

STORIES FROM THE GESTA ROMANORUM

The *Gesta Romanorum*, a medieval collection of anecdotes, to which moral reflections are attached, was compiled in Latin, probably by a priest, late in the thirteenth or early in the fourteenth century. The original object of the work seems to have been to provide preachers with a store of anecdotes with suitable moral applications. Each story has a heading referring to some virtue or vice; then comes the anecdote followed by the moralisation. The collection became so popular throughout Western Europe that copies were multiplied, often with local additions, so that it is not now possible to determine whether it was originally written in England, Germany, or France.

The manuscripts differ considerably as to number and arrangement of articles, but no one manuscript representing the printed editions exists. Probably the editors of the first printed edition selected stories from various manuscripts. Shortly after this collection had been published, an enlarged edition, now known as the Vulgate, was issued, containing 181 stories. All these three editions appeared between 1472 and 1475, and subsequent reprints were numerous.

The first English translation, based on the English group of manuscripts, was issued by Wynkyn de Worde about 1510, and was followed by others. These English editions have many stories in common with the Vulgate, but include others derived from the English manuscripts. None of the English editions, old or new, give the moralizations in their entirety, full as they are of Catholic teaching, dogmatic and moral.

Though the title of the work suggests Roman history as the chief source of the stories, many of them are taken from later Latin or German chronicles, while several are Oriental in character. In estimating the wide influence of the *Gesta* it must be remembered that the collection proved a mine of anecdotes, not only for preachers, but for poets, from Chaucer, Lydgate, and Boccaccio down through Shakespeare to Schiller and Rossetti, so that many of these old stories are now enshrined in masterpieces of European literature.