevertheless powerfully underscores the truth that the work of medieval scribes and editors often went beyond a simple process of faithful copying and became instead a pro-active process of creative reception.

It remains only to survey the English versions of the *Gesta Romanorum* that have hitherto appeared in print. The first of these was made by Wynkyn de Worde in London at some point between 1510 and 1515, and consisted of some 43 stories, taken in the main from the Middle English manuscripts, but considerably modernizing their language. This was followed by the far more influential version of Richard Robinson, which appeared in six editions between 1577 and 1601 and was patently known not least to Shakespeare (see Krug, p. 243). Robinson's *Gesta*

'altered and modernized the language of Wynkyn de Worde, corrected [in a Protestant direction, N. H.] the applications, and added an argument to each story, the number and order of which he has retained' (Herrtage, p. xxiv); and so durable did his text prove that it received further reprints in Aberdeen in 1715 and Glasgow in 1753. By this time it was competing with a volume first printed by Richard Jakeway in London in 1703 (and reprinted in 1720 and 1722), which contained 45 stories newly translated by one 'B. P.' from a Latin *Gesta* edition of 1514.

The most recent English translation of a corpus of Latin *Gesta* remains that of Charles Swan, published as long ago as 1824.[23] Swan used as his source an edition printed by Heinrich Gran in Hagenau in 1508, which was plainly very close to the 'Vulgate' text printed by Zell in 1473: his 181 items correspond to the first 181 subsequently published by Oesterley and newly translated here. Inevitably, Swan's translations are of their time. Whilst by no means disastrous, they avoid or gloss over many difficulties, use much deliberately archaizing vocabulary and, more seriously, often make free with the actual contents of the text. The most notorious example of this comes at the end of story 28, which Swan changes fundamentally, in order presumably to accommodate his own and his nineteenth-century contemporaries' moral scruples. He shrinks

from making specific mention of the climactic act of adultery between the lady and her youthful admirer which the ostensibly holy old woman has arranged, telling us instead that, in the night in question, 'the husband returned, and put the whole party to a shameful death. Thus did the wicked project of the old woman involve many in ruin' (p. 129). This of course necessitates an addition also to the accompanying moralization, which sees the returning husband as Christ, who 'will come during the night, and condemn the sinner to death' (p. 129). Whatever the merits of Swan's translation, so anachronistically moralistic and cavalier an approach to a medieval original cannot be viewed as appropriate for the twenty-first century; and this is one of the reasons why the translations which follow in this volume fill a significant gap in medieval studies which has been neglected for far too long.

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1 The term 'exemplum' is used in this book to refer to a brief story which is used to make or reinforce a didactic point.

2 Of these, the German versions are the most thoroughly researched. See in particular Peter Hommers, '*Gesta Romanorum* deutsch. Untersuchungen

zur Überlieferung und Redaktionengliederung', PhD thesis, University of Munich, 1968; Brigitte Weiske, *Gesta Romanorum*, 2 vols, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1992 (Fortuna vitrea, 3-4), vol. 1, pp. 107-26. Also noteworthy is Geoffroy Hope's recent edition and study of the early-sixteenth century French version known as *Le Violier des Histoires Rommaines* (Geneva: Droz, 2008; Textes Littéraires Français, 548).

3 Details of such influence are given most conveniently by Udo Wawrzyniak, 'Gesta Romanorum', in Rolf Wilhelm Brednich et al. (eds), *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung,* Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1987, vol. 5, col. 1206. For a detailed analysis of Shakespeare's use of the *Gesta* in his *Merchant of Venice* see Rebecca Krug, 'Shakespeare's Medieval Morality: *The Merchant of Venice* and the *Gesta Romanorum*', in Curtis Perry and John Watkins (eds), *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 241–61. For a survey of the *Gesta*'s reception in vernacular English romance, see Diane Speed, 'Middle English Romance and the *Gesta Romanorum'*, in Rosalind Field (ed.), *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), pp. 45-56.

4 Nigel F. Palmer, 'Das *Exempelwerk der englischen Bettelmönche:* Ein Gegenstück zu den *Gesta Romanorum*?', in Walter Haug and Burghart Wachinger (eds), *Exempel und Exempelsammlungen* (Fortuna vitrea, 2), Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1991, pp. 137-72; Brigitte Weiske, 'Die *Gesta Romanorum* und das *Solsequium* Hugos von Trimberg', *ibid.,* pp. 173-207. See also Weiske, *Gesta,* vol. 1, pp. 77-81.

