Notes on Serpent Tales for Gesta

Snakes have always held fascination for humans, and the medievals saw them in many lights: religious, magical, historical. Sometimes the snakes are similar in function to those of the ancient world, where stories come from Pliny, or the fable tradition; other times, they are completely medieval. As a symbol, snakes can be very powerful; see http://misfitsandheroes.wordpress.com/tag/snake-symbols/ for a discussion of good and evil.

In heraldry, according to most sources, the snake stands for wisdom and knowledge. One website, http://www.familytreesandcrests.com/heraldry-symbols.htm, adds that the snake is also “a symbol of defiance.” We can see this in the Revolutionary War flag for the navy: don’t tread on me. Snakes are symbols of fertility and life, since they live even after they shed their skin. That site goes on to say, “Because of its forked tongue, it was also associated with lightning and the sun.”

Story 18:

Here we see the relationship between snakes and stones, which is very common in these stories. Special stones which have magical properties are well attested: the sorcerer’s/philosopher’s stone, which would turn other metals into gold; various stones which could protect their wearer from evil, etc.

A stone from a snake, if the snake is here the embodiment of wisdom, would be very important. The stone in this story seems to give the gift of life (water and food) to anyone who licks it.

Story 25:

Swan’s commentary on this story is as follows:

in reference to the Latin Aesop: (version from 1658, p. 80 modernized by Breindel) …
And the serpent said, “Seeing that you repent your misdeed, I forgive you; but as long as I shall live, I shall remember your malice; for since you hurt me once, so you might again. Wherefore that which was once evil, shall ever so be held; men ought therefore not to insult the one from whom they receive some benefit, nor yet suspect their good and true friends.”

Swan then goes on to cite Avianus’ fable about the golden goose, here in Latin from the Latinlibrary website (notes by Breindel):
XXXIII. DE ANSERE OVA AUREA PARIENTE

Anser erat cuidam pretioso germine feta,
Ovaque quae nidis aurea saepe daret.

Fixerat hanc volucrī legem Natura superbae,
Ne liceat pariter munera ferre duo.

Sed dominus, cupidum sperans vanescere
votum, Non tulit exosas in sua lucra moras,
Grande ratus pretium volucris de morte referre,
Quae tam continuō munere dives erat.

Postquam nuda minax egi per viscera ferrum,
Et vacuam solitis fetibus esse videt,
Ingemuit tantae deceptus crimine fraudis;
Nam poenam meritis rettulit inde suis.

Sic qui cuncta deos uno male tempore poscunt,
Iustius his etiam vota diurna negant.

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1 de ansere ova aurea pariente: “about the goose giving birth to golden eggs”
2 anser: anser, anseris, f., goose
3 cuidam: quidam, quaedam, quoddam, a certain (one) [dative of possession]
4 germine: germen, -inis, n., bud, sprout; here: product [egg]
5 feta: fetus, -a, -um, pregnant with
6 ovaque: ova (+-que, ovum, -i, n., egg
7 nidis: nidus, -i, m., nest [dative with daret]
8 volucrī: volucrēris, -i, f., bird
9 ne liceat: “it would not be permitted.” The meaning of the entire line is that the bird was not permitted to give two gifts/eggs at a time.
10 vanescere: vanesco, -ere, disappear
11 votum: votum, -i, n., vow; this refers to the legem – see footnote 9 above
12 exosas: exosus, -a, -um, hating
13 lucra: lucrum, -i, n., avarice
14 ratus: reor, reri, ratus sum, think
15 quae: refers to the bird
16 continuō: continuously
17 minax: minax, -acis, threatening; agrees with ferum
18 viscera: viscer, visceris, n., vital organs, guts; nuda agrees with it
19 fetibus: fetus, -us, m., offspring
20 ingemuit: ingemisco, -ere, groan
21 fraudē: fraudus, fraudis, f., delusion
22 supply dare here, using deos as subject in indirect statement based on poscunt
23 male: evilly [with poscunt]
24 his: dative; refers to qui
25 diurna: diurnus, -a, -um, daily [with vota]
26 negant: supply dei as subject and add iustius as an adverb
This also appears in Babrius 123:

Ὄρνιθος ἀγαθής φὰ χρυσὰ τικτούσης
ὁ δεσπότης ἐνόμισεν ἐντὸς εὑρήσειν
χρυσοῦ μέγιστον ὅγκον, ὑνπερ ὁδίνειν
θύσας δὲ ταυτὴν εὗρε τὴν φύσιν πᾶσας
τὰ πάνθ᾽ ὁμοίαν οὐδαν. ἀθρόως δὲ ἔξειν
μέγιστον ὅλβον ἐλπίσας τε καὶ σπεύςας
ἀπεστερῆθη τοῦ τὰ μικρὰ κερδαῖνειν.

A good bird having given birth to golden eggs, the master thought to find the greatest mass of gold in there, whatever she produced; he found the nature such of all being similar to the entire thing. Having foolishly hoped to have the biggest mass and hastening to gain the smallest of it he was turned aside. (translation by Breindel; Babrius text from http://mythfolklore.net/aesopica/perry/176.htm)

**Story 57:**

This is a classic story, sometimes told with a snake carrying a mouse, or a fox carrying a scorpion, etc. 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 story also appears in Aesop's Fables 83, Babrius 143 and many other versions. Go to http://mythfolklore.net/aesopica/perry/176.htm for more versions.

**Story 78:**

Again we have a snake and a stone together, in this case, agate. There is actually something called “snake skin agate” whose surface looks like a snake. Many websites tout the healing and medicinal properties of agate.

Swan notes that this story is not found in Pliny.

However, these passages are in Pliny:

LIV.139

Achates in magna fuit auctoritate, nunc in nulla est, reperta primum in Sicilia in ostia flumen eiusdem nominis, postea plurimis in terris, excellens amplitudine, numerosa varietatibus, quae mutant cognomina eius… quidam putant contra araneorum et scorpionum ictus eam prodesse.

The agate was in great authority, now it is in none, found first in Sicily next to the river of the same name, afterwards in very many lands, excellent in size, numerous in varieties, what change its name … certain think that it is of benefit against the sting of spiders and scorpions.

(Next passage on next page.)
There are other differences among the Magi: which are found similar to lions’ hides, they say have power against scorpions. Among the Persians indeed storms and presteras (?) are turned aside by their scent, rivers stop – this is the proof, if added into boiling cauldrons they become cold –

(translations for both sections by Breindel)

[Text from http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Pliny_the_Elder/37*.html]

Story 96:
A very scary monster! This story uses the name Regulus without any historical meaning. It does recognize that he fought the Carthaginians in the First Punic War (264-241).

Story 143:
This is a typical adventure story with some animals tossed in to make it more interesting. Certainly the theme of the steward’s name, Ingratus, plays a large part here. Other themes: the serpent with a magic stone; human/animal interaction, where each helps the other; greed; lying; hubris.

Some commentators believe the story originated in the collections of Berekiah Ben Natroni, who wrote Jewish fables in the late 12th to early 13th centuries AD. Swan, referencing Warton, says it also appears in the Calilah U Dumnah, a collection of Arabic stories.

The story appears in the Confessio Amantis, a medieval poem by John Gower (here in a modern translation) – from Book Five: avarice

http://archive.org/stream/confessioamantis00gowe/confessioamantis00gowe_djvu.txt):

All such obeisance as it might
It did him. And then, last of all,
Out of its mouth the snake let fall
A stone more bright than crystal is;
It went its way then, Bardus his.

This jewel was sold for a vast sum of money; yet, on returning home, Bardus found that it was back in his purse. This happened every time he sold the stone, so that he quickly grew rich. The Emperor heard about him, was told the whole story, and punished the lord Adrian.

Story 156:
This story has wonderful elements: the anthropomorphic snake, who takes her children out for a walk, the description of her ringing the bell “Descende, index, et fac mibi institium, quia iniuste bufo nidum meum occupat!” “Descend, judge, and do justice for me, because the toad unjustly
seizes my nest!” There is the blind king who gives justice to all. Then, of course, the snake thanks the king by giving him back his sight.

Swan quotes Warton: “This circumstance of the Bell of Justice occurs in the real history of some eastern monarch, whose name I have forgot [sic!]. He continues: “In the Arabian philosophy, serpents, either from the brightness of their eyes, or because they inhabit the cavities of the earth, were considered as having a natural, or occult, connection with precious stones.”

Here are some other versions of the Bell of Justice, all found at http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0207c.html:
- Of the Vicissitude of Everything Good, and Especially of a Right Justice (Gesta Romanorum).
- The Emperor Charlemagne and the Serpent (Switzerland).
- The following do not have a serpent, but a horse, as the animal, and there is no reward given by the animal to the king:
  - The Bell of Atri (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Tales of a Wayside Inn).
  - The Dumb Plaintiff (Germany).

**Story 181:**
Here are several articles about poisonous toads!
For Medieval Stories and beliefs in general, see
http://www.all-creatures.org/articles/rf-toads.html
http://www.bookrags.com/Hieronymus_Bosch#br_3
especially with witches: http://witches.monstrous.com/familiars/toads.htm
http://archive.today/CXjbw
and for medical reasons:
OÄo&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.studyhistory.co.uk%2FY7%2FBlack%2520death%2520-%2520cures%2520activity%2520sheet.doc&ei=mP_XU8_uHPHJszQSynoGgBw&usg=AFQjCNErHNfmbDTz3FPVc-8Uw4hxpv9qQ&sig2=FdEY8kchiqZGsZywJDMMkA&bvm=bv.71778758,d.cWc

http://shkrobius.livejournal.com/106463.html

Swan, in another passage, quotes Warton as follows: “The stories, perhaps fabulous, of the serpent fighting with his inveterate enemy, the weasel, who eats rue before the attack beings; and of the serpent fighting with, and being killed by the spider, originate from Pliny, Nat. His. X 84, XX.13.”
Further References

Books:
Swan: *Gesta Romanorum*. https://archive.org/details/talesfromgestaro00swan

Useful Websites:
www.thelatinlibrary.com
http://www.familytreesandcrests.com/heraldry-symbols.htm
http://misfitsandheroes.wordpress.com/tag/snake-symbols/
http://mythfolklore.net/aesopica/perry/176.htm
http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Pliny_the_Elder/37*.html
http://archive.org/stream/confessioamantis00gowe/confessioamantis00gowe_djvu.txt
http://www.all-creatures.org/articles/rf-toads.html
http://witches.monstrous.com/familiars/toads.htm
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http://shkrobius.livejournal.com/106463.html
http://www.bookrags.com/Hieronymus_Bosch#br_3

Note: unless a source is given for a translation, it was done by Ruth Breindel, who also did the notes on the various other passages.
All Babrius texts come from http://mythfolklore.net/aesopica/perry/176.htm