5 See *Gesta Romanorum*, ed. Hermann Oesterley, Berlin: Weidmann, 1872, p. 262; *The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, ed. Sidney J. H. Herrtage, London *[sic]*: Oxford University Press, 1879 (Early English Text Society, 33), pp. 175, 480; Weiske, *Gesta*, vol. 1, pp. 30-41.

6 'fast so viele texte wie handschriften' (Oesterley, p. 255).

7 *Die 'Gesta Romanorum' nach der Innsbrucker Handschrift vom Jahre 1342 und vier Münchener Handschriften,* ed. Wilhelm Dick, Erlangen: Junge, 1890 (Erlanger Beiträge zur englischen Philologie, 7).

8 This point is illuminated particularly tellingly by Christoph Gerhardt, *Die Metamorphosen des Pelikans. Exempel und Auslegung in mittelalterlicher Literatur. Mit Beispielen aus der bildenden Kunst und einem Bildanhang,* Frankfurt: Lang, 1979 (Trierer Studien zur Literatur, 1).

9 For a classic account of this approach to interpretation see Friedrich Ohly (trans. David A. Wells), 'The Spiritual Sense of Words in the Middle Ages', in *Forum for Modern Language Studies,* 41 (2005), pp. 18-42.

10 As discussed in a note to the translation of this exemplum (p. xxx below), Oesterley's baffling choice of title for it brings in another layer of apparent inconsistency.

11 Philippa Bright, 'Anglo-Latin Collections of the *Gesta Romanorum* and their Role in the Cure of Souls', in Juanita Feros Ruys (ed.), *What Nature Does Not Teach. Didactic Literature in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods,* Turnhout: Brépols, 2008 (Disputatio, 15), pp. 401-24.

12 Ella Bourne, 'Classical Elements in the *Gesta Romanorum*', in Christabel Forsythe Fiske (ed.), *Vassar Mediaeval Studies*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1923, pp. 345–76, here p. 375.

13 Bourne, p. 351. Into this category she places nos 8–9, 29, 41 and 48. Nos 33 and 42 are falsely attributed to Valerius.

14 For full details see Bourne, pp. 349–67. The quotation is from p. 366.

15 For parallels to the *Gesta*'s fables in other collections see the index to Gerd Dicke and Klaus Grubmüller, *Die Fabeln des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit. Ein Katalog der deutschen Versionen und ihrer lateinischen*

Entsprechungen, Munich: Fink, 1987 (Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften, 60), p. 849.

16 *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Leiden: Brill, 1969 to present), vol. 4, III, 9.

17 For a survey of much of the *Gesta*'s non-religious content see Rolf Sprandel, 'Die *Gesta Romanorum* als Quelle der spätmittelalterlichen Mentalitätengeschichte', in *Saeculum*, 33 (1982), pp. 312–22.

18 The *Gesta*'s presentation of its many Roman Emperors is discussed by Johannes Schneider, 'Das Fortleben der römischen Kaiser in den *Gesta Romanorum*', in *Klio,* 52 (1970), pp. 395-409.

19 See *'Gesta Romanorum'. Lateinisch/Deutsch*, selected, translated and edited by Rainer Nickel, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991 (Universal-Bibliothek 8717[3]), p. 264. With regard to Seneca he mentions in particular nos 5-7 and 134.

20 Phyllis Margaret Paryas, in Irena R. Makaryk (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory. Approaches, Scholars, Terms,* Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1993, p. 596.

21 One is delighted to read (Bright, as note 11, p. 404) that Philippa Bright and Diane Speed are in the process of preparing an edition of this Anglo-

Latin tradition – whose main characteristics are delineated by Bright in the article cited.

22 London, British Library, Harl. 7333 and Addit. 9066; also Cambridge, University Library, K. k. 1.

23 *'Gesta Romanorum'. Entertaining Stories Invented by the Monks as a Fire-Side Recreation and Commonly Applied in Their Discourses from the Pulpit*, translated by Charles Swan, London: Routledge, 1824.